

POLITICS

Image Is Everything

by Janet Scott Barlow

For at least a year now—ever since the evidence became intellectually irrefutable while yet being emotionally deniable—every second sentence written or spoken about Bill Clinton by the dominant media has begun with the word “if.” Reduced to its essence, the two-sentence refrain goes like this: *Americans do not believe Bill Clinton. If Bill Clinton can become credible, Americans will believe him.* And if my eyes were brown, they wouldn’t be blue. Absent possibility, *if* foretells fantasy. Here is reality: Bill Clinton is not credible, therefore Americans do not believe him. Like the journalists who cover him, however, the President seems baffled by such simplicity. “Character,” he has said, “is a journey, not a destination.” Well, so is a drive to the Grand Canyon, but isn’t the ultimate point to *get* there?

For lack of a better theory, I have come to believe that the purpose of Bill Clinton’s election was existential—he is what the country had to encounter in order to move on. Only with his personality in that office at this moment could Americans confront with such pristine perfection, such pragmatic promise, all that they loathe about politicians: the simultaneous sucking up to and disdain for public opinion; the nearly pathological refusal to give a direct answer; the assumption that attitude can substitute for behavior and behavior for action; the sin of pride made even more offensive by displays of false modesty; the vanity, the condescension, the hypocrisy, the lying. In his unseemly splendor (there is no context in which he looks natural), Clinton beams a ceaseless message: *Don’t ever make a mistake like me again.*

Of course, it was all there from the beginning; and to see it now is to remem-

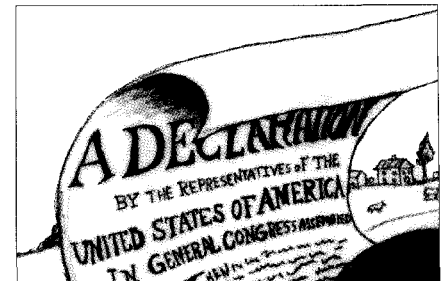
ber it then. One’s first impression of Bill Clinton, you’ll recall, is that he is the product of egotism added to insecurity, an excruciating combination in a politician, because the resulting relentlessness of need wears people out. In other words, he is a man who has spent his entire life making first impressions (which must, on some level, wear *him* out). He is said to be dazzlingly intelligent, yet nothing he says, not a single thing, is inherently interesting. His idea of dialogue is to offer as many people as possible the opportunity to hear him. He gives unmistakable signs of seeing female adoration as his due, and he has a terror of the truth so great (what does he fear it will do to him?) that he makes blatantly self-damaging statements, his vaunted intelligence useless to protect him.

Once in office he glows, lit from within with the pleasure he takes from the pleasure he gives merely at being seen. (It will transpire that Bill Clinton of Arkansas and Barbra Streisand of New York grew up with a shared destiny—to validate each other’s sense of specialness.) He completely lacks a sense of irony. He is not in the moment, he is the moment. (Again, he shares something with Ms. Streisand—as well as with young children.) Though lacking irony, he vibrates self-consciousness, straining always to project “aura” and appearing convinced that he is succeeding.

He is in over his head, however, and at the first signs of trouble he starts saying the kinds of things that mamas’ boys always say. *I’ve worked like a dog . . . my motives are pure . . . I’m being treated so bad . . . people are mean . . . no one appreciates me.* Some psychic aspect of his manhood is missing—he knows it too—and so he follows his complaints with bold declarations of what he would “fight, indeed . . . die for.” He squints one eye and issues warnings; he talks about “hanging tough.” When nothing works and finally he must grope for guidance, he veers from pollsters to academicians to self-help king Tony Robbins. (Do any of them tell him the truth—that his consuming fear of rejection by those whom he would lead makes leadership impossible and rejection inevitable?) He is lost, lost as can be, and the distaste the public feels for him slides into embarrassment. The single most preposterous thing ever

said about him will prove to be this: “Bill Clinton is incapable of sustained error.”

And then there is his wife, who is as inscrutable as he is transparent. No one understands her—not now, not later—mainly because she tries to control, while claiming to discount, other people’s opinions of her. She is humorless but hardworking, and she expends great effort trying to disguise her self-righteousness. Beneath her strangely unaffected public face, she seems to trust no one. As a result, she lacks warmth (warmth being one product of faith in others), which will prove to be as politically detrimental to her as her husband’s missing manhood is to him. She, too, is said to be highly intelligent (“smart as a whip,” they keep repeating), but she must think her fellow citizens are not, for when they reject her idea of government-run health care, she says they have been manipulated, misinformed, duped. (How tediously predictable. For the whip-smart there are no failures, only misunderstandings.) Were she not in a position of authority and importance, she would be thought boring. And when *she* ends up in over her head, she turns for advice to gossip columnists, hoping to learn how to “make the public see her in the sympathetic, more complicated way in which she sees herself.”



To which one can only respond with a question, the insistent, ever more resounding question that has followed her and her husband from the start: Who *are* these people? The answer, at this point, may be more trouble than it’s worth. For the curious, however, there are several clues to go on.

It is December 1993, and Bill Clinton appears on the cover of *Rolling Stone* at the same moment Hillary Clinton does an interview and photo spread for *Vogue*—a pair of journalistic events

whose combined effect is to make Americans feel as if they have suddenly awakened on Mars. Here is the President of the United States, hands in pockets and leg cocked, staring down from the *Rolling Stone* cover, looking like . . . like a boomer trying to look presidential while thinking, Hey, I'm on the cover of *Rolling Stone*! Inside is an interview in which the President uses the word "damn" many times, his tribute evidently to the hipness of his audience. He also speaks often and angrily of not getting credit for his accomplishments, saying, finally, "Do I care if I get credit? No." He returns again and again to the subject of a hated *Time* cover portrait, but then declares that "it didn't bother me very much . . . I didn't pay any attention to it." He volunteers that he has been "attacked" by the press "more often than any other President," then insists, "I don't care what they say about me." The total absence of emotional logic (*If I claim not to care about getting credit, does it make sense to complain constantly about not getting credit?*) makes the interview painful to read. Equally painful are the blushing responses of the interviewers, Jann Wenner and William Greider, who raise Clinton's ire and then swoon that he is, "when enraged, incredibly presidential." His wrath, they sigh, is "awesome." (This is the same Clinton temper that is reported on at length in books by Bob Woodward and Elizabeth Drew. The Clinton "purple rages" discussed in those books, the near-violent rants directed at helpless—and often innocent—underlings, do not come across as "incredibly presidential." On the contrary, they come across as ignoble, the manifestation of a stunted personality.)

While the President is singing his version of "Walk Like a Man" to *Rolling Stone*, Hillary is in *Vogue* trying to—well, it isn't clear what she is trying to do. One full-page photograph shows her posed horizontally, hair flowing back, eyes gazing skyward in feigned reverie, a half-smile on her face. The accompanying article discusses another pose—"chest forward, head back"—and goes on to quote an aide's comment prior to Mrs. Clinton's health care testimony before Congress: "This is Eleanor Roosevelt time." The whole thing is at once bizarre and utterly earnest (missing headline: "Hillary Perseveres Toward Glamour") and demonstrates in the end that the quickest way to look ridiculous is to behave as if you have charisma when you

have none.

Why is it so hard to give these people, Bill Clinton and his wife, the benefit of the doubt? Why do the Clintons engender, as the media keep asking in high anxiety, such harshness of response? Perhaps because they lack humility and hence, paradoxically, size. Because they think so highly of themselves, they are too small for the honored positions they hold. They are without grace—a truthfulness of emotional line, a form of poise that has nothing to do with "self-confidence."

When Bill Clinton is alone in a room, does he know who he is? When Hillary Clinton is in a crowd of American citizens, does she know who she is? I don't think so, and it wouldn't matter except that they are using the presidency as a way *not* to find out, using it, that is, as a fame vehicle, a means of fantasy fulfillment.

This degradation of the office is not conscious, however; it is not a choice. It is simply the natural result of an inherent *gaucherie* that forces things exalted and things inconsequential into the same flattened category of "image." Perhaps the most telling example of this is reported by Elizabeth Drew in *On the Edge*, her horrifying account of the first 18 months of the Clinton presidency. During one of his endless crises (he will never grasp that habitual chaos is a form of self-indulgence), as he continues rapidly to lose public confidence and respect, Bill Clinton is counseled by Leon Panetta to keep in mind the "importance of the stature of the office." Accepting the point, Clinton responds, "I've got to be more like John Wayne."

John Wayne. Not Lincoln or Churchill, not Roosevelt or Truman. Not even Kennedy. The President of the United States, in a moment of political crisis, spontaneously seized as his leadership ideal not a historical archetype but a pop culture icon—an image, a persona, an invention. The banality of his thinking is revealed in his choice of a movie star as role model. The depth of his problem is suggested by the essence of that particular star: the strong silent type. Bill Clinton has nothing in common with the Duke. And all he has in common with John Wayne is that he makes his living pretending to be something he is not.

Janet Scott Barlow writes from Cincinnati.

LAW

The Stuffed Grape Leaf Standard

by Sarah J. McCarthy

Danger lurks everywhere these days, even in five gallon plastic tubs of feta cheese. The containers of feta delivered to our restaurant come embellished with sketches of a baby falling headfirst into a bucket of cheese, which is preserved in liquid, and therefore comes complete with grim warnings of possible drownings in English and Español. Has anyone really ever drowned in a tub of feta cheese, I wondered, as I stared at the toddler going head first into the bucket, or is this warning just the product of a paranoid cheese producer or a plastic pail maker who is afraid of being sued?

The federal government's Consumer Product Safety Commission, it turns out, has been studying the dangers of plastic buckets for the past five years. One of the solutions they came up with was a suggestion to manufacturers that they produce buckets that leak. That solution, swiftly rejected by the Manufacturers' Association, would produce slippery floors in our walk-in cooler, dry cheese on our salads, and icy floors each winter in the trucks that deliver the cheese.

Business owners are nervous these days. Like citizens of a police state, we wait for the knock at the door. Wendy's International thinks it's too risky to sell hot chocolate in America. The Russian Tea Room in New York City no longer sells steak tartare. The Las Vegas Hilton has been sent a message from the legal profession, which sends more messages to businesses these days than Western Union. For not recognizing that the partying pilots of Tailhook needed a babysitter, the Hilton has been fined \$7 million in punitive damages in the first of 12 known Tailhook-related lawsuits.

In Pittsburgh, a woman has brought a \$25,000 lawsuit against a supermarket which sold her a package of chicken complete with a chicken's head. Upon seeing the chicken head, she says she col-