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The Paradox of Presidential Popularity, with an emphasis on Rhetoric

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

**“The Paradox of Presidential Popularity,
with an emphasis on Rhetoric”**

written by

Amanda Wiley

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for completion of the
Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

thesis director

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The Paradox of Presidential Popularity, with an Emphasis on Rhetoric

Introduction

This study considers how President Bill Clinton maintained consistently high levels of public support in the face of the incessant scandals that plagued his presidency. It is my assessment that it is the nature of the presidency, Clinton's political skill, the economic environment during his terms, Clinton's rhetoric, and his personality that made his survival possible. I will place special emphasis on the areas of Clinton's personality and rhetoric as the key components for this explanation, both because I feel these characteristics are most relevant to my study and the most unexplored.

Polling data reveals a high job approval rating of Clinton at the time he left office. Early in his presidency, Clinton's numbers were less than impressive. However, as the government shut down of early 1996, columnist David Moore writes, "...Clinton's approval rating moved permanently above the 50% level, and never fell below 52% after that."¹ When Clinton left office, he had the highest job approval rating that any president had received in the past fifty years.² In January of 2001, sixty-five percent of Americans approved of the manner in which Clinton performed the functions of president.³ Conversely, the numbers concerning personal approval were clearly lower at forty-one percent.⁴

¹ David W. Moore, "Clinton Leaves Office With Mixed Public Reaction," The Gallup Poll Monthly January 2001: 14.

² Moore 14.

³ Moore 14.

⁴ Moore 14.

These strong ratings, even after very public scandal, are one of the reasons I chose to make this inquiry. The numbers regarding dates closely associated with scandal add to the contradictory nature of Clinton's relationship to the American public. In fact, as author David Moore writes, "Clinton's highest ratings came during the Lewinsky scandal... the only time that Clinton received a rating above 70% was immediately after the House of Representatives impeached him and sent the charges to the Senate for trial."⁵ When President Clinton testified before a grand jury concerning an alleged Lewinsky cover up, Clinton's job approval rating rose six points.⁶ These reports, coupled with data that indicates that less than half of Americans think Clinton is a good person, created an enigma worthy of exploration.

The Role of Scandal

Clinton's character and credibility suffered a heavy assault in his bid for the presidency. The first charges against his character rose during his bid for the presidency. During the 1992 presidential campaign, two occurrences from Bill Clinton's past came back to haunt him, his draft status and marijuana use. Clinton was accused of being a draft dodger and participating in anti-war demonstrations while studying in England.⁷ Clinton's response to reporters' questions over whether he ever used marijuana became a running joke in the media. During a prior gubernatorial campaign, Clinton said that he had not used marijuana. Then, at the 1992 primary debate, Clinton admitted that he had tried marijuana, though he had not liked it, did not inhale, and never tried it again. Jeffrey D. Schultz writes, "Most Clinton critics were not concerned that he had used

⁵ Moore 14.

⁶ Moore 23.

⁷ Jeffrey D. Schultz, Presidential Scandals (Washington, D. C.: CQ Press, 2000) 431-432.

marijuana...what concerned them was the lengths to which Clinton went to conceal the truth.”⁸

One of Clinton’s major downfalls was women. According to various reports, Bill Clinton had a number of sexual affairs after his marriage to Hillary Rodham. The list included Dolly Kyle Browning, Gennifer Flowers, Sally Perdue, Bobbie Ann Williams, and Monica Lewinsky. All of these women claim to have had a sexual relationship with Clinton.⁹ Other women charged Clinton with sexual misconduct. In 1994, Paula Jones filed a civil case against President Clinton for sexual harassment. During the course of the Paula Jones case, Juanita Brodderick claimed that, in 1978 Clinton, then Attorney General of Arkansas, had raped her. In 1998, Kathleen Willey appeared on 60 Minutes and accused Clinton of sexual harassment.¹⁰

The Clinton scandal known as “Whitewater” referred to a land deal made in 1978 by the Clintons and James and Susan McDougal.¹¹ Allegations against the Clintons’ involvement with McDougal, who operated a savings and loan, led to an independent counsel investigation by Robert Fiske and later Kenneth Starr. Starr’s investigation into the Clintons’ activities continued for the next four years. During the course of the investigation, White House attorney, Vince Foster, committed suicide. The Senate established a Whitewater Committee, which also investigated the Foster suicide¹². The McDougals and Arkansas Governor Jim Guy Tucker were indicted.¹³ The Starr Report was issued in September of 1998.¹⁴

⁸ Schultz 432-433.

⁹ Schultz 433-438.

¹⁰ Schultz 438-442.

¹¹ Schultz 443.

¹² Schultz 447.

¹³ Schultz 444-445.

¹⁴ Waldman 232.

Another scandal that shrouded the Clinton presidency was "Filegate." "Filegate" referred to the discovery of hundreds of FBI files that the White House had obtained on Republicans. The White House was investigated for using the files for, as Schultz writes, "political dirt."¹⁵ Yet another scandal ensued in 1993 when Clinton fired the employees of the White House travel office and replaced them with a travel business owned by a friend of the Clintons.¹⁶ In addition to the Clintons, members of his administration faced inquiries and charges. Mike Espy, Secretary of Agriculture, Henry Cisneros, HUD Secretary, Ron Brown, Secretary of Commerce, Bruce Babbitt, Secretary of the Interior, and Alexis Herman, Secretary of Labor, all faced criminal investigations.¹⁷

Clinton faced another setback after the mid-term congressional elections of 1994. The Republicans gained control of the Congress for the first time in forty years. This development would make legislative leadership that much more difficult for a Democratic president. The most damaging result of the Democratic minority was that it enabled Congressional Republicans to pursue investigations of Clinton with more legitimacy because majority status gave them the chairmanships of committees. Further, the loss of Democratic seats was blamed on Clinton and his administration's lackluster legislative performance.

Campaign fundraising was another area of controversy for Clinton. Allegations arose concerning Clinton's 1996 election. Washingtonpost.com reports that, "both the Democratic National Committee and the White House were linked to outrageous behavior."¹⁸ Coffee with the president or a night in the Lincoln bedroom were a few of

¹⁵ Schultz 445.

¹⁶ Schultz 446.

¹⁷ Schultz 447-456.

¹⁸ "Campaign Finance Special Report", 20 March 2003 <<http://www.washingtonpost.com>>

the perks enjoyed by large contributors. Though not illegal, the practices were considered repugnant. Then charges were made in the media that Vice-President Al Gore had broken federal law by soliciting campaign funds from his office. Such behavior is illegal on federal property.¹⁹ Eventually, the DNC admitted that many of the soft money contributions in 1996 were illegal, and they returned 2.8 million dollars mostly to foreign nationals and many that had given on behalf of others.²⁰

Attorney General Janet Reno did not appoint a special prosecutor to investigate the matter. However, eventually several people closely associated with the White House were indicted: Johnny Chung, who had reportedly visited the White House forty-nine times; Maria Hsia, a long time Democratic fundraiser; Pauline Kanchanalak, who also had regular access to the White House; and Yah Lin "Charlie" Trie, a friend of Clinton's from Little Rock.²¹ The campaign fundraising controversy not only raised questions about Clinton's character and called his credibility into question, but it also reflected poorly on the American political system. Many felt, as Schultz writes, it was evident that the "wealthy can buy access to power" in Clinton's administration.²²

The impact of all prior scandals would pale in comparison to "the storm over Lewinsky."²³ The story broke in January 1998 that Bill Clinton had urged Monica Lewinsky, a White House aide, to lie about their sexual relationship.²⁴ An excerpt from the Articles of Impeachment approved by the House Judiciary Committee reads:

"William Jefferson Clinton has undermined the integrity of his office has brought disrepute on the Presidency, has betrayed his trust as President, and has acted in a

¹⁹ <<http://www.washingtonpost.com>>

²⁰ <<http://www.washingtonpost.com>>

²¹ <<http://www.washingtonpost.com>>

²² Schultz 452.

manner subversive of the rule of law and justice, to the manifest injury of the People of the United States.”²⁵

Then the case went before the entire House. CQ Weekly reports, “The 228-206 vote on the first article of impeachment closed out a year in which the president’s affair with Monica Lewinsky and his denial under oath of a sexual relationship cast a shadow over Washington.”²⁶ The Senate then put him on trial. On February 12, 1999, the Senate voted to acquit the President.²⁷

During his presidency, Bill Clinton was associated with a host of scandals and personal inconsistencies that rival those associated with Hollywood playboys. Many of President Clinton’s difficulties involving his own personal life were of his own making. Despite the large amount of damage done to Clinton’s image, he was a two-term president with a number of accomplishments under his belt. At times it appeared that Clinton would be removed from office, his ability to hold onto his position earn him the label, “survivor.” The best place to look for his survival skills is in his words. It is here that I begin my search for that elusive quality that allowed Clinton to evade his own personal debacles, the weapons of the Christian Right, and a less than stellar legislative record. What skills, devices, or characteristics allowed Clinton to beat the odds?

In his 1993 Inaugural Address, President Bill Clinton stated, “There is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured by what is right about America. And so today we pledge an end to deadlock and drift, and a new season of American renewal has

²⁵ Waldman 219.

²⁴ Waldman 200.

²⁵ “Special Report Impeachment”, *TIME* 21 Dec. 1998: 20.

²⁶ Nitschke, Lori and CQ Weekly Staff. “Members Made the Deals, But Scandals Made the News”, *CQ Weekly Staff* 22 Dec. 1998:

²⁷ Waldman 261.

begun.”²⁸ This quote marks the beginning of Bill Clinton’s presidency, and he promised Americans a time full of energy, hope, and renewal. The rhetoric was upbeat and poised Americans for change. It had helped him to beat an incumbent president and enter office as the second youngest president ever. “Young and new” were the themes of Clinton’s first presidential campaign, and these themes resonated well with the American public. Despite all the glory of Inauguration Day, times would not always be so good for Bill Clinton. At its lowest points, his presidency seemed to have disintegrated into tabloid headlines. His most memorable quotes were given in the context of scandal. Author Joe Klein writes:

In the end, the only three Clinton quotations judged memorable enough to be included in the seventeenth edition of Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations were:

“I experimented with marijuana a time or two. And I didn’t like it, and didn’t inhale, and didn’t try it again.”—3/31/92

“I am going to say this again: I did not have sexual relations with that woman—Miss Lewinsky.”—1/26/98

“It depends on what the meaning of the word “is” is. If the—if he—if “is” means is and never has been, that is not—that is one thing. If it means there is none, that was a completely true statement.”—8/17/98²⁹

However, for the most part, President Bill Clinton maintained strong ratings in opinion polls.³⁰ How was this possible?

²⁸ Fred R. Greenstein, The Presidential Difference (New York: The Free Press, 2000) 173.

²⁹ Joe Klein, The Natural (New York: Doubleday, 2002)

The Role of Presidential Power

One possible explanation for Clinton's survival is his role as president. This reasoning implies that the amount of power or nature of the authority invested in the president enabled Clinton, as incumbent, to lull his public into agreement or, at least, apathy. There is much evidence to the contrary. First, though Clinton was not removed from office, Congress formally impeached him. Second, despite strong job approval ratings, there was a strong anti-Clinton movement among conservatives and poor polling numbers regarding his character and morals.

Presidents are not spared from bad publicity or criticism simply because they are president. This position, in and of itself, is not enough to guarantee Clinton's continuing in office. Further, if being president gave one an air of invincibility, it would follow that Clinton would have had even higher approval ratings in all areas. This was not the case. Delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1787 had lived under the rule of the tyrannical King George III. They had no interest in being ruled by a king, and it is evident with such constitutional measures as checks and balances and separation of powers. The limits of presidential power are clearly enumerated. The position and power of the president falls short of explaining Clinton's survival.

The Role of Charisma

Bill Clinton has earned a reputation as a very good politician. Of course, in today's anti-government society this sort of reputation can become a stigma. However, what quality, or qualities, does Clinton possess that enabled him to achieve rapport with such varied audiences? Many perceptive observers have labeled Bill Clinton a charismatic figure. First, it is necessary to clarify what this word charisma means.

³⁰ Rick Weiss, "That Magic Touch," The Washington Post 18-24 Nov. 2002, weekly ed.: 34.

According to Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, charisma is "a personal magic of leadership arousing popular loyalty or enthusiasm for a public figure."³¹ Bill Clinton idolized American heroes such as John F. Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He clearly desired to emulate their charismatic personas. Was Bill Clinton successful in becoming a charismatic figure in the eyes of Americans?

Hendrik Hertzberg, Senior Editor of The New Yorker, said of Clinton, "His speech introducing his healthcare plan was a real tour de force. So was his first State of the Union. These were not a tour de force of speechwriting; they're a tour de force of extemporaneous reaching out and grabbing the audience by the throat. He's awfully good at that." Similar sentiments were expressed of Clinton, not only as president, but also during his entire political career. Both experts and members of the American public have recognized the quality of charisma in Clinton. However, not all were won over by this charismatic zeal. Anthony Dolan writes, "...that in the midst of one of his addresses, a little genie gets up and runs around the room and whispers in everyone's ear, even though things are ostensibly going well: 'Don't believe this guy.'³² For Dolan, charismatic Clinton cannot override what he believes to be lacking in Clinton. Similarly, Mary Kate Cary writes:

One of my recent assignments... was to write [the Republican] response to the President's [most recent] State of the Union. And... I was in the position of writing a response to a speech where I didn't know what he was going to say. And... what we tried to do with [Clinton was] to emphasize the things that he is

³¹ Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 1993) 193.

³² Rankin 1.

not, and one of those things, unfortunately, is credible, I don't think [he] comes across as credible to most listeners.³³

Regardless of Dolan's and Cary's opinions, neither of them negates Clinton's charisma. I think both of their opinions clarify the role of charisma in my inquiry and Clinton's style.

Many obstacles exist for a president with a substantially charismatic style. First, Clinton, as governor, had a heavy hand in writing his speeches. This would not be possible as president.³⁴ Secondly, Clinton was very strong when speaking in a setting that allowed him to talk almost one-on-one with his audience. As president, "Television reporters told his story over mute gestures."³⁵ This is not the ideal type environment for a charismatic communicator. Third, Clinton faced the news media's increasing role in American society. Gelderman writes that, "he must work harder than previous presidents at being communicator in chief." Clinton characterized the nation as "awash with news" because of a burgeoning mass media.³⁶ As a result, the public often only heard a thirty-second sound byte from Clinton's much longer speeches. Clinton, charismatic persona that he is, faced a very difficult task in selling himself and his message to his public. Ted Sorensen stated, "...he is least effective when he is giving a formal speech on national television or to a very large audience."³⁷ Of course, Clinton was constantly in both these situations as president.

Could Clinton's charisma override his lack of credibility with the American public? For Anthony Dolan and Mary Cate Cary, it could not. However, what about the American public? Did they believe the words Clinton spoke? The way to best examine

³³ Rankin 1.

³⁴ Carol Gelderman, *All the Presidents' Words* (New York: Walker and Company, 1997) 156.

³⁵ Gelderman 156.

³⁶ Gelderman 156.

this inquiry is through opinion polling data. In 1997, Clinton's personal iniquities had already been the topic of much news. However, 61 percent of Americans approved of Clinton's work as president.³⁸ Columnist Richard Morin, writes, "The survey also found that large majorities of Americans doubt that the scandals that follow Clinton into his second term will significantly weaken the president politically or interfere with his ability to govern."³⁹

Conversely, the public's opinion of Clinton's morality was substantially lower. Over half of those taking part in the survey communicated that Clinton is dishonest and untrustworthy.⁴⁰ It seems that the American public dichotomized Clinton, the man, and Clinton, the president. It follows that charisma is at least one piece of the puzzle I am looking for, but it certainly does not explain the entire puzzle. The rhetorical venues of the office of president provided too many obstacles for charisma to be the sole explanation for Clinton's sustainability.

The assertion that charisma cannot be the sole explanation for Clinton's political viability is important. Charisma is a strong and intense feeling that one can get caught up in and cause him or her to take action. George Stephanopoulos, a former senior advisor to Clinton, described him as a person who possesses "personal magnetism."⁴¹ Clinton is one of the most charismatic politicians of the last half of the 20th century in America. Charisma and rhetoric are closely related, because it is through a person's rhetoric that his or her charisma can be made evident.

³⁷ Rankin 1.

³⁸ Richard Morin, "Clinton's Approval Rating At Highest Mark Since '93" The Washington Post 19 Jan. 1997: A22.

³⁹ Morin A22.

⁴⁰ Morin A22.

⁴¹ John F. Harris, "Stephanopoulos Book Tests Loyalty," The Washington Post 8 March 1999: A3.

It follows that charisma could easily explain high opinion poll ratings for Clinton. However, there were two main barriers between Clinton's charisma and the American people. One was the impersonal nature of television. Charisma cannot be found in the actual words of the speaker, but it is in the feelings that the speaker's words evoke. This feeling is most easily communicated when a person is physically in the same location as the speaker. I was able to hear Clinton speak on Memorial Day 2000, at Arlington cemetery. The feeling I get when watching Clinton speak via television does not compare to how I felt hearing Clinton's words in a crowded amphitheater with Clinton. Instead of person-to-person contact, Americans watched Clinton on their television sets. It is much more difficult to communicate charisma through a blurb viewed on a television.

A second obstacle for charisma was that Clinton was in the news constantly for scandal and even illegal activity. The effects of charisma are clearly limited by the aforementioned institutional restraints of the presidency. In addition, Clinton's ethical and moral shortcomings had a major presence in the news media. The feeling of charisma cannot negate reported facts and impeachment votes completely. Clinton's words were enhanced by charisma (especially in an interpersonal setting), but it cannot alone override the damage to credibility Clinton suffered by his personal shortcomings. Further, the large amount of scandal that Clinton faced personally, politically, and legally served to immobilize him to an extent. The large amount of time and energy needed limited his opportunities for effective, relevant public speaking.

The Role of Coalition-Building

Perhaps Clinton was able to maintain himself by forming a coalition in his behalf and dividing his opponents. However, Clinton faced many obstacles to form such a

coalition. He was the first Democrat since Harry Truman to operate within a divided government.⁴² A strongly unified coalition would enable Clinton to have policy success and present a purposeful image to the American public. Mark A. Peterson writes:

When one looks at Clinton's actual engagement with the group system, as expected one observes a president and White House using the established institutional resources of the Executive Office to pursue a number of interest group strategies, both simultaneously for divergent purposes and sequentially as the political ground shifts dramatically under the president's feet. These activities, however, have been at best only modestly successful in fulfilling the president's objectives.⁴³

Instead of a legacy of strong interest group coalition, the political environment composed of the issues, personal scandal, and the nature of politics united those who were in opposition to Clinton. These factors armed Clinton's enemies with a large artillery, which was effectively used to damage much of his legislative agenda and tarnish his image. This explanation does more to account for Clinton's downfalls than his survival.

The Role of the Economy

Another area that needs to be explored is the economic environment during Clinton's presidency. During the 1992 presidential campaign, James Carville had the words "The economy, stupid" posted near his desk.⁴⁴ One of Clinton's major successes was the strengthening of the United States economy. Whether or not these developments were directly a result of choices he made, Clinton received much of the praise for the

⁴² Campbell and Rockman The Clinton Legacy 141.

⁴³ Campbell and Rockman The Clinton Legacy 142.

economic growth, such as budget surpluses. Paul J. Quirk and William Cunion wrote, "He has presided over one of the most prosperous eras in the nation's history."⁴⁵ Many have asked whether Clinton could have survived impeachment if he had not enjoyed such economic strength?

There is a concept known as "pocketbook politics" that hypothesizes that people recognize and act on their economic interests. If they are doing better, they vote for the person they think is responsible. According to polling conducted by the Gallup service, from the time Clinton entered office to his re-election in 1996, the numbers of Americans who would term economic conditions in the United States as "excellent/good" increased by twenty percent.⁴⁶ This could possibly explain why Clinton ran well in opinion polls despite being surrounded by scandal.

Michael Waldman writes, "His popularity wasn't just a product of the good economy, like a stock market index fund. The public approved his leadership, liked the approach to government and even to the presidency."⁴⁷ Of course, this is the opinion of a person who worked for Clinton. However, I agree with Waldman that the economy is not the sole explanation for Clinton's survival. His strong economic success made Clinton much more politically viable, but economics alone does not explain his staying power.

The Role of Presidential Character

Another explanation for Clinton's staying power lies in his presidential character. James David Barber has created a way to categorize presidential character according to

⁴⁴ Campbell and Rockman *The Clinton Presidency: First Appraisals* 27.

⁴⁵ Campbell and Rockman *The Clinton Legacy* 214.

⁴⁶ Jeffrey M. Jones, "Hispanics, Whites Rates Bush Positively, While Blacks Are Much More Negative." *The Gallup Poll Monthly* June 2001: 44.

five areas—character, world view, style, power situation, and climate of expectations⁴⁸. According to Barber's criteria, Bill Clinton is clearly an active-positive president. Some of the other active-positive presidents are Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, and John Kennedy. This type of leader possesses "an ability [to] dance to the music."⁴⁹ Clinton has this talent. Barber writes that an active-positive president will find it difficult in interacting with others that do not "see things his way."⁵⁰ Clinton also has this fault as was evident in his early policy debacles, such as overhauling health care and gays in the military. Also, the "active-positive Presidents are those who appear to have fun in the vigorous exercise or presidential power."⁵¹ Greenstein remarks that Clinton is one who is "...political in every fiber of his being."⁵²

An active president is a workhorse. Clinton got himself into many, major predicaments. His approach to the job and work ethic toward the presidency provided the drive and commitment to overcome such difficulties. A positive president likes his job. Bill Clinton had desired to be President of the United States and took calculated steps toward the office. Someone once asked Bill Clinton, with all the talents and strengths he possessed, why politics? "It's the only track I ever wanted to run on," he responded.⁵³ Further, President Clinton was willing to fight to keep his position. Charles O. Jones said of Clinton, "Far too often, he took his appeals on the road or to the airwaves, perhaps cheapening the presidential currency..."⁵⁴ Clinton was willing to do and say things that other presidents would have considered beneath them, for example discussing politics

⁴⁷ Waldman 213.

⁴⁸ James David Barber, *The Presidential Character* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1992) 8.

⁴⁹ Barber 9.

⁵⁰ Barber 9.

⁵¹ Barber 267.

⁵² Greenstein 174.

⁵³ Manariss 390.

and whether he wore boxers or briefs on MTV. As William Randolph Hearst put it, “A politician will do anything to keep his job...”⁵⁵ As a result, most are willing to do whatever it takes to maintain their place. Bill Clinton was clearly this type of politician. He was willing to eat a great deal of crow in the face of public scrutiny. It is not that Bill Clinton did not have ego (I am sure he did and does), but he was willing to do some very embarrassing “damage control.” Bill Clinton’s characterization as an active-positive president offers another piece to the puzzle of his political durability.

The Role of Personality

Personality is “an individual’s enduring persistent response across a variety of situations.”⁵⁶ A person’s personality is relatively stable way for ascertaining how they react to certain situations. A personality consists of a number of different personality traits. One of Clinton’s personality traits deals with attitude. Clinton has an attitude of extroversion, according to Jung’s typological characterization of personality. A person’s basic attitude “describe[s] the direction of psychological interest.”⁵⁷ On the other hand an introverted person is much more drawn to that which is internal or within one’s self. A few characteristics of extroverts are: focusing on the interpersonal side of psychic life, living according to external necessity, and a high concern for adaptation to environmental demands.⁵⁸ All of these traits lend themselves well to one whose job maintenance is based on approval.

⁵⁴ Campbell and Rockman *The Clinton Presidency: First Appraisals* 5.

⁵⁵ James B. Simpson, *Simpson’s Contemporary Quotations* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1988) 29.

⁵⁶ Rom Harre and Roger Lamb, ed., *The Encyclopedic Dictionary of Psychology* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1983) 460.

⁵⁷ *The Encyclopedic Dictionary of Psychology* 228.

⁵⁸ *The Encyclopedic Dictionary of Psychology* 228.

Another of Bill Clinton's personality traits is optimism. Optimism is defined as "a tendency to expect the best possible outcome or dwell on the most hopeful aspects of the situation."⁵⁹ Clinton's optimism served as a strong asset for him in the face of scandal. Clinton developed his talent for optimism at a young age. His stepfather was an alcoholic, and he would often have to protect his mother from him. However, "Bill gave no outward sign of turmoil at home."⁶⁰ Bill Clinton would use this ability to appear a focused, energetic leader, while facing severe personal difficulties. Clinton describes it best, when he stated, "... All my life, I've had to work to draw the line in the dirt, to make conflict my friend, not my enemy."⁶¹

Clinton was more comfortable with controversy and conflict than many politicians are because of his background. His adeptness in the hot seat would be needed several times during the course of his presidency but never as drastically as in the face of the Lewinsky scandal. Clinton went on to say, "If you grow up in an environment that causes you to want to avoid trouble, you tend to try to keep peace at all costs."⁶² Contrary to Clinton's own words, in actuality, many times his combativeness, as a politician and as a president, did not serve his best interest.

An episode early in Clinton's political career taught him a valuable lesson on the danger of being too non-combative, his loss to Frank White for re-election as Arkansas's governor in 1980. Author David Maraniss writes, "When Frank White's campaign began running television commercials depicting the Cuban Refugee riot at Fort Chaffee,

⁵⁹ *The American Heritage Dictionary*, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000) 1235.

⁶⁰ Greenstein 175.

⁶¹ Greenstein 175.

⁶² Greenstein 175.

Clinton's lead dropped 10 percentage points in one week. There was no response."⁶³ Clinton lost his re-election bid making him the "the youngest defeated governor in American and only the third Arkansas governor in the twentieth century to be denied a second two-year term."⁶⁴ Hillary's own analysis of the election led her to the conclusion that Clinton's organization had not run the campaign well. They had been altogether ineffective, especially in their reaction to Frank White's ads of the Cuban refugees' riot at Fort Chaffee. White's ads had provided Arkansas voters with a negative depiction of Clinton's leadership skills. The reaction time for the Clinton camp was too slow. Both Hillary and Bill Clinton had underestimated the impacts of the negative attacks because neither thought anyone would give the claims validity. She realized later, "it was not fair or accurate, but it was very effective."⁶⁵

Clinton did not stay down long and by February 1982, he had begun running television ads for the next gubernatorial election. In the ads, Clinton used common Arkansas language to apologize to the people of Arkansas and promised that he had changed. Clinton based the apology on the reasoning that his dad had never had to punish him twice for the same thing.⁶⁶ The strategy worked and Clinton won the gubernatorial election of 1982. Manariss writes that there was a clear lesson that Clinton should have learned from the loss, "By admitting his mistakes and seeking absolution before the first tough question of the race could be asked, Clinton was able to say that criticisms of his previous actions were irrelevant."⁶⁷

⁶³ David Maraniss, *First in His Class* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995) 384.

⁶⁴ Maraniss 387-388.

⁶⁵ Maraniss 393.

⁶⁶ Maraniss 398.

⁶⁷ Maraniss 399.

Clinton's combativeness is a strength in a tough political environment. However, the excesses of combativeness would turn out to be pathological for Clinton's presidency. Scandals ranging from Whitewater to Monica Lewinsky showed him to be a man ready to engage in confrontation, though not always to be forthright about his mistakes. Another illustration of the aggressiveness that plagued Clinton's presidency was his refusal to settle outside of court in the Paula Jones sexual harassment case. If he had agreed to settle the Jones case out of court, there would not have been as much of the negative publicity to combat. The case exploded when the Supreme Court ruled that a sitting president could be sued for actions prior to his time as president if it did not cause him to be taken away from his duties. Specifically, the Supreme Court ruled that Paula Jones could sue Bill Clinton for sexual harassment. Clinton had learned in his 1980 re-election bid that it was dangerous to lay low and assume the best. So, in the Jones case, Clinton did not back down. However, this was to his detriment. Paula Jones paved the way for Monica Lewinsky and painted Clinton as a sex-obsessed cad.

At the end of the Lewinsky affair, Clinton would fall back on the strategy that had allowed him to win back the governorship. He apologized to the American public and sought their forgiveness. However, this tendency to pursue reconciliation, even when he had caused the conflict himself, helped him to combat political and personal obstacles throughout his presidency. For example, a week before Clinton was to deliver his 1998 State of the Union Address, the report of a Monica Lewinsky-Bill Clinton affair broke. What would Bill Clinton say to the nation in the face of such charges? Surprisingly, Greenstein reports, "He hit a home run."⁶⁸ His approval rating improved by eight points after the speech. Clinton had learned how to perform as a child, and he had perfected the

ability over time. It is clear that Clinton's personality helped him remain politically viable in the face of scandal and, eventually, impeachment.

The Role of Personal Character

There has already been much discussion of Clinton's character. A person of character is someone whose word can be trusted, and his or her actions are correct. The debate about morality and its role in the presidency raged during the Clinton presidency. Should morals be evaluated? Can morals be enforced? Whether or not morals are relative is beside the point. A person's character is going to be injured when he or she is involved in the number of scandals that Clinton was. If he was just a United States citizen, such accusations would merely damage his reputation. Clinton held the most important office in the United States. Damage to his character brought damage to Clinton's credibility. This is where scandal hit him the hardest.

Author Waldman writes, "But character has another face. He kept his head during a harrowing economic crisis. He never gave up, and he instilled that determination in those of us around him. That grit is a form of character, too—the highest kind."⁶⁹ I have no doubt that Clinton's charisma enabled many close to him to view him through that same lens as Waldman. Unfortunately for Clinton, the American public was not privy to such personal access of him. As a result, most found Clinton's character to be severely lacking, and it is not an explanation of his political vitality.

The Role of Rhetoric

The component of the Clinton presidency that necessitates further examination is his rhetoric. First, it is necessary to understand the importance of the development of the

⁶⁸ Greenstein 183.

⁶⁹ Waldman 273.

rhetorical presidency. Jeffrey K. Tulis describes this as “the modern tendency of a president to attempt to govern by means of direct rhetorical appeal.”⁷⁰ This is a twentieth century development, and it has changed the way that political scientists view presidential power. Prior to the advent of the rhetorical presidency, presidential power was “seen as consisting primarily of persuasion through bargaining with elites in the Washington community.”⁷¹ After the rhetorical presidency was established, the public superseded Washington elites as the president’s main customers. Public approval became the president’s chief weapon. What had allowed this evolution? The main explanation is the mass media. The president now has direct access to the people through the news media. Rhetoric is now at a higher premium than ever because it has the potential to make or break a presidency. Should this development bode well for Bill Clinton’s presidency? Ted Sorensen stated, “...Clinton is a superb communicator.”⁷² Whether Clinton was able to use his rhetorical skill to effectively consolidate presidential power is a key question in my inquiry.

In undertaking a study of former President Bill Clinton’s political rhetoric, one is immediately drawn to the pretty phrases and hometown dialect.⁷³ Clinton was able to use these two rhetorical devices with ease though they seem to contradict each other. For example, on the eve of the 1992 New Hampshire Primary, Clinton told the audience that he would stay in the race “until the last dog dies.”⁷⁴ On the other hand, when speaking to the United Nations General Assembly, Clinton states, “So let us resolve in the bright

⁷⁰ Richard J. Ellis, ed., *Speaking to the People* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998) 211.

⁷¹ Ellis 162.

⁷² Rankin, Bob, interview with Anthony Dolan, Rick Hertzberg, Ted Sorensen, and Mary Kate Cary, *Speechwriters Critique President Clinton As Communicator*. 16 April 2002.
<<http://www.rhino.com/Albums/7197bio.html>>

⁷³ Stephen A. Smith, ed., *The Rhetorical Invention of Bill Clinton* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1994) 1.

dawn of this new millennium to bring an era in which our desire to create will overwhelm our capacity to destroy. If we do that, then through the United Nations and far-sighted leaders, humanity finally can live up to its name.”⁷⁵ The two quotations are so different it would seem they were made by two, different people. However, these devices were signposts of arguably one of this country’s most rhetorical presidencies ever. The question I sought to answer was how Clinton was able to maintain his position of president and healthy public opinion ratings despite the numerous scandals that darkened his presidency. There are many possible answers to this question. I propose that it was the way in which Bill Clinton and his staff crafted his political rhetoric that allowed him to outlast the personal and political debacles that plagued his presidency. However, this answer is not specific enough. What specific elements of Clinton’s rhetoric allowed him to do this? There are a number of answers to this question.

The Role of Word Choice

One possible answer is his actual word choice. This does not speak of Clinton’s rhetorical presentation but the specific words he chose to include in his speeches. There are a number of ways to categorize these words. First, there are words used to make personal references, instances in which Clinton cited his own personal testimony within his speeches. Scholar Rachel Holloway notes that politicians use this sort of rhetoric to ask “citizens to vote for themselves.”⁷⁶ However, these words are not only useful in the context of an actual campaign. In fact, once elected, most politicians find themselves in almost constant campaign mode. Clinton was able to recognize the value in these types of words. For example, in his speech entitled “A Bridge to the Future” given at the

⁷⁴ J. Dennis Robinson, “As I Please” 20 March 2002 <<http://www.seacostNH.com>>

⁷⁵ Bill Clinton, “Peace in the New Millennium,” *Vital Speeches of the Day* October 1999: 5.

Democratic National Convention on August 29, 1996, Clinton said, "I know that Hillary and I still talk about the books we read to Chelsea when we were so tired we could hardly stay awake. We still remember them. And, more important, so does she." With this quote, Clinton shares a personal memory, but a memory he has in common with parents all over the country.

Bill Clinton made himself, not the Democratic Party or its platform, the political product he sold to the American people. He labeled himself a "New Democrat" with different ideas about where the party should be heading. During his presidency, Clinton would be forced to be intensely personal with America. As a result, the public saw every side to Clinton, the good, the bad, and the ugly. Were they more forgiving toward Clinton because of this openness? Was he so able to humanize himself to the American public that his own personal weaknesses somehow became embroiled in American's own weaknesses?

After being acquitted in the Senate impeachment trial Clinton stated, "I want to say again to the American people how profoundly sorry I am for what I said and did to trigger these events and the great burden they have imposed on the Congress and the American people."⁷⁷ Clinton responded to his acquittal with a very humble statement. The sincerity with which Clinton spoke cannot be assessed. However, his intensely personal statement assuaged much of the American public. In other words, were Americans willing to give him a break because they identified with him, and since they would give themselves that same break it was also extended to him? Bill Clinton was not America's first president to connect with Americans on an intensely personal level.

⁷⁶ Roderick A. Hart, *Campaign Talk* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 80.

⁷⁷ Greenstein 174

However, this was a clear strength of Clinton, who was at his best one-on-one or with a small group. The trend since Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his “fireside chats” has been toward a more personal presidency.⁷⁸ People had grown accustomed to the nature of a personal presidency. Clinton continued to use a strategy that had already been proven successful. Thus, though it gave Clinton a foothold with many Americans, this link alone would not be strong enough to explain Clinton’s survival.

The Role of Inclusive Language

A second aspect of word usage is inclusive language. A speaker uses inclusive language when he chooses words that include his audience in the subject matter of his speech. Some examples of inclusive language are our, us, we, the American people, etc. Clinton’s speeches are saturated with this type of language. Roderick P. Hart refers to this type of language as “human-interest language.” In Clinton’s address to the Democratic National Convention entitled “A Bridge to the Future”, he stated:

So tonight, let us resolve to build that bridge to the 21st century to meet our challenges and protect our values. Let us build a bridge to help our parents raise their children, to help young people and adults to get the education and training they need, to make our streets safer, to help Americans succeed at home and at work, to break the cycle of poverty and dependence, to protect our environment for generations to come, and to maintain our world leadership for peace and freedom. Let us resolve to build that bridge. Tonight, my fellow Americans, I ask all of our fellow citizens to join me and to join you in building that bridge to the 21st century.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Carol Gelderman, *All the Presidents’ Words* (New York: Walker and Company, 1997) 11-14.

⁷⁹ Bill Clinton, “A Bridge to the Future,” *Vital Speeches of the Day* September 1996: 707.

Clinton used more human-interest language than any other presidential candidate, of either party, from 1948 to the present, except Hubert Humphrey.⁸⁰ Hart sums up Clinton's rhetoric stating, "President Clinton stressed the common ties among the American people."⁸¹ On May 10, 1995, Clinton gave a speech regarding U. S. -Russian relations at Moscow State University. Instead of emphasizing the differing goals of Russians and Americans, he stressed commonalities between the goals of the two countries. He stated, "Your decision for democracy and cooperation has given us the opportunity to work together to fulfill the promise of our common victory over fascism 50 years ago." Not only did Clinton choose words that would make his audience feel included, but he also pointed out a common action that Russia and America had taken in the past. In a speech entitled "C-17, The Work Horse of The Future", Clinton stated:

Why do we have a strong defense today? To defend our immediate interests and our borders, but also because we learned in the 20th century that if we want to keep America free and safe we have to stand up for freedom and safety and security and peace and prosperity around the world. We can't be everywhere. We can't do everything. But when we can make a difference and when it is consistent with our values and our interests, we have to try.⁸²

The use of human-interest language helped the American people to feel as if they were a part of the Clinton administration. This helped him to maintain public opinion poll ratings, while caught in behaviors that most Americans would identify as immoral. However, is this use of inclusive language a defining characteristic for Clinton,

⁸⁰ Hart 4

⁸¹ Hart 4

⁸² Bill Clinton, "C-17, The Work Horse of the Future," *Vital Speeches of the Day* March 1996: 323.

specifically, or a Democratic politician in general? I think this final question deserves some further consideration.

Clinton was a member of the Democratic Party, had run on the Democratic ticket, and had, at least for the most part, advocated Democratic policies. A typical stereotype of the Democratic Party is that it is the more inclusive political party. It was the party with the demonstrably greater appeal to African-Americans, women, and other minorities. The Democratic Party is known as a proponent of diversity and the protector of minorities. These positions are reflected in the rhetoric of Democratic politicians. Of course, the presence of such language in Bill Clinton's rhetoric stems from his life before becoming a major political player. Although I do think this type of language draws people to Clinton, I do not think that the use of inclusive language, in and of itself, can account for Clinton's ability to dodge events that could have ended his presidency.

The Role of Common Language

The third specific attribute of Clinton's rhetoric that I studied was common language. Roderick P. Hart identifies this dimension of language as realism. He describes this type of language as "tangible, immediate, recognizable matters that affect people's everyday lives."⁸³ Clinton was masterful at using common language, and he used realism when appropriate. In a speech entitled "We've Made Good Progress", Clinton stated:

And he saw a guy out in the crowd that he knew and he said, "Brother Jones, if you had three Cadillacs, wouldn't you give one of them so we could gather up the kids and take them to school during the week and take them to church on the week end?" He said, "Sure, I would." He said, "And if you had \$3 million,

wouldn't you give up just a million of it so we could put a roof over somebody's head and make sure everybody had food to eat?" He said, "Well, of course, I would." He said, "And if you had three hot dogs—" He said, "Wait a minute, Governor, I've got three hot dogs."⁸⁴

Clinton realized his chief audience was not Washington elites but the American public. Was Clinton so able to identify with the American people by speaking their language that they were willing to excuse him for more than one half-truth? I do not think there is enough evidence to suggest that Clinton's use of realism alone could explain such inconsistencies. Moreover, Clinton did not use common language all the time. He used it when it was appropriate to the context. For example, in his 1996 acceptance speech, Clinton referred to the famous children's book, The Little Engine That Could.⁸⁵ Mothers and fathers all across America were brought in to Clinton's speech, because he was talking about matters that affect them on a daily basis. He also selected political advisers with similar styles. For example, James Carville, the political director for Clinton's campaign, reinforced Clinton's "good old boy" style.⁸⁶

Many people identified with this type of rhetoric. Clinton's talent lies in the fact that he could engage in small talk at a coffee shop, and, in the next instant, he could discuss details concerning Social Security with members of Congress. He showed an exceptional ability to entertain heads of state and connect with the American people. A good example of this ability is found in remarks that Clinton made to reporters after a meeting with congressional leaders on July 15, 1993, he stated:

⁸³ Hart 38.

⁸⁴ Bill Clinton, "We've Made Good Progress," Vital Speeches of the Day May 1995: 418.

⁸⁵ Hart 111.

Keep in mind the ultimate purpose of deficit reduction is to improve the economy by getting interest rates down, freezing up tax funds that we would otherwise have to spend on servicing the debt, and improving the climate for new jobs. It's also clear that we have to have some investment incentives. People have to take this money we're going to save through reducing the deficit, turn around and invest it in the economy. And if you raise tax rates on upper income people and then you provide only in a very targeted way to in effect lower their tax burden by having them create jobs, then you win either way, because either way you reduce the deficit and you improve the economy. That's what we are trying to do.⁸⁷

The Role of References to the "Little People"

Another aspect of Clinton's word usage that I examined was references to the "little people." These types of references are more prevalent in modern presidential rhetoric. And this is another element one would expect to find in the rhetoric of Democratic candidates. However, again, its presence in Clinton's rhetoric is so pervasive that it can be considered a trademark of Clinton. This is a product of many factors, but Clinton's background in small town Arkansas plays a huge part in the way he communicates with people. For example, in his 2000 State of the Union he stated, "There's another part of our American community in trouble tonight—our family farmers." Later, in the same address, Clinton says, "Everywhere I go, I meet talented people eager for opportunity, and able to work."

In many senses, Clinton was a people's president. In an address entitled, "Proposed Tax Breaks," Clinton stated:

⁸⁶ Colin Campbell and Bert A. Rockman, eds., *The Clinton Legacy* (New York: Chatham House Publishers, 2000) 287.

I won't support ideas that sound good but aren't paid for, ideas that weaken the progress we've made in the previous two years for working families, ideas that hurt poor people who are doing their dead-level best to raise their kids and work their way into the middle class, ideas that undermine our fight against crime or for a clean environment or for better schools or for the strength and well-being of our armed forces and foreign policy.

It is not surprising that references to the "little people" would be such a large part of the words he chooses. In his 1996 acceptance speech, Clinton stated, "I want to build a bridge to the 21st century...where every eight-year-old can point to a book and say, 'I can read it myself'."⁸⁸ Was this connection able to keep Clinton afloat, when the scandals that rocked his presidency arose? This is a part of the explanation for Clinton's remarkable staying power.

The Role of Speech Organization

An important component of speechmaking is pattern of organization, or the format of a specific speech. Clinton gave a large variety of speeches in a number of very different venues as President, so it is difficult to find any meaningful pattern in the way his speeches were organized. However, it would be advantageous to examine the form of speeches that Clinton gave as president. Was he particularly adept at the speaking engagements of a president? Did this in some way enable him to win over the hearts and minds of a number of Americans despite his less than honest behavior toward them? This is a very crucial element of Clinton's rhetorical abilities.

⁸⁷ Greenstein 173.

⁸⁸ Greenstein 108

There are many ways in which to prepare a speech. Manuscript and extemporaneous speaking are two of the main ways political rhetoric is communicated. A manuscript speech is one, in which the complete text of the speech is pre-prepared and written or typed out. An extemporaneous speech is one given with knowledge of the subject and usually it is given from an outline format. This allows the speaker to personalize and ad-lib during the speech. I interviewed Dr. Stephen A. Smith, author of Bill Clinton on Stump, State, and Stage: The Rhetorical Road to the White House. Aside from penning a book on the topic, Dr. Smith actually wrote speeches for Clinton during his time as governor of Arkansas. Dr. Smith stated:

I first started writing speeches [for him] in 1974. I would spend a week working on a specific policy or concept, and he could know it all in 30 minutes. After awhile, I just started giving him an outline. He did not do well from a prepared text. For example, the Dukakis disaster to be sure. The speech was 18 ½ pages long. It takes about 2 minutes to get through a page, and the crowd kept interrupting. He only had 15 minutes to deliver the speech, so it was a prescription for disaster. He should have just given them a five-minute pep talk. Instead, we had written draft after draft.⁸⁹

Dr. Smith feels that Clinton is at his best when speaking extemporaneously. I asked Dr. Smith how, in general, he felt about Clinton's evolution as a speechmaker. This question for Dr. Smith has a direct correlation with the type of speeches presidents usually make. He said, "I think it was more of a devolution. I think he was more inspiring in the 1970s. I thought he was boring as president—he did not have the time.

He was almost always using a prepared text.” (Clearly, Dr. Smith sees Clinton’s strength in an extemporaneous format hampered by the kinds of speaking engagements required of a person serving in the capacity of president.) Clinton, himself, voiced his own concerns, “I was always worried that I never would quite fit in modern politics, which is so much television and the thirty-second sound bite and look macho, whether you are or not, and all that sort of stuff.”⁹⁰ According to Dr. Smith, it was not Clinton’s ability to speak extemporaneously that enabled him to maintain his position. Clinton’s speaking style alone does not explain Clinton’s survival.

The Role of Vision

Another aspect that I identified in Clinton’s rhetoric is vision, or the ultimate goal of his politics. In other words, where did Clinton want to take the American public? I examined his speeches for this overriding principle. This is very difficult to do with Clinton’s large number of speaking engagements as president. Some of the themes that were very repetitive were equality, hope, and opportunity for all Americans. Clinton’s rhetoric is filled with happy endings. In his address “The Lessons of the Marshall Plan”, Clinton said:

For a teenage boy in Germany, Marshall aid was the generous hand that helped lift his homeland from its ruinous past. He still recalls the American trucks driving onto the schoolyard, bringing soup that warmed hearts and hands. That boy grew up to be a passionate champion of freedom and unity in Europe, and a great and cherished friend of America. He became the first Chancellor of a free

⁸⁹ Stephen A. Smith, personal interview, 1 July 2002. These comments are in reference to the selection of Clinton to give the 1988 speech to Democratic convention nominating Michael Dukakis for president. Clinton’s performance was poor, and the opportunity led to disaster.

⁹⁰ Greenstein 174.

and unified Germany. In his good life and fine work, Helmut Kohl has come to symbolize both the substance and the spirit of the Marshall Plan.⁹¹

Clinton's personal experiences came out in the theme and vision of his rhetoric. He was an optimist, always believing a solution would come. Clinton had lived the American dream. He was born in a small town in Arkansas to an alcoholic father, and now he was President of the United States. It was the ultimate bad ending. In his book Bill Clinton, on Stump, State, and Stage, Dr. Smith identifies a vision, which he states is consistent in all of Clinton's campaigns. This vision can best be understood in Clinton's own words, "I will try to bring out the best in all of us...I will try to be honest about what cannot be done, but I will direct our policy visions toward what must be done."⁹²

Clinton opted for rhetoric that was optimistic and future-oriented. He seemed to be telling Americans, "You may not like where you are right now, but, if you will get on board with me, I will take you where you want to go." Clinton, I think, saw himself as a biblical Moses, who would take Americans to the Promised Land. Clinton articulated his ideal of a Promised Land in this way, "I want all of us to be able to say, we don't need to look down on anybody else to feel good about ourselves and our families and our future."⁹³ This message was well received by the American public. And a little known governor from a small, Southern state was able to defeat a relatively popular, incumbent president. Kenneth Duberstein, a former Reagan official, remarked early in Clinton's administration, "The American people are rooting for Bill Clinton and rooting for our

⁹¹ Bill Clinton, "The Lessons of the Marshall Plan," Vital Speeches of the Day July 1997: 547.

⁹² Smith 8.

⁹³ Hart 81.

system of government to work.”⁹⁴ The popularity of Clinton’s themes helps explain his political sustainability.

The Role of Ambiguity

Clinton’s use of ambiguity, mentioned by Smith, makes it extremely difficult to understand what Clinton’s actual thoughts were when he spoke. Greenstein writes of this ambiguity, Clinton’s “positions are ever open to modification.”⁹⁵ Clinton is the consummate politician. He was one who not only campaigned for people’s vote but also for their love and affection. It was very difficult to do so given the pluralistic society Clinton governed. This is evident in the large amount of money that the White House spent on public opinion polls. The White House spent \$1,986,410 in 1993 alone to gather public opinion data. In comparison, George Bush spent only \$216,000 for this sort of information in 1989 and 1990 together.⁹⁶ It is clear that Clinton and his staff made a huge effort to keep their finger on the pulse of American public opinion. A few examples of the many groups with which Clinton sought approval were his party, civic groups, political action committees, and single-issue interest groups. Because of the number of groups and Clinton’s desire to win the approval of each, he earned the reputation of being a person whose words changed too often to mean very much.

The Role of Credibility

As Smith stated, it is almost impossible to ascertain the level of sincerity with which Clinton spoke. It is this specific weakness and strength that allowed Clinton to maintain his position despite the many obstacles to his presidency. Roderick Hart writes

⁹⁴ Colin Campbell and Bert A. Rockman, The Clinton Presidency: First Appraisals (Chatham: Chatham House Publishers, 1996) 21.

⁹⁵ Greenstein 187.

⁹⁶ Campbell and Rockman The Clinton Presidency: First Appraisals 234.

that Clinton's "favorite terms included children, jobs, cuts, welfare, peace, and, of course, bridge," in his 1996 acceptance speech.⁹⁷ With such an assortment of terms, Clinton leaves himself open to the criticism of "becoming all things to all people."⁹⁸ This is not surprising considering Smith's assessment that this is Clinton's goal when speaking to a group of people. It is this characteristic that both helped and hurt Clinton. It handicapped Clinton in that it caused him to be ridiculed as "Slick Willie." Conversely, it enabled him to survive many trying situations.⁹⁹ Bert A. Rockman remarks of Clinton's "Slick Willie" persona, "... Clinton could manage to wiggle his way out of every crisis he faced."¹⁰⁰ This ability to say anything in a situation helped to ensure his survival, but this ability also earned him the label as one whose words meant little. Clinton's use of ambiguity became a liability because of the damage it did to his already flimsy credibility.

The greatest blow to Clinton's credibility, at least according to history, will most likely be his impeachment. The Constitution empowers the House of Representatives to file impeachment charges against the president. The Senate then holds the impeachment trial. If the Senate votes to convict the President on impeachment charges, then he or she is formally removed from office. However, Clinton was not the only person responsible to the citizens of the United States. Each member of the House represents his or her congressional district, and each senator represents his or her state. Representatives and senators want to be re-elected, which means they need to make the people in their district

⁹⁷ Hart 108.

⁹⁸ Hart 108.

⁹⁹ Campbell and Rockman, *The Clinton Legacy* 284-288.

¹⁰⁰ Campbell and Rockman, *The Clinton Legacy* 286.

happy. If members of Congress were to act against the will of their constituents, then the chance of them not winning re-election increases.

The Role of "Technique"

After finding many partial answers to my original question, I stumbled across a somewhat obscure passage in Roderick P. Hart's book, Campaign Talk. Hart is a distinguished scholar of rhetoric at the University of Texas at Austin. I do think I have uncovered many partial answers already, but this passage identifies a clear reason Bill Clinton was sustainable amid scandals of huge proportions. Hart did not specify the application I use it for, but nonetheless it does offer an explanation for Clinton's survival. It is the concept of "technique." From what did this concept develop? C. K. Ogden created a Familiarity Dictionary that "consists of forty-four simple words...the most common words in the English language."¹⁰¹ These words consist of prepositions, demonstrative pronouns, interrogative pronouns, conjunctions, and connectives. It was Ogden's supposition that it would be impossible for a person to communicate, in English, without these words.¹⁰²

Hart feels that politicians of the modern era are trying to communicate without the words in this Familiarity dictionary. In fact, politicians' usage of such words has decreased dramatically since the 1960s. Why this drop in usage? There has been a technological explosion that has occurred in America since 1950. What have these words been replaced by? Raymond Gozzi has found that 45 percent of words new to the English language are technological in nature.¹⁰³ How is this new world characterized? Hart suggests that voters are buying what politicians are selling. What has been

¹⁰¹ Hart 66.

¹⁰² Hart 66.

produced? According to author, R. Gozzi, “the most artificial world that has ever existed.”¹⁰⁴ Hart labels this type of language and its usage, “technique.”

I suggest that Clinton, his generation, and most Americans have become consumed by what Hart has termed “technique.” Along with the spread of this technological language, the idea that because something is new and modern it is somehow better has taken hold. This is, of course, a logical fallacy. Time, in and of itself, cannot recommend or negate a product or idea. However, politics has become saturated with this fallacy. Hart cites Clinton’s “building a bridge” metaphor as further evidence of the spirit of this age.¹⁰⁵ Hart states that Clinton believed “it was now possible to think oneself out of all political problems, either by deploying high-tech weapons in the Persian Gulf or by Ethernetting the entire inner city.”¹⁰⁶ It seems that Hart is poking fun at the usage of technique. It does not seem to be because Hart protests technology or progress, in and of itself. However, he does seem to make fun of the idea that technology can solve all the world's problems. One’s belief in “technique” to the extreme becomes almost some sort of religion that Hart finds lacking.

“Technique” explains much of Clinton’s post-scandal actions. I conclude that, just as Clinton, in the role of president, saw the problems of the United States as solvable by the appropriate policy, Clinton, the eternal politician, envisioned his own personal and political difficulties as resolvable by the correct rhetoric. Clinton had experienced this many times in his political career; for example, this was how he won his 1982 bid for governor of Arkansas. His campaign had used three, thirty-second commercials

¹⁰³ Hart 66.

¹⁰⁴ Hart 66.

¹⁰⁵ Hart 67.

¹⁰⁶ Hart 67.

apologizing to the people of Arkansas for his shortcomings and announcing his intent to run again for governor. The result was a victory for Clinton.

The combination of Clinton's belief in the power of "technique" and his own past experiences empowered Clinton to do whatever it took to remain as President of the United States. An example of his use of technique is his apology that aided his re-election as Arkansas's governor in 1980. Further, this was exhibited in Clinton's "confident, precise vocabulary that reduces all" philosophical questions to "technological considerations."¹⁰⁷ Every problem had a solution. If a solution was not readily available, "spin" could make it appear so. Carol Gelderman writes, "Recent chiefs of state with their spin doctors create pseudo events and photo-ops to market virtual-reality versions of themselves to the public..."¹⁰⁸

Drug use, shady business dealings, and an improper relationship with an intern were just a few of the political problems that Bill Clinton faced. Every charge could be answered through the right speech, appearance, policy victory, or publicity stunt. Clinton was willing to do whatever necessary to survive such charges whether it required an humble apology, a vehement denial, or to turn the blame on his opponents. This is an extraordinary characteristic. Fred Greenstein remarked, "He also is marked by...a resiliency and coolness under pressure that enable him to extricate himself from many of his predicaments."¹⁰⁹ I believe that this resiliency and coolness is a result of Clinton's belief that he can overcome whatever befalls him. He has a very rare confidence bordering on arrogance. One who possesses it is indeed well equipped for the game of politics. However, in Bill Clinton's case, he was so bogged down by personal scandal he

¹⁰⁷ Hart 67.

¹⁰⁸ Gelderman 177.

did not get to use this device to further his political agenda. Instead, his exceptional abilities were occupied keeping his presidency alive.

The Role of African-American Support

It is difficult to identify a consistent policy or guide for actions in Clinton's speeches. Greenstein writes, "No American president has exceeded Clinton in his grasp of policy specifics...but his was a mastery that did not translate into a clearly defined point of view."¹¹⁰ I asked Smith if he could identify such a perspective in Clinton's words. Smith stated that Clinton's key downfall is:

He wanted to tell people everything he knows...It is hard to tell what he really thought. He wanted everybody to love him. He would try to find out what people wanted and give it to them. Only once during the campaign did he knowingly go against what an audience wanted to hear. He was speaking to the Rainbow Coalition at a church in Memphis (where King had given the "I Have A Dream Speech"). This was one of his best speeches. He tries to ingratiate himself with his audience. [However] He never wavered and was very consistent on the issue of civil rights for minorities.¹¹¹

In the 1992 presidential election, Clinton received "overwhelming" support from African-American voters.¹¹² Dr. Smith referred to one of Clinton's most famous speeches as president. He gave the speech at Mason Temple Church of God in Memphis, Tennessee. Martin Walker wrote, "It was a stern and moralizing admonition that only a

¹⁰⁹ Greenstein 175.

¹¹⁰ Greenstein 187.

¹¹¹ Steven A. Smith, personal interview, 1 July 2002.

¹¹² Theodore J. Lowi and Benjamin Ginsberg, Democrats Return to Power (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1994) 15.

black leader... could have delivered.”¹¹³ In an address at the University of Texas on the day of the Million Man March in the nation’s capital, President Clinton stated, “... The great potential of this march is for whites to see a larger truth, that blacks share their fears as well as their hopes, and that most black people shared their old-fashioned American values.”¹¹⁴ Many prominent members of the black community acknowledged Clinton’s commitment to civil rights. Author Toni Morrison said of Clinton:

...white skin notwithstanding, this is our first black President. Blacker than any actual black person who could ever be elected in our children’s lifetime. After all, Clinton displays almost every trope of blackness: single-parent household, born poor, working-class, saxophone-playing, McDonald’s-and-junk-food-loving boy from Arkansas.¹¹⁵

Could Clinton’s stance on Civil Rights somehow give him the boost he needed to overcome personal scandal and even impeachment? Clinton found substantial support from the African American community even during the scandal-ridden second term of his presidency.¹¹⁶ Authors Sapiro and Canon write, “...blacks’ support for Clinton was unshakable throughout the second term.”¹¹⁷ Though Clinton did have substantial support from the African-American community, it is unlikely that this support alone explains his political durability.

The Role of Public Approval

¹¹³ Martin Walker, The President We Deserve (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1996) 336.

¹¹⁴ Walker 337.

¹¹⁵ Toni Morrison, “Talk of the Town,” The New Yorker 5 Oct. 1998: 32.

¹¹⁶ Campbell and Rockman, The Clinton Legacy 169.

¹¹⁷ Campbell and Rockman, The Clinton Presidency 182.

Early on in his presidency, Clinton pollster Stan Greenberg said, “We need popular support to keep pressure on Congress to vote for change.”¹¹⁸ Later, in his presidency, Clinton would need that same pressure in order to remain in office. The Washington Post reported, in the week before the House impeachment vote, that the public was not in favor of the Senate removing Clinton from office.¹¹⁹ Waldman writes, “On February 12, 1999, the Senate voted to acquit the President. Neither of the charges received even a majority of votes. A move for congressional censure petered out.” Since polling data revealed a public that was anti-impeachment, members of Congress had to go out on a limb to vote for it. In the end, the Senate bowed to public opinion, and Clinton remained in office. However, further investigation is necessary to determine what it was about Clinton that enabled him to maintain a strong public approval rating in the face of a criminal investigation.

Clinton’s perpetual campaign style made it easier to maintain public approval. George C. Edwards III stated, “[that] the Clinton administration is the ultimate example of the public presidency.”¹²⁰ This sort of presidency is built on the public approving of how the president is doing at being president. One who seeks to be a public president does not quit campaigning after winning office. Instead, he seeks to use every source of technology to measure and mold it according to his policy goals. Public approval or lack of it plays a key role in determining how much the Congress is willing to work with the president. In Clinton’s case, his numbers remained stable through hearing after hearing

¹¹⁸ Campbell and Rockman, The Clinton Presidency: First Appraisals 235.

¹¹⁹ Waldman 248.

¹²⁰ Campbell and Rockman, The Clinton Presidency: First Appraisals 235.

and even impeachment.¹²¹ However, the public was increasingly negative towards the Congress, especially the Republicans. This gave Clinton key leverage in the affair.

The Role of Public Interest

Is it possible that Clinton's survival was a product of people's lack of interest in the scandal that surrounded his presidency? Did people just not care? Initially, at least, this was not the case. There was a news frenzy. Waldman writes, "Coverage of presidents, indeed of all politicians, had been growing steadily more negative for decades."¹²² And President Clinton had possibly had a sexual relationship with a White House intern. Sound bytes were played over and over again in the ear of the American public. Clinton's "It depends what the definition of "is" is" were made famous by the news media. Then, is it possible that the charges against President Clinton were not that serious?

Early on in the Monica Lewinsky scandal, speechwriter, Michael Waldman writes, "There had been scandals before, allegations, explosions, but it was obvious that this would be different."¹²³ As time passed, he continued, "Gradually, as the reality sunk in that this was not just a spate of bad headlines but a fiercely determined criminal investigation closing in..."¹²⁴ It is evident by the comment made by Waldman, who was included in Clinton's inner sanctum, that the Lewinsky scandal was, at least at its inception, a topic that people did care very much about. Further evidence of the scandal's impact on Clinton himself is included in the comments of Bob Shrum, a friend

¹²¹ Campbell and Rockman, *The Clinton Legacy* 285.

¹²² Michael Waldman, *POTUS Speaks: Finding the Words that Defined the Clinton Presidency* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000) 120.

¹²³ Waldman 201.

¹²⁴ Waldman 203.

of Clinton. Shrum stated, "I have known Bill Clinton for decades, and I have never seen him like that."¹²⁵

The extent of interest in the scandal was growing. CNN's Wolf Blitzer reported that Clinton was considering resigning.¹²⁶ The White House quickly challenged this report, but the weight of such reports was not equally discounted. More and more journalists began to report similar findings. Sam Donaldson, on ABC's This Week, said, "if he's not telling the truth, I think his presidency is numbered in days."¹²⁷ Obviously, when the Lewinsky story broke, it was a topic of much interest. Also, the issue was not just a newsworthy item. The Lewinsky scandal threatened to turn into a criminal case, and Clinton's position as president was in question. Neither of these suggestions holds weight in determining the basis of Clinton's ability to maintain himself. Eventually, there seemed to be a counter-reaction to coverage of the scandal. Author, Joe Klein, writes:

The public loved the Lewinsky show for a time. The ratings of all-news networks soared...but the ratings only held for the prurient stage of the drama; the story was, in effect, over after Clinton's testimony aired. The distended impeachment hearings were judged wasteful and unnecessary by the folks—the worst sort of television, a foregone conclusion. And when it all had been digested, public opinion had shifted not a whit. The President's job approval ratings remained very high, in the 60 percent range...¹²⁸

Conclusion

¹²⁵ Waldman 203.

¹²⁶ Waldman 209.

¹²⁷ Waldman 210.

¹²⁸ Klein 179.

In conclusion, I began my study with two contradictory phenomena. One, President Clinton maintained high job approval ratings throughout his presidency. Second, Clinton's presidency was saturated with both personal and political scandal. The nature of such discrepancies augmented by the continual coverage of such events by the mass media appeared impossible to overcome. However, Clinton did survive impeachment and have a fair amount of success in many policy areas as president. The purpose of my inquiry was to discover how Clinton was able to perform such a feat. My hypothesis was that the nature of the presidency, Clinton's political skill, economic conditions during his presidency, Clinton's rhetoric, and his personality combined to give him enough political might to withstand such blows. After extensive study on this subject, I found my initial expectations inadequate.

Clinton's communication abilities do provide a sizable portion of the ultimate answer. The specific areas of rhetoric that gave Clinton leverage were: going personal, his use of inclusive language, his use of common language, references to the "little people", and desirable themes. However, I found a number of other factors that enabled Clinton to remain in offices. Clinton's words were augmented by his characterization as an active-positive president, extensive monitoring of public opinion, charisma, public loss of interest in scandal, economic prosperity, and Clinton's own belief in "technique". The combination of Clinton's rhetoric and the factors listed above made it possible for Clinton to maintain high levels of job approval despite his involvement in personal and political scandal.

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