

Clinton's Farewell Address: The Traditional Self-Assessment of a President

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Abstract

Bill Clinton is not the first president to attempt to influence assessments of his legacy. Clinton's farewell is one of his many efforts in self-assessment. The speech has not received the attention of either his keynote address to the 2000 Democratic convention or his memoirs. However ever since Washington's address in 1796, farewells have a special place in the rhetorical presidency. Washington's is best remembered for his advice to nation, but it can also be read as a defense of his administration. Th paper concentrates on reading the text as a defense of the record of the president and his administration. Clinton makes no apologies and claims that after eight years America is a better society. The heart of his argument is that America has never been economically stronger. But not only has the economy improved, the lives of most members of the society have as well. He claims that these accomplishments were achieved in midst of a period of global transformation that not only offered opportunities but frightening challenges as well. While not taking personal credit for all the improvements, he does claim that his administration's efforts, ranging from getting the budget under control, redesigning the government, and a foreign policy of engagement and leadership played a significant role in making both economic and social improvement possible. He does this by first acknowledging the people's part in the improvements made during his administration. He then identifies himself with these achievements and reiterates his emphasis on a strong economy and the values of opportunity, responsibility, and community, culminating in the use of concrete example and statistics to demonstrate some of these accomplishments. Through his advice to the nation and the incoming president he makes a plausible argument that the administration's key economic, foreign policy, and social initiatives played a significant role in improving the lives of Americans in challenging times of economic transition and global integration. Finally, the construction of the case in favor of his administration is built in a manner that clearly claims that it is the public Bill Clinton, the highly competent politician, not the private Bill Clinton who should be judged by history.