

Bill Clinton, Historian: My Life as a Grand Narrative of the Culture War

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The Lewinsky affair and its outcome, Clinton's acquittal in the Senate and in the court of public opinion, have become enduring symbols of the Culture War. As the century ended, they were also interpreted as a sign that the religious right's campaign had stalled. Paul Weyrich, the conservative activist who coined the phrase "moral majority," conceded as much. "We lost the culture war," Weyrich said. "I no longer believe that there is a moral majority." Historian Eli Zaretsky likened impeachment to a furious insect dying after stinging its prey: the Senate defeat finally broke the moral right's power over public debate. Alan Wolfe, a sociologist who studied the beliefs of ordinary Americans, interpreted the post-impeachment situation more broadly. "The right won the economic war," he said, "the left won the cultural war and the center won the political war."

Bill Clinton's My Life (2004) extends this line of interpretation. It is a unique and ambitious narrative, one in which the author appears both as the principal historical actor and chief historical analyst. In the book's climactic passage, Clinton reads his own impeachment ordeal as a referendum on the moral revolution. His side (that of the Enlightenment) won, though at steep personal cost. "Although I would always regret what I had done wrong, I will go to my grave being proud of what I had fought for in the impeachment battle, my last great showdown with the forces I had opposed all my life..." he writes in the book's climactic passage "I understood why the people who equated political, economic, and social conservatism with God's will hated me. ... They also hated me because I was an apostate, a white southern Protestant who could appeal to the very people they had always taken for granted."

My Life succeeds better as a work of history than as an autobiography. The book shares two of its author's unfortunate traits, sexual obfuscation and excess weight. But as a political history, it is a first rate. It shows great insight into political figures like Newt Gingrich and an acute, almost detached, understanding of its author's political fate as a "counterculture McGovernick" pummeled by Republicans and sensation-mongering media. As a historian who is himself researching the Culture War, I argue that My Life's grand theme—impeachment as an extension of the struggle over racial, sexual, and moral politics that erupted in the 1960s—is the best way to understand the tumultuous political events of Clinton's second term. The Culture War was to the Lewinsky affair what the Cold War was to Vietnam: the master historical context without which the particular conflicts and controversies simply do not make sense.