

A 'New Covenant' Kept: Core Values, Political Legacies, and the Paradox of the Clinton Presidency

According to the conventional wisdom, Ronald Reagan was an exemplar of philosophical consistency as President of the United States. Reagan, it is said, knew who he was, spoke consistently about his vision for America, and carried it out. Reagan, commentators argue, was a strategic thinker, a transformative leader, and left policy and tactical calculations to others. In contrast, the conventional wisdom is that Bill Clinton exhibited little philosophical consistency, was lost in tactical considerations at the cost of strategic vision (a transactional leader at best), and responded to, rather than created, events. This evaluation of Clinton will work against him in the eyes of historians, political scientists, and pundits if it is the picture of the man and his presidency that prevails in the years and decades to come.

This paper will do three things. First, it will argue that the conventional wisdom is wrong: Clinton exhibited a degree of philosophical and operational consistency during his years in the White House that has gone unnoticed by commentators. Second, it will assess why the conventional wisdom is so wrong? Third, and in light of these factors, the paper will suggest how President Clinton and his supporters can best correct this misperception or else consign his presidency to assessments by historians and presidents that understate its significance and accomplishments.

To these ends, Part I of the paper will begin by grounding the Clinton presidency within the three philosophical pillars of his 'New Covenant' (and of the Democratic Leadership Council that he helped establish): responsibility, opportunity, and community. After discussing the substance, logic, and philosophical coherence of Clinton's New Covenant, the paper will examine the legislative legacy of the Clinton years in terms of these core principles. Identified will be the ways in which they were consistent with New Covenant principles, as well as the pattern and pace of those initiatives over his eight years as president.

Part II of the paper will discuss four primary reasons why the philosophical and operational consistency of the Clinton presidency has been underappreciated to date by commentators. The four are: (1) a decision making style that is consistent with what leading management scholars herald as a strong one, but which conflicts with commentators' images of strong leadership; (2) the failure of commentators to focus on Clinton's use of administrative strategies to advance the core values of the New Covenant; (3) commentators' preferences for "big initiatives" and derision of "small bore" initiatives, despite the latter being more consonant with changes in the administrative state and more consistent with the core values of American exceptionalism; and (4) the failure of President Clinton and his speechwriters to use state of the union messages (and other major speeches) in a sustained way to showcase how his policy initiatives fulfilled his New Covenant philosophy of government throughout his term.

Part III then concludes by offering suggestions about how these shortcomings might be corrected in the future.