

"Bill Clinton and the Redefinition of Liberalism"

Paper Proposal for *William Jefferson Clinton: The 'New Democrat' from Hope*

David Greenberg, Rutgers University

As governor of Arkansas in the 1980s and as a presidential candidate and president in the 1990s, Bill Clinton did more than any other individual to redefine liberalism and reorient the Democratic Party. With the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, many of the liberal ideas that had governed American life in the postwar era and had come under fire in the 1970s finally fell from favor with a majority of Americans. The Democratic Party was strongly identified with many of these "liberal" qualities: dovish in foreign affairs, reckless in fiscal policy, indulgent toward women and racial minorities at the expense of the white majority, and intrinsically incapable of fixing incorrigible social problems such as crime and poverty. By the time Clinton left office, he had presided over successful military interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo, turned record budget deficits into record surpluses, reformed welfare, helped to lower the crime and poverty rates, and regained for the Democratic Party the votes of many former "Reagan Democrats." Democrats who ran for president after him preached a very different set of programs, including fiscal responsibility, middle-class tax cuts, and tough, interventionist foreign policies.

Needless to say, Clinton did not achieve these feats single-handedly. But as early as the 1980s he was a leading participant in self-conscious efforts to redirect the party. Although he worked with the right-leaning Democratic Leadership Council and served as its president, he was not a conservative Southern Democrat (like his colleagues Sam Nunn and Chuck Robb), as some on the left supposed. Nor was he the quintessence of 1960s liberalism, as his right-wing enemies imagined. Rather, Clinton retrieved three key elements that had been missing from Democratic rhetoric and policies -- populism, pragmatism, and the language of values -- and molded them into policies that broke with both Democratic orthodoxy and Reagan Republicanism.

As president, Clinton certainly partook of his share of cynical "triangulation," to use his pollster Dick Morris's term for the expedient adoption of small-bore policies like school uniforms or the television V-chip that situated the president between, and above, the two parties. And he often used deliberately ambiguous rhetoric, in futile attempts to reconcile irreconcilable differences such as calling for making abortion "safe, legal, and rare" -- which liberals heard as promoting contraception and education and centrists heard as erecting legal barriers such as parental notification laws. But typically he strove to depart from older liberal policies without embracing DLC-style accommodationism by finding ways to turn the perceived weaknesses of liberalism into strengths. Gun control, for example, when fused with support for local policemen and support for capital punishment, helped his party seem tough on crime. Pragmatism (a commonsense embrace of solutions that worked, as opposed to ideological shibboleths) mixed with a language of values (giving equal weight to the grievances of victims as to the accused) and a populist strain (rallying the people against a powerful lobby like the NRA) to command broad support for a largely liberal program on an issue once considered taboo for Democrats.

The paper will show how on crime and the other issues mentioned above Clinton worked in the 1980s to fashion new positions for the Democrats and tried as president to govern from a liberal center. In so doing, helped to rid the party of its severe liabilities, not by adopting a me-too Republicanism, nor simply by rhetorical artifice and opportunism, but by seeking out policies that stemmed from his first principles of favoring the interests of a broad middle class, making choices based on effectiveness, and unabashedly using an idiom of values.

David Greenberg
Rutgers University
4 Huntington Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08901
732-932-7500 x8178
greenberg@aya.yale.edu