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### **Paper Proposal: Hofstra University Clinton Conference**

#### **“Liberation Now, Then, Forever, Never: Clinton and the 1960s”**

Even compared to recent decades such as the Thirties and the Fifties, the Sixties is, at the moment, the most contested decade of them all. No doubt this contentiousness can be explained by the closeness of the decade itself to the present. Children of the Sixties are now men and women in power and not only are their memories vivid but their very identities were formed by the decade. But there is an even broader reason for this special contestedness. As David Steigerwald has observed, the Sixties ended in a “social and political stalemate.” Without “clear winners and losers,” the issues of the Sixties seem to remain. In the “culture wars” of the Nineties, Bill Clinton assumed a symbolic status as great as FDR in the 30s, Eisenhower in the 50s and Reagan in the 80s. In order to approach this question of why President Clinton became the “poster child” of the decade in the 1990s, this paper examines autobiographical attempts to preserve or revise the collective memory of the Sixties and compares them to Clinton’s own political persona as a candidate, president and finally as an autobiographer himself in his memoirs.

Sixties autobiographers have attempted to preserve or revise the collective memory of the decade. These autobiographies are of course personal accounts of Sixties projects—marches, collectives, even bomb making—but they were also generational narratives. This co-mixture of the personal and public exists in all autobiographies but this form seems especially appropriate for the Sixties generation since it perfectly coincided with the decade’s idiom—“the personal is political.” The primary structure of these recollections are conflicting narratives of ascent and descent. Some (Hoffman, Hayden, Gitlin) focus on the decade as a positive experience while others (Alpert, Collier and Horowitz) emphasize its negative legacy.

The autobiographical (re)collection of Bill Clinton placed before the American people by both himself, his supporters and his opponents in 1992 and 1996 and in 2004 included many of the same epiphanies as others who came of age in the Sixties: marijuana use, moral quandaries over the draft (as well as prudential strategies to avoid it), opposition to the war in Vietnam and segregation. Clinton, however, employed a number of imaginative strategies to deal with this contested decade. Sometimes he attempted to bifurcate the 60s, sometimes he attempted to redefine or reject it, sometimes he attempted to “complete” the decade. In 1992, he identified with the early part of the Sixties. His use of the photo of an eager and awed boy Clinton shaking hands with President Kennedy in 1963 attempted to imprint upon the public that he was a member of the generation that was the heir to Camelot. The ascent model was thus preserved by lopping off the late Sixties and placing the loss of faith with Watergate and “the every man for himself and get it while you can” philosophy of the Reagan-Bush administrations. Later he attempted to recapture the Sixties’s spirit of individual transformation through public empathy with his adaptation of the electronic town meeting. As president, he reintroduced race and

feminism, themes of the late Sixties, into public discourse. And in his own post-presidential autobiography, *My Life*, he attempted to connect the personas of the youthful Clinton of the Sixties to his subsequent successes and failures, both personal and public, in later life. Throughout all of these efforts, Clinton's critics and supporters challenged and endorsed these readings of the decade. Nevertheless, Clinton has become the preeminent autobiographer of the Sixties, preserving and revising the decade.

An examination of the relationship of President Clinton to the Sixties can both help explain this complex president as well as his own contested status with the public as Americans have continued to debate the decade in the elections of 2000 and 2004.