

Abstract  
“Was the Clinton Presidency a ‘Co-Presidency’?”

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“Co-presidents” may have become political and managerial requisites of the contemporary presidency, as former President Ford’s negotiation to become Ronald Reagan’s 1980 running-mate suggested. As institutions subsumed within the presidency, the vice presidency and first ladyship also have been subject to the institutional and political transformations that have washed over the presidency. Upgrading and mobilizing ‘VPOTUS’ and ‘FLOTUS’ in order to help meet the spatial and temporal challenges of the contemporary presidency has empowered these former ‘mutes’ of the presidential establishment to such an extent that they themselves now have their own transformational effect upon the presidency. The extensive-and-intensive political and managerial involvement of First Lady Clinton, Vice President Gore, Vice President Cheney, and their staffs, for example, not only helped define their respective presidents, but in so doing established precedents and license for future occupants, even if their immediate successors choose not to follow suit.

This paper will not argue that the vice president and first lady are in any sense the *co-equals* of the president—as one who staffed both President and Mrs. Clinton notes, “Bill Clinton is very clear about being president. He is, you’re not”—but rather that they have become *co-dependents*. Gil Troy argues that first ladies are essential to building and maintaining the public image and public support that presidents need to govern; data making their way into the journal literature show that First Lady Clinton was even more crucial to her husband’s popular support and re-election in 1996 than she was in 1992; and Barbara Burrell has shown that First Lady Clinton’s mean ‘feelings-thermometer’ score was almost seven points lower than the president’s during his party’s midterm electoral setback in 1994, but almost four points higher than his during the astounding midterm electoral gains of 1998. And Mr. Clinton himself underscored the political consequences that vice presidents embody when he reminded the nation during his prime-time nomination acceptance speech in 1992 that “George Bush’s first decision was to pick Dan Quayle; mine was to pick Al Gore.”

It will be argued that “Co-presidents” already have been with us; they are a logical progression for which there are ample historical antecedents from the “traditional presidency” as well as identifiable contributing institutional forces and environmental influences stemming from the “modern” and “postmodern” presidencies; and they should be seen to occur more frequently in the future because of the direction and momentum of the presidency’s evolution as an institution. Moreover, this would be the case even without taking into account other significant transformational social forces relevant here, such as feminism, which will be self-consciously overlooked in this essay in order to focus attention more fully upon the implications of the process of institutional development as such, apart from such potent social forces.