

**Proposal for the 2005 William J. Clinton Conference
at Hofstra University**

**"Bill Clinton's Moderate Evangelicalism, the Christian Right, and the
Politics of Religion"**

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Proposal

The inter-relationship between religion and politics has been gaining increasing attention in recent years (Green et al. 1996; Green, Rozell, and Wilcox 2003; Singer 2004; Marty 2000; Morris 1997; Wills 1991). Jimmy Carter and George W. Bush are routinely cited as examples of presidents who openly expressed religious language while in office. Often overlooked in assessing his presidency, Bill Clinton's moderate evangelical theology is a key component of his worldview. Clinton invoked religious language on a number of occasions and appealed to the nation's broadly shared civil religion in public speeches. In addition, Bill Clinton repeatedly evoked the ire of the major figures of the Religious Right who fanned the flames of opposition to his presidency (in one instance, the Reverend Jerry Falwell went so far as to imply that the President was involved in the death of his long-time friend Vince Foster). Understanding Clinton's use of religion, as well as

the use of religious rhetoric by the enemies of the administration, is crucial to understanding the politics surrounding the Clinton presidency.

The paper will examine the religious aspects of the Clinton presidency by exploring two general themes. The first is the extent to which Clinton's own theology was used as a source for mobilizing his supporters and bolstering his public policy positions. This will be accomplished by employing a close reading of his public use of religious rhetoric. The President's ability to adopt the tone and substance of moderate Baptist preachers is critical to understanding why, even in light of his famous "Sista Soldier" comment during the 1992 campaign, as well as his willingness to support public policies not popular among leaders of the Congressional Black Caucus, Clinton was nonetheless extraordinarily well regarded among African-American voters—a key constituency of the Democratic Party. In the immediate aftermath of the impeachment crisis, the President used his address at a national prayer breakfast to ask for forgiveness and to seek redemption from the nation's religious figures.

The second theme will be the extent to which Mr. Clinton became a symbol in the nation's ongoing "culture war." The level of animus expressed by conservative ministers toward the Clinton presidency has no contemporary equivalent and this is at least partially explained by his becoming such a symbol. He was routinely cited as a specific example of the nation's moral decline by leading fundamentalist clergymen. Following the lead of James Davison Hunter (1992), the paper will point out that many of the political fights during the Clinton years have their genesis in the theological and religious struggles currently being waged in the country.

The paper will draw on such primary sources as the public speeches and papers of President Clinton, as well as a variety of secondary sources dealing with the theoretical and practical effects of religion in contemporary American politics. The paper is part of an ongoing book-length project by the authors, both of whom have written and presented papers at other academic conferences on the broader subject of religion and the modern presidency. Background assumptions as well as personal worldviews have long been a subject for political scientists seeking ways to explore the motivating factors in executive decision-making. This paper will take its place in the literature of presidential studies as well as religion and politics.