Shining spotlights on the Clinton years

He stood out as wrong kind of role model

By Alvin S. Felzenberg

No president has ruminated so frequently or so publicly about his place in history as Bill Clinton. Soon, a Clinton court will rise at his senatorial wife's $2.85 million home in Georgetown and its satellite in Chappaqua. It will spin all the virtues of Clintonism in the hope of fueling a call for its restoration.

The "legacy" he, his handlers and his acolytes are seeking to reinvent falls into four categories.

Domestic policy. Clinton signed into law three bills of note: Family leave, NAFTA and GATT. All were on the national agenda before he became president. Yet Clinton played a crucial part in different ways in their enactment.

Recent Republican Congresses were responsible for two other measures for which Clinton takes credit: welfare reform and deficit reduction. He vetoed welfare reform twice before he signed it. The robust economy he hails might well have slowed had a Democratic Congress, with Republican help, not torpedoed two costly Clinton proposals: the "economic stimulus package" of 1993 and health-care reform in 1994.

Clinton was at his best when he expressed, if not felt, the nation's pain after tragedies like the Oklahoma City bombing and shootings at Columbine. He related well to African Americans. Yet he shied away from the one thing that offers the best hope for a brighter future for all Americans: radical restructuring of education. That, though, would have entailed taking on a major constituency: teachers' unions.

Another missed opportunity for greatness was entitlement reform. Conditions were ripe for partial privatization of Social Security in 1997. The recently reinaugurated president wasn't ready.

Foreign affairs. Clinton lucked out in Kosovo, confounding all skeptics. His record in Bosnia was mixed, but Slobodan Milosevic is gone and democracy is taking hold. Peace in Northern Ireland may prove a second Clinton success.

In pursuit of a legacy, Clinton bartered away Israel's security. Aware of his true goals, Palestinians kept upping the ante. Historians will question why Clinton sent troops to Haiti, embarked on "nation building" in Somalia and took to bombing distant lands whenever his continuance in office appeared at risk.

Clinton's subordination of national security interests to those of trade (and possibly campaign contributions) may have compromised American security and secrets. Yet, American relations with China worsened. Under Clinton's watch, reform in Russia took a time out as millions of dollars of aid vanished. The opposite occurred south of the border because of his bailout of Mexico's economy.

Integrity in government. Clinton brought respect for public institutions to an all-time low. His Justice Department shielded admitted violators of campaign-finance laws from prosecution, acted imprudently in Waco, botched the Olympics bombing and Los Alamos espionage investigations and forcibly returned a 6-year-old to a communist regime without so much as a hearing.

Clinton minions fabricated charges against White House travel office personnel, handed sensitive FBI files to political hacks and repeatedly rented out the Lincoln bedroom to contributors. The President leaves office facing possible disbarment and indictment.

Impact on the presidency. Here, Clinton may most be remembered as a negative role model. Before his coming, citizens had not been accustomed to parsing presidential pronouncements (like "ending welfare as we know it" and "will not raise taxes to pay for my programs") for wiggle room. Nor did they expect the President to contribute to the debasement of the culture with cracks about AstroTurf in his pickup truck, descriptions of his underwear, or assertions that "other presidents also did it," as if the "it" pertained solely to sex, or that Jefferson, Roosevelt or Kennedy had perjured themselves.

Many presidents made recess appointments, issued executive orders, and removed federal lands from development. But Clinton made the extraordinary routine. In devising newer and newer ways to circumvent conventional checks on his power, Clinton began the first extra-constitutional presidency in American history.

During two government shutdowns, during his campaigns, during the fight against impeachment, Clinton employed the tactics for which he will be most remembered: demonization of opponents and blatant disregard for boundaries. History would think better of him had he employed his charm and well-honed political skills in pursuit of goals loftier than his own survival.

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BARRIE MACLURE

He brought out activist spirit of government

By Sean Wilentz

Except for Thomas Jefferson and the early Virginians, only four Democrats in American history have won consecutive terms in the White House: Andrew Jackson, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt and Bill Clinton. Like his fellow successful Democrats of the past, Clinton has been at once a popular and a polarizing figure.

The other three were all hated by their opponents and beloved by their supporters — and, overall, all three have stood up well in history. So it has gone, and may well go, for Clinton. The vast right-wing conspiracy (which seems to include the entire Republican Party) hates him as a draft-dodging, womanizing disgrace who merited impeachment. The not-so-vast left-wing conspiracy (including the Naderites and various left-leaning pundits) hates him as a sell-out of liberal values — a triangulating crypto-Republican.

Yet Clinton leaves office with the highest job approval ratings ever won by a departing president. Although future historians may not rate his performance on a par with Jackson's, Wilson's or FDR's, his reputation will probably be strong — stronger, certainly, than those of his accusers.

Despite ferocious, often scurrilous opposition in a generally conservative time, Clinton has been an inventive, liberal, activist president — the first to confront the post-Cold War forces of globalization and to try and make them work on behalf of ordinary Americans. Sparked by his 1993 budget plan, the economy under Clinton has boomed. Real wages have risen faster, and in a more sustained fashion, than at any point since the 1970s. Unemployment has fallen to its lowest levels since the late 1960s. So has the crime rate, particularly the rate of violent crimes. Income inequalities, though persistent, have narrowed during the Clinton years, reversing the 1980s trend.

These successes were neither automatic nor accidental. Clinton leaves behind a solid record of legislative achievements and proposals. These include raising the minimum wage and supporting the Family and Medical Leave Act, the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, the Safe Drinking Water Act, the Brady Act, the Violence Against Women Act and the proposed ban on assault weapons.

Clinton will be remembered for standing up to the worst excesses of a Republican right wing that had captured the GOP. The most dramatic examples came in 1995, with his steadfastness during the government shutdown and his patriotic defense of government in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing. Historians will recall his vetoes of bills like the anti-estate-tax bill, as well as his defiant of Republican attacks on legal immigrants in connection with welfare reform. They will also recall how he managed to achieve balanced budgets, offsetting the huge deficits of the Reagan-Bush years while actually increasing federal spending on social investments, above all in education. And they will recall how he ran considerable political risks with his interventions in Haiti and Kosovo, and with his bucking of his own party over trade policy.

Most important, Bill Clinton salvaged American liberalism and thereby changed the nation's political landscape. Since the mid-1970s, the very idea of activist government had become heretical. In his own way, Clinton revived it, restoring public confidence in government action — on protecting Social Security, on reforming health care and improving public education. Even conservatives such as Clinton's successor, George W. Bush, have had to camouflage themselves as new-style "compassionate" conservatives.

But for his most implacable enemies, epitomized by Ken Starr, and but for his own blunders — on health care, in the Lewinsky affair — Clinton might have achieved even more. But taking the long view, Clinton has done what liberal activist presidents have always done — use the powers of the federal government, within the constraints of his political situation, to advance the interests of ordinary Americans.

Polarization aside, that is his legacy.

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Tomorrow: Perspectives on King Day: Sen. Joseph Lieberman, Edwin Locke, Earl Ofari Hutchinson.

When politics became entertainment

By Jerry Long

He was "Our Leader."

And no matter how he ends his days ... exiled like Napoleon to an upstate New York Elba; meeting death in a seedy, Sam Cooke-style motel fiasco; or ruling, à la Marlon Brando in *Apocalypse Now*, as a bloated, bald despot, deep in some remote Fourth World jungle, handing out inscrutable justice to the natives, musing darkly about the nature of power, and, above all, feeling wronged ... the history books will record that William Jefferson Clinton was the most entertaining President since the dawn of the Republic.

Bill Clinton used lies the way Van Gogh used yellow, to intensify and transcend reality. He had a talent for misdirection that rivaled Slydini's. And, like all great artists, he constantly worked to redefine the boundaries of his art.

Personally, I was always more offended by the rationale for The Gulf Of Tonkin Resolution, running guns to the Contras, allowing Kurds to be massacred or any random hour of the Nixon presidency, than I was by "Our Leader" engaging in what the Rat Pack would term "a little hey-hey with a broad."

Yet Clinton had many enemies. Some Republicans saw him as a perjuring, lecherous, draft-dodging, drug-addicted murderer who ordered the marines into Haiti so he and Hillary could be supplied with fresh human hearts, which they ate in a satanic voodoo ritual that maintained their hold on power. Other Republicans *really* hated him.

In truth, I could never understand the way saner Republicans loathed Bill Clinton. Perhaps they despised him for being the Jackie Robinson of campaign-fund raising, breaking the GOP money barrier by inviting donors over to the White House for a cup of French Vanilla Roast, a glazed cruller and a tax exemption for their transnational conglomerate. He was the first president whose attention could literally be bought.

And yes, any mention of Bill Clinton will forever be a source of quintuple-entendre. My current favorite was uttered by a White House aide when asked why the President hadn't campaigned more extensively on behalf of Al Gore. The aide informed us that "the President is unwilling to insert himself where he's not wanted" — a response that will surely come as news to both Juanita Broaddrick and employees of Sudanese aspirin plants.

But Our Leader's single greatest strength, as he strolled every Sunday from church, waving to us with his heavily dogeared-for-loopholes bible, was that he was impossible, absolutely impossible, to embarrass. A trait that enabled a never-ending cavalcade of indigenous American absurdities:

• Ken Starr in Little Rock, interviewing every woman in Arkansas the President ever slept with on the theory that he may have engaged in some "pillow talk" about Whitewater. As if Clinton would turn to his posturgasmic paramour and purr, "That was great, baby. Reminds me of the time I pressured state officials to approve a loan."

• A horde of pundidiots analyzing video of a rope-line hug as if it were the Zapruder film.

• Larry King beginning a panel discussion with Evan Thomas, Steven Brill, Jonathan Turley and a forensic expert by asking the following question: "Suppose there's sperm on a car seat and somebody sits on the car seat?"

• Ken Starr relentlessly taking his trash down his driveway, and pausing once to babble about the pleasure of having met Jack Webb.

• Clinton making his entrance at this past Democratic convention, endlessly roaming the hallways of the Staples Center, looking like a member of Spinal Tap trying to find the stage.

And now he will be gone. The bit lip and the 17-hour State Of The Union address replaced by a man who smugly expects us to be as impressed with him as he is with himself for the spitting, brow-furrowing exertion required to slowly spout his platitudes.

Farewell, Bill Clinton. In this land of unending hypocrisy, I know one thing to be true. W. may be president, but he will never be Our Leader.

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The Prez becomes a wife

By Susan Perloff

Before you become president of the United States of America, you serve as class president, pull watcher and water commissioner, enhancing your celebrity status at every step. You grow habituated, maybe addicted, to people asking your opinion, making sure you have sugar for your coffee, waiting for you to set the mood. By the time the Marine Band plays "Hail to the Chief" while you shower, you're accustomed to the trappings of fame.

But when you head in the opposite direction — oblivion — it's a sudden plummet to the lowly status of needing to carry your own Visa card.

Bill Clinton's only certified future job will be as spouse of a U.S. senator, a supporting role that can be difficult, depressing and demeaning. It's anonymity writ large: He can get an unlisted phone number without making anyone unhappy. It's conventions and meetings without a name tag. His dismay will replicate what many women have experienced since men invented neckties and time clocks: the plight of the wife.

He'll have to bite his tongue rather than tell the senator's colleagues his mind. He may, indeed, have to rethink the entire etiquette thing, now that people he used to boss around have more clout. If he invites other Senate wives for tea, who pours?

If Sen. Clinton decides to move, her mate may become an insignificant "trailing spouse," as the mates of corporately relocated executives were called in the '80s. As the "leading spouse," the partner with the power and the perks, moves where she chooses, will the follower drag his heels, whining, worrying about Socks and finding a new dry cleaner?

His new neighbors will view him as a devoted support system for the senator. They'll assume he's responsible for cooking, cleaning and calculating the number of petunias to buy for the window boxes. Will he know the pain of having dinner on the table promptly at 7:30, only to learn that the senator is engrossed in a roll-call vote? Will tears run slowly down his cheeks, nearly invisible in the tea-light candles flickering low?

His future may include devotion to looking good, as a senator's spouse should: a massage, a manicure, a weekly facial. He'll be the envy of the other senators. Maybe they'll pay attention to him.

To pass the time, he can engage in charity work, joining other spouses weaving blankets for the homeless, becoming a docent at the art museum or teaching English as a second language. He can join a Y or start a book club. Maybe he'll get a mention in the hometown paper. Hey, it's a start.

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