

## In the Eye of the Storm

### Bill Clinton, the Culture War, and the Politics of Religion

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#### Abstract

We examine the religious aspects of the Clinton presidency by exploring two general themes. The first is the extent to which President Bill Clinton's own theology was used as a source for mobilizing his supporters and bolstering his public policy positions. 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 illuminates the extent to which Mr. Clinton became a symbol in the nation's ongoing "culture war." The level of animus expressed by conservative ministers and leaders toward the Clinton presidency has no contemporary equivalent and this is at least partially explained by his becoming such a symbol. President Clinton was routinely cited as a specific example of the nation's moral decline by leading fundamentalist clergymen, conservative pundits, and lawmakers. We contend that many of the political battles fought during the Clinton years had their genesis in the theological and religious struggles pre-dating his presidency; these battles are still being waged even after the turn of the twenty-first century in a post-Clinton era.

#### Introduction

[1] On February 12, 1999, Americans watched as the United States Senate voted to acquit President Bill Clinton of two impeachment articles, thus sparing him and the country the

pain and embarrassment of removing the popular president from office.<sup>1</sup> The vote, only the second time in American history that the Senate voted on impeachment charges, came at the end of a long and agonizing national saga. For a year the country had been riveted by the controversy surrounding President Clinton's relationship to a young White House intern named Monica Lewinsky. Charges were exchanged between social conservatives, who argued that the incident was a perfect symbol of the libertine ethos of the 1960s, and liberals, who strenuously objected to what they regarded as the unwarranted investigation into the President's private life (Toobin).

[2] The impeachment episode was played out against the backdrop of the nation's "culture war," a widely debated phenomenon that animated much of the politics of the 1990s. There is much disagreement as to the origins of the cultural divide in the nation, a description that is easily summarized in contemporary terms by the colors blue and red as represented on the electoral map (e.g., Wolfe). Although the exact nature of the division is a matter of scholarly dispute, few contest the notion that its origins can be traced to the counter-culture and President Richard Nixon's response to it more than a generation ago. According to social conservatives, ultra-hedonistic radicals of the 1960s openly brought into question the time-honored traditions of American life (e.g., Himmelfarb). The conservative critique conjures up images of demonstrations against the Vietnam War and the counter-cultural valorizations of free expression, loosening sexual mores, and recreational drug use. Liberals, on the other hand, tend to view conservatives as simply transferring their Cold War anxieties over to the domestic arena. Conservatives are said to use the language of national security to justify imposing a rigid orthodoxy of personal behavior and nationalistic sentiment on a largely unsuspecting American populace.<sup>2</sup> Talk radio, with its take-no-prisoners format, is viewed as insidiously inciting cultural antagonisms in order to secure ratings and therefore profits (e.g., Conason).

[3] Regardless of the fairness or accuracy of either of these characterizations, Bill Clinton will long be remembered for his central role as a figure of scorn by traditionalists and his sympathetic predicament in the eyes of many fellow baby boomers. We argue that Clinton found himself at the center of the culture war due to three major factors: 1) the changing nature of American religion and its place in national life; 2) the nature of the policy positions taken by the administration; and, 3) the controversy surrounding the circumstances of his impeachment.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g., a CNN/Gallup/USA Today poll conducted February 12-13, 1999, found 68% job approval for President Clinton (<http://pollingreport.com/clinton-.htm>).

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Alterman and Green contend that much of the debate has been successfully framed by conservative media with much of the language once reserved for America's external enemies now being redirected in internal debates.

## America's Changing Religious Culture

### *The Rise of Evangelicalism*

[4] American religion is in a period of dramatic change. In the aftermath of the Scopes trial in 1925, fundamentalism went into a period of self-imposed exile.<sup>3</sup> For the next half-century mainline Protestantism held sway as the dominant public expression of national religious life. Prominent mainline theologians such as Harvey Cox, Paul Tillich, and Reinhold Niebuhr offered religious justifications for America's powerful New Deal center.<sup>4</sup> In the 1970s, however, the country's mood drifted into the unmistakable territory of backlash. Abortion, busing, school prayer, and the question of equal rights for women fundamentally altered the equation. A powerful new evangelical revival swept the nation in that decade. Fundamentalists, once so staunchly in favor of separation from the public realm, abandoned their marginalization and mobilized their parishioners in an effort to rescue what they perceived to be a culture in decay. After first supporting and then quickly deserting Jimmy Carter, a Southern Baptist Democrat, they fell into line behind the candidacy of Republican Ronald Reagan, raised in his mother's tradition of the Disciples of Christ. The fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention, America's largest Protestant denomination, was followed by the emergence of the Moral Majority under the leadership of Independent Baptist Jerry Falwell. Voter guides were distributed in churches all across Bible-Belt-states and helped to seal the fate of key liberal Senators such as Birch Bayh (D-IN), Frank Church (D-ID), and George McGovern (D-SD).<sup>5</sup>

[5] By the time of the 1992 election, not only were the mainline Protestant churches nearly three decades into their steady decline, the political arm of conservative religionists was truly coming into its own. The Democratic Party, and liberals more generally, were routinely bashed on radio and from the pulpit as enemies of "ordinary" Americans.<sup>6</sup> Their ideology was typically characterized as aggressively secular and openly hostile to people of faith. Liberal support for abortion rights, gay rights, and a more egalitarian society in general were all subjected to attacks that alternated between lampooning and bitter vituperation. One of the Christian Right's premiere strategists, Ralph Reed, characterizing his tactics as "guerilla warfare," once said: "I paint my face and travel at night. You don't know it's over until you're in a body bag. You don't know until election night" (Balz and Brownstein).

[6] It was into this new religious and political landscape that Bill Clinton first took the oath of office for the presidency. His support for such things as health care reform and racial

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<sup>3</sup> The Scopes trial was a 1925 showdown in Dayton, Tennessee, between modernists who advocated teaching evolution in school and traditionalists who wanted only creationism to be taught (see Marsden).

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Mattson argues that the backing given by such liberal theologians as Reinhold Niebuhr for New Deal Liberalism was crucial in securing the support of the American people.

<sup>5</sup> Oran Smith argues that the fundamentalist takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1979 is one of the key points in contemporary American social history. His thesis: as the Southern Baptists go, so goes the South and as the South goes, so goes the rest of the country.

<sup>6</sup> David Brock contends that conservative groups effectively mobilized in an effort to dominate the nation's media markets. They have, according to Brock, succeeded beyond their most ambitious hopes (2004).

reconciliation were immediately spotted as being out of step with the newer religious sensibilities. Contemporary conservative evangelicalism, particularly in its Southern Baptist variety, tends to place the emphasis not on the Social Gospel of yesteryear, but on personal salvation. Efforts to reform the world where we now reside is not evidence of a commitment to religious principles, but rather is regarded as an affront inasmuch as it fails to rate personal salvation as the supreme religious value.<sup>7</sup>

*Clinton's Religious Roots & Rhetoric*

[7] Bill Clinton's religious roots reflect a Southern Baptist brand which predates the modern fundamentalist mentality. Baptists prior to the efforts by such notables as Charles Stanley, Paul Pressler, and Adrian Rogers, were generally considered to be moving in the direction of the mainline Protestant Churches (Shurden). Seminaries such as Southern in Louisville, Kentucky, one of the last of the SBC seminaries to be taken over by the fundamentalists, boasted a wide and continuing dialogue with the seminaries of other denominations (Smith). Typical of this more moderate and ecumenist Baptist tradition, Clinton stressed racial reconciliation and the Scriptural injunctions to provide support and assistance to those who lived their lives on the margins of society. Indicative of these emphases was Clinton's welcoming remarks when Pope John Paul II arrived in the United States early in the first term. Quoting John F. Kennedy, America's only Catholic President, Clinton declared, "Here on Earth God's work must be our own" (1993b: 1612).

[8] Clinton was never more comfortable talking about faith and Scripture than when he was stressing the themes of the Social Gospel. A typical event was his 1993 visit to Memphis, Tennessee, to honor the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. There he made common cause with those who suffered under the yoke of systematic discrimination during the Jim Crow era and framed America's duty to respond to the modern crisis of youth violence in specifically religious terms:

Scripture says, you are the salt of the Earth and the light of the world. That if your light shines before men they will give glory to the Father in heaven. That is what we must do. . . How would we explain it to Martin Luther King if he showed up today and said, yes, we won the cold war. . . Yes, we developed all these miraculous technologies. . . Yes, without regard to race, if you work hard and play by the rules, you can get into a service academy or a good college, you'll do just great. How would we explain to him all these kids getting killed and killing each other? How would we justify the things that we permit that no other country in the world would permit? How could we explain that we gave people the freedom to succeed, and we created conditions in which millions abuse that freedom to destroy the things that make life worth living and life itself? We cannot (1993c: 2361-62).

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<sup>7</sup> Philip Jenkins argues that Christianity is changing, both domestically and abroad, and is becoming more dogmatic and much less inclusivist. As part of this change, the former emphasis on social reform is being replaced by an accent on personal piety.

[9] Bill Clinton's religious rhetoric was decidedly of the civil religion genre, calling the country to service and sacrifice. During his first inaugural he challenged the country in Kennedy-esque terms to accept the mantle of moral leadership:

Let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. From this joyful mountaintop of celebration we hear a call to service in the valley. We have heard the trumpets. We have changed the guard. And now, each in our own way and with God's help, we must answer the call (1993a: 77).

Such soaring rhetoric stood in stark contrast to the decidedly anti-statist approach of conservatives such as Governor Kirk Fordice of Mississippi: "God, not government, will be the savior of welfare recipients" (Shapiro and Wright).

[10] While the themes of the Social Gospel were becoming increasingly anathema to large segments of White Evangelicalism, such ideas were well received in the religious circles of the Black community. Leading African-American theologians, such as Cornel West, Michael Eric Dyson, and Peter Gomes, continue, despite the rise of fundamentalism in the white evangelical denominations, to stress racial reconciliation, regard for the poor and marginalized, as well as the need to preach a more inclusive Gospel. Dyson, for example, despite his education at a college affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, continued to call for the kind of social change advocated by Bill Clinton.<sup>8</sup> Cornel West, ubiquitous commentator on subjects as far-ranging as critical race theory to American Pragmatism, enjoys significant cross-over appeal in the largely white mainline Protestant denominations. His reflections on the changing nature of American religion, echoed by Harvard's African-American campus minister and professor of Religion, Peter Gomes, are centered on a well-sustained critique of the penchant of white evangelicals to interpret the Gospels literally and with a narrow cultural focus reflective of the norms and values of white, middle class America.<sup>9</sup> The prevalence of the theological reflections of Dyson, West, and Gomes serve as good indication as to why President Clinton's Social Gospel based rhetoric found such appeal.

[11] The theological positions of many African-American religious groups stand in stark contrast to the emerging fundamentalism of the country's White Evangelical community. Significant elements of contemporary white evangelicalism are centered on the individual, not institutions. Small group interactions focusing on personal betterment and spiritual confession are ubiquitous in evangelical churches of today.<sup>10</sup> This runs counter to the more established approach of corporate worship and social service, both of which were hallmarks of the older Protestant tradition in which Bill Clinton grew up. Many evangelicals decry what they perceive to be the lack of significant mystical spirituality in mainline Protestantism and

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Eric Dyson has devoted much of his academic writing to the cultural changes and pressures affecting African-American culture, including its diverse religious culture.

<sup>9</sup> Both West and Gomes provide trenchant criticisms of the rise of fundamentalism with theological and philosophical approaches to religious life that are reminiscent of earlier versions of the Social Gospel.

<sup>10</sup> Donald Miller observes the rise of the small group movement in conservative evangelical churches and identifies their emergence as the key point of difference with older versions of mainline Protestantism.

view its absence as indicative of a religious expression far too accommodating to modernity.<sup>11</sup>

[12] The consistent theme of saving religious expression from modernist encroachment runs counter to the way President Clinton viewed his own motivations. At the time of the signing of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act in 1993, the President specifically invoked the writings of popular neo-conservative law professor Stephen Carter. Carter's books, dealing with civility and integrity and the marginalization of religious life in secular America, were quite popular in the mid-nineties.<sup>12</sup> Clinton linked his social mission to doing the will of God and called on progressives to be less reticent about framing issues in those terms:

Let us never believe that the freedom of religion imposes on any of us some responsibility to run from our convictions. Let us instead respect one another's faiths, fight to the death to preserve the right of every American to practice whatever convictions he or she has, but bring our values back to the table of American discourse to heal our troubled land (1993d: 2378).

[13] Evangelicals, no strangers to using religious rhetoric to further their social agenda, rejected Clinton's use of religious oratory as the usurpation of authentic spirituality. This is reflective of a greater divide in America as the disagreement between evangelicals and mainline Protestants is more than just a theological argument. According to James Davison Hunter, author of a widely read and highly regarded book on the culture war, the conflict is momentous.

These headliner issues...are anything but mere distractions. At stake are competing non-negotiable claims about how public life ought to be ordered; these claims emerge out of our ultimate beliefs and commitments, our most cherished sense of what is right, true, and good, and they are directly linked to competing ideals of national identity (1993; see also 1992).

If Hunter is correct, and there is, in fact, a great struggle to define national identity, it becomes clear why Bill Clinton became such a symbol in the culture war – he represented the most visible symbol of a rival interpretation of the vocabulary system held most sacred by evangelicals. As evidenced by the fight in the Southern Baptist Convention over the nature and meaning of Biblical language, the struggle to define the meaning of religious terms takes on dramatic and important national implications (e.g., Lively).

### **Clinton's Social Policies**

[14] President Clinton came into office promising to “focus like a laser beam” on the economy (Gellman). He had taken a variety of stands most closely associated with the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), a group formed in the wake of the Dukakis debacle of 1988 (Baer; Klein). These centrist Democrats argued that the only way to advance the

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<sup>11</sup> E.g., Thomas C. Reeves takes issue with the theology of the old mainline Protestant churches and contends that the future of Christianity rests with evangelicals.

<sup>12</sup> Carter's book became a favorite of neo-conservatives who argued that the trend toward secularization was ruining American society.

cause of the Democratic Party was to recognize the prevailing ideological winds in the country and to make some accommodation with them. Accordingly, many DLC Democrats urged the President to push his centrist agenda of middle class tax cuts, increase the number of police officers on the streets, and overhaul the welfare system (Harris). Instead, Clinton chose initially to advance policy positions that were guaranteed to alienate moderates and enrage religious conservatives (Schier). The best known, of course, was the President's effort to remove the military's ban on gays in the armed forces. Few issues were as explosive as the role of homosexuals in modern American life.

[15] The issue of gay rights, dating from the famous Stonewall incident a generation ago, was becoming a central flashpoint in the culture war.<sup>13</sup> From a legal standpoint the issue was simple: should the rights guaranteed under the Fourteenth Amendment be extended to homosexuals, thus allowing gays and lesbians the same legal protections afforded heterosexuals?<sup>14</sup> Stemming from the privacy revolution in contemporary jurisprudence, pro-gay rights advocates challenged the government's role to regulate human sexuality. Christian Right activists, on the other hand, perceived the issue to be nothing short of cataclysmic for American society.<sup>15</sup> According to their arguments, the family is the central institution in any nation's life. Natural law, generally regarded as complimentary if not synonymous with Scripture, was interpreted as being implacably opposed to extending public recognition of homosexuality as a lifestyle choice. The issue presented a stark illustration of James Davison Hunter's thesis that the culture war is a clash between the forces of tradition versus those who accept the implications of diversity that accompany modernity (1992).<sup>16</sup>

[16] Elevating the saliency of the issue still further for Christian Right activists was the perception that the gay rights revolution was made possible by a hopelessly out of touch left-wing judiciary. Still seething from the defeat of Judge Robert Bork's nomination for the U.S. Supreme Court a decade earlier, Christian Right activists were spurred on by the Judge's best-selling treatise linking the decline of moral values with judicial activism.<sup>17</sup> According to Bork, those who would undermine the moral fabric of the country would have no legal leg to stand on were it not for such invented rights as privacy. He called on the courts to abandon their activism and abide by the restraints imposed by the text itself. Civil libertarians, on the other hand, applauded the courts' activism and embraced the entire area

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<sup>13</sup> On June 27, 1969, a police raid of the Stonewall Inn, a mob-owned, gay night club in Greenwich Village resulted in six days of uprising. The "Stonewall Riot," is viewed as the impetus to the beginning of the gay-rights movement. For an overview of events surrounding Stonewall, see David Carter.

<sup>14</sup> Jean L. Cohen argues that gay rights are the logical outgrowth of the privacy revolution begun under the Warren Court forty years ago.

<sup>15</sup> Chris Bull and John Gallagher argue that the disagreements between the Religious Right and the gay rights movement are virtually non-negotiable. Further, the two sides represent larger forces than just themselves as their respective positions accurately reflect the divisions that divide the country culturally.

<sup>16</sup> Hunter's book became one of the most widely quoted sources of the 1990s culture war. Hunter describes the conflict as existing between the *orthodox*, those who view tradition and revealed religion as the basis for national culture, and the *progressives*, those who view reason as the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong.

<sup>17</sup> Bork's book, coming a decade after his defeat at the hands of the Democratic-controlled Senate in 1986, is a broad indictment of American liberalism and its commitment to state neutrality in matters of moral choice.

of privacy jurisprudence as the logical outgrowth of a rapidly diversifying national community. President Clinton's attempt to lift the ban on gays serving in the military was heralded as the long over-due remedy to systematic discrimination (Blumenthal).

[17] Regardless of the legal and moral merits of both arguments, it was clear that by the spring of 1993, the President had badly miscalculated the political fallout from his policy. Southern Democrats, already reeling from the steadily rising Republicanism of their region, resisted the Clinton administration's efforts to change the policy. Senator Sam Nunn, a highly respected senator from Georgia and chairman of the Senate Armed Services committee, was angered by the failure of the administration to thoroughly vet the idea before proceeding with the policy. Another powerful Democrat who railed against the proposed policy was Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia. In a meeting with President Clinton, Vice President Al Gore, and other White House staffers and Congressional members regarding the gays-in-the-military policy, Byrd reportedly told the President: "Remove not the ancient landmarks thy fathers have set. I am opposed to your policy because it implies acceptance. It will lead to same-sex marriages and homosexuals in the Boy Scouts" (Stephanopoulos: 127).

[18] While the controversy surrounding the gays-in-the-military policy swirled around the Beltway, the White House proceeded to push Clinton's campaign pledge to reform the nation's healthcare system. Already accounting for nearly one seventh of the U.S. gross domestic product, the perception was that the administration was trying to nationalize a considerable portion of the economy. Making matters more difficult for the Democratic Party was the idea of raising revenue by passing new taxes on tobacco. This was a serious and badly underestimated blow to the Clinton administration's standing throughout the South. Rural citizens, many with historic ties to the Democratic Party, now came to regard the Clinton administration as somehow anti-small town America. The stage was set for a major disaster for the President's party in the South (Black and Black).<sup>18</sup>

[19] Cultural populism, long a latent attitude structure throughout the South and rural West, gelled around the issues of gays, gun control, abortion, and the defense of tobacco. On the issue of guns, the Democratic Party had long been divided. Rallying around the unlikely symbol of James Brady, Ronald Reagan's former press secretary who had been badly wounded in the 1981 attempt on Reagan's life, President Clinton urged Congress to pass the Brady Bill. The legislation was designed to increase the regulation on certain kinds of weapons, but critics on the right frequently described Clinton's efforts as the opening salvo in a long march toward the banning of all guns. Such fears were fueled early in the administration when Attorney General Janet Reno, a perennial target of conservative critics, oversaw the storming of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas on February 28, 1993. The crisis had been precipitated by an earlier attempt by agents of the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) to gain forced entry into the main building being occupied by followers of David Koresh. A firefight ensued in which several people died, including four ATF agents and an indeterminate number Branch Davidians, and was

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<sup>18</sup> The Black brothers provide a detailed overview of the declining fortunes of the Democratic party in the South. They identify cultural variables, such as abortion and gun control, as key policy initiatives that helped to move white southerners out of their traditional home in the Democratic Party and over to the GOP.



followed by a standoff lasting 51 days. The ultimate outcome was nothing short of tragic as the nation watched the compound burst into flames resulting in the deaths of most inside, including women and children. Following, the Clinton administration was caricatured as heavy-handed and anti-gun (e.g., Bovard).

[20] Since the late 1970s, cultural conservatives of all types have rallied around the issue of abortion. Again, the question of whether or not a woman has the right to choose to terminate her pregnancy raised the specter of judicial activism, an activism derisively labeled as “liberal elitism” (e.g., Coulter). Abortion raises a host of questions related to the role of women in American life. If a woman is denied access to safe abortions, liberals argue, they will be placed at an unfair advantage in the job market as well as relegated to their biological role as mothers. Conservatives, however, see the issue as nothing short of an assault on the family and the wholesale devaluation of human life (Sanger). While public opinion polls throughout the Clinton administration still depicted a badly cross-pressured electorate, the general impetus was for the procedure to remain available, although restricted.<sup>19</sup> The Supreme Court, just prior to Clinton’s arrival in Washington, dealt with such restrictions in a series of high profile cases that both affirmed the central tenets of *Roe* while also allowing for state regulation.<sup>20</sup> Such rulings presumably ran parallel to the pledges that Governor Clinton made during the campaign. He had, in fact, run on the promise to make abortion “safe, legal and rare,” a DLC approach that sought to reassure suburban voters while also placating more traditional elements of the electorate (Baer).

[21] Bill Clinton’s moderate approach was put to the test when Republicans pushed through Congress a ban on late-term, or what social conservatives call “partial-birth,” abortions in 1996. The procedure, putatively used in only rare circumstances, was overwhelming regarded in a negative light by the electorate.<sup>21</sup> Pro-life forces, unable to muster majorities for a total ban, sought to make support for abortion-rights an untenable position one procedure at a time (see, e.g., Saletan). Maintaining the commitment of the Democratic Party to preserve the ready accessibility of reproductive rights, President Clinton vetoed the ban citing a lack of an exception if the health of the mother were in jeopardy. In a letter to the Archbishop of Chicago, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, President Clinton explained his action:

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<sup>19</sup> In response to a 1996 *Los Angeles Times* poll which asked respondents if they were “in favor of the Supreme Court decision (*Roe v. Wade* 1973) which permits a woman to get an abortion from a doctor at any time within the first three months of her pregnancy?” 54% said they “favor strongly” or “favor somewhat” the decision (Survey by *Los Angeles Times*, April 13-April 16, 1996, iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut, <http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/ipoll.html>).

<sup>20</sup> Many of the key Supreme Court decisions of the 1980s and 1990s addressed the efforts of the legislatures in such states as Missouri, Ohio, and Pennsylvania to curb abortion by placing various notification restrictions (see, e.g., *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* 505 U.S. 833 [1992]; *Akron v. Akron Center for Reproductive Health*, 462 U.S. 416 [1983]; *Planned Parenthood v. Ashcroft*, 462 U.S. 476 [1983]).

<sup>21</sup> According an April 1996 *Gallup* poll, 57% favored “A law which would make illegal the use of an abortion procedure conducted in the last three months of pregnancy known as ‘partial birth abortions’, except in cases necessary to save the life of the mother” (Survey by *Gallup Organization*, April 25-April 28, 1996, iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut, <http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/ipoll.html>).

This is a difficult and disturbing issue, one which I have studied and prayed about for many months. I am against late-term abortions and have long opposed them, except where necessary to protect the life or health of the mother. . . In short, I do not support the use of this procedure on an elective basis where it is not necessary to save the life of the woman or prevent serious risks to her health. That is why I implored Congress to add a limited exemption for the small number of compelling cases where use of the procedure is necessary to avoid serious health consequences (1996: 646-47).

While support for abortion rights itself hardly guaranteed defeat at the ballot box, the electorate was far less cross-pressured on the issue of late-term abortions – they were against it. Yet again, it became easy to characterize the Clinton administration as out of the cultural mainstream.

[22] In one issue after another, President Clinton found himself open to the charge that he was advocating a hard-left agenda that ran counter to the wishes, if not of the entire populace, of at least the traditionalist elements of American society. By late in his second term, a spate of books cited these policy positions as indicative of Bill Clinton's desire to use the presidency to further the Sixties-era ethos. A paradigmatic example was Gertrude Himmelfarb, a former leftist radical turned neo-conservative, who argued that the nation was solidly divided between two cultures. President Clinton's presidency represented the full realization of the moral libertarianism of counter-cultural radicals. His opposition to guns, support for abortion rights, and advocacy of equal rights for gays and lesbians demonstrated, according to Himmelfarb, contempt for the moral views of average Americans. Using the high-toned language of academic discourse, Himmelfarb sided with populist conservatives. J. Budziszewski, a political theorist seeking to revive the natural law tradition of Thomas Aquinas, went so far as to characterize the Clinton administration as being in open rebellion against the moral precepts etched into the fabric of the cosmos.

[23] Academics like Himmelfarb and Budziszewski reached only a limited audience with their objections to the Clinton administration. Populist radio and TV personalities such as Anne Coulter, Sean Hannity, G. Gordon Liddy, Rush Limbaugh, Oliver North, Bill O'Reilly, and Michael Savage, however, were able to parlay their disgust with the Clinton administration proposals into mass audiences, angered by what they perceived as Ivy-League arrogance (Brock 2004). Clinton's support for abortion rights was described as a license to murder, while his support for gun regulation was depicted as urban snobbery (Blumenthal). Early in 1998, conservative critics were handed an issue by Clinton himself that, in their minds, crystallized the moral depravity of the Baby-Boomer President. What followed was the drama of only the second impeachment trial in American history.

### **Impeachment**

[24] Bill Clinton was dogged by rumors related to his private life throughout his presidency. The allegations began before he was even nominated by the Democratic Party. Facing a tough primary battle with former Senator Paul Tsongas (D-MA) and Senator Bob Kerrey (D-NE), there were those who believed that the Clinton candidacy was doomed by the claims of Gennifer Flowers that Clinton had engaged in an illicit extra-marital affair with the

lounge singer. Flowers charged that she and Clinton were lovers during his tenure as Arkansas governor. To bolster her claims, she produced a recording of the governor that had been recorded on Flowers' answering machine. While not itself conclusive, Governor Clinton's tone and demeanor suggested a level of familiarity and intimacy that raised questions in the minds of even his most loyal supporters. The famous Clinton War Room went into crisis mode and defended their candidate from the fallout. Despite being wounded by the incident, Clinton finished second in the New Hampshire Primary, thus earning the title of the "Comeback Kid." Following his surprising New Hampshire showing, Clinton went on to secure the Democratic nomination and ultimately, the presidency itself. The damage had been done, however. Clinton came into office with the baggage of his personal life hanging over him (Klein; Stephanopoulos).

[25] It was largely due to this episode that an article published by conservative activist R. Emmet Tyrell, in his magazine, *The American Prospect*, almost immediately gained traction. In the article, the genesis of a scandal known as "troopergate," came into being. According to Arkansas state troopers who had been charged with the governor's personal protection, Clinton had engaged in routine rendezvous with various paramours (Brock 2002). This revelation sent immediate shock waves through the conservative movement. Clinton, they charged, was a serial adulterer who had trouble keeping his covenant with his wife. How, they asked, could he therefore be entrusted to abide by his inaugural oath to uphold the Constitution? Apparently, in the minds of some of the President's harshest critics, Bill Clinton's marital difficulties were only the tip of the iceberg. Following the suicide of close personal friend Vince Foster, Reverend Jerry Falwell began marketing a video to his followers purporting to prove that the suicide was, in fact, a murder (Waas). The accusations seemed to reach a crescendo following the death of Commerce Secretary Ron Brown, whose plane crashed in the mountains of southern Europe in 1996. Again, charges of foul play appeared in conservative media. Carl Limbacher, a contributor to *NewsMax*, a source of consistent anti-Clinton propaganda, declared that the government was hiding the facts of the crash from the public. He directly implicated the President in yet another murder (Brock 2004).

[26] Defenders of President Clinton quickly moved to dispel such stories and to charge the right-wing with the grossest form of paranoia and rumor-mongering. The sheer audacity of the claims were said to be proof enough that some elements of the conservative movement never accepted the verdict of the 1992 election and would stop at nothing to bring the President down. When the election of 1996 returned Clinton to office for another four years, the partisan battle lines were firmly drawn. Some elements of the conservative movement were intent on believing whatever charges were circulated about the President, including the accusation that he had sold sensitive materials to China. Allies of Clinton, however, were equally determined to protect him from what they sensed were incredibly exaggerated attacks, the likes of which had not been seen since the early days of the Second Party System over a century and a half ago (e.g. Klein).

[27] With this highly charged political atmosphere as backdrop, the story of President Clinton's relationship with Monica Lewinsky was revealed to the nation in January 1998. The President immediately denied the charges but the groundwork had been carefully laid for such charges to stick. Visibly shaken, Clinton refused to concede to having had sexual

relations with the intern and asked that he be allowed to proceed with the normal affairs of state. Critics of the administration would have nothing of it, however. Calls for Clinton's impeachment began to circulate around the U.S. Capitol and the nation was braced for a political firestorm not seen since the Iran-Contra hearings. Ultimately, the intimate details of the affair were revealed in a report prepared by Kenneth Starr, hero to the right and independent prosecutor examining the allegations (see Starr).

[28] At the height of the impeachment crisis, Bill Clinton apologized. In front of dozens of religious leaders at an annual prayer breakfast, the President bared his soul in a rare public act of contrition and plea for forgiveness:

I don't think there is a fancy way to say that I have sinned. It is important to me that everybody who has been hurt know that the sorrow I feel is genuine: first and most important, my family, also my friends, my staff, my Cabinet, Monica Lewinsky and her family, and the American people. I have asked all for their forgiveness. But I believe that to be forgiven, more than sorrow is required – at least two more things: First, genuine repentance – a determination to change and to repair breaches of my own making – I have repented; second, what my Bible calls a “broken spirit”; an understanding that I must have God's help to be the person that I want to be; a willingness to give the very forgiveness I seek; a renunciation of the pride and the anger which cloud judgment, lead people to excuse and compare and to blame and complain (1998: 1762).

He closed his short speech asking God for help through his personal journey:

I ask you to share my prayer that God will search me and know my heart, try me and know my anxious thoughts, see if there is any hurtfulness in me, and lead me toward the life everlasting. I ask that God give me a clean heart, let me walk by faith and not sight. I ask once again to be able to love my neighbor – all my neighbors – as myself, to be an instrument of God's peace; to let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart and, in the end, the work of my hands, be pleasing (1998: 1763).

[29] Prominent theologians, many of them traditionalists, published the results of a forum on the Clinton apology. For most of them, Clinton's *mea culpa* could not redeem so clearly flawed a presidency (Fackre). House Republicans were unmoved as well and they pressed ahead with impeachment. Social conservatives were surprised that public opinion polls consistently revealed that the electorate was opposed to impeachment.<sup>22</sup> Speakers at the Fall 1998 meeting of the Christian Coalition decried what they saw as the public's moral tone deafness. They lamented the fact that the American people seemed content to let the matter rest (Goodstein). The gulf between the public opinion polls and the disgust of many

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<sup>22</sup> For example, in an *NBC News/Wall Street Journal* poll conducted in October 1998, only 24% of respondents responded “yes” to the question, “Should Congress impeach Bill Clinton and remove him from office?” whereas 71% replied “no.” Furthermore, in a *Harris* poll conducted that same month, 55% of respondents agreed with the statement, “the Republicans in Congress are just out to get the president, whatever it takes, fair or unfair.”

evangelicals led prominent neo-conservative activist, Bill Bennett to publicly question America (Bennett). “Where is the outrage?” became the rallying cry of social conservatives.

[30] Ultimately, Bill Clinton survived the impeachment crisis. On December 19, 1998, the House impeached the President on two articles: lying under oath to a federal grand jury and obstructing justice. However, on February 12, 1999, the Senate acquitted him of both charges thus ending an ugly chapter in American political history. No event better served to highlight what Christian Right commentators perceived to be the morally depraved nature of the Clinton presidency. He had more or less escaped the judgment of the American people and had survived the political and legal assault from the Republican Party and religious conservatives. The Comeback Kid had comeback from another likely defeat by serving out the remainder of his term. And, despite the fact that Clinton was forced to publicly recant his earlier denials on national television, his party went on to defy precedent and add seats in the mid-term election.<sup>23</sup>

[31] Many of Bill Clinton’s foes during the impeachment battle were not as fortunate as the President himself. Some of Clinton’s leading House critics, all of whom were part of the GOP leadership or important players in the impeachment drama, were tarred publicly with personal scandal and became symbols of hypocrisy. Henry Hyde (R-IL), chair of the House Judiciary Committee, was forced to admit to a five-year affair with a married mother from decades earlier. Dan Burton (R-IN), Chair of the House Government Reform and Oversight Committee, was also compelled to acknowledge an extra-marital affair which resulted in his fathering an illegitimate child. Speaker-elect Bob Livingston (R-LA) resigned from the House on the day of the impeachment vote having never served a day as Speaker because of the revelation of his having several extra-marital liaisons. Finally, around this time, it was revealed that Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-GA) was divorcing his second wife to marry a House staffer who was 23 years his junior.

### **Conclusion: The Clinton Legacy, Christian Right, and Culture War**

[32] James McGregor Burns and Gloria Sorenson contend that Bill Clinton faced a choice upon coming into office. He could veer in the direction of the common American and embrace his working class roots by supporting a right of center approach to policy and downplaying his baby boomer biography. Clinton failed to effectively follow this strategy. Instead, he became a cultural symbol of the 1960s at a time when American politics was moving away from divisions based on class to ones based on culture. The changing nature of American religious life effectively left the theological legacy of Clinton’s upbringing marginalized. Newly active evangelicals entered the public realm in the decade preceding Clinton’s election and fundamentally changed the nature of American political life. Formerly important religious concerns, such as Social Gospel policies designed to reduce poverty, support for civil rights, and support for the enhanced role of women were replaced by issue positions stressing personal morality and ultimately, salvation.

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<sup>23</sup> For only the second time since the Civil War, the president’s party added seats in the House of Representatives during the midterm election. The result was so stunning that Republican Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich (R-GA) retired from Congress (see Clines; Mitchell).

[33] Regardless of the Clinton administration's considerable efforts at promoting a centrist economic agenda, by pushing a liberal agenda of social change, President Clinton set an early tone for an administration that was easily caricatured as out of touch with Middle America's moral sensibilities. For much of the decade, talk of the President's relationship to Gennifer Flowers and persistent rumors regarding his conduct with Juanita Broaddrick and others were used to lay the groundwork for the impeachment crisis of 1998-1999.<sup>24</sup> In areas of the country such as the South where traditional mores and evangelical culture thrive, the Democratic Party steadily lost ground throughout the decade. After the 1994 mid-term elections, the number of Republican House members outnumbered Democrats from the region for the first time since Reconstruction (Black and Black).<sup>25</sup>

[34] And yet Bill Clinton's personal popularity rarely suffered during these times. He was able to leave office with the backing of a clear majority of the American people.<sup>26</sup> Success in the areas of economic policy and debt reduction clearly buoyed the President's popularity; however, the loss of Democratic control of Congress in 1994 and the failure to elect presidential candidates Al Gore in 2000 and John Kerry in 2004 demonstrate the persistent difficulties the Democratic Party faces in a post-Clinton political environment. In fact, during the following era of unified Republican rule, it was quite difficult to recall the time just over a dozen years ago when the Clinton era began with the hope and promise of a new Democratic majority. As time marches forward, it will be interesting to watch and see if the Democratic Party's success during the 2006 midterm election represents a long-term shift to a Democratic Congressional majority or a temporary setback to the rising fortunes of the Christian Right and social conservatives.

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<sup>24</sup> Typical of the right-wing media's assault on Clinton during this period is a 1998 article by Carl Limbacher of *NewsMax* in which he made an unsubstantiated claim that then Arkansas Attorney General Bill Clinton raped Juanita Broaddrick, who was working on his first gubernatorial campaign, in a Little Rock hotel room. Limbacher asserted that Broaddrick was actually Jane Doe #5 in the *Starr Report*.

<sup>25</sup> The 1994 election was an unmitigated disaster for Democrats who lost 54 seats in the House and 9 in the Senate.

<sup>26</sup> In December 2000, Bill Clinton's approval rating was 66% (December 15-17, 2000 *CNN/USA Today/Gallup Poll*, available online at: <http://pollingreport.com/clinton-.htm>).

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