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Out of Office and In the News: Early Projections of the Clinton Legacy

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The development of presidential legacies—understanding the political, institutional, and policy implications of an administration on the American system of government—occurs in various phases. During the first year that a president has left office, a legacy can be greatly influenced by news media coverage in both the tone and topic of stories. This study considers coverage of Bill Clinton during his first year out of office in the New York Times and on network news shows, and offers a comparison to news coverage of Ronald Reagan and George Bush during their first years out of office. Coverage of Clinton scandals through the end of 2001 mirrors the type of coverage throughout the Clinton administration, and projects a more critical and negative view by the news media than coverage received by Reagan or Bush when considering early legacy assessments.

An ex-President of the United States occupies a unique position in our national life . . . His countrymen cannot forget that he was once their chosen chief of state. Interested in him for this special reason, as in no other person, they are naturally curious to know what course he will mark out for himself, now that he has become an ex-President. Will he retire into quiet seclusion, to occupy himself with his favorite pursuits, or, perchance, to write memoirs of his times and of his part in them? Or, if a lawyer, will he once more hang out his shingle and resume the practice of his profession? Will he continue to be a national figure, gracing many a public occasion with high thinking and eloquent speech, or will he pass into the twilight zone of the “Has-beens,” who have had their day and no longer attract followers?

--Winthrop Dudley Sheldon (1925, 3)

Presidential inaugurations represent a unique feature of the American constitutional system of government—a peaceful transition of power from one administration to the next. The incoming president faces many daunting tasks in his early days in office—creating a legislative agenda, building working relationships with his newly appointed cabinet members and staff as well as key congressional leaders, and developing an effective means of communicating his goals and vision to the American public. The tasks that the outgoing president faces are much different as he looks to the development of his legacy, which usually includes building a

presidential library, writing memoirs, a variety of speaking engagements, and worrying how presidential scholars will view his years in office. And while there are no guidelines, constitutional or otherwise, for how former presidents should spend their time, most gracefully step back from the national spotlight of the presidency while Americans, and especially the news media, focus on the new occupant of the White House.

The inauguration of George W. Bush on January 20, 2001 was just as newsworthy as any previous inaugural, with perhaps a slightly heightened public interest following the November 2000 election controversy. The day would mark not only the start of the Bush administration but also the end of the Clinton era in Washington. From the time he announced his candidacy for the presidency in 1991 until his last moments in office, Bill Clinton had dominated the political center stage. His eight years in office included some big political wins and losses and plenty of scandal; his relationship with both the American press and public was nothing if not complex. Clinton has been described by friends as “a tornado that roars through people’s lives” (Grier 2001), and his presidency tells a similar tale, “full of ironic twists and turns, of a president whose mixed record of accomplishment and failure illuminates the point that the historical process is never static and that it unfolds in ways that are often unanticipated” (W. Berman 2001, 2). His last day in office was no different. Having promised to “work until the last hour of the last day” (Clinton 2001), Clinton managed to deliver the last of his 416 weekly radio addresses and granted 140 presidential pardons (including the controversial pardon to fugitive financier Marc Rich) during his last hours in the oval office. Shortly after witnessing Bush take the oath of office, Clinton promised a crowd of supporters gathered at the airport for his departure from Washington that “I’m not going anywhere.” And during the first weeks of the new Bush administration, Clinton’s promise turned out to be an accurate prediction. The “comeback kid”

kept coming back in the news media, time after time, to rival the new president as the nation's top political newsmaker.

This article considers two distinct yet related issues: First, we examine the role that continuing press coverage of a former president plays in the development of a presidential legacy; and second, we consider the impact of Clinton's lingering presence in the news media in the first year after he left office and how that has shaped the early phase of his legacy. While the historical rankings and public approval ratings of former presidents can and do shift—sometimes dramatically—in the years after leaving office, news coverage during the first year can be important in setting a tone as to how the president will be viewed and the public role that he will assume, as well as what news organizations view as significant from his time in office. A recent study on press coverage of former presidents Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush suggests that the amount of post-White House coverage decreases after the first year out of office; once both the press and the public are satisfied in knowing how the former president is adjusting to his new responsibilities, then he is no longer viewed as tremendously newsworthy. Therefore, the first year of coverage is important if the former president hopes to create positive coverage through his public activities by working “toward the goals in which he believes in the hopes of drawing both media and public attention . . . [since] an ex-president with a rigorous agenda is bound to capture more media attention than one with a less rigorous postpresidential schedule” (Asante, 2002, 75).

The activities of former presidents in the modern era (beginning with Harry S. Truman) are also considered here in order to assess the process of building a presidential legacy through its various participants, in particular the news media, which provides an on-going link between the former president and the public even after he has left office. We also provide a comparative

analysis of Clinton's first year out of office with that of former presidents Reagan and Bush through the watchful, and sometimes critical, lens of the news media. Finally, we consider whether or not Clinton upstaged George W. Bush's honeymoon with the American press and public during the early days of the new administration in 2001.

Specifically, this research focuses on the following questions: First, what comprises a presidential legacy and how does it take shape during a president's years out of office? Second, how have modern presidents spent their time after leaving office, and how has this contributed to public expectations for former presidents? Third, what type of news coverage did former President Clinton receive during his first year out of office compared to former presidents Reagan and Bush? And finally, did Clinton's coverage pre-empt national news coverage of President George W. Bush's first 100 days in office?

To answer the last two questions, news stories on Clinton in the *New York Times* and on the nightly newscasts on ABC, CBS, and NBC were content analyzed for story topic from January 21, 2001 through December 31, 2001. For comparison, the same news media sources were content analyzed for Reagan from January 21, 1989 through December 31, 1989, and for Bush from January 21, 1993 through December 31, 1993. Widely recognized as the nation's "newspaper of record" and a trendsetter in coverage for which other news outlets often follow, the *New York Times* was selected as an appropriate representation of print coverage due to the influence that the paper wields as an important political player within Washington.¹ Television coverage was also included for comparative analysis due to the expanding influence that television news has enjoyed on presidential politics for the past several decades, which became

¹ The influence of the New York Times, both politically and within the journalism industry, has been well documented. For example, see Michael Emery and Edwin Emery, *The Press and America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media*, 8th ed., (Needham Heights, MA: Simon & Schuster, 1996) and Dean E. Alger, *The Media and Politics*, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1996).

particularly evident in the 1980s as the Reagan administration made imagery and symbolism through television coverage a vital part of their communication strategy. A separate comparison will also be made of front-page coverage in the *New York Times* of Clinton and George W. Bush between January 21, 2001 and February 28, 2001.

Ex-Presidents: Of Legacies and Greatness

To determine a president's true legacy—that is, understanding the political, institutional, and policy implications of an administration on the American system of government—can take years, even decades, to sort out. Numerous participants can play a role, including presidential scholars, the news media (which captures the day-to-day events during the administration, as well as initial assessments as the president is leaving office and ongoing coverage over the years), pollsters (who determine one measure of presidential “greatness” both during the administration and after), the American public (both as participants in public opinion polls and voters during subsequent elections), and the president himself (assuming that he has not died in office). However, a magic formula for determining presidential greatness, or lack thereof, does not exist, but news coverage during a president's first year out of office can indicate the early mood of the news media as to their view of the president and how that may impact subsequent public opinion.

Several political scientists have attempted in recent years to more clearly define presidential legacies and to clarify what factors contribute to their development. According to Cronin and Genovese (1998, 88-96), many presidential “experts,” which include the news media, rely on the following factors in determining a legacy: the scope of problems faced while in office, the actions to deal with those problems and their long-term affects, overall

accomplishments, and a judgment of the president's character. Similarly, Neustadt (1990, 319) states that a legacy can be understood in three ways: the conventional wisdom that defines presidential successes and failures; the opportunities and constraints facing the president's immediate successor; and a "retrospective view in the sense of place in history." Skowronek (2000, 164) offers a different approach to understanding the presidency and the legacies of particular presidents by shifting from an "individual-centered perspective on leadership" to looking at presidential leadership in political time: "To catch the patterns and sequences in the politics of leadership, we need to adopt a much broader view of the relevant historical experience than is customary." In all three scholarly discussions, the news media play a significant role in communicating relevant information about a president's tenure to not only the public at large, but also to those participants directly involved in the creation of a president's legacy.

The news media has also long been fascinated by scholarly discussions of presidential rankings, always eager to promote the latest findings by scholars as to how past presidents have fared in the latest polls. Since the time of historian Arthur Schlesinger's initial survey published in *Life* in 1948 (65-74) and his subsequent book *Paths to the Present* (1949, 94-6), both historians and political scientists have debated the methodological approach of determining so-called "presidential greatness." Through a poll of 55 "students of American history and government," Schlesinger sought the opinions of his fellow scholars in determining the assessment of former presidents and their places in American history. With no specific criteria, the respondents selected six "great" presidents—Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Thomas Jefferson, and Andrew Jackson. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. conducted a second poll among 75 scholars in 1962 published in the *New York Times Magazine* with similar rankings (40-3). According to James MacGregor Burns (1966, 80-

1), a participant in the second poll, “historians are a profoundly important constituency indeed” in determining how the accomplishments of a president will be viewed and that agreement existed over the criteria for Schlesinger’s polls—“strength in the White House.”

Since then, other surveys have been conducted in an attempt to rank former presidents², and several articles and books have debated both the methodologies and usefulness of such scholarly endeavors³, including Dean Keith Simonton’s *Why Presidents Succeed* (1987, 5-6), a quantitative analysis that offers a means for predicting presidential greatness before (who will win the general election), during (approval ratings and legislative performance), and after (“the president’s ultimate standing with posterity”) an administration. Two new polls emerged during the end of Clinton’s time in office in 2000—one conducted by the Federalist Society and the *Wall Street Journal* and the other conducted by C-SPAN—which both ranked Clinton as an average president.⁴ A study of the C-SPAN survey, which also included the opinions of informed citizens as well as presidential experts, showed great stability in how each group rated presidents. Interestingly, in the wake of the Clinton scandals during his administration, character traits have not become more important in rating presidents, which shows “great temporal stability in how presidents are rated” (Cohen, 2001).

² For example, see Thomas A. Bailey, *Presidential Greatness* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1966); Robert K. Murray and Tim H. Blessing, *Greatness in the White House: Rating the Presidents from George Washington Through Ronald Reagan*, 2nd ed. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994); Gary M. Maranell, “The Evaluation of Presidents: An Extension of the Schlesinger Polls,” *Journal of American History*, 57: 104-113; Steven Neal, *The Chicago Tribune Magazine*, 10 January 1982: 9-13, 15, 18; and Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., “The Ultimate Approval Rating,” *New York Times Magazine*, 15 December 1996: 46-51.

³ For example, see Arthur B. Murphy, “Evaluating the Presidents of the United States,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* (Winter 1984): 117-26; Jack E. Holmes and Robert E. Elder, Jr., “Our Best and Worst Presidents: Some Possible Reasons for Perceived Performance,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* (Summer 1989): 529-57; Partick J. Kenney and Tom W. Rice, “The Contextual Determinants of Presidential Greatness,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* (Winter 1988): 161-169; Dean Keith Simonton, “Predicting Presidential Greatness: An Alternative to the Kenney and Rice Contextual Index,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* (Spring 1991): 301-5;

⁴ The Federalist Society/Wall Street Journal Survey on Presidents, which ranked Clinton as 24th out of 39 presidents in the “Average” category, can be accessed at <http://www.opinionjournal.com/hail/rankings/html>. The C-SPAN Survey of Presidential Leadership, which ranked Clinton as 21st out of 41 presidents, can be accessed at <http://www.americanpresidents.org/survey/historians/overall.asp>.

When Bill Clinton became president on January 20, 1993, until Richard Nixon's death on April 22, 1994, Americans enjoyed the presence of five former presidents (Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan and Bush). Such an event had only occurred once before in American history in 1861 following Lincoln's inauguration (with former presidents Martin Van Buren, John Tyler, Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan). While the activities of a former president are usually considered newsworthy, a public gathering of several former presidents can make for a great news media photo opportunity. This has occurred several times in recent years, usually at presidential library openings and dedications, or at more solemn occasions such as Nixon's funeral or the national day of prayer in Washington following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

By the 1980s, with three former presidents in the public eye and many presidential observers looking ahead to the formation of "the Reagan legacy," public discussions began about the role, if any, that former presidents should play in the operation of the federal government, since "the men who have served as our presidents are significant enough political figures for us to be concerned with them after they have left office" (Schenker 1982). Unlike some of their earlier counterparts, this new breed of former presidents in the latter half of the twentieth century did not show interest in seeking other elected or appointed positions, yet still remained newsworthy. (Upon leaving the White House, William Howard Taft became Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, John Quincy Adams served in the House of Representatives, Andrew Johnson served briefly in the Senate, and three former presidents—Martin Van Buren, Millard Fillmore and Theodore Roosevelt—ran for their former office representing third parties). By the early 1990s, some members of Congress had begun to criticize the federal funds appropriated to former presidents as an "extravagant retirement, complete with Secret Service protection for

widows and children, ‘fat’ book deals, handsome offices, and bloated staffs as well as presidential libraries that more nearly resemble monuments than research institutions” (Smith and Walch 1990, xi-xii).

At a conference debating the question of “What to do with ex-presidents?” historian Daniel J. Boorstin (Boorstin 1990) urged Americans to embrace former presidents for the knowledgeable public servants that they had both been and could continue to be through the creation of an official council of former presidents: “Who is better qualified to help us focus on enduring national issues than our former presidents with their experience and their feeling for the nation’s unfinished business?” However, not many have subscribed to this official role for former presidents. Several journalists, as participants at this conference, also weighed in with their opinions on the issue of former presidents. According to broadcast journalist Roger Mudd, with no constitutional or legal mandate, a former president’s role in public life has remained unofficial based on their “reputations, accomplishments, wisdom, believability and political credibility” (Mudd 1990). Perhaps ironically, Mudd pointed out that all new presidents also wish to be free of their predecessors, stating “The new headmaster does not want Mr. Chips living on campus,” yet it is his colleagues in the news media that can create this problem as they continue to find these men to hold tremendous news value.

Many political observers—scholars and journalists alike—have nearly institutionalized the “legacy watch,” with a president’s legacy “debated, constructed, and reconstructed long before he leaves office” (Murphy and Stuckey 2002) through scholarly articles, books, conference panels, newspaper editorials, and other news media coverage about the impending finale of a president’s time in office. Perhaps no president, especially during the modern presidential era, has left a greater legacy, with the help of scholars and journalists, than Franklin

D. Roosevelt, whose “legacy for his successors would be the shadow he cast on them . . . He personally dominated the political landscape, and his policies changed American society permanently” (L. Berman 1987, 209; Leuchtenburg 1983). Still, scholars and other interested presidency observers have also pointed to other contemporary presidents who have left an indelible mark on the presidency as an institution. Two noteworthy examples include Nixon, whose resignation following Watergate left the modern presidency “limited and diminished” (Woodward 1999, 514), and Reagan, whose legacy has received much attention since as early as his last year in office, as he was credited with closing “the gap between the public and its leader” (Jones 1988, vii) and putting “a stamp upon his party and upon the nation’s political culture that shapes it still” (Gergen 2000, 351). According to presidential communications advisor David Gergen, who worked in the Nixon, Ford, Reagan and Clinton administrations, the ability to create a legacy is a lesson in presidential leadership for future presidents to ponder, since “the most effective presidents create a living legacy, inspiring legions of followers to carry on their mission long after they are gone.”

Life After the White House in the Modern Era: Does Time Heal All Wounds?

Since FDR’s death in 1945, only one other president, John F. Kennedy, died while in office. The remaining nine presidents (some longer than others) enjoyed their time in the exclusive club of ex-presidents, fondly called “my exclusive trade union” by former president Herbert Hoover. (Hoover was the only former president when he left office in March 1933 and he enjoyed the longest tenure as an ex-president, 31 years until his death in 1964). Various factors can impact the activities of and public expectations for a former president, including his age when leaving office (leaving the presidency as a relatively young man can create much

higher expectations about contributions to public life), his length of tenure in office (a two-term president presumably contributed more to policy changes during his time in office and can receive more attention as a policy “expert”), and whether or not a president leaves office in good standing with the public (some presidents have left office with low approval ratings and/or under the cloud of a scandal, leaving even more legacy-related questions to debate than usual). The activities in which former presidents have engaged during the past half century have varied tremendously due not only to the circumstances stated above, but also due to the individuals’ desire to be publicly active and viewed as making a useful contribution to society and, therefore, also viewed as a successful former president.

Harry Truman, while not a young man when he left office in 1953, would spend twenty years as a former president until his death in 1973. Truman relished his return to life as a private citizen in Independence, Missouri, and it was this simple life as a former president that allowed his low public approval ratings upon leaving office to slowly begin to rise during his post-White House years through the public’s glimpses, via news coverage, of his daily activities. He spent a good deal of his time going for walks, playing the piano, driving, writing his memoirs, and working at his library—for many years, the “most memorable exhibit on display was Truman himself.” Truman left the White House with no secret service protection, and no expense accounts or staff funded through the federal treasury; he also did not work as a lobbyist or consultant and never attempted to cash in on his fame as a former president. His return to life as a citizen was considered one of the happiest periods of his life (McCullough 1990, 47-54), and his public approval resurgence by the late 1970s led to many politicians and citizens alike longing for the simplicity and directness of Truman’s political style.

Upon leaving the White House in 1961, Dwight Eisenhower also enjoyed his chance to return to life as a private citizen, and at the age of 70 he did not have a high public expectation for continued service. Instead of remaining active on the political scene, Eisenhower played golf, visited with friends, wrote both formal and informal memoirs of his life and presidency. His political visibility remained low key; he gave advice on foreign and military affairs when asked by Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, and months before his death in 1969, Eisenhower had endorsed Nixon in his 1968 bid for the presidency. Eisenhower's ranking as a great president has steadily risen among historians since first being rated as "average" in Schlesinger's 1962 survey, with more recent surveys placing him in the top ten and labeling him as "near great."⁵ According to biographer Stephen Ambrose (1990, 573), the eight years of peace and prosperity during the Eisenhower years will continue to improve his public standings as a great president: "No other President in the twentieth century could make that claim. No wonder that millions of Americans felt the country was damned lucky to have him."

The next two former presidents—Johnson and Nixon—would leave office under much different circumstances. Johnson, whose initial legacy could be summed up by one word—Vietnam—spent his four years out of office, prior to his death in 1973, building his library, writing his memoirs, and working on his ranch. His public appearances were limited, but did include some speaking engagements (most notably at the LBJ Library) and interviews with Walter Cronkite. The press, however, portrayed him as "a sullen, bitter, brooding, unhappy man, retreating to the isolation of his ranch to lick his wounds" (Hardesty 1990, 97). By the 1990s, Johnson was enjoying a resurgence in public standing in spite of Vietnam, in part through efforts of the Johnson Library, family members, former colleagues, and even scholars who began to pay more attention to Johnson's achievements in the domestic policy arena (Sweany 2000).

⁵ See both the Federalist Society/Wall Street Journal and C-SPAN surveys from 2000.

According to Richard Goodwin (1999), former speechwriter during the early years of the Johnson administration, scholars and commentators were finally reassessing Johnson's domestic agenda, which had long been obscured because of Vietnam: "[F]or years afterward, the moans of the battlefield have obscured the narrative of achievement and spacious vision that may ultimately rank Lyndon Johnson among our very great leaders."

After his resignation from office in August 1974, Nixon began a twenty-year effort of rehabilitating his public image and shaping his legacy while "running for ex-president." He traveled around the world, wrote several books (mostly on foreign policy), gave lectures, wrote newspaper editorials and counseled presidents on the state of foreign affairs. Public passions about Nixon, both good and bad, continued throughout his twenty-year tenure as a former president; however, slight improvements in his rankings by historians have been slow in coming as he is still rated as "below average" and in the bottom third of recent surveys.⁶ According to biographer Melvin Small (1999, 307-8), Nixon did restore some of his image as a knowledgeable resource for national and international concerns: "Whatever people may have thought of Watergate and Nixon personally, by the time [his] library opened [in July 1990], many considered him a wise elder statesman whose ideas about foreign policy, particularly relating to the communist bloc, were worth listening to." Upon his death in 1994, many political observers discussed the Nixon legacy, which was muddled at best even two decades after Watergate: "At Nixon's death, nothing about him was perfectly clear anymore. Like children standing at the grave of a deeply flawed father, Americans began to construct a more complex picture of his strengths and weaknesses" (Alter 1994).

According to Gerald Ford (1990, 173), who once described his post-presidential years as being "without prescribed activities and [enjoying] a marvelous array of choices," five themes

have characterized his return to public life, including education, advocacy, partisanship, the celebrity status accorded a former president, and former presidents as symbols. In addition to writing his memoirs and remaining somewhat active in Republican politics (including Ronald Reagan's 1980 presidential campaign), Ford was criticized during the early 1980s for his ability to make large sums of money from business consulting and his service on a variety of corporate boards (Morganthau and DeFrank 1981). However, Ford's legacy, like that of many of his predecessors, has improved with time. After his appearance, at age 87, at the 2000 Republican National Convention, where his political colleagues paid him tribute, political observers in the press also began to cast a different light on his political legacy as "underrated" for his role in helping the nation recover from Watergate, which has been considered "one of America's darkest periods" (Newsweek 2000).

Jimmy Carter's role as a former president represents a unique schism in the pattern of his contemporary colleagues—his accomplishments as an ex-president in many ways rival those of his presidency. Carter was also relatively young when he left office in January 1981; at the age of 56, he had many viable years with which to remain publicly active. Through his work with Habitat for Humanity, international human rights, overseeing elections and other diplomatic foreign missions, there has been continuity in the issues that Carter pursued both during and after his years in the White House. Carter has "redefined the ex-presidency" by adding a new dimension "to the traditional roles of ex-presidents—the retired statesman who simply returned to his home, from which he offered sage advice, or, more rarely, the occasional public servant who ran for office again or accepted a presidential appointment." In just over a decade after his presidency, Carter's record, particularly in foreign policy, had begun to look better in retrospect as he solidified "the political resurrection that had turned 1980's malaise-ridden loser into 1994's

⁶ Ibid.

distinguished global peacemaker” (Brinkley, 1998, xi-xii). According to historian Douglas Brinkley, Carter used his time in the White House “as a stepping-stone to greater *global* achievement. . . . What Carter really wanted was to find some way to continue the unfinished business of his presidency. . . . Nothing about the White House so became Carter as having left it” (xvi).

Ronald Reagan, as the longest living ex-president and first two-term president to leave office since Eisenhower, has remained newsworthy throughout his tenure as a former president. Each year his birthday in February is a ready-made news story recollecting the achievements of the Reagan administration, and much press attention was paid to the announcement in 1994, and has continued since, that Reagan was battling Alzheimer’s. By the end of the decade the press was following closely the efforts to name a variety of federal venues after Reagan, including National Airport in Washington and the Reagan Federal Building. Initially, his legacy was discussed in terms of his skills as a communicator and the changes that brought to presidential leadership during the 1980s, that in addition to policy changes “his more important legacy is in how much he changed our minds” (Gergen 1989). The successful public image of strong leadership cultivated by the Reagan administration, in spite of the perceived manipulation of the news media, continues to mold his legacy, exemplifying the fact that “Americans felt good about Reagan generally, if not about the presidency itself. If Reagan had alienated reporters, it had not affected his bond with the public”(Liebovich 2001, 148).

In contrast to his immediate predecessor and former boss, the initial assessment of George H. W. Bush’s legacy was formed, without the lead-time in the press of a second term, following his reelection loss in 1992. And while his pardons of Casper Weinberger and others involved in the Iran-Contra scandal during the last weeks of his administration threatened to

tarnish his legacy, Bush has maintained a somewhat low profile as a former president and has been “deeply ambivalent about trying to shape his own legacy” (McDaniel 1997). Bush has participated in the usual activities of former presidents, including speeches and publishing books. At the dedication of his library in 1997, however, Bush made it clear that it was the job of historians, not his or the library’s, to assess his legacy. Bush has remained off the national stage, having stated “we only have one president at a time,” particularly since the election of his son as president in 2000. He has been reluctant to use his library “to erect a monument to himself,” sees much of his legacy in the political careers of his sons, George W. and Jeb Bush, and sets himself apart as a former president in his “calm indifference to his place in history” (Walsh 1997).

Clinton’s Legacy: The Perpetual Paradox

Even before Clinton officially left office, presidential scholars and the news media began considering the question of the Clinton legacy. As the youngest man to leave the White House since Teddy Roosevelt in 1909, and as a two-term president, Clinton faced different and perhaps greater public expectations as a former president than some of his predecessors. By most accounts, Clinton was a complex president during a “turbulent” political era in American history; during the 1990s, Americans witnessed both tremendous economic growth and partisan polarization in Washington while trying to sort out the complexities of where America fit into the post-Cold War “New World Order” (Schier 2000). The Clinton years have also been described as a paradox and a time of missed opportunities—a skilled politician governing at a time of economic prosperity yet whose personal scandals diminished his ability to command

leadership over the national agenda. Clinton is viewed as “a politician of extraordinary talent [who] missed the opportunity to be an extraordinary president” (Dionne 2001).

In spite of the economic growth during the 1990s, the achievement of producing a balanced budget, and policy victories like welfare reform, the impeachment in 1998 will forever cast a dark cloud over the Clinton presidency as it “continued the long-term loss of presidential prestige” that began during the imperial presidencies of Johnson and Nixon (W. Berman 2001, 123). The economic boom of the 1990s may also work against the ultimate legacy of the Clinton years, since facing a crisis provides a better opportunity for strong leadership: “Except for the scarlet letter of impeachment, Clinton’s presidency is not particularly likely to stand out because the times in which he governed denied much opportunity to make a bold mark” (Campbell and Rockman 2000, ix). But some remain optimistic for a positive legacy based on Clinton’s policy accomplishments, once the memory of the impeachment has begun to fade, which “might eventually outweigh his lack of personal judgment. Historians tend to be more concerned generations later with the impact a president has on a country from the long view” (Liebovich 2001, 229).

In the waning days of the Clinton presidency, the national news media also began to weigh in with their early assessment of the Clinton legacy, particularly how to view the personal failings of such a skilled politician. But in one of his last acts as president, Clinton extended the national discussion about his lack of moral judgment by granting a presidential pardon to Marc Rich, a wealthy financier-turned-fugitive whose ex-wife had donated millions of dollars to Democratic Party coffers and whose attorney was once employed by the Clinton administration. Others who received a pardon included Susan McDougal (who served 18 months in jail for refusing to testify against the Clintons in the Whitewater scandal), Patricia Hearst (the publishing

heiress kidnapped in the 1970s), and Roger Clinton (the President's half-brother who once received a conviction on drug charges). The Rich pardon remained the most controversial; Rich had been living in Switzerland since 1983, having fled the country when he was indicted on federal charges of evading more than \$48 million in income taxes and illegally buying oil from Iran during the 1979 hostage crisis (Rosenblatt and Vrana 2001). Other negative stories also followed Clinton out of office, including those about gifts that the former president and First Lady had not properly reported, rumored misdeeds and pranks by Clinton staffers in their last hours in the White House, the cost and location of Clinton's post-presidential offices, and Clinton's negotiation of a deal with the special prosecutor to end legal problems stemming from the Monica Lewinsky scandal. But it was the flap over the Marc Rich pardon, as well as other questionable pardons that had been solicited by Clinton's brother-in-law, Hugh Rodham, that lead the *New York Times* in an editorial to declare Clinton's last presidential acts a "redoubled effort . . . to plunge further and further beneath the already low expectation of his most cynical critics and most world-weary friends" (New York Times 2001).

Former President Clinton as News: The Gift That Keeps on Giving

Stories in the national news media about Clinton's ongoing problems kept the former president in full public view for months after he left the White House with much coverage that presented a critical and negative tone⁷ about the end-of-administration scandals and how his legacy would be adversely affected. Other studies have documented the finding of the prevalent coverage of Clinton once he left office. According to a study by the Center for Media and Public

⁷ For the purposes of this study, critical and negative news coverage consists of scandal-related coverage or other issues that reporters suggest may harm the development of a positive presidential legacy. Neutral and/or positive

Affairs (CMPA)⁸ published in March 2001, during the time period of January 21, 2001 through February 28, 2001, a total of 101 stories about Clinton were broadcast on the nightly network news shows, compared to only 14 stories that had been aired on former president George H. W. Bush during the same time span in 1993 (2001a). A second study by the CMPA published in May 2001 found that during the first 100 days of the new Bush administration in 2001, stories related to the Rich pardon ranked 6th in a study of top ten news stories on the nightly network news shows (in number of minutes). And if late-night television is any indication of news prominence on the national level, Clinton also beat out Bush during the first 100 days in the number of jokes; Jay Leno, David Letterman, Conan O'Brien and Bill Maher "barely seemed to notice the presidential transition" as Clinton garnered 293 jokes compared to Bush's 200, according to the same study (2001b). The potential damage to Clinton's legacy resulting from the pardons also remained a topic of discussion on the op-ed pages of America during Bush's honeymoon. For example, a column in the *Christian Science Monitor* stated: "Permanent damage to Clinton's legacy and future is possible, but unlikely, say some analysts. Virtually every previous president who left office under some sort of cloud eventually recovered standing with the American people. But for now the ex-president's travails have damaged his ability to provide a countering view to President Bush's initial policy proposals" (Grier 2001).

Coverage in the New York Times: An analysis of Clinton stories in the *New York Times* from January 21, 2001 through December 31, 2001 shows several negative stories about Clinton in early 2001, but as the frequency of the stories decreased throughout the year, the tone of the coverage began to turn more positive. The shift toward more neutral or positive coverage is

coverage consists of stories about a president's post-White House activities that keep him in the public eye without harming his potential legacy.

consistent with the coverage, considered “largely favorable in tone,” that each of his four predecessors received after leaving office (Asante, 74). During the time period studied here, a total of 174 news stories (excluding editorials and columns) appeared in which Clinton or his actions were the subject. (A break down of topics covered in these stories is provided in Table 1).

A more focused look at the tone of coverage shows that in his first weeks out of office, stories on Clinton were mostly negative in tone, which is not surprising when considering the conditions in which Clinton left office. The focus of early Clinton coverage is centered on basically two issues: last minute pardons and the taking/returning of White House gifts and other property. During Clinton’s first month out of office, 84 news stories appeared in the *Times* (from January 21st to February 21st) focusing on the former president; of those, 40 stories were related to the pardons and seven focused on White House gifts. Negative coverage of Clinton in the *Times* peaked in mid-February with ten front-page stories in a 16-day span from February 9th to February 25th (including four stories on the Rich pardon and subsequent investigation, two stories on Roger Clinton's role in the pardons, one story about Hugh Rodham's role in the pardons, one story about the pardons in general, and two stories about Clinton’s initial choice of office space in Manhattan). Negative news coverage of Clinton during his first six weeks out of office prompted *New York Times* columnist Adam Nagourney to document the irony of Clinton’s political isolation while perhaps enjoying the notoriety as the world's most famous man. Nagourney described Clinton on March 1st as "a man who so craves attention and company and is [now] described by friends as adrift and often isolated," concluding that "the incessant

⁸ The Center for Media and Public Affairs is a nonpartisan research and educational organization that conducts scientific studies of the news and , and its goal is to provide an empirical basis for ongoing debates over media fairness and impact through studies of media content.

controversy over a series of last-minute pardons has exacerbated his forced isolation" (Nagourney 2001).

By May, stories appearing in the *Times* about Clinton were mostly neutral in tone for several weeks, turning to mostly positive stories by late July, taking a more human-interest perspective on the former president that described more typical activities that Americans had come to expect (for example, a story appearing on May 16th discussed Clinton's attendance at a New York high school graduation). Previously critical storylines about the end-of-administration scandals also began to neutralize somewhat in May; for example, staff writer Christi Marquis wrote on May 19th that the vandalism reported in the White House by Clinton staffers was overblown. A front-page story on Clinton's Harlem office appears on July 31st, followed by another front-page story about his book deal on August 7th. In a 12-day period from July 31st through August 11th, Clinton received a total of 13 news stories in the *Times*, as well as a column by Maureen Dowd on August 1st about Clinton's public relations strategy as a former president: "Trying to move past the fiasco about the Marc Rich pardon and the china and silver heist, Mr. Clinton emerged from a funk and reintroduced himself this week. He has reintroduced himself so many times after overstepping and screwing up . . . [that] his old White House aides laugh at the fact that the Protean Pol is still doing it after his presidency is over" (Dowd 2001).

Coverage of Clinton decreases after the spring and early summer months with only thirteen stories from August 11th through December 31st. Coverage of Clinton during 2001, however, ends with a familiar theme from earlier in the year—a December 21st front-page story on Clinton's attempt to repair his public image and the strategy for building his legacy. In describing the aggressive public relations campaign to strengthen Clinton's image during his first year out of office, staff writer Richard Berke wrote, "No modern president has ever mounted

such an aggressive and organized drive to affect the agenda after leaving the White House." The strategy consisted of "efforts to deploy surrogates to speak out for him [which were] reminiscent of his vaunted war rooms in the White House, which were established for him to seize the political offensive on matters that included Whitewater and health care." Berke also noted that Clinton was careful not to attempt to upstage Bush, but that Clinton still faced an uphill battle to repair his public image (Berke 2001).

In contrast, both Reagan and Bush received much less coverage in the *Times* during their first years out of office. Between January 21, 1989 and December 31, 1989, a total of 85 stories appeared in the *Times* about Reagan, nearly one-half the number of stories for Clinton during the same time period. Approximately one-third of those stories dealt with the on-going legal actions stemming from Iran-Contra, including speculations as to whether Reagan would testify in court during the trials of those indicted (Oliver North, John Poindexter, etc.). Other stories focused on typical post-White House topics, such as travel and speeches (in particular Reagan's visit to and speeches in Japan for which he received \$2 million); Reagan's health was also covered (a fall from his horse and subsequent medical procedures). With the exception of Iran-Contra coverage and two critical stories of the Reagan legacy on domestic policies such as Medicare and welfare, the remaining news coverage of Reagan in the *Times* presented a mostly positive view of the former president and his legacy.

Bush, a one-term president, received just over half the coverage in the *Times* as Reagan with a total of 49 stories from January 21, 1993 through December 31, 1993. Of those, a total of 11 stories focused on the Iraqi assassination plot against Bush in early 1993. Bush also faced lingering coverage from Iran-Contra, which received a total of five stories, mostly critical of

Bush's connection to the scandal while vice president. Most of the remaining coverage was positive, and like Reagan, focused on his post-presidential activities.

Coverage on Network News: A similar analysis of Clinton stories on the nightly network newscasts from January 21, 2001 through December 31, 2001 shows that while the *New York Times* had begun to soften its critical stance towards Clinton by the end of the year, the television coverage from the three major networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) had remained harshly critical. (This data was accessed from the Vanderbilt University Television News Archive).⁹ Each of the three networks began their coverage of the former president with critical stories during his first months out of office, but rarely acknowledged Clinton's existence during the latter half of 2001. *ABC Nightly News* dedicated just over 79 minutes of its national nightly newscast to Clinton, with approximately 55 minutes focusing on the pardon controversies, approximately eight minutes on the Harlem office, with the remaining 16 minutes focusing on various topics such as his book deal, his trip to India, and the controversy over taking gifts from the White House. A story on Clinton led the ABC newscast nine times after he left office in 2001. The *CBS Evening News* dedicated nearly 75 minutes of airtime to Clinton (the lowest total of all three networks). Approximately 47 minutes focused on the pardon controversies, while approximately 10 minutes was spent on the Harlem office and the remaining 18 minutes went to other topics, including the Clinton administration's policy on terrorism and Osama bin Laden. Like ABC, CBS led its newscast nine times with stories on Clinton.

The *NBC Nightly News* dedicated a network-high 102 minutes to Clinton coverage during this time period—approximately 71 minutes were dedicated to the pardon scandals, with approximately 8 minutes related to the Harlem Office, 8 minutes related to the taking and

returning of White House gifts, while the remaining 15 minutes related to various other topics such as the India trip and Chelsea Clinton's college graduation. NBC also had a regular segment in their program from February 1st to March 2nd dubbed the "Clinton Watch" in which various aspects of Clinton's post-presidency were discussed. NBC also led its broadcast nine times with stories on Clinton. In general, most network coverage of Clinton during 2001 came within his first six weeks after leaving office. From January 21st through March 7th, Clinton received 83 total stories on the three networks, including 25 of his 27 lead stories. During this time, topics relating to Clinton received a total of 215 minutes of coverage for all three networks out of 255:50 minutes total airtime on Clinton through the end of 2001. After March 7th, Clinton received only 39 stories, two of which were lead stories.

In comparison to Reagan and Bush, Clinton again eclipses his two predecessors in amount of coverage on network news shows during the first year out of office. (See Table 2) During the time period of January 21, 1989 to December 31, 1989, Reagan received a total of 141:20 minutes of coverage on all three networks—ABC had the most with 51:20 minutes, followed by CBS with 50:00 minutes and NBC with 40:20 minutes. Each network had brief stories on Reagan's travel to and speeches in Japan, as well as other typical post-presidency stories on topics such as his memoirs, other travels, and his daily routine after the White House. Reagan's health (the fall off the horse) also made news, including three lead stories on NBC and one each on ABC and CBS. Most of Reagan's network coverage, however, focused on the ongoing Iran-Contra court cases. On ABC, 15 stories totaling 21:50 minutes focused on Iran-Contra; similarly, NBC devoted 13 stories totaling 22:10 minutes and CBS devoted 18 stories totaling 42:40 minutes to the ongoing story. Bush enjoyed much less coverage on the network

⁹ The Television News Archive collection at Vanderbilt University holds more than 30,000 individual network evening news broadcasts from the major U.S. national broadcast networks: ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN, and more

news during the time period of January 21, 1993 to December 31, 1993. A total of only 16 minutes is devoted to Bush on all three network—NBC had the most coverage with 6:50 minutes, followed by ABC with 5 minutes and CBS with 4:10 minutes. Speeches and travels by Bush received occasional coverage, but most of the network airtime was devoted to updates on the Iran-Contra scandal and the uncovering of the Iraqi assassination plot against the former president. A total of 8:10 minutes were devoted to the assassination plot on all three networks, with a total of 4:40 minutes devoted to Iran-Contra on all three networks.

Analysis: When assessing the comparisons of coverage for each of the three former presidents considered here, it is interesting to note the approval ratings of each just prior to leaving office. Clinton enjoyed a 65 percent approval rating, according to a Gallup Poll, just days before leaving office in January 2001, while Reagan had a 63 percent approval rating in late December 1988 and Bush's approval rating in January 1993 was at 56 percent.¹⁰ While both Reagan and Clinton left office with high approval ratings, each received different news coverage during their first year out of office. Also important to consider is the fact that as a one-term president, Bush had just lost a presidential election and the news media had not been preparing for his exit from center stage for four years throughout a second term. As a result, much of the coverage in the last weeks of the Bush administration served as a summation of his four years in office. However, without the coverage of Iran-Contra during 1989, Reagan's coverage in both the *Times* and on the networks does not differ that much from Bush's coverage, at least by topic. Former presidents remain an important public figure, and their activities—speeches, honors, travels, and health—rightly remain newsworthy.

than 9,000 hours of special news-related programming including ABC's *Nightline* since 1989.

¹⁰ Data from *The Gallup Poll, Public Opinion 1989*, (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1990), *The Gallup Poll, Public Opinion 1993*, (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1994), *The Gallup Poll, Public Opinion 2001*, (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2002). An analysis for soon-to-be former presidents also states,

Reagan did have the ongoing story of Iran-Contra shaping the first phase of his legacy in the news media during his first year out of office, but the significance of this “scandal” coverage differs greatly in its focus than ongoing scandals for Clinton throughout 2001. Critical news coverage of the Reagan administration dealt with just that—the administration and the various political actors within it—and not necessarily Reagan the man. Clinton’s troubles with the news media, and throughout his administration, were most often focused on Clinton personally, and not his administration as a whole. This continued during his first year out of office, with most of the coverage focusing on pardons and concluding activities surrounding the Whitewater/Lewinsky investigation. The personal angle of Clinton’s troubles highlighted his ongoing press coverage, while Reagan’s coverage while out of office suggests the validity of the oft-quoted nickname “The Teflon President.”

Given the national furor among the press and the American public over Clinton’s last-minute pardons, particularly the Rich pardon, it is interesting to note that Bush received no news coverage in the sources considered here once he left office on his controversial pardons of Casper Weinberger and five other Iran-Contra participants on Christmas Eve 1992. While many in the press suggested that the pardons would tarnish his legacy, Bush was not hounded by ongoing questions in the press about his actions. (He also did not wait until his last hours in office to grant the pardons, which gave the news media time to move on to other stories by January 1993).

The amount of coverage received by Clinton during his first year out of office, unlike Reagan and Bush, suggests two explanations. First, Clinton, at age 54, was the youngest president to leave office since 1909 (Reagan was 77 and Bush was 68) and was not at the typical

“Historically, incumbent presidents tend to receive a boost in their job approval ratings in the month following an election,” *The Gallup Poll, Public Opinion 2000*, (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2001), 422.

retirement age, which left much speculation as to how Clinton would spend his time. Also, his connection to Washington politics remained stronger than most other former presidents with his wife's election to the U.S. Senate in 2000. Second, and perhaps most importantly, much of the coverage of the post-Clinton presidency maintained a critical, somewhat sensational tone about ongoing scandals and controversies, which certainly proves the adage that "old habits die hard." From the early days of the presidential campaign in 1992, the news media had been in perpetual scandal-mode while covering Clinton throughout his entire eight years in office, making the possibility of the news media suddenly seeing former President Clinton in a new light unlikely. The nation may have been suffering from "Clinton fatigue" by the time he left office, but the nation's news media was still going strong in its coverage of ethical questions, legal problems, and allegations surrounding Clinton.¹¹ The American press has always enjoyed a good story, and as such, Clinton is perhaps the most newsworthy ex-president in American history.

Crashing Bush's Honeymoon: The Tale of the Uninvited Guest?

One final question must be considered when looking at the first phase of Clinton's legacy—what is a new president to do with a former president that is still dominating center stage? Presidents during the modern era have usually experienced a "honeymoon" period when first taking office—a brief time period when both the news media and political adversaries allow the new administration to settle in to its new surroundings (Grossman and Kumar 1981). The honeymoon has also been defined as the "courteous manners and procedural accommodations" most incoming presidents receive from Congress during their first weeks in office, which can be affected by outside sources as well: "The answer seems to lie in public opinion, or more

¹¹ For a discussion of the legacy of scandals during the Clinton administration, see Stanley A. Renshon, "The Polls: The Public's Response to the Clinton Scandals, Part 2: Diverse Explanations, Clearer Consequences," Presidential

accurately in public sentiment as gauged by Members of Congress themselves and by their party leaders, drawing upon polls and on press treatment of the new regime downtown” (Neustadt 2001, 49). This follows the 11-week transition period between the election in November and inauguration day in January, which the president-elect spends making top-level appointments to his cabinet and staff and laying the groundwork for his legislative agenda. (In 2000, however, Bush experienced a shortened transition period due to the contested presidential election. Vice President Al Gore officially conceded the election on December 13, one day after the Supreme Court’s historic ruling in *Bush v. Gore*). Timing is especially crucial for newly elected presidents who must have an effective strategy to “hit the ground running” to achieve policy agenda success. The power to control the political agenda must be seized early in an administration; only constitutional authority is automatic, since the “power of the presidency—in terms of effective control of the policy agenda—must be consciously developed” (Pfiffner 1996, 3).

What a presidential candidate talks about during the general election campaign, especially if he discusses specific domestic policy proposals, is a good indication of what his agenda will look like once in office. However, presidents alone do not control their destinies, since outside political actors such as Congress or interest groups, among others, are important players in the agenda building process. Presidents only have control over the policies they choose to initiate and the strategy behind that initiation (Fishel 1985, 187-8). An important tool for that strategy is the use of public activities, since a president can affect to some degree the public’s policy agenda through public speeches. Developing an effective strategy for press relations must also be a top priority for new administrations since the news media is the primary link between the president and the public, especially in terms of setting the national political

agenda. Communication strategies have become an important and permanent part of the everyday operation of the White House. As such, the expanding role of the rhetorical presidency in American politics, along with the growing technology and influence of the mass media, has forever changed the definition of presidential leadership. Most often, the mass media provide the primary means of presidential communication (Han 2001).

The traditional honeymoon period for new presidents, however, is no longer a guarantee. Both Clinton in 1993 and Bush in 2001 experienced predominantly negative news coverage during their first weeks in office, and Bush received less media attention overall than did Clinton or his father, George H. W. Bush, did in 1989, which “illustrates the shriveling of the honeymoon period” (Graber 2002, 282-3; Center for Media and Public Affairs April 2001).

Research on the Clinton and Bush honeymoons, or lack thereof, substantiate the claim.

According to a study by the Project for Excellence in Journalism published in April 2001, Bush received less positive coverage overall in his first 100 days in office during 2001 than did Clinton in 1993; Bush was also “dramatically less visible” than Clinton was with 41 percent fewer stories in major newspapers, network television, and a major newsweekly magazine. A trend has also emerged in how the press follows the first 100 days: initial coverage looks at whether the president is up to the job, then coverage moves to the policy agenda, particularly budget issues; presidents also appear to receive less coverage overall on the front pages of newspapers as the press continues a trend of “lighter,” meaning less political, news. A similar study by the CMPA published in May 2001 found that television news coverage of Bush during the first 100 days was substantially less than the amount of airtime given to Clinton during his first 100 days in office.

The lingering media presence of Clinton during the Bush honeymoon period raises the question of whether the former president edged out the new president in terms of press coverage. According to the CMPA in March 2001, Clinton garnered 101 stories on the nightly network news shows, compared to 201 stories for Bush through the end of February 2001, suggesting that in spite of the unprecedented coverage for a former president that Clinton had not completely “elbowed [Bush] off the stage.” Nonetheless, Bush staffers seemed “annoyed that Clinton [was] hogging the limelight,” but hoped that their administration’s “orderly launch” presented a positive public image in “contrast with the final, frenetic days of the Clinton presidency” (Fineman 2001). Clinton, however, seemed to have lost the opportunity to present the Democratic voice as a former two-term president who could still speak as a leader of his party in the early dialogue on Bush’s legislative agenda. The news media was more interested in the scandal-plagued last days of the Clinton administration, which allowed the Bush administration to focus more intently on their early policy messages.

An analysis of front page stories in the *New York Times* for both Bush and Clinton from January 21, 2001 through March 1, 2001 (the first 40 days of the Bush administration) suggests the former president did, at times, rival his successor in the White House for the national news media’s attention. During this time period, 16 front-page stories focused on Clinton, while 51 front-page stories focused on Bush. The former and current presidents shared front-page headlines 14 times during the 40-day period. During the week of February 13th, both Clinton and Bush earned five front-page stories apiece. During this week, Bush was attempting to push his defense policies to center stage, but stories of Clinton's plans to move his office from Manhattan to Harlem and the Rich pardon scandal countered the new administration’s attempts to dominate the national news agenda. Clinton earned front-page headlines in the *Times* on February 16th and

19th when Bush received no front-page billing. (On Sunday, February 18th, Clinton also made national news with an op-ed column in the *Times* defending his last-minute pardons). Finally, on March 1st, Clinton received two front-page headlines to Bush's one at a time when Bush was attempting to promote plans for his first budget proposal to Congress. However, it should be noted that the Bush administration employed a targeted news coverage strategy in its early months on specific policy topics and therefore, quantity of coverage was not necessarily the overall goal. Also, the continuing coverage of Clinton's problems provided a positive contrast for Bush in highlighting the differences in their leadership styles and personalities.

Conclusion

In 1989, George H. W. Bush was quoted in the *New York Times* that "History is basically kind to American Presidents. Everybody looks better over time. Herbert Hoover looks better today than he did 40 years ago, doesn't he? Time is generous to people" (Weinraub 1989). Most scholars considering presidential legacies have come to similar conclusions. Historian Marie B. Hecht wrote in 1976 that former presidents should be allowed to choose how to spend their retirement years without the designation of a formal role in government. However,

[N]o ex-president can hope for obscurity. A sense of history drives them to protect and defend their administrations in statements and writings. This influences their actions and their behavior in retirement. . . . For the people, an ex-president is a link with the past, a symbol of continuity, and an exercise in nostalgia. If he lives long enough, no matter how unpopular on leaving office, he acquires respect. The public is fickle in its bestowal of favors but also has a short memory for those it disliked. Retired chief executives become sages, nestors, beloved elder statesmen, or even folk heroes. (313)

The question of defining Bill Clinton's legacy, and his continued role in American public life, remains unanswered. Well into his third year out of office, Clinton has continued to make headlines as the newsworthiness of the former president has not waned. In March 2002, upon

the release of Independent Counsel Robert Ray's final report about the Whitewater/Lewinsky investigation, a March 10, 2002 editorial in the *Washington Post* declared that while "the official era of Clinton scandals is finally over," it appears unlikely for a "meeting of the minds about the Clinton presidency" to appear any time soon. In May 2002, the topic of Clinton again dominated political talk shows and op-ed pages with the news that he was considering a network television deal to host his own talk show on NBC or CBS, reportedly worth \$50 million (Hofmeister 2002). This news prompted much criticism in the press that Clinton was once again tarnishing the integrity of the presidency; however, Richard Cohen of the *Washington Post* defended Clinton in his comparison to money-making efforts by other former presidents, most notably Ford's \$1 million deal with NBC in 1977 to offer his commentary on current events, suggesting that unless Clinton decided on a "Montel Williams-style show" that he could be a "great teacher" on important domestic and foreign policy matters (R. Cohen 2002).

There is little doubt that both the press and public remain fascinated with Bill Clinton. In its April 8, 2002 edition, *Newsweek* ran a cover story by Jonathan Alter on the former president and his life since leaving the White House—his numerous speeches around the world, his work on his memoirs, his life as husband to a U.S. Senator. The conclusion, at least in terms of the unfolding legacy, was that Clinton still has "star power," and while talk of the initial overshadowing of George W. Bush has faded, "the incumbent can't possibly match his predecessor as a figure of fascination." In making a first assessment of Ronald Reagan's legacy in 1988, Charles O. Jones (1988, vii-x) wrote that it was not too early to analyze the "extraordinary" political events of the Reagan administration, since a more in-depth analysis would emerge as time went by: "All Presidents leave something of themselves behind, to be sure, but whatever that legacy may be, it is fitted into larger, ongoing political developments. No

President is forgotten. But all leave town when it is over.” Clinton may have left Washington, but he left center stage later than most former presidents. The impact that the continuing coverage will have on Clinton’s longer-term legacy is yet to be determined. However, the image left in the minds of Americans during his initial days out of the White House was not an overly positive one.

Newsweek columnist Jonathan Alter provided an accurate summation of the news media’s ongoing obsession with the Clinton story on February 26, 2001, during the early days of the Bush administration:

At first I was puzzled by why the latest installment of the Bill Clinton Story has been so big. Yes, the Marc Rich pardon was inexcusable by any standard, and the Bush honeymoon a tepid media affair by comparison. But week after week of it? The man’s a former president, after all; even Richard Nixon didn’t dominate the news this way from his Elba in San Clemente. . . . It’s clear that Clinton is more than just another addiction in a nation of substance abusers. He’s the gift that keeps on giving—to the media, the lip-smacking Republicans and anyone with any appreciation of the subtleties of character and motivation.

Even out of office, Clinton is still a good story, and this will undoubtedly impact future assessments of his legacy as it has the early projections of his years in the White House. And in the final analysis, at least one aspect of Clinton’s legacy has probably already been determined. As the nation’s first Baby Boomer president born during the television age, Clinton set a new standard for turning “the personal” into “the political” in news coverage of the White House, which is likely a difficult path that future presidents must navigate as well.

**Table 1: New York Times Coverage By Topic
(Former Presidents Reagan, Bush, and Clinton –
Total Stories First Year Out of Office)**

Topic	Reagan	Bush	Clinton
Legacy	10	5	7
Pardons	0	0	85
Travel/Speeches	9	2	4
Memoirs	0	0	1
Presidential Library	0	0	5
Office	0	0	20
Life After White House	4	1	10
Policies	16	18	15
Honors	0	0	0
Health	8	0	0
Ongoing Scandals	29	5	16
Miscellaneous	9	18	11
TOTAL	85	49	174

**Table 2: Total Airtime on Nightly Network News Shows
(Former Presidents Reagan, Bush, and Clinton –
First Year Out of Office)**

Total Airtime Minutes	Reagan	Bush	Clinton
ABC World News Tonight	51:20	5:00	79:10
NBC Nightly News	40:20	6:50	102:00
CBS Evening News	50:00	4:10	74:40
TOTAL	141:20	16:00	255:50

**Table 3: New York Times Coverage of Clinton and Bush
(Comparison of Front Page Stories,
January 21, 2001 through March 1, 2001)**

Date	Topic: Clinton	Topic: Bush
1/23/2001	Foreign policy	Abortion policy
1/29/2001	Pardons	Church groups
2/3/2001	White House Gifts	
2/6/2001	Pardon Inquiry	Tax Cut
2/9/2001	Rich Pardon	Tax Cut
		Defense policy: Iraq
2/13/2001	NY Office	Energy policy
2/14/2001	NY Office	Defense policy
2/15/2001	Rich Pardon	
2/17/2001	Rich Pardon	Drug policy
		Missile defense
		Defense policy: Iraq
2/19/2001	Rich Pardon	
2/22/2001	Pardons	Missile defense
2/23/2001	Pardons	Foreign policy: China
	Rodham Pardons	
2/25/2001	Pardons	Missile defense
3/1/2001	Pardons	Budget
	Rodham Pardons	

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