

bill clinton

by sean wilentz

How would you define the current moment? Are we at the beginning of a new progressive era, as you suggested when you spoke at Princeton in 1996?

First of all, let's go back to '96. I believe that the historical time in American history that my period of governance most resembles is Theodore Roosevelt's. We both made a lot of progress and changed the economic and social paradigm, but both of our administrations were followed by a period of reaction. A lot of Roosevelt's proposals weren't enacted until the New Deal, until the Depression and war made possible the sort of coming together that he visualized. u So that puts us in the New Deal now? u I don't know if we're at the New Deal now, but we got through the period of reaction quicker than we did in the Twenties. In 2000, this sort of experiment in extremism, to use my wife's phrase, was pretty strong – strong enough, at least, to get Bush to the Supreme Court. But two years ago we basically resumed the course that we were on in '92 and '96. If the progressives win this election, and I think we will, then we'll cause a reformation of both parties, and we'll begin a debate about future issues.

But won't the Republicans try to monkey-wrench that debate, as they did during your administration?

There are a lot of people in the Republican Party who want changes. If you read Newt Gingrich's critique of Hillary's health-care plan in this morning's paper, it's very interesting. He says, "We think it's the wrong approach, but give her credit – at least she's going after the right issues." It's a really responsible article. Many Republicans want to have a twenty-first-century debate, because they know we can't use the methods of sixty years ago to solve twenty-first-century problems.

What will that debate look like?

After this election, America will have a serious response to climate change that will be good for the domestic economy, and help to lift the fortunes of the middle class. We'll start asking hard questions about education, we'll start grappling with the terms of retirement for the baby boomers. And we will once again approach the world as we did at the end of World War II, with the understanding that even if, for a while longer, we're the most powerful country in the world, there are almost no problems that any country can solve alone. You'll have a successor to the Kyoto Accord on climate change, you'll have a new round of interest in nuclear nonproliferation. At least two of the Democrats, Hillary and Obama, have endorsed the general outlines of the position laid out by George Shultz and Sam Nunn: "Let's denuclearize the world." There will be a renewed effort toward a more perfect union. If you look at the whole arc of American history, we do best when we try to define the mission of the founders in contemporary terms, when we ask ourselves, "There are all these forces pulling us apart, pulling the world apart. How can we hold them together?"

In a sense, it's back to what the historian Arthur Schlesinger called the vital center.

Yeah. But this time it's not splitting the difference – it's a dynamic center. It's "How can you create a consensus for the change necessary to preserve and enhance the union?" And increasingly, the union involves union with people beyond our borders. Even within our borders, we grow more diverse.

In your memoir, you write about growing up as a Democrat in Hot Springs, Arkansas, and being moved to tears watching Martin Luther King Jr. on television. But you also got a strong taste of the racial hatred that was forged into a powerful political movement in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Thinking back once again, how did you imagine then what the country and the world would look like in the future?

When I was very young, I thought that by now we would have solved most of the racial problems of the country. I did foresee a highly interdependent world, which is why I went to Georgetown University, because I thought that our relationships with other people would become ever more important. But forty years ago I did not foresee the yawning economic gaps, the pressure on American families, where the bottom dropped out of the economy and the bottom dropped out of the family social structure at the same time, so that all these kids would be growing up under enormous

adversity. I didn't foresee the extent to which America would become even more diverse. I didn't foresee the rise of Islamic fundamentalism – I didn't think forty years ago about the extent to which we could become mortified by terror, not because so many people embrace it, but because in an interdependent world, a tiny number of people can damage a very large number of others and the psyche of tens of millions more.

So I foresaw some of the big developments when I was a very young man, but not others. It wasn't really until I went home to Arkansas and got into politics and started looking at people's lives from the bottom up that I saw how this economy was splitting us apart. I really did believe the American middle-class model that grew out of the New Deal and the mobilization for World War II – I thought it would just work if we could solve the civil rights problem and stop acting stupid. We could build a world that the American visionaries after the war wanted, that Truman and Marshall wanted and all those people wanted.

What stopped it?

What ended it was, we won the Cold War. But underneath that, between 1945 and 1989, when the Berlin Wall fell, all these other things were happening that we were largely unaware of – the hollowing out of so much of the government structures in Africa, the inadequacy of a lot of our foreign-aid programs, the rise of AIDS. The economy and the society of the world were changing underneath the old structures. For the last twenty years now, we've been trying to grapple with this new reality.

What are the most profound changes the country will face in the next twenty years?

We're going to be dealing with a Chinese economy, an Indian economy and a European economy that in the aggregate are bigger than ours, because they have more people, they're smart and they work hard. We may or may not be dealing with the continued persistence of Islamic fundamentalism and crossborder terrorism. We'll almost certainly still be dealing with the globalized organized crime related to drugs. Yet we will also have the benefit of our dramatically increasing knowledge about how to alleviate poverty and universalize education and fight disease.

There will be drastic new developments coming out of the sequencing of the human genome, which will allow people to live longer lives and higher quality lives. There will be continued explorations of space and the ocean depths, and a continuing struggle to accommodate a larger population to the planet in a way that leaves something for our grandchildren to look forward to. So the world will get fuller and fuller and fuller of good options if we can avoid calamity, but we will have to become better and better at cooperating with people.

All that change sounds daunting.

The three central challenges of the future are already quite apparent, and they have been apparent for a couple of decades. There's the challenge of persistent inequality, globally, in income, education and health care. There's a cluster of challenges related to sustainability – climate change; the depletion of valuable resources, which may bite us before climate change; and the extraordinary projected increase in the globe's population by midcentury from six and a half billion to nine billion. Then you've got a set of identity challenges, whether they're manifesting as terrorism or racial, religious and ethnic conflicts. They basically all cluster around the idea that Robert Wright wrote so well about in his book *Nonzero*. He said, basically, that all of human history is about people coming in contact with the Other, and then converting the Other from "them" to "us." Learning to live together at the last minute, just before they destroy each other. Essentially, we now are in a position where we have to figure out in shortened time frames how to get people to see their common humanity as more important than their differences.

The illegal-immigration debate is about identity issues. The difference between a devout Sunni who despises Al Qaeda and a devout Sunni who embraces them is an identity issue. Why have the Hindu Tamils and the Sinhalese Buddhist majority in Sri Lanka accounted for almost twice as many deaths as the Palestinians and the Israelis over the last thirty years? As I look ahead, the opportunities of the future are self-evident – and they are met by challenges of inequality, unsustainability and identity.

You're something of a historian. How would you describe the Bush administration from a historical point of view?

It was the first chance to govern in full that the people who began building an organized conservative opposition to the conventional politics of America after Goldwater's defeat ever had. When President Reagan was in office, there was always a Democratic House, and he also had pretty good instincts about when not to go quite off the cliff. Then, when Gingrich became the leader of the Republican Congress, I kept him from going off the cliff. So when President Bush got in after the Supreme Court ruling, they had, for the first time, the power to implement what their core ideology had advocated for decades. They did it, and it turned out to be a radical experiment in extremism on economic policy, on social policy and certainly on foreign policy. They believed that we were threatened with enemies on all sides, and they wanted to go alone and build a world that would slay all the dragons.

So for the first time, their ideology became policy and took effect in American life. As their alluring rhetoric was put into effect, the social conservatives and the economic royalists had to face their own contradictions. Even before the midterm election in 2002, there was a survey showing that undecided voters, by more than twenty points, thought the country needed more Democrats in the Congress. But we were still in the emotional grip of 9/11, so that blocked it. The 2004 election was instructive, because it was the narrowest re-election victory for an incumbent president since Woodrow Wilson in 1916. But again, it was blocked by 9/11. So in 2006, the grip began to be broken, and 2008 is going to be a referendum in ways that voters may not even be aware of – whether they are really prepared to make a clean break and free the Republicans, as well as the Democrats, to develop alternative approaches to the real challenges of the twenty-first century.

What has surprised you the most about this administration?

On the international front, that they clung so long to their ideology over evidence. It didn't surprise me that they tried to implement their ideology – the intellectual hubris of Cheney and Rumsfeld and all those people around the president didn't surprise me. But when it became obvious that it wasn't working, you would have thought they would have let it go. They just couldn't give up their ideology – they want it to be true so bad.

If you build it, they will come.

The administration sees not just me and people like me, but even moderate Republicans like Colin Powell and Brent Scowcroft as lesser political mortals trapped in what they call the “reality-based” world. They thought they had a chance to change reality. Now, I grew up in difficult circumstances. I spent my entire childhood trying to get into reality, and I like it here. I find it makes sense to operate here. I think a hundred years from now – assuming we meet the challenge of climate change and we’re all still here in good shape and America is roaring forward – it will be difficult for people to understand the dimensions of the argument we had today, the incredible fulminating over things like the Terri Schiavo case. They will have to understand that this was a very clear ideological divide in America that went to the root of what kind of country we’re going to be and how we’re going to relate to ourselves and the rest of the world.

What should they have done differently in Iraq?

We won the Cold War with a brilliant strategy that we ought to remember in dealing with terror. You can see it now in Anbar province in Iraq. At some point, if somebody has a fundamentally negative ideology that won’t work, and yours at least has the possibility of progress and people living their dreams, then in the end, what they’re selling will not be bought. You have to be prepared to pay the price of time. If you look at Anbar, it’s a microcosm of what happened in the larger world in the Cold War. Al Qaeda comes in there, and when they’re helping the local insurgents kill Americans and push back on the Shiites, they’re popular. When they’re trying to exercise local control and cutting off the heads of tribal leaders who don’t do what they want, they’re not popular. When we go in and use our soldiers to help the locals who used to fight against us fight against them so they can recover control of their own destiny, it works.

Are there things the administration has gotten right?

If you look at where the president has had success, it’s been almost exclusively by making the most of America’s position in the modern world – the AIDS program, the malaria program, the North Korean negotiations. Those things have made a real

difference, because they're consistent with America's historic mission of looking for those more perfect unions. A recent Pew poll showed that America's reputation has tanked in so many countries – yet there's a cluster of about ten countries in Africa where we're in really good shape. That's because the image of America for them is the president's AIDS program, the president's malaria program, the work of the Gates Foundation, the work I did. They see us as trying to build a common future with them, trying to empower them to do a better job.

Not too long ago, the media were hailing Karl Rove as a political genius. Would you say that his polarizing strategy – fifty percent plus one vote – has back fired?

He was only the latest practitioner of the politics of polarization. Look, the heart and soul of the Republican Party are white Southern Protestant conservatives. The roots of the polarization lie in the civil rights revolution. Lyndon Johnson was right when he signed the Voting Rights Act, but he knew what would happen. On the state level, Democrats like me did very well because we could form new biracial coalitions and do positive things. But the further you got away from the people, toward national politics, the easier it was to turn three-dimensional reality into two-dimensional cartoons and have the politics of divisions. That's what carried them.

Karl Rove was a brilliant practitioner of it. He took what basically had been their driving theory since the early Seventies to a higher level. It's a miracle that it worked for him as long as it did. Before the Voting Rights Act, Democrats had a base of forty percent, the Republicans had a base of forty percent, and we fought over the remaining twenty percent. Those swing voters were our ballast. But from 1968 forward, the Republican base ratcheted up to about fortyfive percent, while we were still at forty. There's fifteen percent undecided, which means for us to win an election, we not only have to do as good a job on turnout as they do, we have to win three to two in the undecided vote. In that connection, the Rove theory is really accurate.

But America has grown much more diverse. As a consequence, somewhere in my second term, our base equaled theirs. We now had a new phenomenon – we had two parties with a forty-five percent base. So Rove was bound to fail, because their policies wouldn't work. The American people are more practical than ideological – they want

to know what the results are. And the administration's results rested on attacks that were fundamentally inaccurate. All tactics in elections are ultimately at the mercy of these sweeping developments. What will decide the future of progressive and conservative politics, in the final analysis, will be their responses to crises of inequality, instability and identity. In the end, politics has to follow the substance, not the other way around.

Since you've been out of office, you've focused on AIDS and poverty in the developing world. How has that experience changed your thinking about the challenges and opportunities of public service, now and in the future?

I was surprised at how much good you do, and how quickly. We've been able to do more than I thought we could. It's convinced me that de Tocqueville was right for the twenty-first century as well as for the nineteenth. He noted that one big difference between the United States and the European continent was that we tended to have a vibrant civil society, we tended to organize into all these volunteer groups to solve problems. Even in the best of times, every country needs those civil organizations to work with government. They're entrepreneurial, they're not saddled with certain rules, they can move in a hurry, change it in a hurry, and admit failure without consequence. In my work at the Clinton Foundation, I can say, "We tried X and it didn't work," and I don't have to worry about losing the vote.

In my second term, Hillary convinced me to meet with all these nongovernmental organizations whenever I traveled abroad, which no American president had ever done before. I'd also seen what President Carter had done after he left office and been immensely impressed. But I did not understand the extent to which groups like this really can do things until I got out and started doing it myself. If these things work, they're a very important part of building not only effective economic and social networks, but also the kind of human contacts you need in the modern world.

What makes you optimistic about the future, despite the many threats we face?

When I took office, I read everything I could get my hands on about other presidents, even the ones who were less well-known. I wanted to see why they failed, why they succeeded, what worked and what didn't. I thought about all the battles I was fighting and where I was trying to leave America when I left office in the twenty-first century, against what had happened in the whole history before me. David Herbert Donald's magnificent biography of Lincoln convinced me that the only thing that really makes sense as a unifying thread throughout the whole of American history is the idea of the more perfect union. It tells us that we can always do better, that constant progress is possible when we come together. But it also reminds us that we'll never be perfect, that perfection in this life is not possible. So the more perfect union contains two messages, not one. I never really seized on both the messages until I became president.

So you believe the union will be more perfect in the future?

It's important to remember that the American republic was born at a seminal time. The whole idea of divorcing religion from politics – because the unity of the two corrupts both and inevitably leads to ideological decisions that aren't fact-based – that was a new idea when Thomas Hobbes and John Locke proposed it, from very different perspectives. We have to fight hard to preserve that. It's more important than ever.

Think of this: As far as we can tell, the first Homo sapiens rose up from the African savannah give or take 150,000 years ago. That means it took us 150,000 years to grow to our present population of 6.5 billion. Now all of a sudden, in the next forty-three years, we're going to go from 6.5 billion to 9 billion – at the very time we're facing climate change, resource depletion and real identity tensions all over the world. That's why I think more about fifty years from now than fifty days from now.

It lends a certain ironic quality to the recent fevered debate, in the Congress and in the country, on illegal immigration. Thirty years from now, all of these people who fear immigration will long for those days in 2007. Today will look like a tea party compared to the challenges they will face in the future.