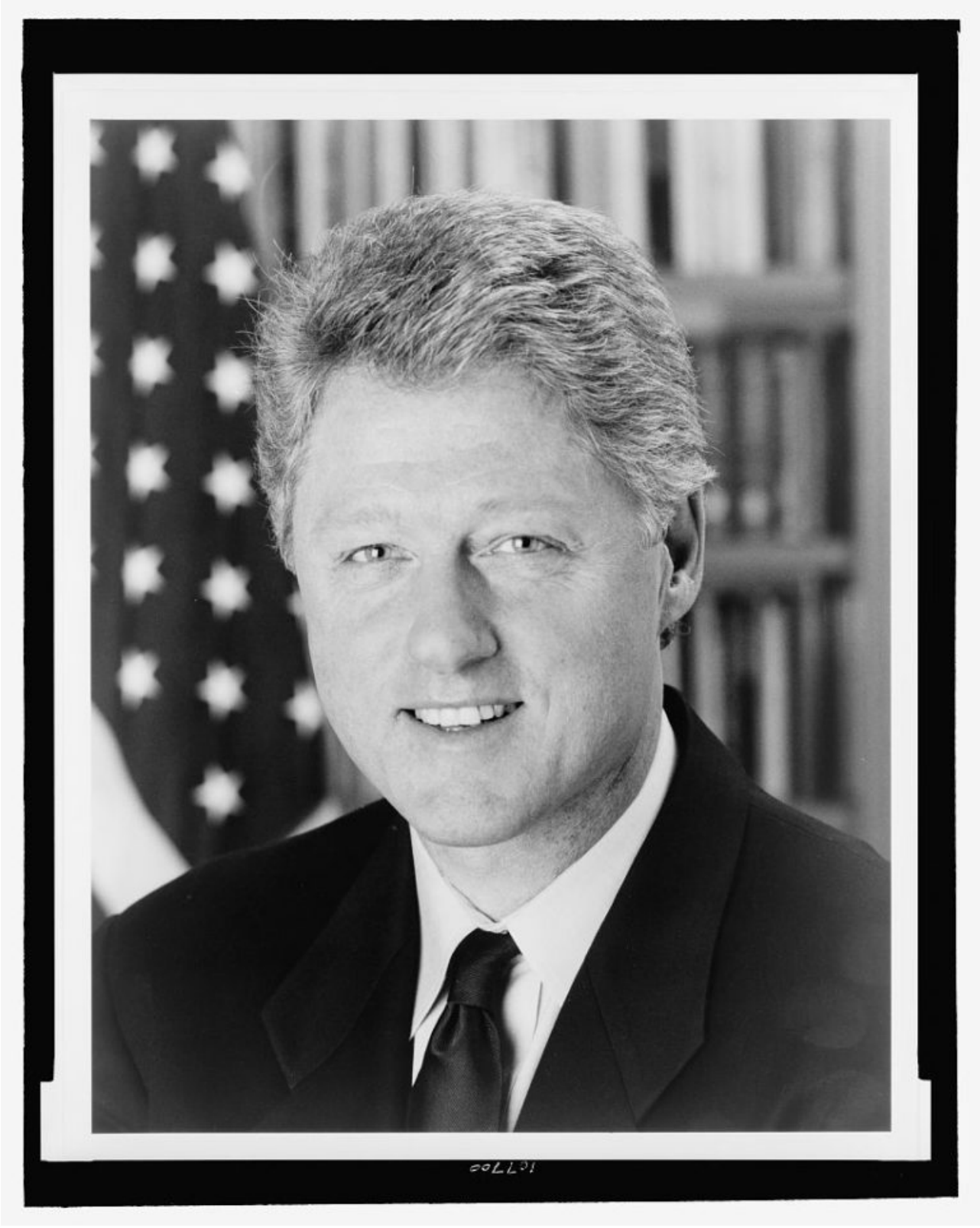
The Clinton Impeachment: Clinton Hating



As the hot glow of 1998-99’s impeachment crisis fades, and the Clinton presidency recedes into the past, we now know far more than we could have wanted to know about the former president’s personal life. We have also learned

much that we should have known earlier about the right-wing agitators and propagandists who discovered, publicized, fomented, and sometimes simply manufactured scandalous accusations against him. Yet with all the ink spilt, strikingly little attention has been paid to the nature of the political passions underlying the crisis—the outsized and persistent contempt and resentment that the president himself inspired among a vocal minority of the American electorate.

Why did so many conservatives see the president not simply as a detested opponent but as a cheater, a deceiver, a beguiler, and a rogue? Why did many left-liberals regard him as a self-serving betrayer of their principles? And, perhaps most perplexingly, why did so many members of the cosmopolitan middle, what we might call the supercilious center—people who actually come very close to sharing the former president's politics—hold him in such disdain? It won't do simply to say that the accusations are true and thus the opprobrium justified; for one must then contend with the fact that the man was not only twice elected president, but maintained historically high levels of public approval through most of his presidency. Clinton hating was more than ordinary disaffection; it was aggravated and embittered, a phenomenon as much personal as political, and one that simply confounds conventional political analysis.

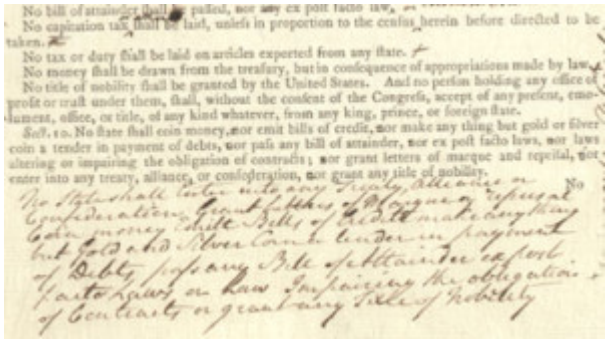


Fig. 1. First printing of the second draft of the Constitution from the Committee of Style. September 12, 1787. The Gilder Lehrman Collection, courtesy of the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, New York.

So how is this phenomenon and impeachment, which was its logical culmination, to be understood in the context of the American constitutional order?

While the United States Constitution is a table of rules and procedures for organizing and running the national government, it was also devised—perhaps principally devised—as a structure to channel and break the tides of passion and political enthusiasm that are common to, and recurrently threaten, the existence of popular government. Impeachment had a narrow constitutional focus in the sense that the trial and attempted removal of the president followed the prescribed constitutional procedures. But it is perhaps more fruitfully understood as the culmination of a process that has several times recurred in American political history and is in some sense intrinsic to the American constitutional order: periods of turbulent political transition wherein the

Constitution's separation of powers prevents the resolution of basic political questions for an extended period of time. Parliamentary systems avoid this problem, providing the possibility of unified control of the levers of legislative and executive power even when substantial division in the electorate remain. But the separation of powers at the heart of the American governmental structure—along with the additional divided authorities created by federalism—creates too many redoubts and recesses of authority where committed oppositions can retrench, regroup, and stymie majorities.

The pattern of a two-term president who is widely popular but also deeply reviled in a period of rapid political, economic, and social change is not unprecedented in our history. In their own times, Franklin Roosevelt (1933-45) and Andrew Jackson (1829-37) engendered similar political polarization, with embitterment and contempt on the one hand, and a deep, intuitive identification with a broad mass of the population on the other. (The only other presidential impeachment, that of Andrew Johnson, originated similarly in a disjunction between the forces controlling the executive and legislative branches.) Franklin Roosevelt's enemies vilified him as "that man"—a demagogue and class traitor who had seduced voters through a kind of illicit, hypnotic mass spell. Jackson was, in his own time, similarly reviled. Part aristocrat and part rough-hewn soldier, Jackson represented a new kind of politics and a new conception of the presidency. He too had a deep, intuitive connection with the American people that terrified his enemies and convinced them that he was a demagogue who threatened the very institutions of American government.

Both men's presidencies had a transformative character. Each, individually, had a unique ability to connect and communicate with ordinary citizens, an ability that their enemies saw as phony, perverse, opportunistic, and ultimately dangerous. In each case the president's adversaries' attacks upon him only deepened and intensified the support of his supporters, in a circular and mutually reinforcing fashion. The antagonism over the man echoed deeper cultural and political rifts that remained inchoate, latent, or simply unspoken. The impeachment crisis of 1998 and '99 had similar origins in unresolved political stalemate and the unrelieved passions and antagonisms this generated.

Over the years observers have posited a number of possible explanations for the enmity that grew up around the forty-second president. Early in his presidency the disaffection was often chalked up to generational transition: Clinton was the first president since John Kennedy to be well under fifty years of age; he was also the first president to have been fully washed over, and in many ways compromised, by the upheavals and experimentation of the 1960s. His very person, in this reading, became a battleground for a newly intensified version of culture war that had been playing itself out in one form or another since the late 1960s. Yet another theory sees Clinton hating rooted in a sort of baby-boomer self-loathing, a contempt for their inability to reconcile their own youthful indulgence and middle-aged hypocrisy. Each of these explanations is partly true. But neither is quite satisfactory.

To get a better purchase on the questions, let's first distinguish between at least three distinct kinds of Clinton hating: conservative Clinton hating, left-liberal Clinton hating, and cosmopolitan Clinton hating, each of which shares common roots and predilections but remains nevertheless distinct.

The rhetoric of conservative Clinton hating is immediately familiar. Clinton is a liar, a phony, an immoral man, a deceiver. He can't be trusted. He had "stolen" their issues. The feelings have become more tortured and embittered because again and again Clinton has won when he shouldn't have been able to win.

Conservative Clinton hating echoes the McCarthyism of the 1950s, only not necessarily in the sense some of his supporters have argued. The subtlest historical interpretations of McCarthyism describe the movement as a product of two quite distinct forces—one crassly political and opportunistic, another deeply rooted in the insecurities of the early Cold War. In 1946 the Republicans won back the Congress for the first time in fourteen years, only to lose it again two years later, and be defeated in a presidential election they seemed certain to win. From what seemed like an expected restoration after Franklin Roosevelt's death, the GOP now faced a fifth straight presidential loss and what seemed like it might be a near permanent exclusion from power in the national government.

This reverse made Republicans resentful; it also made them feel cheated. And they retaliated with an attitude that held no tactic or charge as beyond the pale. As Robert Taft, the respected Republican Senate Majority leader, famously told McCarthy early in his crusade, "[K]eep talking, and if one case doesn't work—proceed with another." But partisan warfare was only half the story. It was a necessary, but not a sufficient cause for what happened in the early 1950s. Only in a climate of deep-seated political uncertainty and fear could such concerted political attacks have had the truly explosive results they did. The early 1990s were not the early 1950s, of course, but in many respects the times were equally unsettled. The end of the Cold War, though immeasurably more benign than its onset, nevertheless created a similar disequilibrium in the nation's politics, shaking free a swirling hatred of government and a search for internal enemies that had not been seen in so virulent a form since the McCarthy era. Journalists have described the partisan campaigns—open and covert—against Clinton, but why these efforts struck such a profound chord among a minority of the population still needs to be explained.

One clear reason for the out-sized opposition to Clinton was how much his election—and even more his subsequent success—scotched the paradigm of historical and ideological transformation Republicans had been crafting for themselves during their twelve-year hold over the executive branch from 1980 to 1992. For partisan Republicans these three successive presidential victories were not simply the result of favorable times or quality candidates—for many Republicans, in fact, quite the opposite for the first President Bush. They were the result of an epochal shift in the ideological complexion of the

American electorate—a wholesale shift away from liberalism and the New Deal. Clinton's election in 1992 might have been either an accident or simply a time-out in the Republican hegemony—à la Jimmy Carter. But his eventual success created a dissonance and frustration among partisan Republicans that in its own way was as frustrating as Truman's unexpected victory in 1948, which seemed to doom them to permanent executive-branch oblivion.

Much less visible to the general public is the equally charged antipathy toward the president among many liberals. The left-liberal Clinton hater found the president phony and inauthentic, willing to sacrifice any principle or precept not simply for expedience but for self-interest. At the same time however (and in a partly contradictory fashion) these Clinton haters see the president as providing Democratic cover for a complete surrender to Reaganism, with balanced budgets, welfare reform, and tax cuts. Like conservative Clinton haters, they despised him because he is something their map of the world doesn't account for: a Democrat who plays to win, a Democrat who wasn't afraid to play political hard ball, cut necessary deals, or generally get his hands dirty in the inevitable back and forth of political warfare. Other similarities exist. Part of the depth of disaffection with Clinton among many left-liberals was that he had been successful when he should not have been able to be successful. In many cases he had been able to accomplish goals these critics have long espoused by means that shouldn't have worked. And perhaps most galling, Clinton had been able to gain the support of constituencies left-liberals have long considered very much their own (women and African Americans particularly), even while eschewing their policies.

The third group, the cosmopolitan Clinton haters, are the most paradoxical because their displeasure is not obviously rooted in specific ideological disagreement. For many, in fact, the level of disgust and disdain for the president appeared to be inversely related to ideological proximity. Political commentators and prominent press figures Howell Raines, Michael Kelly, Maureen Dowd, Joe Klein, Christopher Matthews, and most of the rest of Clinton's most vituperative elite media critics were centrists of a vaguely liberal hue. This group includes much of establishment Washington, but extends a good deal further, taking in an important slice of society up and down the Northeast corridor. With this group the element of class condescension and resentment runs most deeply, and what seems to cause the greatest irritation is that Clinton is a "bubba" and a mandarin—two qualities that should not be able to coexist in the same person.

As in the cases of Roosevelt and Jackson, a group of journalists and intellectuals slipped into a pit of their own contempt for Clinton and somehow became unhinged by it. They became obsessed and this obsession transformed them, in many cases leaving them different, damaged, certainly not the same. Some of the prime examples of this are Stuart Taylor, Michael Kelly, Maureen Dowd, Christopher Hitchens, Nat Hentoff, and even Kenneth Starr. Every president has critics. And most of these began in a conventional enough way. But Clinton's unwillingness to be defeated by conventional political

means—typified by his refusal to resign after being impeached—undid them. The failure of ordinary means pushed them to extraordinary means. Their failure to bring him down, paradoxically, magnified him in their eyes, leading these critics into an endlessly escalating series of polemics.

Clinton was different, of course, for at least two reasons. Jackson and Roosevelt each in their own way threatened important political and economic constituencies and interests. On the surface at least it is difficult to see how this can be said about Clinton. His policies were centrist and, after 1994 at least, cautious. His cabinets were liberally staffed with men and women who had made their careers on Wall Street. The stock market prospered mightily during his presidency. Many of the social pathologies that conservative politicians and social critics have railed against have undeniably diminished during his tenure in office. Clinton's policies significantly tacked against the conservatizing course of his predecessors and cut against the pure celebration of the market that so typified the decade. But his policies were still generally friendly toward business and the market and surely not nearly so leftist in complexion as the intensity of the opposition would imply. So—and I hasten to say again, on the surface at least—it is not immediately clear why Clinton's presidency should be so contentious and polarizing.

Second, as the president's critics never tire of pointing out, while his public approval numbers were high by historical standards, Clinton has always enjoyed more support than respect. His political strength has been rooted in a politics of empathy, a fact which polling data, if scrutinized closely, bear out. Beside the normal horse-race polls we usually see, pollsters ask a variety of other basic questions, one of which is: Does politician X care about the needs of people like you? On many other questions Clinton's numbers have fluctuated drastically. Thus, for instance, according to the Gallup poll, from February 1995 to January 1999, the percentage of Americans who believed Clinton could "get things done" rose from 45 to 82 percent. Less favorably, over precisely the same period, the percentage of Americans who believed Clinton was "honest and trustworthy" dropped from 46 to 24 percent. But on the question of whether Clinton "cares about the needs of people like you" his numbers remained virtually unchanged over the entire course of his presidency, averaging just over 60 percent. Without too much facetiousness this might be fairly be called the "feel your pain" index. And, though he was roundly abused for that line, it was also been the core of his political strength and resilience.

Many of those who opposed impeachment saw it at the time as an abuse of constitutional mechanisms provided for most of extreme crisis and executive malfeasance. But the roots of the crisis—particularly the structure of the government the Constitution prescribes, with its pronounced separation of powers, which frequently stalemates resolution of major political divisions and questions—are just as clearly rooted in the Constitution itself. Separation of powers may benignly slow the workings of government and refine them through countless small revisions and seasoning of radical reforms. But in an essentially democratic polity it also contains within itself the seeds of

crises—crises for which the extreme solution of impeachment may have been virtually preordained.

This article originally appeared in issue 2.4 (July, 2002).

Joshua Micah Marshall, former Washington editor of the American Prospect, is author of Talking Points Memo. His articles have appeared in a wide variety of print and electronic publications including the *American Prospect*, the *New Republic*, the *New York Times*, *Salon*, *Slate*, *Talk*, and the *Washington Monthly*. He is currently finishing his doctoral dissertation in colonial American history at Brown University.