

FORUM

'My Life' or my fable?



Earl Ofari Hutchinson
Guest Columnist

With the passage of time, the Bush administration's foreign policy and domestic bumbles, and the lackluster performance by the crew of Democratic presidential candidates during the primaries, former President Bill Clinton not only has been personally and politically rehabilitated, but hailed as a political genius. The overwhelming temptation is to inflate his life story and political deeds to Olympian heights.

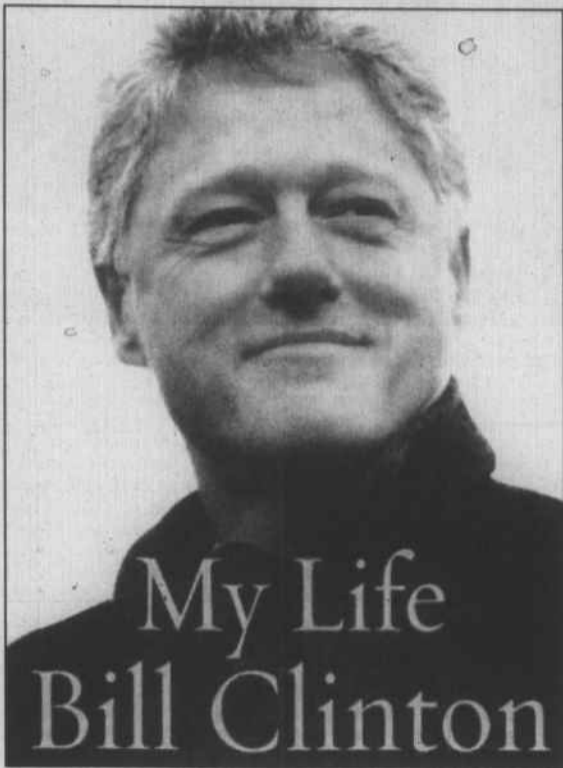
As the Democrat that took back the White House in 1992 after 12 years of Republican rule, the story line is that he snatched a big page from Ronald Reagan's ideological playbook, and out-Republicaned the Republicans. He pledged to ramp up America's military prowess, aggressively fight terrorism, crack down on crime, and reign in domestic spending. He resuscitated a moribund Democratic Party and made it a competitive political force nationally. He did all this and still came off as a champion of racial justice and social reform.

The truth is quite different. In 1992, Clinton did not handily defeat Bush Sr. Clinton won with a minority of the popular vote, one of only a handful of presidents in the 20th century to do that. Bush Sr. got fewer white male votes than Reagan and Richard Nixon in their smashing presidential wins, and those votes are always the ones that make or break a presidential candidate. But Clinton didn't get those votes. Reform Party presidential candidate Ross Perot, with his anti-government assault, grabbed them. That did more to sink the Bush presidency than Clinton's vaunted charm, charisma and tilt-to-the-right "New Democrat" forgotten man pitch.

In 1996, Clinton's political good fortune held up. Clinton's opponent, the venerable Republican Party warhorse Robert Dole, inspired little voter enthusiasm. And Republicans reeled from the tarnish of their rancorous but failed fight over Newt Gingrich's Contract with America, and the Pat Buchanan insurgency, which siphoned conservative votes from the Republicans. This ensured Clinton's walk-over victory.

Clinton did not heal the divisions and rivalries in the Democratic Party, or define a political identity that separated the Democrats from tail-ending the Republicans on policy issues. During Clinton's terms, the Democrats lost more ground in state and national elections that they had in decades. In his first year in office, the Democrats had the presidency (him), the House, Senate, and a majority of governorships. By the time he left office eight years later, Republicans increased their number of governorships, and their control of Congress. Despite being a child of the South, Clinton did not loosen the Republicans' iron grip on the South and mid-America. Clinton also served as the perfect whipping boy and straw man for the Republicans to solidify their conservative ideology within their party and much of the media.

Clinton gave Bible-thumping speeches at black churches, surrounded by a gaggle of black Democrats, and made a few well-publicized appointments of blacks



to cabinet posts. This did much to sell his image as a dedicated fighter for racial justice and a social reformer. Blacks eagerly gave him more than 80 percent of their vote and dubbed him an honorary "soul brother."

But Clinton was no liberal reformer. He radically downsized welfare, toughened federal anti-crime and drug laws, and pared away affirmative action programs. These were all Reagan, Bush Sr. and Nixon proposals that the Congressional Black Caucus and liberal Democrats vehemently

opposed, and had languished in Congress. The ranks of the black poor quickly soared; the numbers jailed for mostly nonviolent, non-serious crimes jumped; and funds for skill and education programs to permanently break the welfare cycle for the poor evaporated.

Current President Bush's black and Latino cabinet appointments of Secretary of State Colin Powell, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, and White House Counsel Alberto Gonzalez were far more significant in terms of making key policy decisions

than any of Clinton's black and Latino appointments.

Clinton's party dominance badly hurt the Democrats in 2000. Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore was mute on issues such as urban investment, health care for the uninsured, failing inner-city public schools, and criminal justice reform. This brand of political plantationism alienated and angered many blacks and Latinos. They stayed away from the polls in droves and turned what should have been an easy Gore victory into a numbing defeat.

Clinton's negative stamp was firmly imprinted on the Democrats during the primaries when the white Democratic presidential contenders tried to out-Bush Bush on national security, the war on terrorism, and greater defense spending and preparedness. Their talk on domestic issues consisted mostly of hammering Bush on tax cuts and his grossly under-funded No Child Left Behind education initiative. This ignited no spark among minority voters. Even now, presumptive Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry's spike up in the polls is due mostly to public anguish over Bush's Iraq quagmire.

Clinton's "My Life" is not the milestone in presidential storytelling that his PR flacks boast. But it will do much to further establish the myth that Clinton was a political genius. But then a storybook written by a president wouldn't be complete without myths.

Earl Ofari Hutchinson is an author and political analyst. Visit his news and opinion Web site: www.thehutchinsonreport.com. He is the author of "The Crisis in Black and Black" (Middle Passage Press).

A love letter to Clinton



Armstrong Williams
Guest Columnist

Some people have it: that special intangible that draws you in. No, pulls you in. They emit empathy, maybe even a calm spiritualism. But they also seem like us. No look of statue. Maybe even a bit fat. This is key. They inhabit a realm that is just a few degrees from us. This gives us hope.

Former President Clinton has it — that endearing smile that draws you in. There is no excuse for liking him. But we do. He shows up for a book signing, and it is not a discussion; it is a pseudo event. He love-bombs the audience. Maybe he hugs someone dressed a bit too shabbily, someone who has trouble with the bills. We fawn over this.

Already, the forthcoming release of his book has been transformed into a full-scale pseudo event. There will be appearances on "Oprah," "60 Minutes," and town hall meetings. In many ways, he is promoting his book the same way he promoted his presidency: not so much by achieving historical significance, but by embracing and exuding the popular culture of his nation. He was warm, effusive, warmly expressive and horribly endearing. He played

the saxophone, listened to Elvis, appeared on MTV and said "aw shucks." He consciously associated himself with the popular culture. He surrounded himself with movie and music stars. This son of a poor white working class family proclaimed that he was one of us — albeit a bit more charming and well-known — and he rewarded him not just with votes, but with a sense of personal connectedness.

When Princess Diana died, people who had never met her cried. They felt a sense of loss in their personal lives, even though their own daily drudgery remained unchanged. Diana had that quality that allowed people to fill her up with their hopes and passions. Clinton has it too. In a democracy, that counts for a lot.

Yes, of course, there were the scandals: Hillary care, Travelgate, Whitewater, Filegate, impeachment hearings, a perjury conviction. Even the last few days of Clinton's presidency were marked with scandal, after he rubber-stamped pardons for his friends and sponsors. There can be no justification for using the powers of the presidency to shield friends from justice. Clinton's intentionally false testimony regarding whether he ever engaged in sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky similarly made a mockery of the commander-in-chief's duty to see that the laws are faithfully executed.

In the end, even his indiscretions were twisted to his advan-

tage. He's that charming. Every time he was caught with his hand in the jar, he simply began wagging his plump little fingers at the Republicans. Unable to defend Clinton's actions, the Democrats would circle the wagons and paint his accusers as some extremist segment of society. In doing so, they managed to endow Clinton with an almost heroic quality.

Of course, the reality was never that clearly drawn. Plainly, Clinton did not choose to involve himself in the Whitewater, Filegate, and Travelgate scandals because of Republican pressure. Nor did he grope his intern because of the Republicans. Plainly, the president was not so much a victim of bipartisanship, but of his own inability to keep his appetites in check.

Still, many of us forgive him. Most of us miss him. We call in favors just to secure a spot at one of his book signings. This makes us feel close to center stage. It has nothing to do with issues, hardly anything to do even with language. (Presidential campaign ads have dropped in modal length from 30 minutes in 1952 to 30 seconds in 1988.) Our modern leaders ascend as images, as suggestions. They act, speak and think in television terms. Wherever they go, a perpetual ad floats off them like vapors. President Clinton strolls out for a book signing. We crane our necks for a peek. A star is born.

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THE CHRONICLE

The Choice for African-American News
617 N. Liberty Street
Winston-Salem, NC 27101

The Chronicle was established by Ernest Pitt and Ndubisi Egemonye in 1974, and is published every Thursday by Winston-Salem Chronicle Publishing Co., Inc.
The Chronicle is a proud member of
National Newspapers Publishers Association •
North Carolina Press Association • North Carolina
Black Publishers Association • Inland Press
Association

National Advertising Representative:
Amalgamated Publishers, Inc., 45 West 45th
Street, New York, NY 10036 212 / 869-5220

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Copy Editor 723-8448 PAUL COLLINS
Circulation 722-8624
Sales Staff 722-8628

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