

**Effects of the Impeachment on Bill Clinton's Staff, Cabinet,  
Agenda, and Legacy**

Samuel Jacob Sarver

Knox College Class of 2007

Department of Political Science

ssarver@knox.edu

## **Introduction**

William Jefferson Clinton had every reason to be jubilant in January of 1997. Having rebounded, perhaps even benefited, from the Republican takeover of Congress in the 1994 midterm elections, he had outfought and outlasted his opponents in battles of public perception and actual policy. Now he had become the first Democrat since Franklin Roosevelt to be reelected. The U.S. economy was strong and growing stronger. Clinton's star seemed ever in the ascendant. In his second inaugural address, he called for an end to "the politics of petty bickering and extreme partisanship" (Clinton 741). Yet within a year, allegations of sexual impropriety with a White House Intern named Monica Lewinsky would dash those hopes. By the penultimate year of his administration, 1999, his poor judgment had come back to haunt him and made him "the first president in history to testify before a grand jury as a target of a criminal investigation; the first president forced to make a humiliating confession of infidelity; the first while in office to have his sexual life graphically publicized; and the first elected president to be impeached" (Gergen 316-317). Yet even that litany of firsts tells little of the impact Clinton's impeachment had on his administration and legacy. In order to better understand the fallout from the Lewinsky scandal and resulting impeachment, it is necessary to examine the effect it had on his staff and cabinet, his ability to execute policy after the crisis, and his standing in public opinion polling, including where the American people rank him among former presidents. By doing this, it can be seen that the impeachment did not have a uniform impact on these areas, but instead changed each of them in different ways and to different extents.

## **I. Short-Term Effects On Clinton's White House Staff**

Perhaps the most immediate and visceral effect of the scandal was on Clinton's staff. Besides diverting attention from administration policy goals, the affair seriously damaged the staff's credibility, their trust in the president, as well as the organization and effectiveness of the staff. In his autobiography, *My Life*, Clinton remarks:

After the impeachment ordeal, people often asked me how I got through it without losing my mind, or at least the ability to keep doing the job. I couldn't have done it if the White House staff and cabinet, including those who were angry and disappointed over my conduct, hadn't stayed with me. (Clinton 845).

Here, however, Clinton either misjudges the impact of his actions on the staff, or simply glosses it over. Indeed, the staff (for the most part) "stayed with" Clinton, but the amount of loyalty and respect they lost for him is immeasurable, and the scandal took a severe toll on the staff's morale. Peter Baker's account of the impeachment, *The Breach*, sheds a great deal of light on just how hard the staff was hit. From the time the allegations broke in January of 1998 until Clinton publicly admitted them on August 17, "a pallor had set in for seven months and virtually never lifted. The energy of the place was sapped, and top aides squirmed when forced to answer questions about their boss's sexual adventures" (Baker 35). In the days after the allegations came out, Clinton largely paved the way for much greater disillusionment to come by unequivocally assuring his staff that the charges were false (Gergen 315). After the *Washington Post* first ran the story, Clinton told his chief of staff and close friend Erskine Bowles, "I want you to know that this story is not true" (Baker 39).

Even before the president admitted to the affair with Lewinsky (and despite his repeated, explicit denials), as devoted as the aides were to publicly defending the president, it was not enough to prevent some of them from privately doubting his veracity. Given what David Maraniss' 1995 biography of Clinton, *First in His Class*, quotes Frank Greer saying of Clinton, that he "had 'an exceptional reputation around town' for philandering" (Maraniss 460), and how much of an issue his womanizing was in the 1992 campaign, it is hardly surprising that a few staffers were skeptical. Press Secretary Mike McCurry was a chief example of this:

McCurry had never considered himself close to the first family [. . .], but he had come into his job as the public face of the Clinton White House with a long career of credibility in Washington and was determined not to sacrifice all that by becoming the Ron Ziegler of his era. McCurry suspected from the beginning that Clinton was not telling the truth, and the press secretary went out of his way to parse his briefings with reporters to leave himself an escape hatch later should his suspicions be borne out – as they ultimately were. (Baker 37).

Not everyone was as cautious as McCurry, and many aides put their reputations on the line by repeatedly asserting that the allegations were false and that Clinton was the victim of a political witch-hunt. Those same staffers would feel particularly stung when Clinton confessed to having an affair with Lewinsky on August 17, seriously damaging their credibility. That, in turn, contributed enormously to the generally low morale within the staff throughout the scandal.

Making matters worse throughout the process was Clinton's legal team:

Whatever esprit de corps had once existed in the White House likewise degenerated into political cannibalism, as political advisers intent on saving Clinton's administration were shut out – and sometimes even lied to – by the president's own lawyers, who insisted that secrecy was the best course for their client. (36).

Aides repeatedly protested the deception by Clinton's attorneys, arguing that they needed information to defend the president politically. McCurry warned that he would resign if the lawyers were not more forthcoming with him, though that did not seem to do anything to change matters (36). Even the writing of the president's address on August 17, in which he admitted to the affair before scornfully criticizing Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr, was largely the product of Clinton's legal team, not his political advisors. The frustration of the staff was palpable. Of the speech, Baker states:

It was a go. But first, the lawyers said they wanted a chance to debrief their client in private and ushered him off to the Solarium, while [Paul] Begala, [Doug] Sosnik, and the other political aides returned to the West Wing to prepare. About a half hour later, Begala headed up to the Solarium to see where things stood. Eventually 7:30 P.M. rolled around and the rest of the political aides still had not been called to come join the president and his legal team. For seven months the lawyers had shut out the political advisers from the defense efforts, and now it looked as if it was happening again. (Baker 32).

The aides were proven right when they arrived and found the president and his legal team “prepared to go on national television with both barrels blasting at Starr” (32). The staff

tried to convince Clinton that, though he was right to be upset with Starr, this speech was not the proper venue for it, and that they should be the ones to attack Starr (32).

Interestingly, here there is a significant difference between Clinton's account and Baker's description. According to Clinton, "the question was whether or not I should also take a shot at Starr's investigation and say it was time to end it. The virtually unanimous opinion was that I should not. [. . .] Only Hillary refused to express an opinion, instead encouraging everyone to leave me alone to write my statement" (Clinton 802). Baker agrees that the staff firmly believed Clinton should not attack Starr in the speech and that Hillary was involved in the discussion. Baker, however, portrays the first lady as stung by Starr's investigation and humiliated by being forced to testify in person over Whitewater. According to Baker, "At some point, the discussion boiled down to a one-on-one match between the first lady and Erskine Bowles. Never before could anyone remember Clinton ignoring Bowles's advice on a significant matter, but on this one the chief of staff was not getting through" (Baker 33). The first lady ultimately ended the discussion, as Clinton claimed, by "encouraging" the staff to let him write his own speech. The manner in which she did it, however, indicates that she was probably expressing an opinion through passive-aggression. Baker quotes her as saying, "it's your speech, you should say what you want to say," turning on her heel and leaving the room (33). Regardless of the first lady's involvement, this incident is extremely telling of how the White House staff was shut out by Clinton's attorneys and, even when they were present, they were ignored by the president at crucial moments. The advice of the world's best counselors means nothing if the advised does not heed their recommendations and give them due consideration.

Once the president admitted to his misdeeds, the staff situation continued to deteriorate. While some staffers, like deputy chief of staff John Podesta (later promoted to chief of staff upon Erskine Bowles' exit) and senior adviser Rahm Emanuel "took it in stride" (37), others had a much more difficult time coming to terms with the scandal, and in general, "[T]he revelation that the president really had lied – and had sent aides out to repeat his lies on television and to the grand jury – further embittered a demoralized staff" (37). There was a great deal of concern, particularly by Podesta, that one or more members of the staff might resign to gain the limelight (64). Mike McCurry was already slated to step down as press secretary in October, but Podesta charged Doug Sosnik with the "McCurry Watch," hoping to catch any warnings that he might be jumping ship earlier than that (64). For the most part, this disaffection was kept private, as it had to be. Senior staffers tried to keep the internal "political cannibalism" and the divided, demoralized state of the White House from becoming public, thus weakening and embarrassing them. One example of this is presented in *The Breach*:

To keep the rest of their troops in line, White House officials accustomed to spinning anything even drafted talking points for how they should respond when asked about being betrayed by the boss.

Question: "Do you forgive him for misleading you and the country?"

Answer: "It's been said that 'he who cannot forgive others breaks the bridge over which he must pass himself.' Of course I do." (64).

Despite the public showing of support, many aides were deeply disappointed and angry at the president, and made their feelings known in private. As Joe Klein writes in his book,

*The Natural*, “privately, the White House staff was aghast. More than a few of his closest advisors – especially those who had vehemently defended the President on television during the past eight months – felt personally betrayed” (Klein 173). Among the hardest hit by feelings of anger and betrayal were two of Clinton’s most veteran counselors, Paul Begala and Erskine Bowles.

Paul Begala, who had moved from Texas to Washington to help put together a promising second term, was devastated to learn that Clinton had deceived him and let him publicly lie on the president’s behalf. Begala took his politics personally and sank into deep depression, to the point where he vowed never to appear on television again defending the president – and began thinking about whether he should resign altogether. (Baker 37).

Throughout the scandal, Begala battled not only a sense of betrayal, but a moral dilemma as well. While he struggled with his conscience, he was much less involved in the operations of the White House than he normally would have been (130). Though he was dispirited, Begala could not bring himself to leave in the middle of the crisis.

For his part, Paul Begala had decided to stay. During a fishing vacation with his wife in Utah following the president’s August 17 admission, the disillusioned counselor had come close to quitting. Clinton had made a fool out of him. [. . .] Now knowing the truth, Begala could not stand even to look at the president. “I’m a Catholic,” he explained again and again to fellow White House aides. Had it not been for the impending impeachment drive, Begala would have bolted. But as Republicans

moved to launch an inquiry, the anguished aide determined he had to stay for one last fight. Impeachment, he thought, was too extreme. (118-119). Begala did stay on to fight the drive for impeachment, but his loyalty to the president was clearly damaged beyond repair. When confronted by Clinton's personal counsel, David Kendall, over the wisdom of admitting a crime for which he could be prosecuted out of office, Begala responded, "I don't work for Bill Clinton. I work for the people of the United States. I don't care if he goes to prison the day he leaves office. But until then I want him doing his job" (194). It appears, however betrayed by the president he felt, he remained loyal to the presidency, and was thereby able to continue working in the White House at least until the scandal ended.

Begala persisted in publicly defending the president, even breaking his vow and going on television to do so:

The President's speechwriter, Paul Begala, who had gone to ground in disgust and anger over Clinton's behavior, suddenly reemerged as Larry King's guest – a chirpy presidential cheerleader once more. "Is this something that we impeach a president over?" he asked, adding that the prosecutors had been fundamentally unfair... (Klein 178-179).

Despite his public show of loyalty to Clinton, in private, Begala was still intent on leaving once the scandal was resolved. Even when the Senate trial ended in Clinton's acquittal, Begala began planning his departure.

Six days after the vote, he [Clinton] flew to New Hampshire to celebrate the seventh anniversary of one of his greatest political victories, the night

he rescued his foundering presidential campaign in the 1992 primary [. . .]. Paul Begala, the tormented aide who had almost quit the previous fall, chose that moment to tell Clinton in a private huddle that he would resign now that the threat to the presidency was over. Begala could not even wait a full week to bolt. He told friends he would never look at Bill Clinton the same way again. (415).

The fact that Begala had been one of the architects of Clinton's 1992 "comeback" in New Hampshire only underscores the depth of his disenchantment. It is unlikely that any place in the world would have been more fitting, or ironic, for Begala to inform Clinton of his resignation.

While Begala ultimately decided to stay on Clinton's staff at least for the duration of the crisis, Erskine Bowles, the White House Chief of Staff, was a different story. Close as Begala was to Clinton, "Bowles had sometimes been described in the media as the president's best friend – not just his best friend in the White House, but best friend, period" (40). Bowles had left the staff late in 1995, but had been persuaded by Clinton himself to return briefly after the 1996 election (38). After balancing the budget and many other policy successes in 1997, "Bowles became increasingly determined to use the rare moment of opportunity to fix the long-term generational problems of Social Security and Medicare" (39). Baker continues that "in a fit of optimism, Bowles told Clinton in mid-January that he would stay on as chief of staff. Less than a week later, the Monica Lewinsky story broke" (39).

After Clinton told him in no uncertain terms that the allegations were false, "Bowles had to believe him. If Bowles did not accept Clinton's word, there was no way

he could still work for him. And yet colleagues could see that Bowles was unnerved” (39). The mere discussion of the scandal made Bowles visibly uncomfortable. Baker presents a dramatic portrait of a troubled staffer unable to come to grips with the situation. “[During] a meeting with other top aides in his office on Saturday, January 24, to plot damage control, Bowles grew sickened at the discussion of the situation. ‘I think I’m going to throw up,’ he said, and abruptly bolted out of the room, never to return to the meeting” (39). Despite being described by Clinton himself as “a superb manager” (Clinton 716), and by Baker as “an upright, no-nonsense administrator who helped banish the political chaos that had dominated the first-term administration” (Baker 37), “for the next seven months, Bowles refused to get involved in the political effort to save the president, almost as if he would not let himself even acknowledge the allegations – or the possibility that they could be true” (40). Thus, the White House Chief of Staff disengaged himself from what was easily the biggest issue confronting the administration in 1998, contributing even more to the confusion. That certainly did not help the dismal state of morale within the staff. Bowles even went on vacation just prior to Clinton’s deposition in August, and by the time he was told that Clinton’s DNA was on the infamous dress:

Bowles was distraught. Clinton had lied to him, lied to his face. He had sent him to the grand jury with that lie. [. . .] The man he thought he knew – the voracious reader who devoured information before making a considered decision, the caring leader who saw hard-luck stories in the papers and asked aides to help out people in distress without disclosing his role, the politician with the vision to imagine things his staff could not –

was not in fact the whole picture. Everyone who knew Bowles saw that he was taking the betrayal hard. (40).

Between the shock of discovering the truth, that Clinton had lied to him without flinching, and Clinton's utter refusal to listen to Bowles while writing the speech he gave that night, the president's closest advisor and "best friend" had suffered two very personal blows, both at the hands of the man he had worked so hard and made so many sacrifices for. Bowles was in a unique position to help Clinton, being both politically and personally close to him. Clinton's deceit, besides undermining the bond of trust between friends, also hampered Bowles' ability to be of assistance. The more Bowles knew, the more useful he could be, as with all of the staff. Moreover, Clinton's rebuff of Bowles' appeal not to go after Starr in the August 17 address, in front of both the legal team and other senior staffers, caused even further harm to Bowles' position, and likely made him wonder if he could continue to be effective in his position.

Bearing this out, Bowles announced his resignation as Clinton's chief of staff early in October (118). By that point, there was something of an exodus from Clinton's staff, as Bowles, McCurry, and Rahm Emanuel all departed.

No one was quitting in protest, at least officially. But in effect, Bowles and McCurry really were. Both had the advantage of credibility when they said they were leaving for other reasons. [. . .] Yet few other top aides were quite as disenchanted with Clinton. He had squandered everything they had tried to do. (118).

Protest or not, Clinton's staff was losing three of its most experienced members.

Between the "witty and widely respected" McCurry, "the street fighter" Emanuel, and

Bowles, the White House had some very big shoes to fill (118-119). Clearly, not everyone was happy about the timing of their departure.

Doug Sosnik, who would take Emanuel's title as senior adviser and had already become a constant companion to the president, did not blame McCurry because he had announced his plans three months earlier. But Sosnik was furious at Bowles and Emanuel for abandoning them at this danger point. Indeed, Sosnik generally stopped speaking to either one. (119).

Between the resignations and the general stress of the situation, "those left behind were exhausted physically, mentally, and emotionally" (130). In the void of leadership, the staff assumed a lesser role behind Clinton's attorneys.

By December, the divisions in the staff again became clear when a contrite, apologetic speech draft meant to head off an impeachment was leaked to the press (207).

One by one that night, Podesta interrogated them about what they had done with their copies of the draft. By the end of the evening though, the identity of the culprit was not entirely clear. While there was plenty of speculation, the theories boiled down to two – either hard-line Clinton defender Sidney Blumenthal had leaked it deliberately or someone at pollster Mark Penn's office had by accident. Nobody was admitting to it. (208).

New chief of staff John Podesta confronted the staff at the next morning's strategy session. Clearly angry, he railed about the damage the leak had caused, and the steps being taken to prevent such leaks in the future. "From now on, information was going to

be much more restricted. These meetings were going to be smaller. Fewer aides would be allowed to attend” (209). While that policy did prevent further catastrophic leaks, it further demonstrates the suspicion that overcame the staff. Even by mid-September, “the White House was a den of backbiting and recriminations,” according to Baker (96). As the scandal slogged to its conclusion, “the bone-weary staff could not bear the notion that it might drag on much longer” (271). There was anger and disappointment, but more than anything a desire to get back to what Begala called “BAU, meaning Business As Usual” (Klein 179).

## **II. Short-Term Effects On Clinton’s Cabinet**

While the White House staff struggled to defend the President, the Cabinet also found itself diverted from BAU. Many of the secretaries had publicly defended the president, and just as the staff did, they were angered at Clinton’s behavior and deceit.

Indeed, the cabinet had not met in nearly eight months, not since that day in January in the early throes of the Lewinsky scandal when Secretary of State Madeline Albright and three other secretaries were dispatched to the White House driveway to vouch for the beleaguered president. “I believe that the allegations are completely untrue,” Albright had said then. “I’ll second that, definitely,” Commerce Secretary William Daley had agreed, followed by Health and Human Services Secretary Donna E. Shalala and Education Secretary Richard W. Riley. Now they were being summoned back to hear from their leader why their faith had been misplaced. (Baker 72).

At the cabinet meeting in the Yellow Oval Room the day after the Starr Report was delivered to Congress, Clinton addressed the secretaries. The atmosphere of the meeting was tense. A similar sense of suspicion as had overtaken the White House staff seems to have lingered among the cabinet as well. “Many of the cabinet officers found themselves strangely nervous. Some stared at their shoes, avoiding eye contact not only with the president but with each other as well. Others wondered whether their colleagues would stand by him” (73). Clinton himself writes:

On September 10, I called the cabinet to the White House and apologized to them. Many of them didn’t know what to say. They believed in what we were doing and appreciated the opportunity I had given them to serve, but most of them felt I had been selfish and stupid and left them hanging for eight months. Madeline Albright led off, saying that I had done wrong and she was disappointed, but our only option was to go back to work. Donna Shalala was tougher, saying it was important for leaders to be good people as well as to have good policies. (Clinton 809).

Perhaps surprisingly, here Clinton’s account actually differs very little from Baker’s, though Baker offers a bit more insight into what the secretaries and Clinton himself said.

From Baker’s description, it was Clinton at his most emotional, and his eyes moistened as he told the cabinet that “it’s more important to be a good person than a good president, and I’m going to spend the rest of my life trying to atone for this” (Baker 73).

Opening up in a way none of them had ever seen before, Clinton told his cabinet secretaries that he had grown to feel like a person who was not

himself since taking office. [. . .] And that, he suggested, had created a behavior pattern that was not justified but could be explained because he was not at peace with himself. (73).<sup>1</sup>

As far as what the secretaries themselves had to say, Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala was, by far, the most outspoken. While others quoted scripture and lectured the president about confession, forgiveness, and redemption, Shalala felt “there was far too much ass-kissing. [. . .] And nobody in the room was telling him that what he did was simply wrong. Not the lying, the sex” (Baker 74). It had been known prior to the meeting that Shalala was livid, and Erskine Bowles “had called to tell her not to hold back. The president still did not get it, Bowles said. Clinton thought it was all just a right-wing conspiracy to get him. ‘You’ve got to tell him the truth,’ Bowles said. ‘You’ve got to be honest’” (74-75). As Clinton suggests, she was “tougher” on him, but that portrayal downplays the brief but heated exchange between them in front of the other secretaries. In a brave (perhaps even semi-suicidal from a career standpoint) display of speaking truth to power, Shalala strongly emphasized the need for good behavior as well as good governing. At one point, Clinton spoke back, and what followed was a remarkable tête-à-tête between Shalala and the president:

“I can’t believe that is what you’re telling us, that is what you believe, that you don’t have an obligation to provide moral leadership,” Shalala told the president. “I don’t care about the lying, but I’m appalled by the behavior.”

---

<sup>1</sup> Here Clinton’s explanation may be hard to believe, yet former staffer David Gergen suggests something very similar in his book *Eyewitness to Power*:

Bill Clinton is not a bad man, as his enemies claim. In fact, in most ways he is a very good and caring man who wants to improve the lives of others. But his career has been so rushed, he has never had time to let roots grow in his interior life. He has spent huge amounts of time helping others, but has never taken the time to allow others to help him. (Gergen 329).

Clinton seemed taken aback. “By your standard, Richard Nixon would’ve beaten John Kennedy,” he replied sharply.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” she retorted. (75).

Baker continues that “no one else had the temerity to confront Clinton quite like that” (75), though that may only be because no one else was quite so willing to risk sparking Clinton’s temper, which Joe Klein describes as “shocking to those who didn’t know him well” (Klein, 49), and Baker calls “volcanic” (Baker, 106). And, Clinton’s temper aside, such a public scolding of a president by any of his staff or cabinet is extremely rare.

According to Baker:

Others in the room were stunned by the exchange. It was a strikingly candid back-and-forth between a president and a cabinet secretary in front of so many people. [. . .] And more than a few of Shalala’s peers were distinctly uncomfortable that she had done so and privately disapproved. (75).

However, judging by Clinton’s recollection of the meeting and the aftermath, it seems Shalala and the other secretaries got through to him. Clinton writes, “listening to my cabinet, I really understood for the first time the extent to which the exposure of my misconduct and my dishonesty about it had opened a Pandora’s box of emotions in the American people” (Clinton 809). In this, it seems Erskine Bowles was exactly right when he instructed Shalala to “tell him the truth.”

Also of note at the September 10 meeting was Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin, “the subject of persistent rumors that he might quit” (Baker 75-76). Both Baker and Clinton describe Rubin’s statement as “blunt” (Clinton 810, Baker 76), and highlight

virtually the same words. According to Clinton, Rubin said, “there’s no question you screwed up. But we all make mistakes, even big ones” (Clinton 810).<sup>2</sup> Clinton is also quick to quote Rubin’s jab at Clinton’s enemies and the press: “In my opinion, the bigger issue is the disproportion of the media coverage and the hypocrisy of some of your critics” (810). Given the autobiographical nature of *My Life*, it is hardly astonishing that Clinton would make sure to include such a condemnation of his adversaries.

The last to speak at the full cabinet meeting was Vice President Al Gore. Oddly enough, Clinton makes no mention of him speaking at the meeting, though Clinton’s description of it is only approximately one page long to Baker’s four pages. Nevertheless, Clinton’s omission of Gore is interesting given Baker’s description of what Gore said:

Finally, the vice president spoke. He had remained completely loyal in his public pronouncements, never betraying a hint of disapproval of the president to the outside world. But now in this private moment, he sternly told Clinton that he had let everyone down. Gore too quoted the Bible and concluded that now it was time to move on: “Mr. President, I think most of America has forgiven you, but you’ve got to get your act together.”

(Baker 76).

It could well be argued that Gore’s electoral prospects in 2000 might have been somewhat better if he had taken a similar stance in public during the scandal. While he distanced himself from Clinton in the 2000 campaign, his staunch public defense of the president surely hurt his chances. After the House voted to impeach Clinton, Gore

---

<sup>2</sup> Baker, meanwhile, quotes him as saying: “You screwed up, you screwed up big time. But we all screw up sometimes” (Baker 76).

addressed the rallying Democrats. As Baker depicts it, Gore made a statement that may have cost him dearly:

“What happened as a result does a great disservice to a man I believe will be regarded in the history books as one of our greatest presidents,” Gore intoned as aides winced at a phrase they instantly knew could come back to haunt the vice president in the 2000 race to succeed Clinton. (255).

Whether or not this statement and others like it hurt Gore’s chances in 2000 is still an open question. Whether or not Gore’s public defense of Clinton and his private castigation of him are diametrically opposed is not. The only way they can be reconciled is to believe that Gore that the same man who “let everyone down” was also one of “our greatest presidents.”

In contrast to the White House staff, which lost McCurry, Emanuel, and Bowles in the midst of the scandal, the entire cabinet “stayed with” Clinton, surprising though it was to some. Even Clinton himself seemed to express relief in *My Life*, writing, “I’m grateful that no one quit. We all went back to work” (Clinton 810). There are several possible explanations for this. First, the cabinet secretaries enjoyed the benefit of not being on the front line of the impeachment battle, and were therefore spared the incredible stress that the staff endured. Furthermore, Clinton did not gather his staff and apologize to them as he did to the Cabinet. It is entirely possible that one or more of the secretaries may have chosen to resign had the president not come clean and asked them to forgive him. Ironically, a similar apology might have saved Clinton from being impeached at all. As late as December 7, House Judiciary Committee Chairman Henry Hyde was working on a deal to stop the impeachment vote:

[If] Clinton put a serious compromise on the table, a sincere apology with details about his misconduct, Hyde had agreed to work one-on-one with Lindsey Graham, the most undecided committee Republican, as well as a few others to meet their concerns. That would free scores of nervous moderate Republicans from an impeachment vote they did not want to cast on the floor, and Hyde would have been satisfied. (Baker 196).

Unfortunately, Clinton could not bring himself to be as candid in public as he had been privately with the cabinet, and Hyde's committee instead drafted the articles of impeachment against him. Yet Clinton "thought of the cabinet as something like a family" (73), and he was sincere and apologetic enough to prevent any of his secretaries from resigning, and his cabinet did not suffer the sort of turmoil that befell his staff.

### **III. Medium-Term Effects On Clinton's Post-Impeachment Administration**

Just as chaos overcame his staff during the impeachment crisis, so were the last two years of his administration marked by chaos, albeit of a different kind. Clinton had showed that he could still govern the country and make difficult decisions<sup>3</sup> during the scandal, and he emerged from the impeachment with an approval rating of 68% according to an ABC poll ("1999 Polling On Bill Clinton's Job Approval Rating"). A CBS News/New York Times poll conducted from January 30 until February 1 (while the impeachment trial was still ongoing) found that an overwhelming percentage of Americans, 72%, felt Clinton could still be an effective president ("1999 Misc. Polling Questions On Bill Clinton"). Of the crisis, Paul Quirk wrote, "in the end, the gravest

---

<sup>3</sup> Certainly the decisions to launch air strikes on Afghanistan, Sudan, and later Iraq were the most dramatic, and controversial, examples of this. While the wisdom, timing, necessity, and efficacy of those bombings is certainly worthy of serious debate, they do not fall within the scope of this inquiry.

questions about Clinton's leadership, raised by the Monica Lewinsky scandal, concerned his character, not his competence" (181). Still, the scandal had "consumed thirteen precious months of Clinton's second term" (Gergen 316). Hence, there was a rush to make up for lost time. After the impeachment, Clinton's autobiography largely details a veritable maelstrom of trips overseas, as Clinton fell into the traditional second-term mold of focusing on foreign affairs, which largely freed him from congressional interference and allowed him to move to areas where he had not been as badly damaged by the scandal. Above all, David Gergen pointed out in 2000, "he has worked aggressively to restore his public standing and to leave behind more achievements. His focus on a place in history has been so intense that his chief of staff has banned the word 'legacy' from the lexicon of the staff" (Gergen 317). As with much of the rest of his presidency, the results were mixed.

The most profound act of Clinton's post-impeachment presidency began just over a month after the Senate acquitted him. On March 23, 1999, with the authorization of Congress, NATO forces began a bombing campaign over Serbia, which ultimately forced dictator Slobodan Milosevic to pull his troops out of Kosovo (Baker 419, Clinton 850, and Klein 199). Though public support for the bombing started at 48% according to an ABC News/*Washington Post* poll, from then on until May that number never dropped below 50% ("1999 Misc. Polling Questions On Bill Clinton"). While his credibility was questioned somewhat, Kosovo seemed to be a confirmation that the impeachment had not crippled Clinton's ability to send U.S. troops, sailors, marines, and airmen into harm's way.

In more diplomatic realms of foreign relations, however, Clinton was not as successful. He was unable to get the Senate to ratify the Comprehensive Test-Ban Treaty, “the first time a president had been rebuffed on a major arms control treaty since the Senate rejected the Treaty of Versailles” (Baker 419). More telling, Clinton flip-flopped on the issue of normalizing trade with China. Joe Klein mentions this in *The Natural*:

In the Spring of 1999, the President suddenly changed his position on the normalization of trade relations with China [ . . . ]; the President did this, in part, to repay the liberal, protectionist Democrats in the House of Representatives who had just saved his Presidency by making the impeachment proceedings a partisan vote, thereby stripping the process of any public credibility. (Klein 200).

Political necessity at home, necessity created by the impeachment, required Clinton to cave on trade with China, just as he had had to sacrifice a sizable portion of his policy goals in the budget negotiations of October 1999 due to the impeachment. The effect of this on an international level was substantial, since the Chinese Premier, Zhu Rongji, had flown to the U.S. to ratify the agreement Clinton reneged on (200). Klein continues:

(Normalization of trade relations with China passed in the spring of 2000, after a major lobbying effort by the President, who had reverted to his original position; but to the humiliation of Zhu Rongji, which the Chinese saw as a major loss of face, and the carelessness inherent in the accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during the Kosovo war, probably has strengthened those in Beijing who argue that

the United States is not to be trusted.) (201).

While the bombing of the embassy was something Clinton could not control (unless one wants to believe that Clinton ordered the embassy bombed), the waffling on trade with China almost certainly damaged Sino-American relations, which have never been very cozy to begin with. From a strictly policy-oriented view, a one-year delay in normalizing trade makes little difference, and is a small price to pay to return a favor to representatives to whom the president was unquestionably indebted. But in the delicate sphere of international relations, the delay and resulting embarrassment of the Chinese could likely have effects long after the necessity of a *quid pro quo* to protectionist Democrats have been forgotten.

Clinton also tried to get the Middle East peace process moving again. Klein suggests that “the President’s need to shove Lewinsky into the background, to close his eight years with one last, improbable burst of historic achievements, may also have led him to press too hard for an Israeli-Palestinian peace accord in the last summer of his presidency” (201-202). Clinton himself also admits that he pushed for an agreement to help the besieged Israeli Prime Minister, Ehud Barak, who was trailing the hawkish conservative Ariel Sharon in the polls (Clinton 943). Surprisingly, Clinton even seems to believe that his legacy was largely tied to the peace process, and that Arafat’s refusal of the generous terms of the accord would have a large impact on how he was perceived as a president, not to mention the disastrous effects on the region. He recalls: “Right before I left office, Arafat, in one of our last conversations, thanked me for all my efforts and told me what a great man I was. ‘Mr. Chairman,’ I replied, ‘I am not a great man. I am a failure, and you have made me one’” (944). At the very least, Clinton’s Camp David

summit was universally viewed as a colossal failure, and sparked “a renewal of the *Intifada*; the fiercest, most violent run of terror bombings and Israeli military reprisals in a decade” (Klein 203). Clinton argues that Arafat, in rebuffing the proposal, made “an error of historic proportions” (Clinton 944-945). It could even be reasoned that the Camp David accord was doomed to fail, in which case Clinton erred by fighting so hard for it and thereby leaving his legacy so dependent upon it. Certainly it could not be said that the impeachment lessened Clinton’s desire to push for peace, and history would likely judge poorly a president who did not make every effort to secure better relations among the nations of the world. Nevertheless, the full consequences of the bloodshed in the Middle East beginning again under Clinton’s watch have yet to be seen.

Amid all the foreign affairs and trips of his last two years, Clinton also had some domestic policy successes. He got the GOP to agree to several of his highest priorities into the 1999 budget negotiations: paying U.N. dues, doubling after-school program attendance, and the 100,000 new teachers initiative (Clinton 876). He laid out an ambitious agenda in his 2000 State of the Union, and by the end of the year, Clinton writes, “I reached an omnibus budget agreement with Congress, the last major legislative victory of my eight years. The education budget was especially good” (Clinton 934). Clinton also makes mention of the passage trade bills with Africa, the Caribbean, the Lands Legacy initiative, and “a large increase in child-care assistance to working families” (935).

In general, Clinton’s domestic track record after the impeachment, while it had some major successes, was not as impressive as it was prior to the scandal, and he left office with one final gaffe, which Klein suggests might have been caused at least partly

by a “lingering sense of guilt” in Clinton for not being able to make peace between Israel and Palestine (Klein 203). Klein writes that “Bill Clinton left the presidency the same way he’d entered it: exhausted to the point of foolishness” (203). Even Clinton’s description of his final days in office reads as a continuous stream of events. Klein draws a parallel between the breakneck pace of Clinton’s dénouement and his transitional period, the fatigue from which Klein believes was the root cause of the numerous “slips and miscalculations” of his first 100 days in office (203-204). On the final night of his administration, Clinton granted 177 pardons and commutations of sentence, one of which went to financier Marc Rich (204). In a bizarre connection to the Camp David accord, Rich, also a generous donor to Clinton’s political causes over the years, had been a major contributor to the war chest of Ehud Barak, and Barak himself “called the President three times to plead for Rich [ . . . ] and Clinton later admitted that he gave undue weight to these conversations because he felt responsible for Barak’s political fate” (205). Clinton’s account also mentions that Barak asked for Rich to be pardoned on three separate occasions, though Clinton reveals that “the Justice Department said it had no objections and would lean toward granting the pardon if it advanced our foreign policy interests” (Clinton 941). Given that Ariel Sharon handily defeated Barak a month later, it is unclear how Rich’s pardon furthered American foreign policy in any appreciable way.<sup>4</sup> Klein, meanwhile, chalks the Rich pardon up to “the utter loss of political perspective,” and even goes so far as to call it “Lewinsky redux” (Klein 206). That description is rather hyperbolic, since the Constitution grants the president unmitigated power to pardon offenses and commute sentences other than those imposed by impeachment (and since the Rich pardon was not the focus of American political discourse for a full year as the

---

<sup>4</sup> For Clinton’s perspective on Sharon’s election in February 2001, see Clinton 944.

Lewinsky scandal was), but Klein's assessment of the wisdom of pardoning the (at best) disreputable Rich is sound. Interestingly enough, Clinton focuses more on pardons that he wanted to grant, specifically to Webb Hubbell and Jim Guy Tucker, but was talked down from by his staff and their "hard-nosed judgment," but he also divulges that he "has regretted it ever since" (Clinton 941-942). Given the high-profile natures of those individuals and their well-known connections to Clinton (compared with the less publicly recognized Rich), it seems apparent that the fallout from those pardons would have been exponentially greater and even more damaging to Clinton. This either does not seem to have occurred to Clinton, or simply didn't bother him. In *The Natural*, Klein gapes at Clinton's "eagerness" to exploit, be exploited, and have "certain knowledge that the exploitation was bound to be exposed," and yet still proceed regardless (Klein 207). Even before the end of Clinton's tenure and the Rich pardon, David Gergen was more critical, saying, "sadly, Clinton has given the impression for many years that he feels the rules do not apply to him" (Gergen 333). His pardon of Marc Rich did nothing to dispel those perceptions, and compounded the impact of his impeachment of casting doubt on how well history and the American people will judge his administration.

#### **IV, Long-Term Effects On Clinton's Legacy**

Less than five years have passed since Bill Clinton's tenure as forty-second President of the United States came to an end, and even though it remains too early to see what his legacy will be, especially in light of the impeachment, preliminary observations can be made. It can then be considered whether the impeachment has had a substantial impact upon that legacy, and if so, to what extent.

In the closing days of his presidency, Bill Clinton enjoyed favorability ratings not far from his peak of 68% at the high of the impeachment. A CBS News poll conducted between 15 and 17 January of 2001, less than a week before he left office, showed that he had a 57% favorable rating, while only 35% of people surveyed had an unfavorable opinion of him (“2001 Fav/Unfav Polling on Bill Clinton”). Yet, in August of 2001, a CNN/Gallup/USA Today poll showed a statistical tie, with his favorable rating at 49% and his unfavorable at 48% (“2001 Fav/Unfav Polling on Bill Clinton”). The same poll showed President George W. Bush, one month before the attacks of September 11, with fav/unfav numbers remarkably similar to Clinton’s before he left office. Bush’s favorability sat at 60%, and 35% had an unfavorable view of him (“2001 Fav/Unfav Polling on Bill Clinton”). This seems to indicate a certain level of respect for the office of the presidency, with more people likely to view a common citizen, albeit a former president, unfavorably than a sitting chief executive. The drop could also be due to Clinton’s greatly reduced time in the public eye after his term.

Within a year of his term ending, national polls were beginning to ask questions relating to Clinton’s legacy. A January 2002 CNN/Gallup/USA Today poll asked the following question: “Thinking for a moment about the Clinton presidency, how do you think President Clinton will go down in history -- as an outstanding president, above average, average, below average or poor?” 12% of respondents answered “outstanding,” 27% “above average,” 32% “average,” 11% “below average,” and 17% “poor” (“2002 Polling On Bill Clinton”). This poll also confirmed the earlier, August 2001 data showing that the public’s perception of his time in office had declined, as 24% of those polled said that impression had “gotten worse,” and only 16% said it had “improved.”

Still, a majority (58%) responded that their opinion had not changed (“2002 Polling On Bill Clinton). It is very likely that, as the memory of Clinton’s policy achievements faded, the Lewinsky scandal, being as it was the biggest story in American media for over a year, began to more and more influence people’s opinions of his presidency. That aside, the respondents to that poll clearly agreed on at least one aspect of Clinton’s tenure: his handling of the economy. 36% of those surveyed said Clinton had done a “very good” job, while 44% believed he had done a “good” job (“2002 Polling On Bill Clinton”). Whatever their feelings for him as a person or as a president at that juncture, the public overwhelmingly approved of Clinton’s economic policies.

The trend of shifting approval ratings continued into 2003. An ABC News poll in late May and early June showed a 55%-43% approve/disapprove ratio, and a June CBS News poll echoed those results, showing a 53%-42% ratio (“2003 Polling On Bill Clinton”). Also in June of that year, a CNN/Gallup/USA Today poll asked if America “was better off with Bill Clinton as president, or is better off with George W. Bush as president.” Bush came out ahead at 49% to Clinton’s 46%, but within the margin of error of +/-3% (“2003 Polling On Bill Clinton”). However, the reasons for Clinton’s unimpressive numbers as a former president began to become apparent, as pollsters asked more pointed questions about him. The same June 2003 CNN/Gallup/USA Today poll that had his presidency in a numerical dead-heat with Bush also asked this question: “Which comes closest to your view of the controversy surrounding Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky in 1998 and 1999: It never really bothered you, it bothered you at the time but it doesn't bother you anymore, or it still bothers you today?” In a striking coincidence, 48% responded that it “never really bothered them.” 25% were “bothered

by it at the time,” but weren’t anymore when the poll was taken, and 26% were “still bothered” by it (“2003 Polling On Bill Clinton”). It may well be that those who weren’t bothered at all by the scandal were by and large the same individuals who felt that America was better off during his presidency. Despite that, another CNN/Gallup/USA Today poll in July of 2003 asked whether respondents felt Clinton or President Bush was the more trustworthy. Given the previous results, it might be expected that the margin between them would be relatively thin, but that was not the case. Instead, Bush clearly won out, with 56% saying he was more trustworthy than Clinton, while only 35% believed the reverse. Undeniably, the Lewinsky scandal is largely to blame here for destroying much of the public’s trust in his honesty. As David Gergen said of the impeachment and the aftermath, “Americans now knew for sure what they had only suspected – their President would lie to save himself” (Gergen 316).<sup>5</sup> Americans’ view of Clinton’s morals also showed through in a somewhat unorthodox Fox News/Opinion Dynamics poll in June 2003. The poll asked, “Which of the following do you think will happen to Bill Clinton first -- he'll run for mayor of New York City, he'll be the first "first gentleman" when Hillary becomes president, or he'll become involved in another scandal?” The first two choices only yielded 22% and 13%, 37% of respondents thought Clinton would become entangled in another scandal, or at least, before the other two choices (“2003 Polling On Bill Clinton”). That poll also says little about Hillary Clinton’s prospects of being elected president, unless, of course, those surveyed simply think she’ll be elected, but not before her husband is caught in another peccadillo. Whatever the case may be, these polls clearly indicate that the areas of morals and

---

<sup>5</sup> Gergen and Baker both mention surveys of historians taken before the end of Clinton’s term in which he ranked “dead last in moral authority – behind Richard Nixon!” (Gergen 332). See also Baker 417.

trustworthiness, the areas most connected to and affected by the Lewinsky affair, have also been the areas where the public finds Clinton the most wanting. Entering the presidential election year of 2004, however, the public's distinction between Bill Clinton qua forty-second President of the United State and Bill Clinton the man became even more apparent. An ABC News/*Washington Post* poll showed a 62% approval rating for Clinton's handling of the job as president, with 37% disapproving. Meanwhile, that poll also showed the country evenly split (50% favorable/49% unfavorable) in their "opinion of Bill Clinton as a man" ("2004 Polling On The Former Presidents").

That dichotomy might very well explain why, back in January of 2003, a poll conducted by Zogby regarding the last 12 presidents produced an ominous result for Bill Clinton. Asked to rank the presidents great/near great, average, or below average/failure, 36% of respondents viewed Clinton to be either below average or a failure. Only Richard Nixon, with 44%, had more unfavorable numbers. At the same time, Clinton's 34% great/near great rating wasn't setting the world ablaze either. In that category, Clinton ranked only above Lyndon Johnson (23%), Nixon (18%), and Gerald Ford (who somehow managed to do worse than Nixon with 17%). Even the ho-hum, single-term presidencies of Jimmy Carter (36%) and the victim of Clinton's 1992 ascendancy, George H.W. Bush (39%), fared better than Clinton. Oddly enough, though nearly equal numbers said Clinton was great/near great or below average/failure, the number of people who described Clinton's tenure as average (29%) was the lowest mark in that field for any president since Truman (29%) and FDR (15%), who were the last two presidents on the list, and obviously the two whose term the respondents were least likely to have lived through ("National Polling On The Greatest Presidents"). At this point, no matter what

else may be said, it is certain that public opinion is more divided about Clinton's presidency and his legacy than any other modern president.

While the entire nation does not view him in a negative light, those who do seem to do so more on moral and ethical grounds than on his efficacy as president. Surely the ultimate verification of those qualms during Clinton's presidency was his infidelity and subsequent dishonesty regarding it. Those lapses of judgment have clearly subtracted much from what could have been the great legacy of an immensely talented, charismatic, and intelligent politician and president. In *Eyewitness to Power*, David Gergen suggests that, "Clinton's greatest contribution may not be what he accomplished in the 1990s but how well he prepared the country for the decades that follow. [. . .] While Bill Clinton will never escape opprobrium for his own past, perhaps one day he will receive generous credit for improving our future" (Gergen 342). Just what Clinton's legacy will be, however, is still a subject for debate. In years to come, there will likely be further changes in public attitude towards Bill Clinton the man and the president, and eventually some consensus may arise. Given the stark division currently seen between Clinton's supporters and opponents, that consensus does not appear to be close at hand.

### **Conclusion**

Examining various aspects of Bill Clinton's administration and his legacy, it can be seen that the Monica Lewinsky scandal and impeachment had a tremendous impact, but not in a strictly consistent fashion. While Clinton's staff was demoralized and torn apart in the crisis, his cabinet continued to function relatively well. Though the influence the scandal had on the remainder of his term after the impeachment is unclear, that it has

had a highly detrimental effect on the legacy that is only just beginning to form. It is certain that history will remember him, at least in part, as the second president to be impeached, and much will be written about the impeachment and the events that caused it. His private life has been, and will continue to be scrutinized and documented in more detail than any other president's. Whether or not the waves of scandal will erode away the heights of Clinton's accomplishments during his eight years in office, it seems evident that America is at a turning point much larger than his legacy. The question now becomes whether Bill Clinton is the first in a line of presidents who, through either their own moral lapses or the eagerness of their political rivals to win at all costs, suffer similar fates, or whether he will be the last. The answer to that may well determine the future of American political discourse and the presidency itself.

## Works Cited

- “1999 Polling On Bill Clinton’s Job Approval Rating Poll Track. National Journal. 21 Dec. 1999. Atlantic Media. 1 Oct. 2005. <http://nationaljournal.com/members/polltrack/1999/national/clinton/99clintonja.htm>.
- “1999 Misc. Polling Questions On Bill Clinton.” Poll Track. National Journal. 13 Dec. 1999. Atlantic Media. 1 Oct. 2005. <http://nationaljournal.com/members/polltrack/1999/national/clinton/99clintonmisc.htm>.
- “2001 Fav/Unfav Polling On Bill Clinton.” Poll Track. National Journal. 29 Nov. 2001. Atlantic Media. 1 Oct. 2005. <http://nationaljournal.com/members/polltrack/2001/national/01clintonfav.htm>.
- “2002 Polling On Bill Clinton.” Poll Track. National Journal. 3 Dec. 2002. Atlantic Media. 1 Oct. 2005. <http://nationaljournal.com/members/polltrack/2002/national/02clinton.htm>.
- “2003 Polling On Bill Clinton.” Poll Track. National Journal. 19 Nov. 2003. Atlantic Media. 1 Oct. 2005. <http://nationaljournal.com/members/polltrack/1999/issues/99impeachment.htm>.
- “2004 Polling On The Former Presidents.” Poll Track. National Journal. 21 July 2004. Atlantic Media. 1 Oct. 2005. <http://nationaljournal.com/members/polltrack/2004/national/04expres.htm>.
- Baker, Peter. The Breach: Inside the Impeachment and Trial of William Jefferson Clinton. New York: Scribner. 2000.
- Clinton, Bill. My Life. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 2004.
- Gergen, David. Eyewitness to Power: The Essence of Leadership: Nixon to Clinton. New York: Touchstone. 2000.
- Klein, Joe. The Natural: The Misunderstood Presidency of Bill Clinton. New York: Broadway. 2002.
- Maraniss, David. First in His Class: The Biography of Bill Clinton. New York: Touchstone. 1995.
- “National Polling On The Greatest Presidents.” Poll Track. National Journal. 9 Jan. 2003. Atlantic Media. 1 Oct. 2005. <http://nationaljournal.com/members/polltrack/2003/todays/01/0109zogby.htm>.
- Quirk, Paul J. “Presidential Competence.” The Presidency and the Political System. 7<sup>th</sup> ed. Ed. Michael Nelson. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press. 2003.