

What light is shed on the themes of Presidential power by both the record of Clinton and the events during the period?

Whereas authority is the right to exercise power, power is the ability to exercise power. Powers are the functions, tasks or jobs of an office. Power on the other hand, is the ability to get things done. Every American president has the same powers as his predecessor. Essentially, President George W. Bush has the same powers as Jimmy Carter had, as Harry Truman had, as Woodrow Wilson had, as Abraham Lincoln had, as George Washington had – the powers to sign and veto bills, to appoint cabinet officers and Supreme Court Justices, to negotiate treaties and so on. But the power that each president possesses is very much a variable. Indeed, it even varies for the same president throughout his period of office. One might argue for example, that Nixon after Watergate or Reagan after Iran-Contra, or Clinton after Lewinsky, had much less power than before those unfortunate episodes.

Power is the ability to get people to do the things they wouldn't otherwise do. In his scholarly book on the American presidency (Presidential Power), Professor Richard Neustadt makes it clear that 'powers are no guarantee of power'. In other words, the jobs one has to do as President are no guarantee or actually getting things done. This is why the President has to resort to persuasion. As Neustadt again claims: 'The president's power is the power to persuade. He does allow that 'powers may lead to power', but they are no guarantee of it.

Bill Clinton can certainly not be accused of enhancing the powers of the presidential office and making it imperial. On the contrary, in the eyes of his republican critics, he undermined the credibility of the office and created crises which negatively influenced both elite and popular perceptions of the presidency. However, despite the controversy surrounding his time in office, Clinton was a very popular president who appealed to a wide cross-section of America. He won two successive general elections by comfortable margins and during his time in office, helped the USA to a time of substantial and impressive economic growth. The economy acted as a very important instrument to Clinton in the opposite manner of how it undermined George Bush Snr. Low unemployment levels, low inflation and the eradication of the deficit contributed to the impression that Clinton deserved credit for his efforts as the President. Clinton succeeded in improving the economic environment of the USA, particularly during his second term.

With regards to foreign policy, Clinton occupied the oval office during a period of stability and relative peace. Aside from periodically skirmishing with Saddam Hussein, Clinton avoided military action of significant note, and engaged in efforts to promote peace in the Middle East, and Northern Ireland. Presidential power was not exercised as the expense of the other branches of government.

Although Clinton had an admirable policy record, he undermined the credibility of the presidential office through his personal misconduct. During the 1992 election campaign, he was accused of being unfaithful to his wife, and questioned over drug issues, and avoiding the draft for the Vietnamese war. However, despite all this, he easily beat George Bush Senior. Two years into this term, in 1994, Paula Jones accused him of sexual harassment, and as a result of a Supreme Court decision, he was forced to defend himself. Ongoing investigations revealed and uncovered a secret affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky. It was not the affair itself which put Clinton's presidential future in jeopardy, but the issue over whether or not he had lied under oath and whether this was acceptable behaviour. After congressional hearings, Clinton was impeached by the House of Reps, and faced a trial in the Senate. He was only the second American President in history to suffer the indignity of impeachment. As a result of all these proceedings, his position and the question mark over the authority of the presidency were in question. Although he survived the Senate trial, he was regarded as being untrustworthy and evasive, yet opinion polls showed that there was little support for his removal, and that two thirds of the electorate were opposed to removing him from office.

Clinton's personal activity threatened the standing of the presidency. His opponents charged him with disrespect for the presidency, for exploiting his authority and for bringing disrepute into the office he held. In many respects however, it seemed that many of the American people had separated Clinton the man from Clinton the President. While his personal activities were frowned upon, opinion polls showed that he was given great credit for his policy decisions and his economic management as President.

The record of Clinton's presidency sheds an interesting light on the themes of presidential powers. One would expect his personal debacles would place his position in great jeopardy, but as can be seen from the opinion poll results during the times of scandal, he lost very little support indeed. This could be due to two main reasons: namely his popularity, or the weakness of his opponents. Clinton's record with policy issues, and financial management was first class. He kept peace as best he could, and endeavoured to seek diplomatic, peaceful solutions to problems in the Middle East and Northern Ireland. To most members of the electorate in any modern democracy, the prominent preference in a leader, is one who will manage the finance of the country. Any leader who is successful in keeping inflation levels low, and who can help induce substantial economic growth is going to be popular, and Clinton was indeed this. People seek a leader who can help the nation and its economy prosper.

Clinton was a very skilled president. His popularity with critics and his peers was not important, and his record shows that it was not important and didn't affect his efficiency as president. The fact that he managed to succeed despite his personal misconduct record showed that he was indeed a 'persuader'. He had popularity, but was also able to persuade others to do things they perhaps

didn't totally agree with. This was his great skill, and helped him to succeed as president. As long as Clinton was succeeding as president, his misconduct record did not undermine his popularity, and ultimately, his success.