

Clinton's era

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With his astonishing mix of blarney and brilliance, personal empathy and political calculation, Bill Clinton could have walked off the pages of a southern novel. The revivalist language of repentance and redemption is second nature to him, but so too are the practices of “war room” politics. Often in the past eight years he has seemed like one of Flannery O’Connor’s enigmatic characters, caught between God and the devil—with Hillary Clinton, Dick Morris and assorted other characters nipping at his heels.

Whatever else historians make of the Clinton presidency or the Clinton personality, he presided over an important era of ferment for Democrats and for political liberals. Before Clinton’s election, Democrats had endured over two decades of national defeat, broken only by the anomalous Carter years. Democrats were widely viewed as “tax and spend” liberals who were soft on crime and national defense, flaccid on family values, beholden to bureaucrats, and indifferent to economic realities. As the *Washington Monthly* noted recently, Democrats in those days were seen as “favoring welfare cheats and snail darters” while opposing accountable schools and tough law enforcement.

The prevailing view of liberalism was an enormous caricature in many respects. Nevertheless, it spelled political death, as people named McGovern, Mondale and Dukakis came to realize. Clinton rose to prominence as a New Democrat, determined to reposition liberalism within mainstream politics. It turns out that through a mix of conviction, calculation and opportunism, he did just that. Clinton championed global free trade, a balanced budget and economic growth. He called for more policemen on the streets and for education standards. He backed military action in Bosnia and Kosovo. He reformed welfare. Not incidentally, he won reelection and he remained, despite political missteps and personal sins, an enormously popular president.

Welfare reform was in many respects Clinton’s signature policy decision. Though the legislation carried many risks to the poor and was opposed by some of his closest

advisers, Clinton perceived that the old system—the object of much racially-coded politics, and widely seen as fostering dependency—was a political albatross. He recognized that only by linking welfare to work requirements could a new national consensus on welfare policy be forged.

The struggle to redefine liberalism continues, and the question of whether Clinton preserved, reconceived or betrayed liberal ideals is part of the ongoing debate. Whatever kind of liberal he was, he was highly successful at it. That part of the legacy is hard to ignore.