

End of an era

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [November 22, 2000](#) issue

In an essay in the *New York Times*, written prior to the presidential election and its tension-filled aftermath, author Alan Ehrenhalt argues that the dominant fact of our political life during the late 1960s to the early 1990s, or what he calls the Republican era, was a cultural backlash “against rising rates of crime, illegitimate birth and drug addiction, and a defense of religion, patriotism, authority and conventional family life.” This backlash “endured long enough to generate the Christian activism and antiabortion fervor of the early 1990s.”

The Republican era made life miserable for Democrats, who had to struggle to find acceptable language to deal with this backlash. Republican ideas “sounded like common sense to most of the electorate,” forcing Democrats “to choose their words with excruciating precision to avoid painting themselves into an inappropriate ideological corner.” It was difficult to argue against a public feeling that the government was using public funds “to support fundamental and unwelcome challenges” to the family-oriented values of “middle-class taxpayers.”

Ehrenhalt describes a period before the moral breakdown of the 1960s in his book *The Lost City*, an examination of “the forgotten virtues of community,” described by one reviewer as “an elegy to the 1950s, before the baby boomers imploded authority, institutions and religious belief” and destroyed “the institutions that held communities together—churches, schools, families.”

When Bill Clinton ran for president in 1992, he seemed to instinctively know that the cornerstone of the Republican era was the restoration of middle-class family values. The boomers were older and had their stability back, but they didn’t want moralism with their stability. What they wanted was economic security, which is how a liberal Democrat could be elected on the theme, “It’s the economy, stupid.”

Ehrenhalt knew the Republican era was over when he heard Democratic nominee Clinton speak at a 1992 rally for gay rights in Oregon. This was, according to Ehrenhalt, a “small symbol of the cultural reversal that was to take place in American politics in the 1990s. . . . It has not been the challengers to traditional

values who have sounded awkward and defensive in presidential debate—it has been the challenges to diversity, pluralism and a more permissive social ethic.”

As president, Clinton frustrated his liberal base. He embraced middle-class values with the zeal of a Republican, but he benefited from the public’s “more permissive social ethic” when he faced his own moral failure. Clinton defied his labor supporters by supporting NAFTA, shocked his liberal-left base with assertions such as “the era of big government is over,” and promised to “end welfare as we know it.” Except for the hard-core Clinton haters, people liked this president because they identified with both his failures and his successes. He was one of them.

Along with other religious journalists, I interviewed Clinton in the White House midway through his eight years in office. I had previously worked with the president as a political colleague, but in this meeting I was there to ask questions about his policies, some of which I strongly opposed. His staff had placed me in the chair to his right. Before we sat down, he picked up his coffee cup, turned to me and winked, which I read as a gentle reminder that we “go back a ways, don’t we, and even though we don’t agree on every issue we are still friends, right?” That is the essence of the Clinton charm, the friendly pragmatism of a man who wants to be liked.

The moral certainty of the Republican era was replaced by the sort of pragmatic flexibility at which Clinton is a master. This shift was frustrating to those who had put their faith in absolutes. Ehrenhalt suggests that the peak of this certainty was the Republican congressional victory in 1994, built around Newt Gingrich’s Contract with America. After Clinton was reelected in 1996, the Republicans tried to remove the president on moral grounds, cloaking their effort in high-sounding constitutional rhetoric. This was a serious misreading of the public mood, a mistake shared by media pundits, many religious leaders (both mainline and conservative) and the Republican majority in Congress.

In the 2000 election, two managers of Clinton’s impeachment lost elections—Florida congressman Bill McCullom, who lost his bid for a Florida Senate seat, and California congressman James Rogan. In Bill Clinton’s hometown Arkansas congressional district, Republican incumbent Jay W. Dickey was defeated for reelection, a loss attributed in part to his vote for Clinton’s impeachment.

The election of 2000 should have been an easy win for Al Gore because he was Clinton’s heir. It also should have been a sure loss for George W. Bush, because his

Republican-right base was no longer dominant. Each man ran campaigns that contradicted public expectations. How did Bush make this such a close race? He did it by emulating Bill Clinton's charm and avoiding moral certainties in his campaign. He made no references to Clinton's impeachment struggle. Al Gore was the candidate who ran away from Bill Clinton—first by choosing Senator Joe Lieberman, a strict moralist, as his running mate, and then by sharply reducing Clinton's campaign role.

Gore ran his campaign as though the country were still in the grip of the Republican era, while Bush campaigned like Bill Clinton, a two-time winner. The next president will need to keep in mind that the Republican era is no more and a new era is in place. If he ignores this reality, he does so to the detriment of the nation he was narrowly chosen to lead.