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The Perils of Privatization

What News Doesn't Know About History

PLUS: Gregg Easterbrook, Timothy Noah, John Morton Blum and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

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HES NO BILL CLINTON

*Clinton's First Two Years
Truman's to Shame*

BY DANIEL FRANKLIN

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He's No Bill Clinton

Everyone loves "give 'em hell" Harry. But Clinton's first two years have put Truman's to shame

BY DANIEL FRANKLIN

It was a tough year for the President. Foreign policy errors bogged down his domestic programs; nominations were stonewalled by a hostile Congress; party insiders even considered recruiting a challenger for the Democratic nomination. He was, in the words of one journalist, "essentially indecisive ... essentially vacillating." Quite simply, Americans began to doubt seriously that he had the character to be the country's top executive.

Yes, 1946 just wasn't Harry Truman's year. But he bounced back, won reelection in 1948, and has received from history a reverence that borders on the Rushmoric. For many Americans now, Truman is seen as a model president—a man of integrity, modesty, and decisiveness. Walter Isaacson of *Time* called him "America's greatest common-man president." Eric Sevareid said that "Remembering him reminds people what a man in that office ought to be like.... He stands like a rock in memory now." So revered is the Man from Independence that in 1992, both parties' nominees fought to be considered "the Truman candidate."

Now that Republicans have both houses of Congress for the first time since 1946, Clinton aides are scanning David McCullough's best-selling Truman biography in search of the magic bullet that will hand Bill Clinton a Trumanesque comeback in 1996. Clinton took the Truman title in 1992, but now the country—and the press—is skeptical. "Bill Clinton," wrote historian James Pinkerton in the *Los Angeles Times*, "is no Harry Truman."

That's true, but those White House staffers looking for a magic bullet are missing the point. Clear away the historical fogs and set aside the acerbic press coverage and you cannot escape a startling conclusion: Clinton's first two years have put Truman's to shame. By April 1995, Clinton has accomplished far more for the American people than "give 'em hell" Harry had by April 1947. Clinton has guided the economy more successfully. He has enacted more laws with real impact. Yet while Truman is held in near-Jeffersonian regard, Bill Clinton is written off as a Warren Harding in jogging shorts.

Consider one of the core issues of any presidency: the economy. With the war over, the country began the painful conversion to a peacetime economy. Hundreds of thousands of veterans returned from

World War II to an economy that had reached record production levels without them. In Chicago alone, at least 100,000 veterans were jobless. Major industries—including coal, railroad, and steel—convulsed with labor strikes that threatened to paralyze the entire country. Truman's response was heavy-handed and ineffectual. He threatened to seize coal mines and draft striking railroad workers into the military. Both measures were rebuffed by the Supreme Court and Congress, respectively, for being blatantly unconstitutional.

The economy grew but the growth was more than overshadowed by inflation rates that soared to 14.6 percent in 1947. There were shortages in many of the products people needed, including housing, automobiles, sugar, coffee, and meat. And with the Great Depression fresh in the American memory, many wondered whether another economic crash, one even greater than before, was just around the corner.

Truman could have prevented the inflation. After the war, Republicans in Congress launched an effort to repeal wartime price controls. Truman saw that decontrol had to be gradual, so that it would not unleash inflation. But, as *The New Republic's* "TRB" columnist wrote in 1946, "The trouble is, Truman didn't make a real fight.... He didn't carry through.... He saw and predicted the recession but let Congress and business have their way. Truman won the argument all right, but that isn't quite enough in politics."

Clinton knows this. He is the first president in the last 30 years to achieve both job growth and low inflation. The "misery index"—inflation plus unemployment—is currently below nine; under Bush it was above 11; under Truman it was nearly 20.

The key to this achievement is Clinton's budget plan, which passed through Congress in 1993 only after a knock-down, drag-out fight led by the President—a fight won with only the votes of a fractious Democratic party, and against a vehement and united Republican front. Phil Gramm was one of the loudest critics, predicting that "hundreds of thousands of Americans will lose their jobs because of this bill."

Gramm was dead wrong. By cutting the deficit to \$192 billion in 1995, from \$290 billion just three years ago, the President has succeeded in bringing down long-term interest rates and encouraging business investment that has stimulated extraordinary job growth. Already, the economy has produced nearly six million new jobs—five million more than it did during Bush's entire term. The unemployment rate, which was 7.6 percent when Clinton took office, has dropped to 5.5 percent.

In his first two years as president, Truman never seemed to have the stomach to enter the ring and fight like Clinton has. In September 1945, Truman delivered a 21-point program to Congress that rivaled the New Deal in its scope. The plan increased federal funding to agriculture, housing programs, and a variety of public works projects. But Truman let nearly every major component of his domestic program go down in defeat without a fight. In a way, says McCullough, that was the point. "His whole strategy on these domestic issues was to go for the high ground. Be more liberal in the program, and if they knock it down, you'll have something to run on."

This is fine if your only concern is winning reelection, not so fine if you want to solve the country's problems. Clinton has staked his presidency on the passage of his economic and social programs and fought like a junkyard dog for his victories. Elizabeth Drew recounts in *On the Edge* that during the battle to pass the North American Free Trade Agreement, "Clinton threw himself into the fight—meeting members of Congress in one-on-one sessions, making many phone calls to them, giving speeches, meeting with opinion leaders, meeting with individual members. Shortly before the vote, there were White House dinners for undecideds." He brought the same energy and conviction to the fight to pass the Global Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. Clinton was willing to alienate the labor interests that are among the Democrats' strongest constituents because he believed that the treaty would produce jobs for the country. Regardless of your opinion of these treaties, you must respect the fact that he risked his neck to get them

passed.

Clinton has stuck to the path of ambitious achievement throughout his presidency and tried to avoid the partisan posturing that might serve him better at the polls. His success, by any objective measure, has been astonishing. Eighty-six percent of the legislation he endorsed has passed through Congress, a record unmatched by any president since Johnson.

The bills he has passed will make real contributions to the welfare of millions upon millions of Americans. Take education policy. While the economy has changed, putting a higher premium on education and skills, the American education system hasn't. Everyone knows that a high school diploma no longer guarantees a good job. But before Clinton took office, high school graduates who did not go on to college—nearly 40 percent—were stranded because the United States was the only major industrial nation without a vocational apprenticeship program.

Clinton's Schools-to-Work program created a network of apprenticeship programs to give those students real job skills that can't be learned in high school. The students intern with workers—electricians, plumbers, carpenters—and learn the skills needed to find and keep a job. When the program reaches full implementation, one-half million students will be enrolled annually. That's one-half million more skilled workers entering the workforce every year than before the program.

To counter the staggering growth in college tuition, Clinton reformed the student loan program so it would lend money directly to college students, and collect the debt as a percentage of their income. Previously, students received their college loans through banks and paid back a set amount for 10 years. From 1985 to 1991, the size of the average college graduate's total debt had jumped 150 percent. For many, the debt was stifling; 40 percent of graduates said their debt payments forced them to work two jobs.

But under Clinton's plan, defaults will be cut drastically because the debt payments, extended over a 25-year-period and based on the graduate's income, are manageable. A graduate with a \$30,000 income and a \$50,000 debt will pay \$345 per month, instead of the \$581 under the previous plan. As graduates' salaries rise, so do the amounts of their debt payments. As a result,

graduates are able to perform low-paying but meaningful work, such as teaching or social work, that the country desperately needs.

Then there's Americorps. While Republicans seek to slash this domestic Peace Corps, 20,000 volunteers are on the streets immunizing babies, restoring national parks, and counseling troubled teens. For their 10- to 12-month commitment, the volunteers earn vouchers worth \$4,725 toward tuition or for paying off student loans. And, carried out properly, the program has the potential to radically change the way Americans view community and national service. "It provides what might be called a social glue," argues Labor Secretary Robert Reich, "by bringing young people from all different backgrounds and incomes together to work on community projects, and enhance the health and safety or beauty of a community. It not only improves community but it creates community ... connecting people to other people across socioeconomic barriers."

Truman's contribution to equal opportunity and economic fairness—the heart of the Democratic Party—was meager during the first two years of his term. Yet again, his proposals that did aim to aid the poor—unemployment compensation, minimum wage increases, and housing funds—were all abandoned to high-minded defeat in Congress. As with his economic programs, and in stark contrast to Clinton, Truman refused to enter the fray. "I don't think," says Stanford historian Barton Bernstein, "Truman really committed himself."

Even Clinton's harshest critics must grant that the President is committed to economic fair play. And that commitment has led him to push through a program that gave significant help to the most deserving group of society: the 3.2 million working poor, who are struggling to break themselves out of the cycle of poverty. The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) guarantees that any person working 40 hours a week, even at minimum wage, will not fall below the poverty line. Whereas earlier a mother of two may have received more money by staying on welfare and other aid programs, the EITC goes a long way toward making work more profitable than the social dole. Thus, without any of the messy bureaucracies that rankle conservatives, Clinton made the road out of poverty substantially easier. And to pay for his deficit-reduction program and the

EITC, Clinton wisely raised taxes on the very rich, who have benefited most from this country and can afford to give something back.

Nearly as significant has been Clinton's fight to reform and expand Head Start. Nearly one out of every five children in the country lives in poverty. Head Start takes poor children as young as three years old and gives them pre-school education, immunizations, healthy meals, and other services. Clinton increased federal funding by nearly 50 percent from 1992, and added 100,000 children to the program's rolls. And Clinton moved to address the deficiencies in individual Head Start programs by instituting rigid quality standards. If a program does not meet the standards, the government can cut its funding and find a more worthy recipient. Even if Congress fails to pass a single line of welfare reform legislation, between the EITC and Head Start reforms, Clinton will have made one of the more significant contributions to social policy in decades.

And let's not forget Clinton's efforts to solve what many consider the most serious and vexing of America's problems: crime. Amid the partisan attacks and counterattacks, which the press recorded faithfully, the clear benefits of the President's bill were lost. Even the most conservative estimates say that the bill will put around 20,000 more police officers on the nation's streets through support to community policing programs. And the \$8.8 billion that Clinton's bill allocates to prisons will help ensure that violent criminals are not forced back on the streets due to overcrowding.

Clinton is also the first president in history to have the courage to take on the 800-pound gorilla of special interests: the National Rifle Association. The organization is the ninth-largest PAC in the country, donating nearly \$2 million to congressional campaigns in 1994. For years their money and ability to mobilize their 3.3 million members led many to consider them the single most powerful interest group in Washington. For the past 25 years, their friends in Congress have stalled the banning of armor-piercing bullets and assault weapons. But Clinton has defied the gun lobby, including in his crime bill a provision that bans 19 different kinds of assault weapons. He also passed the Brady Bill, which requires five-day waiting periods for all gun purchases so

background checks can be conducted. The law, which had been stonewalled by the NRA's congressional proxies since it was first introduced in 1986, prevented 44,000 convicted felons—and 2,000 fugitives—from purchasing weapons in the first year of its enactment.

Other domestic triumphs? The President early in 1993 passed the Family and Medical Leave Act, which ensures that family members who take time off from work to care for a newborn child or a sick relative will have their jobs waiting for them when they return.

And his "Reinventing Government" initiative has had several notable successes, such as the elimination of over 1,200 field offices of the bloated and overextended Department of Agriculture. Perhaps no government function is more burdened by red tape than the government procurement process. Before the President's plan, buying an office computer could take as much as three months of wading through the swamp of regulations that nearly doubled the retail cost of computers. Now a government worker can go to a computer store and buy one off the shelf like anyone else. This may sound picayune until you realize that 70 to 80 percent of government acquisitions are small, everyday purchases like these. And it is only through this concern for government reform, for which Clinton is unique among recent presidents, that government will begin to work under the guidelines of common sense.

One of the most lasting legacies of any president is the lifetime appointments he makes to the nation's highest court. In this, too, Clinton outshines Truman. Stephen Breyer and Ruth Ginsburg breezed through Senate confirmation with bipartisan support both on Capitol Hill and within the legal community and are universally hailed as being pragmatic, intelligent, and moderate. "These two have helped calm the waters and soothe what had been an inflamed Supreme Court process—inflamed by Bork, inflamed by Thomas," says Yale Law Professor Akhil Amar. "The long-term stability of the Court and the Republic is not well served by confirmation donnybrooks and spectacles." In his first two years, Truman nominated Fred Vinson and Harold Burton, two men whose mark on the Supreme Court was far from exemplary. It was Chief Justice Vinson who, with Burton's assent, delivered one of the most damaging blows to the First Amend-

ment in the Court's history. The *Dennis v. United States* decision, written by Vinson, declared that even the teaching of communism was illegal and punishable by imprisonment.

Truman himself didn't have the most pristine record on civil liberties. He instituted the Federal Employees Loyalty Program, which directed the FBI and the Civil Service Commission to weed out those federal employees suspected of communist or socialist activities. As a result, 212 federal employees were dismissed; thousands more resigned in protest or fear. It was, writes McCullough, "the most reprehensible political decision of his presidency."

It had its competitors. Under Truman, Navy ships were ordered to sail into the fallout zone around Bikini Island after a nuclear weapons test. When the tragic effects of the test were brought to Truman, he decided to keep them secret for fear the embarrassment would hurt the country's nuclear programs—and his reelection chances. This set an ugly precedent: In succeeding years, the government tested the effects of radioactivity on humans and then covered it up.

By marked contrast, it was under Clinton that the government began an active effort to reveal incidents ostensibly classified for national security, but actually hidden to prevent political embarrassments. And it has been under Clinton that the government has finally made a concerted effort to make reparations to the victims of the nuclear tests.

In general, Truman steered clear of the nation's dealings with nuclear issues. In one cabinet meeting, Truman admitted to not knowing, and not wanting to know, the exact number of nuclear weapons in the country's arsenal. "Mr. President, you *should* know," said Secretary of Agriculture

Henry Wallace. But Truman kept his distance, leaving nuclear arms production to the military and Atomic Energy Commission.

Once again, it is Clinton who has stepped up to plate and explained the extent of the mess: It will take, the administration announced, 70 years and between \$230 and \$350 billion to clean up the toxic waste produced by the production of nuclear arms.

You do not have to stop at our shores to come to the conclusion that Clinton has thus far outshone Truman. The great foreign policy decisions attributed to Truman, remember, did not come until

later in his term. In the spring of 1947, the country was reeling from the succession of communist victories. Every Eastern European country had fallen to communism except Czechoslovakia, which would not be far behind. China's fall to communism was imminent. And with their reckless use of its veto in the United Nations, the Soviet Union was halting American efforts to shape the post-war world. The United States, it seemed, was on the ropes.

Meanwhile, Clinton's foreign policy, though ridiculed mercilessly by Republicans, has been, on the whole, refreshingly successful. The passage of NAFTA and GATT were hard-fought and

significant victories. Other successes have been jawdroppers. Answer me this: If you were told two years ago that Israel would sign peace agreements with the PLO and Jordan; that Haiti would have a democratically elected president; that there would be a cease-fire in Northern Ireland; and that the third-largest nuclear power in the world would voluntarily disarm its nuclear capability, what would you say? That's what I thought.

All four developments, to varying extents, can be credited to a foreign policy team that has been



Clinton's first two years outshine Truman's.

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derided as hopelessly incompetent. The success has even impressed Owen Harries, editor of the conservative *National Interest*. "The charge against the Clinton Administration has been that it is all show and no substance," Harries wrote in *The New Republic*. "But the opposite may be nearer the mark.... [S]ome sensible decisions have been made and some dangers avoided. It could have been a lot worse if the advice given by many of the people now criticizing Clinton had been followed."

Take Ukraine, a newborn Soviet successor state with a government considerably less than stable, which suddenly found itself holding the third-largest arsenal of nuclear weapons in the world. Clinton, Gore, and Secretary of State Warren Christopher pressured and cajoled the country to abandon its hopes of becoming a nuclear power. Under this constant pressure, Ukraine agreed last November to dismantle its 1,800 nuclear warheads. Kazakhstan and Belarus, with considerably smaller nuclear forces, followed suit, giving the world three less nuclear nightmares to worry about.

In the Middle East, the first praise for peace accords certainly goes to the major players: Israel, the PLO, and Jordan. But the Clinton Administration deftly walked a very fine line: Israel would never have agreed to the deal without a strong friend in Washington, while the Palestinians and Jordanians would have balked if they felt the administration was one-sided or unfair to their concerns. It is a testament to the trust won from both sides that the peace treaty was signed on the White House lawn.

Most pundits felt that democracy in Haiti was a pipe dream. Bush hemmed and hawed as the military junta settled in and terrorized the Haitian people; thousands fled to the United States. But Clinton's policy, despite messy appearances, has led to the bloodless overthrow of a military dictatorship and the restoration of that country's first democratically elected president.

And in an effort to bring an end to the decades-long fighting in Northern Ireland, Clinton has stood up to England (our "special relationship" notwithstanding) to force it to deal with its troubles in Northern Ireland. When in 1993 Clinton agreed to grant a visa to Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams to visit the United States for the first time, British legislators openly insulted the President,

saying that America had betrayed its trust. But over British objections, Clinton has allowed Adams to return twice more to meet with the administration and continue the push for peace. Eight months into the cease-fire, Clinton's persistence has paid off in lives.

True, there is no "Clinton Doctrine" by which to measure every foreign policy question that comes down the pike. It would no doubt make things easier if there were. But simple doctrines work in simple worlds. Presidents from Truman to Reagan could vow to fight communism wherever it reared its head. Whether or not they met their promise, they at least had the pose.

Clinton, then, is being penalized because there is no mortal threat to the country. The vast majority of armed conflicts in the world today are either civil wars or ethnic conflicts. No simple formula applies. The process has at times seemed messy, but in a subtle and deft fashion, Clinton has loosened diplomatic knots of Gordian complexity.

Truman went on, of course, to make some of the shrewdest and politically courageous decisions of the century: the Marshall Plan in the summer of 1947; the desegregation of the military in 1948; and the Berlin Airlift that same year, which, without provoking war with the Soviet Union, broke the blockade of West Berlin. While pundits hang the lame-duck tag on Clinton, they ignore that if Clinton maintains this pace, and continues to better Truman domestically and abroad, Americans could see an enormously successful presidency.

Similarly, the predictions that Clinton has no chance in 1996 miss a crucial point. Like Truman, Clinton has an uncanny ability to project an empathy with the American people. Truman was profoundly unpopular at this point in his first term. In November of 1946, his approval ratings stood at 32 percent. But in 1948, voters compared the warmth and humility of Truman to the arrogance of Thomas Dewey and chose the man they felt cared most about their problems. By this standard, Bill Clinton will never suffer from comparison to a man like, for example, Phil Gramm. Clinton could still pull off that Trumanesque comeback, and those who wish to make parallels between the Man from Independence and the Man from Hope will have one more comparison to draw. □

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And let's not forget Clinton's efforts to solve what many consider the most serious and vexing of America's problems: crime. Amid the partisan attacks and counterattacks, which the press recorded faithfully, the clear benefits of the President's bill were lost. Even the most conservative estimates say that the bill will put around 20,000 more police officers on the nation's streets through support to community policing programs. And the \$8.8 billion that Clinton's bill allocates to prisons will help ensure that violent criminals are not forced back on the streets due to overcrowding.

Clinton is also the first president in history to have the courage to take on the 800-pound gorilla of special interests: the National Rifle Association. The organization is the ninth-largest PAC in the country, donating nearly \$2 million to congressional campaigns in 1994. For years their money and ability to mobilize their 3.3 million members led many to consider them the single most powerful interest group in Washington. For the past 25 years, their friends in Congress have stalled the banning of armor-piercing bullets and assault weapons. But Clinton has defied the gun lobby, including in his crime bill a provision that bans 19 different kinds of assault weapons. He also passed the Brady Bill, which requires five-day waiting periods for all gun purchases so

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One of the most lasting legacies of any president is the lifetime appointments he makes to the nation's highest court. In this, too, Clinton outshines Truman. Stephen Breyer and Ruth Ginsburg breezed through Senate confirmation with bipartisan support both on Capitol Hill and within the legal community and are universally hailed as being pragmatic, intelligent, and moderate. "These two have helped calm the waters and soothe what had been an inflamed Supreme Court process—inflamed by Bork, inflamed by Thomas," says Yale Law Professor Akhil Amar. "The long-term stability of the Court and the Republic is not well served by confirmation donnybrooks and spectacles." In his first two years, Truman nominated Fred Vinson and Harold Burton, two men whose mark on the Supreme Court was far from exemplary. It was Chief Justice Vinson who, with Burton's assent, delivered one of the most damaging blows to the First Amend-

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In general, Truman steered clear of the nation's dealings with nuclear issues. In one cabinet meeting, Truman admitted to not knowing, and not wanting to know, the exact number of nuclear weapons in the country's arsenal. "Mr. President, you *should* know," said Secretary of Agriculture

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later in his term. In the spring of 1947, the country was reeling

from the succession of communist victories. Every Eastern European country had fallen to communism except Czechoslovakia, which would not be far behind. China's fall to communism was imminent. And with their reckless use of its veto in the United Nations, the Soviet Union was halting American efforts to shape the post-war world. The United States, it seemed, was on the ropes.

Meanwhile, Clinton's foreign policy, though ridiculed mercilessly by Republicans, has been, on the whole, refreshingly successful. The passage of NAFTA and GATT were hard-fought and

significant victories. Other successes have been jawdroppers. Answer me this: If you were told two years ago that Israel would sign peace agreements with the PLO and Jordan; that Haiti would have a democratically elected president; that there would be a cease-fire in Northern Ireland; and that the third-largest nuclear power in the world would voluntarily disarm its nuclear capability, what would you say? That's what I thought.

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Take Ukraine, a newborn Soviet successor state with a government considerably less than stable, which suddenly found itself holding the third-largest arsenal of nuclear weapons in the world. Clinton, Gore, and Secretary of State Warren Christopher pressured and cajoled the country to abandon its hopes of becoming a nuclear power. Under this constant pressure, Ukraine agreed last November to dismantle its 1,800 nuclear warheads. Kazakhstan and Belarus, with considerably smaller nuclear forces, followed suit, giving the world three less nuclear nightmares to worry about.

In the Middle East, the first praise for peace accords certainly goes to the major players: Israel, the PLO, and Jordan. But the Clinton Administration deftly walked a very fine line: Israel would never have agreed to the deal without a strong friend in Washington, while the Palestinians and Jordanians would have balked if they felt the administration was one-sided or unfair to their concerns. It is a testament to the trust won from both sides that the peace treaty was signed on the White House lawn.

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And in an effort to bring an end to the decades-long fighting in Northern Ireland, Clinton has stood up to England (our "special relationship" notwithstanding) to force it to deal with its troubles in Northern Ireland. When in 1993 Clinton agreed to grant a visa to Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams to visit the United States for the first time, British legislators openly insulted the President,

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True, there is no "Clinton Doctrine" by which to measure every foreign policy question that comes down the pike. It would no doubt make things easier if there were. But simple doctrines work in simple worlds. Presidents from Truman to Reagan could vow to fight communism wherever it reared its head. Whether or not they met their promise, they at least had the pose.

Clinton, then, is being penalized because there is no mortal threat to the country. The vast majority of armed conflicts in the world today are either civil wars or ethnic conflicts. No simple formula applies. The process has at times seemed messy, but in a subtle and deft fashion, Clinton has loosened diplomatic knots of Gordian complexity.

Truman went on, of course, to make some of the shrewdest and politically courageous decisions of the century: the Marshall Plan in the summer of 1947; the desegregation of the military in 1948; and the Berlin Airlift that same year, which, without provoking war with the Soviet Union, broke the blockade of West Berlin. While pundits hang the lame-duck tag on Clinton, they ignore that if Clinton maintains this pace, and continues to better Truman domestically and abroad, Americans could see an enormously successful presidency.

Similarly, the predictions that Clinton has no chance in 1996 miss a crucial point. Like Truman, Clinton has an uncanny ability to project an empathy with the American people. Truman was profoundly unpopular at this point in his first term. In November of 1946, his approval ratings stood at 32 percent. But in 1948, voters compared the warmth and humility of Truman to the arrogance of Thomas Dewey and chose the man they felt cared most about their problems. By this standard, Bill Clinton will never suffer from comparison to a man like, for example, Phil Gramm. Clinton could still pull off that Trumanesque comeback, and those who wish to make parallels between the Man from Independence and the Man from Hope will have one more comparison to draw. □

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HE'S NO BILL CLINTON

*Clinton's First Two Years
Truman's to Shame*

BY DANIEL FRANKLIN

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He's No Bill Clinton

Everyone loves "give 'em hell" Harry. But Clinton's first two years have put Truman's to shame

BY DANIEL FRANKLIN

It was a tough year for the President. Foreign policy errors bogged down his domestic programs; nominations were stonewalled by a hostile Congress; party insiders even considered recruiting a challenger for the Democratic nomination. He was, in the words of one journalist, "essentially indecisive ... essentially vacillating." Quite simply, Americans began to doubt seriously that he had the character to be the country's top executive.

Yes, 1946 just wasn't Harry Truman's year. But he bounced back, won reelection in 1948, and has received from history a reverence that borders on the Rushmore. For many Americans now, Truman is seen as a model president—a man of integrity, modesty, and decisiveness. Walter Isaacson of *Time* called him "America's greatest common-man president." Eric Sevareid said that "Remembering him reminds people what a man in that office ought to be like.... He stands like a rock in memory now." So revered is the Man from Independence that in 1992, both parties' nominees fought to be considered "the Truman candidate."

Now that Republicans have both houses of Congress for the first time since 1946, Clinton aides are scanning David McCullough's best-selling Truman biography in search of the magic bullet that will hand Bill Clinton a Trumanesque comeback in 1996. Clinton took the Truman title in 1992, but now the country—and the press—is skeptical. "Bill Clinton," wrote historian James Pinkerton in the *Los Angeles Times*, "is no Harry Truman."

That's true, but those White House staffers looking for a magic bullet are missing the point. Clear away the historical fogs and set aside the acerbic press coverage and you cannot escape a startling conclusion: Clinton's first two years have put Truman's to shame. By April 1995, Clinton has accomplished far more for the American people than "give 'em hell" Harry had by April 1947. Clinton has guided the economy more successfully. He has enacted more laws with real impact. Yet while Truman is held in near-Jeffersonian regard, Bill Clinton is written off as a Warren Harding in jogging shorts.

Consider one of the core issues of any presidency: the economy. With the war over, the country began the painful conversion to a peacetime economy. Hundreds of thousands of veterans returned from

World War II to an economy that had reached record production levels without them. In Chicago alone, at least 100,000 veterans were jobless. Major industries—including coal, railroad, and steel—convulsed with labor strikes that threatened to paralyze the entire country. Truman's response was heavy-handed and ineffectual. He threatened to seize coal mines and draft striking railroad workers into the military. Both measures were rebuffed by the Supreme Court and Congress, respectively, for being blatantly unconstitutional.

The economy grew but the growth was more than overshadowed by inflation rates that soared to 14.6 percent in 1947. There were shortages in many of the products people needed, including housing, automobiles, sugar, coffee, and meat. And with the Great Depression fresh in the American memory, many wondered whether another economic crash, one even greater than before, was just around the corner.

Truman could have prevented the inflation. After the war, Republicans in Congress launched an effort to repeal wartime price controls. Truman saw that decontrol had to be gradual, so that it would not unleash inflation. But, as *The New Republic's* "TRB" columnist wrote in 1946, "The trouble is, Truman didn't make a real fight.... He didn't carry through.... He saw and predicted the recession but let Congress and business have their way. Truman won the argument all right, but that isn't quite enough in politics."

Clinton knows this. He is the first president in the last 30 years to achieve both job growth and low inflation. The "misery index"—inflation plus unemployment—is currently below nine; under Bush it was above 11; under Truman it was nearly 20.

The key to this achievement is Clinton's budget plan, which passed through Congress in 1993 only after a knock-down, drag-out fight led by the President—a fight won with only the votes of a fractious Democratic party, and against a vehement and united Republican front. Phil Gramm was one of the loudest critics, predicting that "hundreds of thousands of Americans will lose their jobs because of this bill."

Gramm was dead wrong. By cutting the deficit to \$192 billion in 1995, from \$290 billion just three years ago, the President has succeeded in bringing down long-term interest rates and encouraging business investment that has stimulated extraordinary job growth. Already, the economy has produced nearly six million new jobs—five million more than it did during Bush's entire term. The unemployment rate, which was 7.6 percent when Clinton took office, has dropped to 5.5 percent.

In his first two years as president, Truman never seemed to have the stomach to enter the ring and fight like Clinton has. In September 1945, Truman delivered a 21-point program to Congress that rivaled the New Deal in its scope. The plan increased federal funding to agriculture, housing programs, and a variety of public works projects. But Truman let nearly every major component of his domestic program go down in defeat without a fight. In a way, says McCullough, that was the point. "His whole strategy on these domestic issues was to go for the high ground. Be more liberal in the program, and if they knock it down, you'll have something to run on."

This is fine if your only concern is winning reelection, not so fine if you want to solve the country's problems. Clinton has staked his presidency on the passage of his economic and social programs and fought like a junkyard dog for his victories. Elizabeth Drew recounts in *On the Edge* that during the battle to pass the North American Free Trade Agreement, "Clinton threw himself into the fight—meeting members of Congress in one-on-one sessions, making many phone calls to them, giving speeches, meeting with opinion leaders, meeting with individual members. Shortly before the vote, there were White House dinners for undecideds." He brought the same energy and conviction to the fight to pass the Global Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. Clinton was willing to alienate the labor interests that are among the Democrats' strongest constituents because he believed that the treaty would produce jobs for the country. Regardless of your opinion of these treaties, you must respect the fact that he risked his neck to get them

passed.

Clinton has stuck to the path of ambitious achievement throughout his presidency and tried to avoid the partisan posturing that might serve him better at the polls. His success, by any objective measure, has been astonishing. Eighty-six percent of the legislation he endorsed has passed through Congress, a record unmatched by any president since Johnson.

The bills he has passed will make real contributions to the welfare of millions upon millions of Americans. Take education policy. While the economy has changed, putting a higher premium on education and skills, the American education system hasn't. Everyone knows that a high school diploma no longer guarantees a good job. But before Clinton took office, high school graduates who did not go on to college—nearly 40 percent—were stranded because the United States was the only major industrial nation without a vocational apprenticeship program.

Clinton's Schools-to-Work program created a network of apprenticeship programs to give those students real job skills that can't be learned in high school. The students intern with workers—electricians, plumbers, carpenters—and learn the skills needed to find and keep a job. When the program reaches full implementation, one-half million students will be enrolled annually. That's one-half million more skilled workers entering the workforce every year than before the program.

To counter the staggering growth in college tuition, Clinton reformed the student loan program so it would lend money directly to college students, and collect the debt as a percentage of their income. Previously, students received their college loans through banks and paid back a set amount for 10 years. From 1985 to 1991, the size of the average college graduate's total debt had jumped 150 percent. For many, the debt was stifling; 40 percent of graduates said their debt payments forced them to work two jobs.

But under Clinton's plan, defaults will be cut drastically because the debt payments, extended over a 25-year-period and based on the graduate's income, are manageable. A graduate with a \$30,000 income and a \$50,000 debt will pay \$345 per month, instead of the \$581 under the previous plan. As graduates' salaries rise, so do the amounts of their debt payments. As a result,

graduates are able to perform low-paying but meaningful work, such as teaching or social work, that the country desperately needs.

Then there's Americorps. While Republicans seek to slash this domestic Peace Corps, 20,000 volunteers are on the streets immunizing babies, restoring national parks, and counseling troubled teens. For their 10- to 12-month commitment, the volunteers earn vouchers worth \$4,725 toward tuition or for paying off student loans. And, carried out properly, the program has the potential to radically change the way Americans view community and national service. "It provides what might be called a social glue," argues Labor Secretary Robert Reich, "by bringing young people from all different backgrounds and incomes together to work on community projects, and enhance the health and safety or beauty of a community. It not only improves community but it creates community ... connecting people to other people across socioeconomic barriers."

Truman's contribution to equal opportunity and economic fairness—the heart of the Democratic Party—was meager during the first two years of his term. Yet again, his proposals that did aim to aid the poor—unemployment compensation, minimum wage increases, and housing funds—were all abandoned to high-minded defeat in Congress. As with his economic programs, and in stark contrast to Clinton, Truman refused to enter the fray. "I don't think," says Stanford historian Barton Bernstein, "Truman really committed himself."

Even Clinton's harshest critics must grant that the President is committed to economic fair play. And that commitment has led him to push through a program that gave significant help to the most deserving group of society: the 3.2 million working poor, who are struggling to break themselves out of the cycle of poverty. The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) guarantees that any person working 40 hours a week, even at minimum wage, will not fall below the poverty line. Whereas earlier a mother of two may have received more money by staying on welfare and other aid programs, the EITC goes a long way toward making work more profitable than the social dole. Thus, without any of the messy bureaucracies that rankle conservatives, Clinton made the road out of poverty substantially easier. And to pay for his deficit-reduction program and the

EITC, Clinton wisely raised taxes on the very rich, who have benefited most from this country and can afford to give something back.

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Jesse's Right

WASHINGTON

In case you missed it, Jesse Helms, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was at it again last week, pronouncing President Clinton as "not qualified" to be Commander in Chief. Senator Helms said he hoped Mr. Clinton would turn over any military decisions regarding intervention in Bosnia to the Joint Chiefs, because the President just wasn't up to the task. The North Carolina Senator's comments stirred up the usual furor over at the White House, and were swatted away by Clinton spokesmen.

Frankly, I don't know what all the fuss is about. I mean, let's be honest, Jesse's right. Bill Clinton isn't fit to be Commander in Chief. All you have to do is compare him with a few previous Presidents and it becomes

What Clinton's not qualified for.

obvious that Mr. Clinton lacks the experience. Here are 14 Clinton shortcomings just off the top of my head:

1. Mr. Clinton has no experience sending 3,000 marines to Beirut, without a defined mission and without proper weapons to defend themselves, so they could become sitting ducks on an airport tarmac and have 241 of them killed in their sleep by terrorists.

2. Mr. Clinton has no experience running up the national debt by \$1.5 trillion over eight years, so that we must now close half the nation's army bases, mothball every other aircraft carrier and severely restrict our ability to fight more than one war at a time.

3. Mr. Clinton has never vomited into the lap of a Japanese prime minister at a state dinner.

4. Mr. Clinton has no experience trading arms for hostages with Iran.

5. Mr. Clinton's White House spokesman has never dismissed Mikhail Gorbachev, the man who dismantled Communism, as a phony "drugstore cowboy."

6. Mr. Clinton's Secretary of State has never said we had to go to war in the Persian Gulf against Iraq because of "jobs, jobs, jobs."

7. Mr. Clinton's national security

adviser has never sent Ayatollah Khomeini a Bible and a birthday cake shaped like a key, thinking that this was the way to the heart of an Iranian despot.

8. Mr. Clinton never allowed the U.S. to be the tardy 37th country to recognize the independence of the Baltic nations, so as not to offend Moscow.

9. Mr. Clinton never looked the other way when Yugoslavia was first breaking up and a firm American response might have made a difference.

10. Mr. Clinton has never lied to the American people about a secret war being waged by U.S. forces in Cambodia.

11. Mr. Clinton never turned a blind eye to North Korea during the 1980's, when it first started building a nuclear bomb.

12. Mr. Clinton has no experience cozying up to murderous thugs in El Salvador and Guatemala (who killed priests, nuns and American citizens) simply because they were anti-Soviet.

13. Mr. Clinton has no experience sending his national security adviser to Beijing to raise a toast to the Chinese leadership a few days after scores of democracy demonstrators were slaughtered in Tiananmen Square.

14. Mr. Clinton has no experience ordering thousands of U.S. troops to Somalia on a poorly defined humanitarian mission with no exit plan.

Well, you get the idea. Going after Bill Clinton on foreign policy is easy work for Republicans. In this post-cold-war era it's hard to define a foreign policy success, and Mr. Clinton's top foreign policy team is so breathtakingly inarticulate that the few successes it has had are easily belittled. Nevertheless, the next time Senator Helms decides to opine about Mr. Clinton's qualifications to be Commander in Chief he might want to keep in mind that old Henny Youngman joke: When people asked him, "How's your wife?" he would answer, "Compared to what?" Compared to his immediate predecessors, Mr. Clinton, with all his shortcomings, looks as qualified to be Commander in Chief as any of them.

In fact, Bill Clinton may even be as qualified to be Commander in Chief as a narrow-minded, little-traveled, mean-spirited Senator from North Carolina is to be chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. □