

The Clinton Record

Despite hobbling criticism, a beltway newcomer makes impressive strides.

By Thomas Mark

WITH THE PRESIDENT'S approval rating slipping into the low forties and with Republicans taking control of both house of Congress, the White House is distributing a set of brochures and an accompanying video to Democratic members of Congress and other party officials detailing the Clinton Administration's accomplishments. This unusual publication "A Solid Record of Accomplishment," demonstrates the frustration of a White House that doesn't think it's getting enough credit for its accomplishments. Contrary to his public image, job performance ratings, and unceasing Republican rhetoric, in less than two years, Bill Clinton has accomplished more domestically than any other president since Lyndon Johnson while remaining devoted to the campaign promises upon which he was elected (Alter 49 & Weisberg 18).

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For the most part, especially this past year, Clinton's achievements have been overshadowed by scandals, both political

and personal. This year began with investigations into the president's past; details from the failed real-estate venture called Whitewater first surfaced in January, and then a month later the New York Times exposed First Lady Hillary Clinton's lucrative investment in cattle futures. These were followed by Paula

Clinton Heeds to Change

His Communications Strategy in order to bring public perceptions lit line

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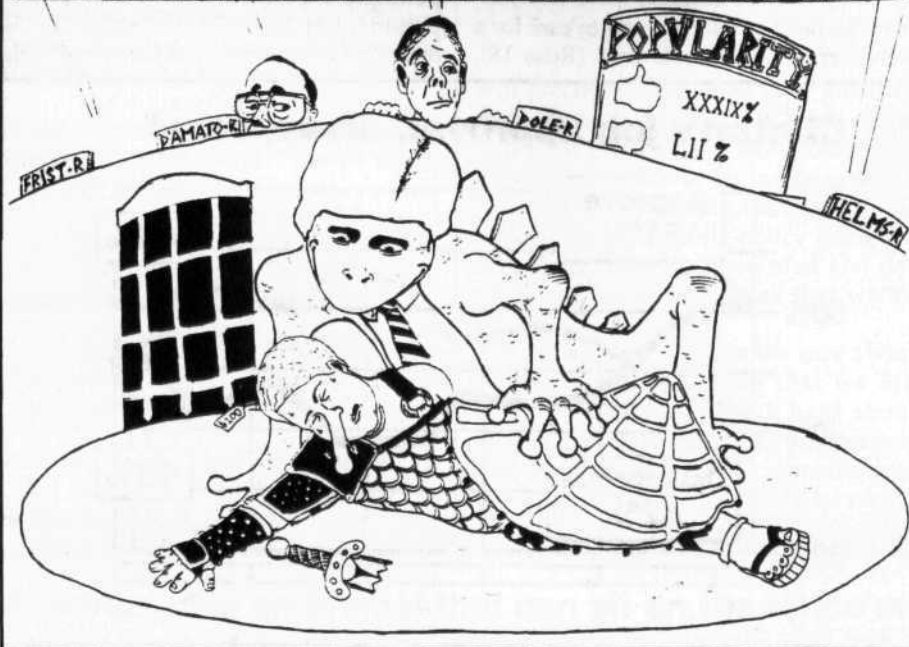
Clinton's embarrassing allegations of sexual harassment and an unprecedented lawsuit against the President of the United States. During the summer, the lengthy Whitewater hearings cost him Roger Altman and could potentially become even more damaging as Kenneth Starr,

the new special counsel and a partisan Republican, starts the investigation all over again. Meanwhile, Clinton had to rearrange his ineffective staff by firing old time friend Mack McLarty. Troubles mounted as the Attorney General announced an investigation of Secretary of Agriculture Mike Espy for accepting illegal gifts from an Arkansas based poultry conglomerate—forcing him resign in early October. And then of course, there was Bob Woodward's new book, "The Agenda," which divulged Clinton's adolescent temper tantrums and ironically characterized the chief executive as indecisive and hesitant (Weisberg 17-18).

Largely due to these embarrassing distractions and the extensive scrutiny of the media, Bill Clinton's approval ratings are very low at a time when by "every traditional measure he should be riding high.... In a USA TODAY/CNN/Gallup Poll 35% [of Americans], likely fueled by continuing charges about financial dealings and extramarital affairs, say Clinton has tended to lower the stature of the presidency, and only one in ten would definitely vote for him again in 1996" (Benedetto 8A). However, despite public censure of his performance in office, Bill Clinton has already fulfilled or is pursuing most of his campaign promises. With Congress backing 88% of his announced positions on bills and contested votes in 1993, — surpassed only twice in the past forty years, by Eisenhower in 1953 and Johnson in 1965 — Clinton has achieved an impressive list of legislative accomplishments (Patterson 11A).

Jobs and the Economy: "It's the economy, stupid," was not only James Carville's motto during the 1992 campaign, but also turned out to be the decisive issue for voters. Bill Clinton won the presidency by promising to rebuild our national economy, by creating new jobs, reducing the deficit, and encouraging investment. Clinton pledged to create 8 million new jobs in four years; in under two years he is already over half way to fulfilling his promise. The Administration has created 5 million new jobs—2.3 million more than during the four years of the Bush Administration (Uchitelle D1, Brown). Furthermore, some 14 million more working poor families, earning under \$20,000 a year, will be pulled out of poverty as a result of a critical expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit in the 1993 budget (Putzel 1). On top of a tax credit for the working poor, he also

THROW HIM TO THE NEWS!



Cartoon by Oleg Vinnitsky

increased the income taxes of the very wealthy—fulfilling yet another of his campaign commitments.

The Deficit: When Clinton took office the budget deficit was around \$323 billion. He promised to cut the deficit in half over four years. He is well on his way; the projected deficit for 1994 is \$202 billion, and the Congressional Budget Office estimates this figure to drop even further, to \$162 billion for fiscal year 1995. By dramatically reducing the deficit, Clinton lowered interest rates and freed additional funds for investment (Weisberg 18). Other sectors of the economy are also showing signs of significant improvement since Clinton took office. Unemployment is hovering around 6%, down from 7.7% in 1992, leading most economists to conclude that the country may have reached its "natural" unemployment level (Weisberg 18). Real growth is in the 3%-plus range and the Council of Economic Advisors forecasts a 2.7% growth for 1995. Also, the Center for International Business Cycle Research at Columbia University predicts that the current expansion will last till December, 1996 (Magnusson 38). Inflation is almost non-existent at 2.6%, while both disposable income and average per capita income have risen during the past year. (Uchitelle D1, DeParle A16). Yet despite these obvious signs of strength and growth, 53% of Americans still disapprove of Clinton's handling of the economy (Pianin). Perhaps one explanation is that while the economy on the national level has been steadily growing and expanding for the past two years, individual households have not benefited directly. According to the Census Bureau, the median household income declined by \$300 to \$31,241 in 1992-1993. However, without trying to dismiss the value of \$300 to American families, this 1% drop is a substantial improvement over the last four years during which a typical family lost \$2344 in annual income—a fall of 7% (DeParle A16). The trend seems to be reversing. Also, while most Republicans argue the recovery was already in motion before Clinton took office, (Putzel 1) "few economists believe it would have been equally as robust without the president's [economic strategy]" (Weisberg 18).

The Federal Government: Vice President Al Gore assumed the task of redesigning the national government to make it more efficient while reducing its massive size and bureaucracy. Gore's plan, "reinventing government," appears

to be a tremendous success already. The reduction in the work force will total 252,000 positions — 152,000 more than originally promised by Clinton — over the next five years, making the federal work force smaller than at any time since Lyndon Johnson was president (Alter 49). In addition to cutting the work force, the plan also includes a reform of the procurement process, alone estimated to save the government some \$22 billion over five years. While unveiling the plan last year, Gore observed that "our antiquated procurement process costs our government in two ways: first we pay for all the bureaucracy we have created to buy things, and second, manufacturers build the price of dealing with this bureaucracy into the prices they charge us."

Even though his health care plan died as Congress adjourned for the year, overall, Clinton has been rather successful in his legislative initiatives, among them NAFTA and the Crime Bill. In the fight for the Crime Bill, he took on the powerful gun lobby and prevailed. The bill bans 19 types of assault style weapons and their copies, extends the death penalty to 50 federal crimes, and puts 100,000 more cops on America's streets, Clinton also gets credit for getting passed what columnist Jonathan Alter has labeled as "second tier" bills — issues deemed not controversial enough for media coverage. For instance, the National Service bill, already bigger than Peace Corps at its height, grants scholarships to youths who perform community service (Alter 49). Family Leave "gives up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave to workers who need to take time off to care for a newborn or a sick relative" (Ross 18).

And Voter Registration Reform will allow citizens to register by mail or at regional motor vehicle bureaus,

However, despite compiling such an impressive record of legislative successes, fulfilling most of his campaign promises, and keeping the economy growing at a healthy pace, Clinton's approval rating is still in the low forties. How do we account for his unpopularity? Thomas E. Patterson, in his column "Clinton's bad rep is a bad rap," places the blame on the media. "Today's journalism is rooted in a profoundly cynical attitude toward politicians, whatever their party. It emphasizes controversy rather than accuracy. Clinton is the victim of superficial and negative news coverage that is worse than endured by prior presidents" (Patterson 11A, Devroy A4). On the other hand, Bill Clinton himself must also share in the blame, Continuing questions surrounding the Paula Jones lawsuit and Whitewater dealings have certainly contributed to the public's mistrust of his presidency. But a much more critical problem, according to Duke University presidential scholar James D. Barber, is a failure to communicate; "he needs to find more ways to talk directly to the American people" (Benedetto 8A). The administration has failed miserably to take advantage of its own successes and therefore, Americans, according to Senior Advisor George Stephanopoulos, have a "fundamentally wrong sense" about the President's record of accomplishments, "Clinton's thematics are weak, and themes —consistently applied, compellingly explained— are the sinews of presidential leadership" (Alter 49). In order to secure reelection for himself and



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his party, Clinton needs to change his communications strategy in order to bring public perceptions in line with the record. The Clinton record is a record of achievements and fulfilled promises; the promise to improve the economy, create more jobs, cut the deficit, restructure the federal government, fight crime, and most importantly to improve the lives of middle class Americans. IB

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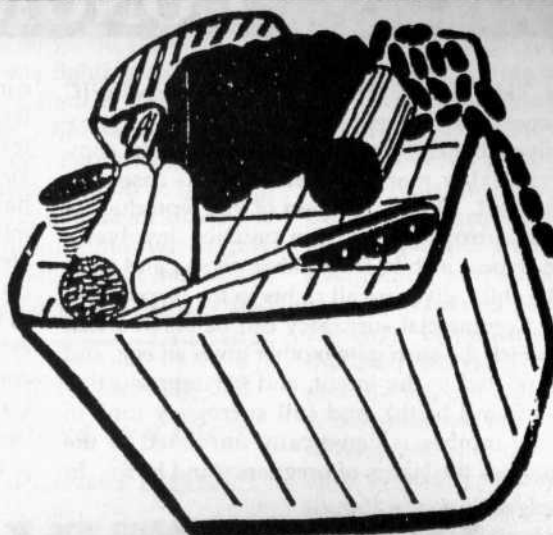
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win elections—by using it to advance their ideas. But in fact, the result of the approach many of the most committed liberals have taken in the last twenty-five years has been exactly the opposite. I believe that the public-policy goals we care about have been retarded and not advanced by the mistakes that we've made.

It is precisely because we care about public policy outcomes that we are morally obligated to think hard about how to win. Adapting one's basic principles and the public-policy commitments that grow out of them to electoral reality

is a complicated and uncertain business.

On several of the most difficult issues for liberals, I have tried as hard as I can to advance a strategy that maximizes both our chances to win and our ability to implement our public policy goals if we do—of course the better the room for considerable debate about the choices I have made in trying to do this. But the issue that is not debatable is our need to make some hard choices. We cannot be certain that any particular approach to making liberalism more attractive to the voters is going to succeed. Anyone who has paid serious attention to American politics in the last twenty-five years must understand that we have to try.

A politician is an animal that can sit on the fence and keep both ears to the ground. - H. L. Mencken