

Bill Clinton Now

An Interview with the Honorable William Jefferson Clinton,
42nd President of the United States

EDITORS' NOTE President Bill Clinton was born William Jefferson Blythe IV on August 19, 1946, in Hope, Arkansas, three months after his father died in a traffic accident. When he was four years old, his mother wed Roger Clinton, of Hot Springs, Arkansas, and in high school, he took the family name. As a delegate to Boys Nation while in high school, he met President John F. Kennedy in the White House Rose Garden – an encounter that helped inspire him to enter a life of public service.

Clinton graduated from Georgetown University in 1968, won a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford University in 1968, received a law degree from Yale University in 1973, and entered politics in Arkansas in 1974. The following year, he married Hillary Rodham, and in 1980, their only child, Chelsea, was born. Clinton was elected Arkansas attorney general in 1976 and won the governorship in 1978. After losing a bid for a second term, four years later he regained the office and served in that capacity until he won the 1992 presidential race.

The first Democratic president since Franklin D. Roosevelt to win a second term, Clinton's tenure was accompanied by the longest economic expansion in American history, low unemployment and interest rates, the lowest inflation in 30 years, the highest home ownership in the country's history, the lowest crime rate in 27 years, and reduced welfare rolls. He also proposed the first balanced budget in decades and put the nation on the road to three successive surpluses – for the first time in 70 years. In the global arena, he helped stop aggression and ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Kosovo, and bombed Iraq when Saddam Hussein stopped U.N. inspections for evidence of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons. President Clinton became a global proponent for an expanded NATO, more open international trade, and a worldwide campaign against drug trafficking. He drew huge crowds when he traveled through South America, Europe, Russia, Africa, and China, advocating U.S.-style freedom.

In 1997 he founded the William J. Clinton Foundation, and in 2001, ground was broken for the William J. Clinton Presidential Center, a facility that will be located within a new 30-acre city park along the south bank of the Arkansas River in downtown Little Rock.

When retired CEOs are asked what they miss most about their former jobs, they generally say the corporate plane. What do you miss most about the presidency?

The work, the job – I loved it. I loved every day of it, even the worst days. And the second thing I miss most are the people I worked with. Maybe it's because I'm a Democrat and the Republicans have had the White House for most of the past three decades, but I never felt entitled to live there. I always felt the White House belonged to the American people, and I felt it was a privilege to get up every morning and go to work there. I never landed in the helicopter on the White House back lawn without having chills run up and down my spine. Even at the end, it was just like it was at the beginning.

Along those lines, I also knew I wasn't going to live there for the rest of my life. I loved living in the White House, going to the movies there, flying around on Air Force One, and going to Camp David. I loved all of that. But do I miss it? No, not especially, because I've also enjoyed getting my life back. I can walk down the street in Harlem and say hello to my neighbors now. When I'm home in the morning in Chappaqua, I can get up and have coffee with the guys who run the local deli. If I want to browse in the bookstore, I can do that. I like having my life back and doing things normal people do that I didn't do for eight years, mostly because I thought I should be on the job as much as possible. So I don't miss the corporate plane, although it's a magnificent plane. Mostly, I miss the work, the job of being president, and the feeling that every day I could get up and do something that would have a positive impact on America and the world.

Behind the facade of any public



figure, president or otherwise, there's usually a lot of emotion. It has been said that when you were in office, sometimes you lost your temper. Is this true?

I think the only time I lost my temper, except when I thought someone had done something terrible to hurt America, was when I was exhausted. And sometimes I did lose my temper because I worked very hard for eight years. Perhaps I worked too hard and put in too many hours, but I worked at it, and the results were pretty good. And, like most people, when I was really tired, I was often irritable, especially early in the morning.

But, at the same time, I think most of the people who worked for me would say that I never stayed mad for more than 20 seconds and that I'm in a good mood most of the time. The people who worked for me never felt that they had to toe the party line to keep their jobs or that they couldn't give me bad news or tell me exactly what they thought. That's the ultimate test of whether your temper gets in the way: If people are afraid of your temper, they'll tell you what they think you

want to hear, and you'll wind up getting into trouble. If a president is surrounded by people who say only what they think he wants to hear, he's better off alone – at least that way he would have more time to think without the noise interfering. So it's important that people feel as if they can tell you what they think, and I don't think anyone ever thought my temper would be used as an instrument of retaliation against them.

What's the most exciting thing that happened during your presidency?

That's impossible to answer because there were so many. But certainly one of the most exciting things was the peace agreement we made and signed on the



White House lawn, between the Israelis and the Palestinians during my first year.

How can world conflicts be eased now? Will there ever be peace, particularly in the Middle East?

Well, the Bible says there will be wars and rumors of war until the end of time, but I'm basically optimistic. I think someday there will be peace in the Middle East, and when it comes, it will look much like the proposal I put forward in December 2000 and January 2001 that Prime Minister Barak accepted but Chairman Arafat rejected, which he now says he'd like to have back. I think everybody pretty much knows what the deal is going to be. But I think now, because of all of the killing and mistrust in addition to the specifics I proposed, it will probably require some sort of multinational peacekeeping force of which the United States is a part.

Looking at history, the prospects for world peace are, on balance, positive. We didn't even advocate a global community of cooperating countries in an institutional way until the U.N. was established in 1945; America killed the League of Nations after World War I. So we really

began to work on all of this in 1945 with the U.N. and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is basically the philosophical basis for the U.N. and cooperation among nations – that our common humanity is more important than our differences. But the Cold War was there, so a global community wasn't a practical possibility until China started moving toward the West in the 1970s and then the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. And just look at what has happened since 1989 – the European Union growing together, Russia reconciling to the West, China joining the WTO, the world banding together to stop ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, and settling of conflicts in Northern Ireland, between Eritrea and Ethiopia, and



any number of other disputes. I think it won't be long before the problems between Turkey and Greece over Cyprus are settled, because that's the price of getting into the European Union, and the Europeans understand how important it is to get Turkey into the EU. NATO has been expanded, and I could go on and on.

But in general, I think the institutions of integration are coming together. We have local terrorism, perhaps on a wider scale than ever before, for the simple reason that you can't have an interdependent world, which isn't yet an integrated cooperating community, without being vulnerable everywhere to the forces of destruction. I know it's scary to people now because they feel vulnerable in ways they didn't before. But looking at this within the long line of history and accurately weighing the positive things that have occurred since the end of the Cold War against the negative, on balance, I'm pretty optimistic.

What do you hope to achieve during the rest of your life?

I hope to be a good citizen of the United States and of the world. I want to

use the unique life I've lived so far to have a positive impact on the problems that I cared most about when I was president. Now that I have no power, I'm trying to have influence by concentrating my efforts.

For example, I'm doing a lot of work to deal with AIDS in Africa and the Caribbean through the Clinton Foundation. I just signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the 15 CARICOM countries in the Caribbean, and with Rwanda and Mozambique to help them develop national care networks and to get the medicine at affordable prices. I'm also working in India with the American India Foundation that I helped set up, and I just got back from a trip to Africa working not only on AIDS, but also on economic development in Ghana with Hernando de Soto, the great Peruvian economist. In fact, we set up a foundation there for capital growth for the poor, which is based on the notion that poor people have many assets, but those assets often go unrecognized in a legal sense, and thus cannot be used as leverage for loans or other kinds of investment.

In addition, I work in Harlem and around the country trying to put music and economic literacy back in the schools and to increase the profitability of small businesses in poor communities. And, of course, Senator Dole and I have spearheaded an effort to raise enough money to guarantee college educations for the children and spouses of all the people who were killed or disabled on September 11, 2001.

So these are the kinds of things I do now, and I hope that, as the years go by, I'll also be able to continue to promote peace and religious and racial reconciliation around the world. I've stayed in touch with the Irish situation, for example, and I do what I can to help there. I still talk to people in the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent, and I do what I can there, although I don't have any formal role. What I try to do is focus my activities with the foundation on those areas where I can have an impact if I work hard enough and smart enough, and get enough help.

But this all requires a lot of funding, doesn't it?

Yes, and we've raised a good deal of it – enough to operate every year just from small donors. In fact, we've had 70,000 small donors, people who have given \$100 or less, as well as a number of large donors. I'm actually a little behind on my fundraising because I basically stopped after 9/11 and devoted time to raising money for the Families of Freedom Fund for college scholarships. I only resumed my fundraising a short while ago.

You have a new addition on your wrist – a gift from one of your trips?

Yes, it's a welcome bracelet from Colombia. I went to Cartagena last June,

■

**I've said
some rough things
about the press, so let me
say something nice
about them.**

■

after President Uribe was elected, but before he took office. President Pastrana had a conference with all the business interests in Colombia, in which he and President Uribe appeared jointly, and asked them to continue operations in Colombia, even though they had lost control of 35 percent of their land. Because I sponsored something called Plan Colombia to give them \$1 billion a year to fight the narcotics traffickers and the terrorists, they asked me to come down and speak, and I did.

I also asked them if they would have the Children of Vallenato, a group of child musicians, meet me because they sang for me in 2000 when I was there and subsequently at the White House under the wing of the then-cultural minister of Colombia, who was known only by her first name, Consuelo. The children were wonderful – mostly between the ages of five and 14, wearing native dress, playing accordions, doing percussion, singing, and dancing. They come from a very violent area, and they've been a real force for peace. They were crowding the terrorists who didn't think they could kill the kids, as there's not a big market for that, so instead they kidnapped and killed the cultural minister. I spoke long distance, via video, at the event they had for her, and when I went back down, I asked to see the children, who came, sang, and gave me this welcome bracelet. That was in June, and I haven't taken it off since. I love the Colombians, and we can't afford to lose the oldest democracy in Latin America. I wear this bracelet every day to remind me about why it's important to work for peace and stand together against terror.

If there had not been a law, the chances are pretty good you would have been reelected president.

Pretty good, yes.

Will the law ever be changed?

I doubt it; it's two terms. But there's no incentive to change: The Republicans don't want me to run. And there's no shortage of Democrats interested in running. So I'm happy to be spending most of my time on my foundation, and on

occasion lending a hand to my party and its candidates, when I can.

You're so good on television and with people: You look them in the eye, and they look you in the eye. But in politics there are many false friends – people who say one thing and mean another. Did this ever bother you?

I was remarkably well served. After we lost the Congress and got killed in 1994, I remember everybody said that I was dead and wouldn't be reelected. At the time, I had these scholars of the presidency come to the White House for dinner to talk about something entirely different, and a man from Harvard, Ernest Lake, said: "Oh, you'll be reelected; I don't care what they say. You have the most loyal cabinet since Jefferson's second administration. They work hard and are loyal to you, and as a result there's surprisingly little backbiting in the press. When you have a team like that in a political town like Washington, you get results and rewards." As it turned out, he was right.

But once in a while, of course, someone who worked for me said something that I regretted, but I always try to remember that when people say things, it's just as much about them as it is about me. So I just try to let it go because I don't have a lot of time to be angry at people. I've been told one of my greatest weaknesses as a politician was that I could never remember whom I was supposed to be mad at for very long. However, I think if you weigh these instances against all the loyalty I received from the people who've supported and worked for me over the years, all the way through the impeachment thing, I've been more fortunate than most. So I try to give loyalty and trust, and I have gotten a lot of it back in return.

Bill Cohen, your former secretary of defense, always talks about you in exactly the same way.

I always trusted Bill Cohen; it never bothered me that he is a Republican. I knew he was an honorable man and had a good head on his shoulders about defense. I knew his sense of ethics would never have permitted him to take that job

if he hadn't been committed to being loyal to the presidency and to me personally. And if he thought I was wrong from time to time, he said so, and we had some disagreements, but I never thought it had anything to do with the fact that we are members of different parties. He's a terrific man, and he was a good secretary of defense.

At one time, most young people thought it would be wonderful to run for public office, but today many are shying away from it because of the way politicians get picked on unmercifully in the press. How can young people be encouraged in this arena if they're going to be lambasted everywhere, no matter how good they are?

First of all, I don't think that's so much true anymore, at least in the mainstream press. In fact, I think many in the media realize that they went overboard in the past, but rather than admit they were wrong, they'll just go a little easier on the next crowd.

If you're a Democrat, of course, you have to be prepared for that, because there is a very well-organized, well-disciplined, right-wing press, and if you start doing well, they'll go after you. It's amazing to me. Tom Daschle supported President Bush on Afghanistan, but he asked one question about the conduct of the war, which had nothing to do with his support for the policy, and the next day in South Dakota they were running ads comparing Daschle to Saddam Hussein. The very next day!

So, if you want to get in politics and you're a Democrat, I would advise you to read Nelson Mandela's autobiography and learn how to put yourself in a Zenlike state in which you can take criticism seriously but not personally. Benjamin Franklin said our critics are our friends because they show us our faults, so sometimes the critics are right. However, many people are just in the business of running up negative ratings, and they do. So you have to get to the point where you say: "This is the price I have to pay to be in public life, and it's a price well worth paying because all that really matters is the

truth, not what they say about me. So I'm prepared to fight." And that's the way that I felt about it.

I believe most of life's greatest wounds are self-inflicted anyway; I'm Exhibit A of that. So spending all your time worrying about what people say when it's not true is just ridiculous. There are people who just can't stand to be criticized, especially if it's an abject lie, and for those people, I would say you need to do some mental practice before you get into politics, especially if you're a Democrat, because we don't tend to get into personal destruction quite as much as Republicans do. But even if you're a Republican, you might make a mistake sometime that only represents 1 percent of your life, and that mistake will be blown up and taken out of context because of the media's insatiable desire for a new 24-hour story. So you just have to remain calm.

If you don't want to get beat up in the press, it's like a football player saying, "I weigh 320 pounds, I'm the fastest guy off the line in the world, and I'd be an all-pro lineman, but I don't want to risk having my finger broken." Just look at these guys who were in the pro football line for years; you know their hands got gnarly. It's like saying, "I run a 9-second 100-yard dash, weigh 225 pounds, and would be the best halfback in the world, but I don't ever want to be tackled." If you play a contact sport – and politics is a contact sport – you have to expect contact, and you have to try to achieve trust, peace, and understanding, but you can't practice unilateral disarmament. If you do, it's an unsatisfactory strategy, and you will be both unhappy and defeated. I decided I was willing to pay the price to serve, and every so often it made me angry, but over time I got to the point where I was happy virtually all the time, no matter what was being said about me.

Of all the things you and Mrs. Clinton have achieved in your lives, there's one thing that stands out beyond each of you – your daughter, Chelsea. She was basically out of the limelight during your presidency; she seems to have become such a lady, and everybody admires her. Was it hard to balance fatherhood with the presidency?

I've said some rough things about the press, so let me say something nice about them: I have no words to express the gratitude I feel to the national press for the almost-unwavering policy they had of protecting my daughter's privacy when she was in junior high school, high

school, and by and large when she was in college at Stanford. They gave her a chance to have a normal life, to become the person she was meant to be and has become, and I'm very grateful for that.

I think my daughter is a fine person. She's smart, works like crazy, and I'm very grateful that she had a chance to have the experiences that we were able to give her when we were in public life, without the attacks, ridicule, and other things that go along with being a public figure today. Grownups can handle it, but kids



shouldn't have to put up with it, and I'm just so grateful that she was so spared.

Of all the people you've met in your life, is there one person that you admire more than anyone else?

I don't know about more than anyone else, because I've found examples of heroism, wisdom, and saintliness almost everywhere I've gone on this earth. But I loved Nelson Mandela because he was a true friend when I was going through turmoil and they were trying to run me out of office. He imparted a lot of wisdom to me about how he dealt with turmoil over the years, which made my experience look like a Sunday afternoon picnic. He taught me how to keep your eye on the prize and your head in the right place, and he came to Washington and defended me in a wonderful way. He's a great spirit – a man who gave up 27 years of his life and came to a fundamental understanding

that most of us would never achieve, even if we suffered like he had: He realized that he could never get even and that if he spent any time trying to get even or being mad about the time he'd lost, he'd be giving his oppressors more time. So, when he was finally free, unlike most people who suffer as he did, he was able to be truly free.

I also loved Yitzhak Rabin as much as any man I've ever known. He was a magnificent human being in every way – brave beyond all belief, wise as an owl, and fun to be with. I cherish every single minute we shared together, and everyone in the White House felt that way: We all would've taken that bullet for him that night. In fact, he was very much on my mind recently because it was the seventh anniversary of his death, and I flew down on election night to the Israeli embassy to speak at his memorial service. Former Secretaries Baker, Eagleburger, and Albright were all there, as well as Sandy Burger and Admiral Scowcroft – Republicans and Democrats alike. I thanked them all for their bipartisan support for the peace process and the security of Israel. I can see why the soldiers followed Rabin to the death, why the Israelis elected him, and why he was wise enough and brave enough to see that, in an interdependent world in an interdependent neighborhood, there are no final military victories. He understood that the only final victory comes from peace and reconciliation, and that the West Bank had become an albatross, not a guarantor, of Israel's security. It didn't protect anyone from SCUD missiles from outside or from angry people on the ground within. He realized that if they kept it all, they'd have to decide whether to let the Palestinians vote, and if they voted, Israel would no longer be a Jewish state in 30 years, but if they didn't vote, Israel would no longer be Israel; it would be 21st-century apartheid. He had the courage to tell people the truth and make them like it. I've never met anybody like him; he was truly something.

You're currently writing an autobiography. Is writing hard?

Sometimes, but it's fun; I love it. I think everybody over 50 should take six months sometime to write the story of his or her life.

It seems that you love everything, that you love your life.

Well, we're all just passing through it, and we don't know how long we're going to last, so we should try to love life and love our work as long as we can. ●