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# The First Postmodern President

*Bill Clinton uses both sides of the road, and that's why he'll win a second term*

WHO IS BILL CLINTON? IS HE AN "OLD DEMOCRAT" or a "New Democrat"—left, right or center? Posing this question is about as helpful as using a mechanical typewriter to access the Internet.

Bill Clinton has transcended the classic polarities of politics, and this is why he is going to win re-election to the White House on Nov. 5 (though Republican challenger Bob Dole helps too). Clinton is both left and right. He is the first postmodern President, the first to turn "anything goes" into a political creed.

Call him the son of the White Queen, who, as she told Alice, sometimes "believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast." Over on the right, we have Bill Dole. He preaches fiscal probity, family values and lock-'em-up justice. "We're putting 100,000 police on the streets." "We've made three-strikes-and-you're-out the law of the land." "The era of Big Government is over."

Culturally, Clinton is more conservative than predecessor George Bush. The man from Arkansas wants school uniforms and teen curfews. No more "self-esteem" instead of hard work, and so students should "pass tough tests to keep moving up in school." Teachers "who don't measure up" should be "removed." But he is also there masquerading as Teddy Kennedy, a man of the old left. This Clinton wants the Federal Government to teach third-graders how to read. He preaches national health insurance and the "integrity of our pensions"—shibboleths that stand for lots of new taxes as the electorate gets older (and sicker). Classic Democratic fare, in short.

Then, in the culture wars, there is the Clinton who talks as if smokers belong in re-education camp, who is not merely environmentally correct but sounds like an eco-authoritarian: "We should make it a crime even to attempt to pollute. We should freeze the serious polluters' property."

This is not middle-of-the-road mush. This postmodern President is left and right, which seemed logically impossible just yesterday. And what a lovely campaign strategy it is.

The old way of winning was to secure a base on your side of the ideological spectrum and then push just beyond the center. The postmodern way is to plant two flags well apart, on either side of the divide. While reassuring his party's left with pledges of government activism, Clinton has thrust deep into Republican territory—like the North occupying the South after the Civil War. For good measure, he has also garrisoned the middle by holding out such lavish, middle-class entitlements as tuition tax credits and "tax cuts for homeownership."

This leaves the Republicans with no place to go. Unable to outflank Clinton on the left, they are stuck with a compressed turf war on the right, as reflected by Dole's double-digit lag

in the opinion polls. Hence a baffling question: Why does the electorate go for Clinton's "You can have it all" strategy?

Call it the Winnie-the-Pooh syndrome. When Pooh was asked whether he wanted honey or jam on his bread, he replied, "I'll have both—but I won't take the bread." Today's voter is a perfect complement to the postmodern presidency.



The electorate has "deconstructed," meaning those who have traditionally heeded the call of class, religion or ethnicity have become nimble-footed shoppers in the market of political goodies.

More than two souls dwell in the voter's breast; no longer does he demand ideological consistency. Like the White Queen, he believes in "six impossible things." Like Pooh bear, he wants both for breakfast: the right-

ish jam and the leftish honey.

In the old days candidates had to harness coalitions clustered around a common denominator. Today the trick is to assemble an election-winning basket of diverse, indeed incongruous, political goods: pot roast and croissants, salsa and Spam. This is why Clinton's acceptance speech in Chicago read like a presidential tour through the local supermarket. And this is why Bob Dole will continue to play the panting hare to Bill Clinton's laid-back tortoise. Dashing to and fro with mounting exhaustion, Dole will discover that Smilin' Bill is already there.

Will it work? It already does in Europe. Look at the granddaddy of political postmodernism, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who has long practiced what Clinton is preaching. He stands for market deregulation, competitiveness and fiscal discipline. But like Clinton, he has raised taxes—to a top rate of 57%. Naturally, he is also a green-minded environmentalist. And of course he promises to defend the core of Germany's lavish welfare state against all comers. In the process, Kohl has decimated the leftish Social Democrats who last ruled in 1982. And guess who is avidly taking pointers from both Clinton and Kohl? Britain's Labour leader Tony Blair. He too talks both market and munificence, low taxes and high welfare, and the pollsters assure him that Britain is ready for the "anything goes" message. Like Clinton, Blair holds a double-digit advantage over his Conservative rival, John Major. The White Queen has met Winnie-the-Pooh. ■