

The Clinton Formula

Forget the left-center divide—it's not 1992 anymore. Defend government. Fight smarter. Smile. Win

By Michael Tomasky

When Sylvia Plachy and I walked into Bill Clinton's Harlem office around 2:30 p.m. on Sept. 8, the former president was courteous to me, but he was more interested in telling Sylvia—who, aside from being a world-renowned photographer, is the mother of Oscar-winning actor Adrien Brody—that he'd enjoyed *The Pianist*, but he'd also recently rented and loved *Oxygen*, a 1999 thriller in which Brody played a kidnapper. How Clinton pulled *that* one out we didn't ask; we just took it as a quick reminder that there is such a thing as a president with broad intellectual and cultural interests, and got down to business.

The bulk of his time now is devoted to his book and to the Clinton Foundation HIV/AIDS Initiative, which delivers medicines to sub-Saharan Africa and the Caribbean. But there's always time for politics. The Clinton on display here is combative, and he has some surprising things to say about how this election's crop of Democrats needs to do more than just ape what he did in 1992. But let him tell it.

Q: I'd like to begin by talking about the historical moment. Karl Rove wants to create a realignment along the lines of that which coalesced around the New Deal. This realignment would undo a lot of the work of the last 60 years, including, of course, a lot of your work. Do you think we're at such a turning point?

I do think it's a very important moment. Essentially, Karl Rove's politics are a combination of efforts by the increasingly conservative Republican Party to recover from the '64 election and assume a dominant position in America—through the advocacy of ideas and policies that were designed to have more appeal to the middle class, through the use of socially conservative issues that were designed to get people to vote for them for reasons other than economic ones, and through the extraordinary ability to increase their dominance in the mainstream press [and to] have a competing right-wing press and label Democrats . . . almost turn them into cartoons in a way that got them votes from people who otherwise never would have voted for them. And that's basically been their strategy.

So they believe those things, coupled with their extraordinary ability to raise money from the people they're helping financially with the government, will enable them to pursue policies which are way to the right of where the American people are.

I don't think we're headed for a realignment. If anything, we should be realigning in the direction I took the country. When I left office we had a 65 percent job approval, or something like that, so two-thirds of the people favored my policies. And that's why they attacked me personally so much, why they tried to attack Al Gore and make him look dishonest. And to say that compared to President Bush, and their backgrounds in public life, that Gore was dishonest was ludicrous. But they got away with it.

And if you look at these tax cuts, they got a good return for their investment. I mean, people say, "Gosh, how did Bush raise \$200 million, \$300 million?" I say it's peanuts compared to the tax cuts he gave. It's not even a tithe, you know? Not even 1 percent!

Q: They continue to get away with it . . .

Well, they do, but I think that we as a country, including the press and the political opposition, were profoundly traumatized by what happened on [September 11], and we were angered and we wanted to be united. And we were collectively prepared to check our critical judgment in a deep freeze somewhere for a period of time.

And in that period, they actually had a chance to effect their realignment. But instead, they chose to use the moment to try to consolidate their power, to extend the secrecy of government and to move the country way, way to the right. And there was a slow but building reaction to it. . . . And no democracy can go without debate for very long. So it was inevitable that one by one, the American people would go back to the deep freeze and get their brains back and start thinking, and that's basically what's happening now.

Q: But the Democrats participated in this lack of debate for far too long.

I think that the only place where we really were derelict was in not being tougher in the last six, eight weeks of the [midterm] election cycle. Because that's the only time it could have been made manifest to the voters what [the Republicans] were doing. I mean, the idea that they could be against the homeland-security bill for seven, eight months and then decide that . . . I can just hear Rove now; I mean, it's impressive. Going in there and saying, "You know, we can't make any security votes against the Democrats. One-hundred percent of them are with us in Afghanistan, and two-thirds of them are with us in Iraq. We've got to have some issue, so let's be for this bill we've been against. And let's put a poison pill or two in there that'll give the Democrats some pause, and hope it doesn't get passed by election day, and call everybody a virtual traitor that's not for a bill that we weren't for either until yesterday. Let's just do that. See if we can make *that* work!"

Q: And they did, and part of the reason that they did is that the Democrats didn't do what you're saying. Why not?

I just think a lot of people were just unsure how to proceed after 9-11, and they were somewhat intimidated by the president's big poll numbers. But we always do that in a wartime when we feel threatened. But you know, Max Cleland, the idea that his patriotism could be questioned after he left three limbs in Vietnam, and questioned by a man who had a deferment like I did . . . you know, it's just unbelievable to me. [Then] the Bush people took a compromise on the public-employee issue as soon as the election was over. It was just a scam. One of the great scams of modern American history, the way they did that homeland-security bill.

But we shouldn't whine about that. Their job is to beat us. Our job is to beat them. If they come at us with a deal we think is a scam, we ought to be smart enough to expose it. So I'm not mad at them. That's their job.

Q: Let me ask you about the schism within the Democratic Party. The liberals and the centrists, when you talk with them, express a lot of contempt for each other. At times, the rhetorical tone has crossed the line from reasoned argument to mockery. And this has happened more from the centrists toward the liberals than the other way around—

Yeah, and I think it's a big mistake. And I'd like to say why.

First of all, I think the differences in most cases are overrated. And I'd like to give some examples. When I was president and we did welfare reform, I vetoed the first two bills because they eliminated the guarantee of nutrition, food stamps and health care to poor children. I signed the third bill even though it had restrictions I didn't like on immigrants because I thought that this was a historic opportunity to get a bill that emphasized work over welfare and dependence without hurting poor kids. Now, when I did that we had over two-thirds of the House members and about three-quarters of the Senate voting for it. So we were sort of together.

If you listen to the debate now among the candidates, to take another issue, on fiscal responsibility, there isn't that much difference between the liberals and the conservatives. I reached a judgment that with the baby boomers retiring in a few years, we couldn't keep running these huge deficits and raiding Social Security, and middle-class people

were better off having low interest rates in a growing economy. And that would create more revenues, which we could then spend on poor people. And that's exactly what happened. So we developed a consensus around fiscal responsibility.

I make these two points, just to use welfare reform and fiscal responsibility, to point out that I think it is very easy to overstate the differences.

Now: If there are differences, there's a better way to get them out than having our candidates dump on each other. I have no objection in this primary season [to] Candidate X saying, "I'm for that," and Candidate Y saying, "I'm against it." You've got to have a little of that. But I don't believe that either side should be saying, "I'm a real Democrat and the other one's not," or, "I'm a winning Democrat and the other one's not."

It oversimplifies the issue. The public is operationally progressive and rhetorically conservative. The more they believe that you're careful with tax money and responsible in the way you run the programs and require responsibility from citizens, the more the public in general is willing to be liberal in the expenditure of tax money. The more the public believes the Democrats can be trusted with the national security of America, to protect and defend the country against terror and weapons of mass destruction, the more free they are emotionally to think about the other issues.

Therefore I think it is highly counterproductive to spend a great deal of time trying to identify the wings of the party and [having] each wing criticize the other. I think it's fine to explore specific differences among the candidates. We can't win if people think we're too liberal. But we can't get our own folks out if people think we have no convictions. So the trick is to get them both.

I thought in the [Albuquerque] debate, to be fair to our crowd, they were much better about avoiding these kind of ad hominem attacks, which I think are dead-bang losers.

Q: How do you get both? You, in 1992, given where the Democratic Party had been, made certain steps in the direction of showing you were willing to reject some old nostrums. But is that as necessary a politics today as it was in 1992?

No, I think it has to be done differently today.

Q: How?

Well, first of all I think the Democrats ought to all pocket some of the gains I made. They ought to say, "We're the party that gave you responsible welfare reform. We're the party that gave you fiscal responsibility, low interest rates and high growth. And we're the party that gave you the weapons systems and the training programs that won in Iraq and Afghanistan." The question is, what do we do now?

[The Republicans'] argument to their base is gonna be, "We kept our promises. We promised to cut taxes as much on wealthy people as we could, and we did it. We promised to weaken environmental controls, and we did it. We promised to weaken labor regulations and put less money into workers' safety and more money into investigating unions. We promised to put right-wingers on the court, and we've done it every chance we got. We promised to get rid of Saddam Hussein, and we did it, and we promised to undo everything Bill Clinton did, and we did a lot of that." So that's their promises to their base.

The only promises they have broken so far are promises to swing voters. So [Bush is] gonna say, "I kept my promises to my base. How am I gonna get the others? The same way I got them in 2002. By convincing people the Democrats can't be trusted with national security."

So what we have to say is, "You can trust us with the national security. If America has to fight, we ain't gonna lose, because we've got the only military in the world. And they won in Afghanistan and Iraq with the training programs and the weapons systems

developed during the Clinton years. So what you need a good president for is not to win a war. It's for when you don't fight, for a good diplomacy and a good domestic policy. And we don't agree with the diplomacy or the domestic policy."

But to go back to '92, I don't think we have to do as much conscious adding to the base in the way I did it. I was never against wealth and business creation. My theory was that class warfare wouldn't take us very far, but that if we were growing jobs and growing the economy, the government then should make extra efforts to help the poor. And we did a lot of that.

Now what we should say is that they, not we, have brought class warfare back to America. You know, every time I complain about these tax cuts some conservative says I'm practicing class warfare. I am not. I pay these taxes. And I live in New York state and Westchester County, so I think I probably pay as high [of] rates as anybody in America. And I should. Nobody makes me live in this country. America has been good to me. And I think for somebody to give me a tax cut and then turn around and say, "We've gotta have \$87 billion spent in Iraq, but we're gonna kick 300,000 kids out of after-school programs, 84,000 kids out of student loans . . . 25,000 uniformed police *off the street*? We're gonna kick a coupla thousand police off the street in New York City who put their lives on the line on September the 11th, and they're gonna give me a tax cut?" That's class warfare! And I think we ought to say that!

And the other thing I think is, we can smile when we say that. I don't want our side ever to treat the Republicans with the sort of personal animosity and contempt with which Hillary and I and Al were treated. I don't like that, I don't believe that, I don't think that's necessary. But we *got* to argue. And we got to fight hard. Otherwise they'll run right over us like they did in 2002.

Q: How vulnerable is this administration? What are the main targets of opportunity?

Well, I think the economy is a target of opportunity. I think the fact that most of the world doesn't trust us anymore is a target of opportunity. I think the assault on the environment is a target of opportunity. I think giving me a tax cut and then [trying to take] overtime away from 8 million workers is a target of opportunity. . . . We're gonna spend \$87 billion in Iraq. We're gonna give the 400 wealthiest Americans an average tax cut of \$8-and-a-half million, \$8-and-a-half million! And that's just a start. And they tried to get rid of the children's health-insurance program. That's 5 million kids' health insurance.

Man, if we can't sell that, we ought to get in another line of work! Either that or I don't live in the country I think I live in.

Q: Is part of the problem that when Bush says, "It's your money, you deserve it back," that that's so emotionally compelling—

It is.

Q: What is a good emotional counterargument to that? I believe that Democrats should be willing to make a more direct case for government than they make.

Oh, I do, too. I think we should say, "It *is* your money. And the government should only take your money to do those things which you need done collectively, which we have to do as a community—"

Q: Which neither the private sector nor the states—

Yes, which the private sector won't do in the economy, and which charity can't do. And those things are plainly national security, basic infrastructure, law enforcement, environmental protection, education and health care for the elderly, for poor children, the disabled and others for whom it is inaccessible. Just to start there. And we have a government, and we raise taxes because we think that we rise or fall together, and we want to live in a country where everybody has a chance to live their dreams.

And so, to say that it's your money does not answer any question. That's a demagogic statement that every Democrat could say as well as every Republican. *Of course* it's their money! It's all their money. But the question is, who's doing what with the money? They made a decision to give me a tax cut with the money and kick 300,000 kids out of after-school programs. I haven't met a single person in my income group, Republican or Democrat, who believes that we should get the check and the kids should get the boot. Not one! And I ask a bunch of them. So I think we ought to say, "It's your money, and it's your *country*. What kind of country do you want?"

I also think we ought to say, "It's not like they're not spendin' money! They're creating a big lie here. They're spending the money and giving you a tax cut and printing money to pay the bills." And let me just say, I didn't object to the president's running deficits after 9-11. He didn't make those conditions. But they did decide how to respond to them. And to give a big tax cut in 2001 before we knew what our income, expense or emergency [costs] were gonna be was not responsible. Except to those who believe it was ideologically dictated. So in 2003 we come back, and usually when you find yourself in a hole you're supposed to quit digging, but people who are ideologically inclined will only ask for a bigger shovel. So the 2003 tax cut was the bigger shovel.

Q: One of the problems liberals have had is they haven't found a compelling way to deliver their message. I've been reading lately some scholars who talk about conservatism and liberalism not only as ideologies but as psychological belief systems.

Yeah, I read some of that.

Q: It says basically [that] conservatives believe in authority, they do see things in black and white, and that makes it easier for them to get their message out—it's stark, it's more reducible to the five-second sound bite. Liberals tend to see more nuance, tend to be more skeptical of authority, and it makes it harder, especially in this media climate, to get the message out.

I think that's right. And I think the psychological setting after 9-11 helped them. Because we all wanted to see things in black and white for a while. A grievous thing had been done to us, and we wanted to stand united against it.

But we think there are some things that are not open to debate. One is the historic mission of America, to form a more perfect union. What does that mean? It means widening the circle of opportunity, deepening the meaning of freedom and strengthening the bonds of community. And we feel passionately about that. We feel just as strongly as the Republicans do.

And we are not gonna demonize them the way they demonize us. We will never have the talk-show people saying things about them without regard to whether they're true or not. That's not who we are. But we do show up to fight. We think you're worth fighting for. We think your future's worth fighting for. And we need to use the rhetoric of passion, commitment and combat on behalf of ordinary people without ever slipping into the kind of vicious, personal, evidence-free—to use my wife's phrase—assaults that they're so good at.

We don't have to do that. And it doesn't really sell all that well with our crowd. But people have to believe that we wake up in the morning just as passionately committed to what we believe as they are. And in the process of conducting ourselves in that way, people get the sense intuitively that we're strong enough to defend the country.

This is a contact sport. They're supposed to try to beat us. Now, they do things by and large that we don't think are legitimate. And lord knows they did while I was president. But . . . nobody *gags* us! The press has moved way, way, way to the right. And the mainstream press was incredibly supine in the face of all this secrecy, you know, covering up the [Ronald] Reagan and [George] Bush [Senior] records, covering up the

[Miguel] Estrada legal opinions, covering up the 9-11 report, covering up the global-warming deal and the air-quality issue down there [in lower Manhattan]. And it all started with putting the governor's records in the Bush presidential library. And [the press] just laid down and let it happen. But we don't have to contribute to it.

Now, let me just close on an upbeat note here. I don't entirely buy the Ruy Teixeira [and John B. Judis] analysis about the natural Democratic majority. On the other hand, there is *something* to it.

[Lyndon] Johnson wins big in '64 cuz he marginalizes [Barry] Goldwater. They never got over it and they've been trying to do it to us ever since. By '68, Nixon wins by a point, but we all know he would have beaten [Hubert] Humphrey handily if [George] Wallace hadn't been in the race. So there was a traumatic coalescing of a culturally conservative majority in the Republican Party between '64 and '68, ratified by the '72 election, OK? So essentially from '68 forward the Republican Party had a hardcore base of roughly 45 percent. The Democrats had a hardcore base of roughly 40 percent.

So in '80, Reagan wins 51-to-41, and [John] Anderson gets, what, [6 percent], [7 percent], whatever he got? Then in '84, [Reagan] wins 6-to-4. And in '88, they win 54-to-46, which means they won 9 points of the undecided vote and we won 6 points. In '92, because of the campaign I ran, if no [Ross] Perot had been in there, all the analyses show that it would have been 52 [percent], 53 percent. In '96, if no Perot had been in there and we'd had a normal turnout, it would have been about 55 percent. [So] by 2000, sometime between '92 and 2000, because of immigration, urbanization and the suburbanite voters developing a more communitarian ethic, both parties had a base of about 45 percent. And what happened in 2000 is they were fighting over an effective 10 percent, and they fought to a draw.

So that means that we're in every race. You start with 45 percent, you're in a race. I don't care what anybody says. So sometime between 1992 and 2000, for the first time—probably in the last four years, for the first time since 1964—we were no longer at a cultural disadvantage in our base. So both parties go into this next election with a natural base of about 45 percent. So in 2004, this race will be about—it goes back to your question about the Democrats' dilemma and our division. We have to improve our turnout to their level, as we did in '98 and 2000 but not in 2002. And then we have to win the votes among the other 10 percent. That's eminently doable.

But we've got to fight. And we gotta look like we're havin' a good time doing it.