The Salon Interview: Bill Clinton

The former president blasts the Bush-Cheney rush to war, explains why Gore lost in 2000 and tells how Kerry can win in 2004.

By Joe Conason

At several points in "My Life," Bill Clinton chastises himself appropriately for the reckless selfishness and dishonesty of his affair with Monica Lewinsky. He writes that he was disgusted by his own misconduct and appalled by the consequences to his family, friends, his country and his reputation.

None of this should come as news to the media, which has devoted ample attention to that episode and its aftermath for the past six years.

Yet publication of his exhaustive memoir has been treated as the occasion to renew that same old obsession while matters of substance are neglected or ignored. "Everything has changed" since Sept. 11, or so the portentous slogan goes, but some things haven't changed at all.

As might be expected, Clinton is less preoccupied with the subject of sex than Oprah, Larry King, and Michiko Kakutani. He is perfectly willing to address other questions, including those for which he has no glib reply.

On Thursday afternoon, he spoke with Salon about his administration's "inexcusable" failure to intervene militarily against the 1994 genocide, which cost hundreds of thousands of lives, and about his own responsibility for the rise of a "dangerous" Republican hegemony in Washington. But he also had remarkably harsh words for the Bush administration's dubious claims about Iraq, the "broken pottery" left by its unilateral foreign policy and the president's curious nonchalance about the exposure of CIA agent Valerie Plame. He was frank about why he thinks Al Gore won but lost the 2000 campaign ("The NRA ... hurt us bad") and what John Kerry has to do to win in November.

For a man often accused of worrying too much and too publicly about his legacy, the former president sounds relaxed and confident. While he confesses to lapses of wisdom and courage, he cannot quite conceal the sense that almost every day, the extremism and incompetence of the Bush administration make his controversial tenure look better by contrast. After years of mostly refraining from overt criticism of his successor, Clinton evidently feels free to be more candid from now on. If his book tour offers his political adversaries a fresh opportunity to attack him, it also provides him a national platform to speak his mind about them.

"We were in better shape when I left office than we are now," he said. He was talking about the number of Americans who lack health insurance—but the unavoidable inference went much further.

Q: Al Gore gave a speech in Washington Thursday about the Bush administration's attempts to link Iraq and al-Qaida. Do you agree with him that the administration misled the country about those alleged links?

The whole time I was there [in the White House], I knew of no links. Now, I don't think you can say for sure that there was never an al-Qaida member that was inside Iraq, but in terms of them being operational partners, I didn't know anything about that. I also never had any doubt that Iraq was not behind 9/11, because they didn't have the terrorist capacity to do it.

I supported—as the whole world did—resuming the weapons inspections inside Iraq, for a simple reason. When any kind of tyranny is running out of steam—as Iraq seemed to be—I was afraid if they still did have any of those chemical or biological agents, somebody might sell them or give them away, or they might be stolen. But in terms of [Iraq and al-Qaida] working together, I never saw any evidence of it. And I have not

seen any evidence since—from what's been in the press—that supports that contention. And apparently the 9/11 commission doesn't agree [with the allegation that Iraq worked with al-Qaida] either.

Now I hear Vice President Cheney continuing to assert that there is a connection, but there's a difference between assertion and evidence. If they have some kind of evidence, they can come forward with it, but I haven't seen any yet.

Q: The administration and its supporters have often cited statements from you and your administration about Saddam Hussein's regime to justify the decision to go to war in Iraq. I have heard you say recently that the invasion was too precipitous—and that the president should have waited until the inspections were completed, at least. Do you believe the war was justified?

Well, I believed at the time that it was far more important to win a complete victory in Afghanistan, do everything we could to try to find Osama bin Laden and al-Qaida's leadership, and help Hamid Karzai be the president of the whole country and not just Kabul. Now it seems to be moving in the right direction anyway because Karzai has proved to be a very able man and because we beefed up our support a little bit and the rest of the world came in a little bit. I thought at the time that we should take care of our Afghan obligations first. I thought it was curious—given who did 9/11 and what the big terrorist threat was—that we were sending 150,000 troops to Iraq and had only between 12,000 and 15,000 in Afghanistan.

But Paul Wolfowitz always had a theory that if they got rid of Saddam Hussein they could build a democracy in the Middle East that would shake up the other authoritarian Arab regimes, and that would give them greater leverage in making peace between the Palestinians and the Israelis. The only legal justification they had for going to war was Saddam Hussein's failure to comply with the U.N. resolutions [requiring his regime to destroy its illicit arsenal].

And I didn't see how we had triggered that by substituting our judgment for that of [chief U.N. weapons inspector] Hans Blix. If Blix had said this guy won't cooperate, he's bad, and we ought to take him out, then I would have favored military action. But had that happened, then whether the Security Council voted for it or not, we would have had many more allies and far fewer enemies, and no one would have thought we had a different agenda.

Q: You've said that Prime Minister Tony Blair was caught in a dilemma between our government's position on Iraq and the European viewpoint, and that he understandably tried to maximize his leverage with his decision to go forward with President Bush . . .

Remember that Blair first tried to pass another [Security Council] resolution that the Bush administration didn't want. He tried to get a resolution through that would have extended the inspection time by another four to six weeks. The Chileans and the Mexicans in the end decided not to vote for it because they thought the Russians would veto it anyway . . .

Q: But did Blair make the right decision in the end?

I think he made the decision he thought was right. You know, I'm not the British prime minister. He believed, as I did, that there was at least a strong chance that there were some chemical and biological stocks still there. We didn't know how much we had destroyed in the 1998 bombing. He believed that having gone as far as he did, to turn around and go back to the continental European position would have undermined his ability over the long run to maintain the transatlantic alliance. I think that's what he was thinking—and I think it was a defensible position given the fact that the Bush administration played such a hard hand and he couldn't get anybody to vote for his U.N. resolution. He had two bad alternatives . . .

What I thought the evidence showed was apparently different from what they thought, too. To me, the evidence was more limited than what Vice President Cheney said. There were unaccounted-for stocks of chemical and biological agents; a few unaccounted-for missiles that could be loaded with chemical and biological agents; and some quite limited laboratory capacity to do very preliminary work toward nuclear weapons. That's what we knew. I never knew of any yellowcake from Niger or any of that stuff.

My view was that it would be good if we could account for all that. And if we had a corollary benefit of installing a more representative, less tyrannical government in Iraq, that would be a good thing. But I thought we didn't want to start the doctrine of preventive war there, because we had a lot of fish to fry with bin Laden and al-Qaida and Afghanistan.

My view was somewhere, I guess, between where Al Gore's was and where Bush and Blair were. I never liked Saddam Hussein and I wasn't sure he didn't have some of that chemical and biological weaponry left. So I was left without a home for my policy when Hans Blix wasn't allowed to finish his job. Blix was plainly an honest and competent man who wasn't rolling over for Saddam Hussein. He was tough on the Iraqis when they didn't help him. He tried to totally play it straight.

Q: Speaking of yellowcake, how would you have handled the "outing" of a CIA agent such as Valerie Plame Wilson by officials in your administration? Do you think that Bush's response was adequate?

Well, I'm not sure what he did. I would have done my best to find out who did it, fire them, and make sure they had to live with the consequences . . . I know Joe Wilson. He was a career diplomat, a straight-up professional guy who did a lot of valuable work for me and for America in Africa. What happened to his wife was unforgivable as well as illegal—and potentially dangerous, and damaging to our intelligence networks. And it plainly came from someone who didn't like the fact that Joe didn't give the accepted line [on Iraq]. So it's hard for me to believe they can't find out who outed her. And I would have gone to extraordinary lengths to find that out, and then taken the appropriate steps.

Q: In your book, you describe the American and allied failure to intervene in Rwanda in 1994 as one of your worst errors. How did you reach that decision to do nothing while the genocide was going on there?

That's one of the most regrettable things about it. It's not like we had a decision. I don't know that we ever had a high-level meeting on it. At that time I think the whole foreign policy apparatus, including me, was geared to getting into Bosnia as quickly as possible. We knew we were going to have a problem in Haiti. We were still reeling from what had happened in Somalia. And I think even though there were a lot of indications that Rwanda was going to be quite bad, I'm not sure anybody focused on the fact that 10 percent of a country, 700,000 or 800,000 people, could be killed in 90 days with machetes . . .

If we'd moved right away, we might have been able to save a couple of hundred thousand people. They still could have killed a lot of people before we could have deployed in acceptable numbers there. [Later] we went into the camps and we kept a lot of people alive, both safe from violence and also rehydrating kids . . . We saved tens of thousands of lives, but we could have saved a couple of hundred thousand more if we'd moved more quickly. We hadn't really developed a clear doctrine of when we would go in and when we wouldn't. There was a lot of sentiment against such intervention in the Congress. And the worst thing about it was that we didn't have a meeting with an options paper where we said yes, no, or maybe. We didn't even do that. And before we knew it, they were lying dead.

It was inexcusable. We didn't even seriously consider it, and I feel terrible about it. It's very interesting though: the only people who have never excoriated me for it are

the Rwandans. When I went there and apologized to them, their response was, "You're the only person that ever even said you were sorry. There were other people who could have helped us, too."

Q: The Bush administration has sharply criticized the deal you made with North Korea as a failure, because it was revealed that they have begun to clandestinely reprocess uranium and built at least a couple of nuclear weapons. What is your response to that criticism? How should the United States deal with North Korea?

I disagree with that, and if you look at the press reports from the past few days it seems that the Bush administration is coming back to our policy again. Let's get the facts out first. When I became president, it became obvious that North Korea was moving toward the capacity to build several nuclear weapons a year . . . I was determined not to let that happen. We had a very tense set of negotiations with North Korea, which got quite tense when they kicked the U.N. inspectors out . . . Eventually, we made a deal after we told them that under no circumstances would we allow them the capacity to make several nuclear weapons a year. So the deal we made was that we, along with the Japanese, South Koreans, and other interested parties, would provide them with food and [energy aid] if they would put all the nuclear fuel rods in a place where they could be inspected. That agreement worked and on its own terms was not violated. In 1998 we reached an agreement where they agreed to stop testing their long-range missiles. In 2000, we nearly reached an agreement where they nearly agreed to stop producing and selling those missiles.

After I left office, the Bush administration discovered, and briefed me about it, that in 1998 the North Koreans had started a much smaller program in a lab with highly enriched uranium—enough to produce perhaps a weapon or two. Does that mean my policy was a failure? No, because if we hadn't stopped their reactor program [in 1994], they could have been producing not one or two nuclear weapons but maybe six to 10 a year. Colin Powell said they would have had dozens of weapons by this time, and the State Department in the Bush administration has supported our Korea policy.

What should be done now? North Korea wants three things. They don't want to disappear. They want to eat and stay warm, and they can't grow food or afford power. And they want to be treated as an important country that deals with the U.S. and other countries in their region. They want some sort of official recognition from us.

They're not going to bomb South Korea or Japan. The danger is that a country that builds world-class bombs but can't feed itself or stay warm will sell them . . . What we need to try to do is to get an agreement, with the Chinese, the Russians, the Japanese and the South Koreans, where they finally end all those nuclear and missile programs, and we arrange for them to get food and energy. And we continue to support the rapprochement between North and South Korea. Now it looks to me as if the Bush administration is in the right place and moving in the right direction.

Q: There could hardly be a greater contrast between your view of how to deal with the world and our allies, and the much more unilateral approach of this White House. As you travel around the world, how do you assess the reaction to this change? Do you feel the Bush administration has undone the goodwill and prestige that grew from a more open, multilateral policy?

There's no question that we have suffered some loss, if not of prestige then at least of support in the world by following a more unilateral course. But that's not very important to [the Bush White House], because they saw 9/11 as an opportunity to move the country to the right and mold the world the way they thought it ought to be molded.

That's why they morphed the attack by al-Qaida into the war on Iraq, which is something they wanted to do beforehand. Paul Wolfowitz tried to get me to depose Saddam . . . They see the world very differently. I believe we ought to be trying to build

more and more institutional cooperation in the world, while reserving the right to act alone when we have to. They have believed, at least for the first three and a half years, that they should act alone whenever they can, using the springboard of what happened on 9/11—and cooperate when they have to. In the end it may bring us to the same place. In Iraq they've gone to the U.N. to get a resolution. But in the meanwhile we're leaving a lot of broken pottery along the way . . . That's one of the things that ought to be debated thoroughly in this election.

Q: Senator Kerry got in trouble earlier this year for suggesting that leaders around the world are hoping he will be elected in November. Have you picked up that sense abroad?

I think that a lot of countries would like to see us go back to a more cooperative, multilateral approach like I followed, even though there were times when they didn't agree with me. Now, I signed every international agreement except the landmines treaty, because I thought that had two parts that were malicious and would put our soldiers at risk. And I was doing more to destroy landmines than anybody who signed the treaty.

There will always be times when we are at odds with the rest of the world. But what they want to know is that we basically favor cooperation and that we care what happens to them. When they don't feel that way, they hope for a change in policy. So I think that [what Kerry said] is accurate. John got in trouble partly because nobody can be "outed" admitting that. He would have been better off not saying it, and letting other people say it. None of these people could afford to admit that and make their relations with America even more tenuous.

Iraq was the last straw. They also didn't support the International Criminal Court, although today I see they've changed their policy on that . . . They got out of the climate-change agreement, which hurt America's prestige enormously. They got out of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. They don't want to strengthen the Biological Weapons Convention. So Iraq has to be seen in the larger context.

Q: Many critics, including some Democrats, believe that your presidency damaged the Democratic Party by bringing the party to its present diminished state, where the Republicans control the White House, both houses of Congress, many state houses and the Supreme Court. How do you respond?

I talk about this a lot in my book. I did play a role in losing the Congress in '94. Part of it was inevitable. We had to clean up their fiscal mess and we lost some votes because we did it. The Republicans portrayed our budget as nothing but a tax increase and we didn't effectively counter that . . . We should never have lost the White House and we didn't—we just didn't win by enough to stay out of the Supreme Court. When I left office, about 65 percent of the American people approved of what the administration had done, and we should have won the White House on that.

I feel terrible about that, because I think it's very dangerous for the country to have a party as far right as the Washington Republican Party is, in control of the White House and the Congress, packing the courts with all of these ultraconservative people. It came out today that one of the people who wrote these questionable legal opinions about the treatment of people in Iraq is now a Court of Appeals judge. Whatever they find out about what he did, he's now got a lifetime job.

Q: Did Al Gore make an error in 2000 by seeking to put some distance between himself and his campaign for the presidency, and you and your administration?

In the beginning, I supported his going out on his own with Joe Lieberman, because every vice president has the same problem in running directly for the presidency. People don't give the vice president credit for the good things that happen in the administration, as much as they should. I tried to solve that by giving Al lots of credit all through the

eight years, but [voters] don't absorb that . . . I thought Gore ought to be independent . . .

But I thought it was not a good idea to not embrace the record more explicitly and say we ought to keep the change going in the right direction. Remember in Los Angeles, he said the issue was the people versus the powerful, which it certainly was. Every powerful right-wing interest group in the country was behind Bush. But that didn't send a clear signal that it was necessary to vote for Gore to keep the prosperity going. At the end of the election, when Gore came back to that theme, about eight days before Election Day, he made up points in a hurry and actually won the election by about 500,000 votes . . . He probably would have won by enough to stay out of the Supreme Court if that had been the theme from August straight through November . . . I campaigned in California and Arkansas, and those were the states where we beat the three incumbent Republicans that lost in the House.

I believe Al lost Arkansas because of the National Rifle Association . . . and maybe Missouri, and maybe Tennessee, and maybe New Hampshire (in addition to the Nader vote) . . . I don't think the NRA got near as much credit as they deserve for Bush's election. They hurt us bad.

Q: If you were John Kerry, what would you do to close the deal with voters this year? They seem to be wavering in their support of President Bush, to say the least, but not yet fully embracing Senator Kerry.

They don't know Kerry yet. That's why Bush is running all these ads, trying to fill in the blanks in a negative way, saying Kerry is not a positive figure, he's focused on the past, and all that. What he needs to do is keep doing what has been doing, saying what he thinks and what he would do. To win he needs to have a very good convention in Boston, and then acquit himself well in the debates, and then maximize the time he has following the convention.

Right now he's got a real problem because he got nominated, in effect, so early that even the Democrats in states that weren't involved in the nominating process didn't know him all that well. The independents and the Republicans who would like to vote for somebody other than Bush didn't have much information about him. It's just the downside of the early nomination, although we got more out of that than we lost because we're united and raising lots of money for him on the Internet and doing a lot of good things. He just has to keep doing what he believes is right and keep carrying on. I think he's doing it very well . . . The chances are more than 50-50 that he's going to win this election.

Q: Have the fiscal policies of the Bush administration destroyed your legacy?

No, but they've destroyed the surplus! [Laughs]. I think that he returned to trickle-down economics because that's what they believe in. They don't believe it's important to keep the deficit down, keep debt down, keep interest rates down. They spend money on what they want to spend money on and cut taxes, especially for upper income people. Though he has reversed our policy, he can't destroy our legacy. Our legacy is how many people got jobs, how many people got homes, how many people got college aid—how many people were helped.

Nothing is permanent in politics, but they can't change whether people were better off when you left than when you started. The country needs to return to an economic policy that's an updated version of the one I followed . . . with even more emphasis on a new energy policy to create jobs and free us from foreign oil and do our part to deal with the environmental challenges we face . . . What they've done is undisciplined and shortsighted and wrong on the economic front.

Q: If you had another chance, how would you change your approach to achieving universal healthcare? Although some incremental changes were made, we're still a

long way from the goal you set in 1992.

Well, we were in better shape when I left office than we are now. We had a decline in the number of people without insurance. We passed the Children's Health Insurance Program, which covered about 5 million kids and was the biggest expansion in healthcare since Medicare. We needed a simpler plan . . . When Senator Dole decided to filibuster any healthcare plan we should have stopped and moved on to welfare reform, and then come back after the [1994] election. . . . If you're not going to have an employer mandate, then probably the only way to do it is some version of what Rep. Rahm Emanuel [D-Ill.] is now suggesting—which is to allow all the uninsured people to buy into the Federal Employee Health Benefit Program. That's a private plan with a lot of different options and costs. And then subsidize the purchases for small businesses and those who can't afford it. That's the simplest way to do it, with low administrative costs.

Q: You promoted regional and global trade agreements—some would say at the expense of labor and environmental standards. Is there a way that globalization can enhance rather than diminish those standards in both the developing and the developed world?

Sure. We don't have enough votes in Congress to do it right now. When they had the World Trade Organization meetings in Seattle, I went out there and said the demonstrators in the street are wrong in saying that trade is making the world poorer but they're right in saying that you can't have a trade-only policy and build the kind of world you want. I went to the World Economic Forum in Davos and said the same thing to the WTO and the International Labor Organization . . . They're going to have to open the process of the WTO up, involve the nongovernmental organizations more, and integrate the labor and environmental concerns into their multilateral deliberations . . .

We need to do more to make sure that the global economy doesn't just make the rich richer and the poor poorer. The problem is that without labor and environmental agreements, and without significant new investments in health, education and development, you can lift a lot of people out of poverty with trade—but all the population growth is occurring in the poorest countries, so there will still be more poor people every year. You cannot have a global economy without some sort of global social compact.

Q: People sometimes mention possible future jobs for you, such as head of the World Bank or secretary-general of the U.N. when Kofi Annan leaves. What do you plan to do next?

I can't imagine that [those jobs] would ever be a serious option. I haven't thought about it. What I plan to do now is complete the book tour, do whatever I can to help Senator Kerry, and then as quickly as possible get back to work on my foundation.

Joe Conason writes a twice weekly column for Salon. He also writes a weekly column for the New York Observer. His new book, "Big Lies: The Right-Wing Propaganda Machine and How It Distorts the Truth," is now available.