

GRADING WITH SHADING

United Media Syndicated Column

January 11, 2001

So what about President Clinton? What grade does he get?

Robert Samuelson, an ace columnist who wears no ideological collar, makes the case that President Clinton hasn't left much of a legacy in the realm of public policy. Samuelson says Clinton had eight years to tackle Medicare and Social Security and did neither. Perhaps so, but there was some good work in the field, like the new CHIPs program of medical care for lower-income but Medicaid-ineligible kids.

Clinton's main achievements were linked to the advent of the Republican Congress in 1994: welfare reform, trade treaties and budget balancing. (The first and last were part of the "Contract With America.")

This is not a negative. After all the sound and fury, in functional terms Clinton ended up with a good mark in "Works and Plays Well With Others."

At worst, he did nothing much wrong to stop a surging economy. At best, he was one of several players who helped unleash American creativity and productivity. Now, if the economy tanks for a while, we will get a chance to play the delightful parlor game of "Whose fault is it?" (How would it be Bush's fault if we're already in a recession? Don't ask. A reason will be supplied.)

Notwithstanding the babble about what a wonderful politician he is, Clinton's record is a bummer. Good politicians are not always in a ditch. Clinton never did get 50 percent of the popular vote. (Remember Ross Perot -- yesterday's Ralph Nader?) Clinton started out in 1993

a Democratic president, with a Democratic House, a Democratic Senate, a majority of Democratic governors, and a solid majority of Democratic state legislatures and state legislators. All gone. This trend may not prove to be a Republican Realignment, but it is a pre-condition to such a new era, should it come to pass.

There are those who think Clinton is a great political orator. Not me. I never believed in "overexposure" until Clinton planted himself on my television set, spinning, spinning, spinning. Under his guidance, we have seen the advent of "the permanent campaign," all spin all the time, from the president down to press aide twerps in federal agencies. Yada yada yada. President-elect Bush would do well to un-emulate all that. Stop the spin machine, Dubya.

As recorded in David Gergen's interesting book "Eyewitness to Power," Clinton handed over huge -- incredible -- blocks of near-total responsibility and authority to Vice President Gore and to Hillary Clinton. That's not illegal, but no other president in modern times would have allowed that to happen. I don't imagine it will happen again.

Clinton lied, repeatedly. Sen. Bob Kerrey's, D-Neb., remark that Clinton was "an exceptionally good liar" turned out to be an understatement. Now, the new Nightline/Frontline (ABC/PBS) documentary of the Clinton years maintains that Clinton had Dick Morris type a new, last-minute draft of the 1995 State of the Union speech. Then, in secret, he copied it in his own left-handed script and told his staff he had written it himself.

Add to that what you choose about the Year of the Monica.

When he hit Congressional barriers, Clinton regularly brought to bear policy by executive order, used sparingly heretofore. For example, just now, after 95/96ths of his tenure is up, Clinton has ordered that about one-fourth of America's forests be placed off limits to logging. This may be well-intentioned, but dreadful as process. Isn't that about the way a dictator would do it? Can you blame the Congress, the states or the localities involved for fuming?

Clinton's foreign policy was well-intentioned, and not unsuccessful. (Double negatives imply a superior grade, within the category of mediocre.) Give him a B-.

Clinton left a potential legacy, accurate or not, or partly accurate, of having "moved the Democratic Party to the center." But much of that was squandered by his previously centrist vice president, in a mindless leftward tropism during the 2000 presidential campaign. Whether Clinton or Gore should be angrier at the other -- remains an open question.

And where are we, eight years later? Better off. And both sides won. That is measure of the strength and reach of this country since the disruptions of the 1960s. For example, we became more environmental and more entrepreneurial, with less welfare dependency but more spending on the truly needy.

Of course, that's more due to America, than to Clinton. But the bizarre political rules of the road ascribe all events, trends and conditions to the president. For good or for ill, these will be known as "The Clinton Years." So what's his grade? Give him a B. But he could have been a contender.

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