

NOT A COMPARISON

United Media Syndicated Column

August 16, 2001

This is not a straight-up comparison. President Clinton is in private life. The first six months of President Bush's term is history. The Congress is in recess. It is probably time to look at the scoreboard. Clinton, it's said by some, was a political genius, and a brilliant man. Too bad he had moral failings, but he did great things for America.

Bush, it's said by others, is sort of a dim bulb, occupying an important chair, barely, surrounded by his father's friends, who tell him what to do and when to do it.

My opinion of Clinton is mixed. I think he has been politically over-rated. He never won a majority of the votes in America. He ran against George H. W. Bush in 1992 and Robert Dole in 1996, high among the two worst political campaigns in the history of the world. Clinton was helped enormously by the third-party candidacy of the little man who not many folks talk about the days: Ross Perot.

Coattails? The Democrats lost scores of Congressional seats during Clinton's presidential terms. And he was always in my recreation room, talking, talking, talking. Talking.

But his slogan "end welfare as we know it" was brilliant and proper. Rhetoric has power. Clinton used it periodically. Without a Democratic nominee pushing that language such powerful legislation probably never would have transpired. The same can be said of Clinton's fight for North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA). A majority of Democrats opposed both bills. Clinton also gets partial credit for "moving the party to the center." But he never accomplished it in the muscular way Prime Minister Tony Blair did in the United Kingdom. In any event, something

tells me that's not what Clinton will be remembered for.

Clinton is cashing in on his presidency; that's now the way things are done. But what about Bush? He said he'd set a new tone in Washington, and he has. Fairly high poll ratings in an economically difficult time would seem to bear that out. He pushed and passed a big tax cut. Pundits notwithstanding, voters seem to like those cute green checks, even though the idea was once labeled "DOA" when it arrived at Congress. His education and faith-based initiatives are moving ahead, albeit slowly.

Every new President, especially those who come from the governor's ranks without a stopover in Congress, has a steep learning curve. Bush is on that curve and seems to be mounting it steadily. Even the Europeans, who are aghast that an American President would deign to have an American foreign policy, have noticed (although some of Bush's policies are beginning to resemble some of Clinton's).

Bush said what he'd do, and with some exceptions, he's done what he said he would do. He thought long and hard about his speech on stem cells, his first directly to the nation. He made up his own mind, somewhat contrary to an earlier position. Most of his supporters have given him a pass on it. He says it was a nonpolitical decision, and I believe him, perhaps because I happen to agree with him, perhaps because he doesn't seem to lie.

It was an impressive talk, but not one of those soaring songs of brilliant melodies. Bush was clearly nervous, which lent further heft to his credibility. He explained the problem, he gave his reasons, he rendered his decision, he said God Bless America and went back to his ranch. Elapsed time: 11 minutes.

Don't worry; it's going to be a long argument. Perhaps even as long as the forthcoming one on partial privatization of Social Security, which

may prove to be even more important before all is said and done.

Bush gets high grades on one of the key jobs of a chief executive: getting Americans talking together and civilly, even on issues that may not be solved until long after that president has left office.

It is almost entirely ridiculous to talk about the 2004 presidential contest now. Most anything can happen. Remember Clinton after the first half of his first year? But the Great Mentioners in Washington are already Mentioning. The Democratic horses in the 2004 Sweepstakes stables are already prancing: John Kerrey, D-Mass., John Edwards, D-N.C., Tom Daschle, D-S.D., and Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., -- with a Lieberman caveat that he will run only if Al Gore decides not to. (Who's Gore?)

Meanwhile, there is another possibility. Bush is doing very nicely. We may have another two-term president.

BEN WATTENBERG IS A SENIOR FELLOW AT THE AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE AND IS THE MODERATOR OF PBS'S "THINK TANK."

©2000, *NEWSPAPER ENTERPRISE ASSN.*