

George H. W. Bush and William J. Clinton:

A Tale of Two Presidencies

The recent Bush Jr. presidency, which has been broadly declared a failure both within the United States and abroad, and which led to the spectacular victory of Barack Obama, has once again sparked off discussions about the nature of the American presidency and relative values of different presidents throughout the history of the United States. Among the presidents of the 20th century, rarely have two presidencies been as often compared as those of George W. Bush and William J. Clinton. This is not just due to the diametrically opposite personal characteristics of the two presidents, but also because of the significant differences in their terms of their presidency, the issues, which polarized their campaigns, and the international environment in which they operated. So the present paper will be devoted to a comparative analysis of the two presidents. It will first present both presidencies, preceded by a brief introduction of who these two men were and what is their background. This will be followed by a section recapitulating the major elements of their terms in office, and attempting to answer the question: which one was a better president?

George H. W. Bush

George H. W. Bush, also known as George Bush Sr. ever since the presidency of his son, succeeded Ronald Reagan as the president in 1989, following a four-year spell as vice-president of the United States. As a republican candidate, George Bush was seen by some as the embodiment of the WASP traditions of the Republican Party. He was also in many ways the “transition president” having presided over the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the creation of a new world order.

Born in Milton, Massachusetts, George Bush grew up in Greenwich, Connecticut, where he attended Greenwich Country Day School. Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the future president made a decision to join the US Navy, becoming the youngest naval aviator at that time (American Academy of Achievement). When he was a naval aviator, Bush participated in a number of battles and became a trainer due to the valuable experience he had acquired. After being honorably discharged, he quickly married Barbara Pierce, who hailed from an illustrious family whose roots could be traced back to the New England colonists and which was linked with President Franklin Pierce (Deane Whitney Merrill). Having graduated from Yale, Bush moved to Texas where he became involved in oil business (Common Dreams), becoming a millionaire before the age of forty. Turning his ambitions to politics, Bush went on to hold a number of important positions, including being an ambassador to the United Nations, an envoy to China, and a director of the Central Intelligence Agency – whose moral standing he had allegedly restored.

Bush's presidential ambitions, however, did not come to fruition immediately. His first candidacy was in 1980, when he lost in the primaries to Ronald Reagan. The latter, however, made him vice-president. Eight years later, Bush won the primaries and went on to defeat the Democrat candidate Michael Dukakis on his "thrifty platform", his famous pledge "Read my lips: no new taxes" striking a cord with the voters (BBC). In order to reaffirm his "strong" image (both in relation to the campaign and the primaries), Bush reiterated his commitment on such issues as capital punishment, gun rights, prayer, and being against abortion in a memorable speech (NPR). The second nail in Dukakis's coffin was his opposition to capital punishment, which was turned around as him being soft on crime.

Although the conservative approach to economics had initially won Bush the favor of the public, it soon became contested within the light of the economic recession. During the entire presidency, Bush struggled with the deficit inherited from the Reagan years, and the

general economic gloom. He was more active (and, according to some, successful) on the foreign policy front, where he managed to remove the drug-peddling Panaman dictator Manuel Noriega. He also succeeded in managing relations with the crumbling Soviet Union, and making the START deal on nuclear arms reduction. Finally, he was responsible for the decision to invade Iraq in order to protect Kuwait. Arguably his greatest success was building the foundation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which turned into the world's biggest free-trade area (from a geographical point of view).

William J. Clinton

William J. Clinton, more commonly known as Bill Clinton, was the 42nd president of the United States of America. In many senses, he was the anti-Bush, being different from his predecessor in almost every way possible. Bill Clinton was from a humble family: his father was a traveling salesman who died before he was even born (Sadiq). Although he adopted his stepfather's surname, he did not remember him too fondly, claiming that the man was an alcoholic who abused his wife and son, leading Bill to intervene in order to protect them (Sadiq). Bill received a strict Jesuit education, going on to receive a BA in the Science of Foreign Service from Georgetown University (Clinton). He was an active and successful student leader, as well as the recipient of several scholarships, including a Rhodes Scholarship to study at University College, Oxford (Clinton). As a handsome, sporty, saxophone playing university professor (he had worked as a professor at the University of Arkansas) with a difficult family background, Clinton was bursting with the charisma that George Bush so desperately lacked.

This charisma proved to be a godsend, speeding up his political career considerably. After being the "Boy Governor" of Arkansas, Bill Clinton ran for president in 1992. He won both the primaries and the presidential election on his platform of being a moderate

democratic candidate, without the excessive liberal tendencies that were unpopular with the majority of the electorate. Moreover, he emphasized his concern about working-class Americans in his campaign against Bush, winning many of those hard hit by the economic recession.

Contrary to his predecessor, Bill Clinton served two terms in office. This period is arguably best remembered, on the domestic front at least, as the longest period of uninterrupted economic growth that the country had ever experienced. This aspect of the Clinton presidency is most commonly seen through the prism of his alleged motto “It’s the Economy, Stupid” (CNN), referring to the fact that whenever he was about to take some actions he would always begin with considering consequences for the American economy first. The economic revival plan was largely based on reducing the previously developed deficits, raising taxes, and stimulating the economy in some areas.

In regard to social policy, Clinton was true to his image of a moderate democrat. He improved the rights of homosexuals by allowing them to serve in the armed forces. He was also very popular with the black community, which he also supported through his programs. Although he used to be a capital punishment opponent in his youth, he switched sides and maintained the death penalty as a form of punishment – even increasing the scope of its applicability (primarily towards drug kingpin and those of their ilk). However, he was also the first president to pardon a death row inmate since 1988, when capital punishment had been reintroduced (Death Penalty Information Center). Clinton projected a similar kind of image internationally as he did in the country, which made him very popular, and improved the image of America throughout the world.

Conclusions

While both presidents definitely have their merits, and both presidencies led to a

number of important steps, I nevertheless believe that Clinton was, in the end, a better president. He was able to bring Americans together, which may have been at least as much the merit of his personality as his actions, and which, in a sense, is the most fundamental responsibility of a president. Moreover, Clinton was much more successful in terms of economic management, as it can be demonstrated by the period of economic growth which the United States experienced during his terms in office. What may be even more important is that the rewards of this economic growth were spread throughout society (at least relatively), rather than being directed towards big business, as was the case during the George Bush presidency.

However, when comparing the two presidents, one should always keep in mind the differences of the times in which they operated. Indeed, despite the seemingly trivial difference (timewise) between the two presidencies, there were a number of other fundamental differences. Bush was presiding over the world in tumult, in chaos, which was looking for a new path. Moreover, he inherited the legacy of the Reagan years, which only made it more difficult for him. Under Clinton, the world had become more stable in many ways. Another example is the NAFTA, which provided economic growth under the Clinton presidency, but was constructed by Bush. Nevertheless, even giving Bush the benefit of the doubt in many matters, I maintain that Clinton was a better man. His focus was on the lives of ordinary Americans, not the power of America's corporations. It is no surprise that he left office as one of the most popular presidents of all times (CBS News).

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