Several Theories Could Explain Clinton’s Poor Ratings

The second theory fits not just Clinton, but his predecessor as well: Clinton is suffering the same fate as all other post-Vietnam, post-Watergate presidents. The public and press have lost all respect for public figures, political or otherwise. By the very virtue of their presence before the public eye, movie stars, Wall Street financiers, corporate CEOs, well-known members of the press, and U.S. presidents have all fallen from grace. Betrayed by the people they expected to save a quarter century ago, the baby-boomers of the baby-boom generation now play it safe by not trusting anyone. It no longer matters whether the public believes Clinton guilty of unethical acts in the White House or not; matters more is that the charges have been made. So long as there is a hint of betrayal, no leader can be worthy of respect.

The “turn-to-the-left” theory: According to the moderate and conservative crowd, Clinton squandered the ideological edge he gave himself during the 1992 campaign. Throughout the campaign, Clinton argued that traditional liberals in his party had been wrong in their programmatic prescriptions. The way to fix the country was through a combination of conservative free-marketeering and good old-fashioned compassion. Welfare could be reformed by turning recipients out into the work force. If price competition were introduced into the insurance market, the cost of providing health care could drop for all Americans. If the government cut its deficit, lower interest rates would spur investment and lead to a higher standard of living for all Americans. These were the policy prescriptions of the “New Democrats” — center Americans, whom Clinton promised to lead to a better world.

According to this theory, Clinton dropped his New Democrat pledges to run with the liberals. For instance, while he did slash the deficit and raise the confidence of the bond market, he hurt his conservative standing by sponsoring the pork-filled “stimulus package,” that cost him his first painful defeat in the campaign, Clinton concluded the big government wing of his own party, which wanted a Canadian-style, single-payer system. Instead he proposed the centrist “managed competition” approach initially favored by big business. The Republicans chose to ignore the conservative nature of the health care package, even using the new liberal apologist to help sell it.

The fact that Republicans seem to detest Clinton more than they detest most liberals led to the creation of the third theory: Republicans have no choice but to hate Clinton. Unless they destroy him, Clinton’s New Democrat party will repel their own party to the dustbin of history. In 1986 the Democrats destroyed the Populist party by adopting the latter’s issues as their own. Similarly, Jefferson’s Republicans destroyed the Federalists by accepting the legitimacy of the federal government. Now the Republicans face a president who, according to The Economist, “draws from the same intellectual wellsprings as many 1980’s Republicans.” So the Republicans think that letting Clinton adopt their issues would result in the extinction of their own party. Thus they eagerly use him as a tax-and-spend liberal, as teary-eyed as Michael Dukakis.

Unsurprisingly, the choice of theory seems to depend mostly upon one’s choice of party. A Republican, for instance, could never believe in the “exhibition theory,” nor could a liberal accept the Gergen argument. Unfortunately for Clinton, the debate over his unpopularity seems to be drowning out the debate over his policies.

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