

CENTRIST RHETORIC

**THE PRODUCTION OF
POLITICAL TRANSCENDENCE
IN THE CLINTON PRESIDENCY**

Antonio de Velasco

Centrist Rhetoric

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in memoriam
Raul Victor de Velasco and Eli Hendricks

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Acknowledgments

Centrist Rhetoric looks at cases in which old political myths overlapped with new political openings, calls for harmony doubled as appeals to faction, and the eloquence of transcendence came steeped in the cunning of strategy. To see this mingling of motives, meanings, and possibilities required labor. I had to look closely at political rhetoric, believe that such looking was in itself a rewarding thing to do, and have faith that the process would someday come to a close. On each count, I owe debts to many people.

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Introduction

On December 11, 1996, Bill Clinton addressed a packed gathering of the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), an organization founded eleven years earlier by Democrats concerned with their party's increasingly marginal political identity. The president defined his recent reelection in clear terms. Though he was the first Democrat reelected to the high office since Franklin Roosevelt, Clinton did not describe his victory as a mandate for his party. Though he had ushered through an unprecedented trade agreement, reduced the federal budget deficit, presided over a time of relative peace, helped to calm the nation after a domestic terrorist attack, and signed into law an historic and bipartisan reform of its welfare system, he did not define his win as an affirmation of his strength as a leader, though that point was certainly implicit. Rather, Clinton cited his support from voters as the reaffirmation of the strength of a political "center" that was fundamentally pragmatic and democratically essential:

The clamor of political conflict has subsided. A new landscape is taking place. The answer is clear: the center can hold, the center has held and the American people are demanding that it continue to do so. . . . This is an irreplaceable moment for breaking new ground in America. All our political leaders say we will work together. The public wants us to work together. And our progress demands that we work together. I stand ready to forge a coalition of the center, a broad consensus for creative and consistent and unflinching action. . . . Anchored by our oldest convictions, strengthened by our newest successes, certain of our national purpose, let us go forward from that center to build our bridge to the 21st century.¹

While he equated the timing of his win over Senator Bob Dole with an "irreplaceable moment" in U.S. political history, Clinton implied that the center

to which he referred was still fragile; it had “held” but required work in order to “continue to do so.” The primary challenge of his second term, Clinton argued, would be to translate the centripetal political force sparked by his triumph into “action.”

Clinton had routinely traded harsh attacks with conservatives in Congress and elsewhere since assuming office in 1993. Many of his adversaries on the right questioned the very legitimacy of his presidency and sought to derail it at nearly every turn. And yet, Clinton used the image of a center free from such political calculation to argue that his victory was a plea from voters for an end to all that. He offered a vision of citizens “demanding” that their political leaders remain close to the center in order to transcend their differences. By electing him president, Clinton suggested, Americans had rejected the centrifugal partisanship of left and right that would ostensibly make “creative and consistent” action impossible. In such a formulation, the center served to make vivid the need for, as Erik Doxtader has put it, a “middle of public life” that mitigates against the kind of extremism that can make us “insensitive to the nuances of public interaction.”²² Indeed, as Clinton put it, the DLC had helped him to create “a new center . . . a place where throughout our history, people of good will have tried to forge new approaches to new challenges.” The center, both new and old, timeless and of the moment, it seems, is also fundamentally American.

From a rhetorical perspective, we can observe that Clinton is not merely describing “a new center” in this speech. He is using it as an inventional metaphor to give meaning and persuasive force to his argument. He is using it to produce an epideictic appeal that defines his fellow citizens in terms of a democratic ethos of consensus-seeking deliberation. He is using it to give rhetorical presence of a transcendent public space—a center that can potentially include all who are willing to compromise—in which the possibility of “getting things done” politically always remains in spite of differences of party.

To claim, as Clinton does, that the political center can “hold” is thus, among other things, to reassure ourselves (rightly or wrongly, depending on the situation) of something crucial to almost any understanding of democratic politics: The possibility that in the absence of coercion a free people can still transcend their divisions to arrive at general agreements on matters of mutual concern. What I will call “centrist rhetoric” is the name for a recurring symbolic action that maintains this possibility of transcendence. It does so, I will show, by constantly evoking a space beyond politics to invent what are unmistakably political arguments, that is, strategically driven arguments about contested matters of power, policy, and identity. Inherent in the inventional potential of the center is hence an irony, indeed a productive paradox, that is lodged in its fundamental rhetorical makeup and that serves as the leitmotif of this book. The call for transcendence arouses my curiosity as a rhetorician

precisely because it is always alloyed with the strategic goals of those who issue it. Centrist rhetoric is always dependent, in other words, on an appeal to the partial, and thus potentially divisive, passions and perspectives of those to whom it is addressed. As the *New York Times* reporter covering Clinton's speech to the DLC put it, the occasion was used not only to call for a rapprochement with Republicans, but "to celebrate the success of the centrist strategy that helped re-elect him."³

The reporter's comments stress the strategic rhetoricity of the center as a trope of partisan transcendence that, for Clinton, simultaneously served his partisan ends. That this common trope for transcendence is always implicated in the partisan textures and motives that inspire its use (and that it characteristically denies) renders it somewhat strange. The productive and prominent role of the center in contemporary political discourse, in turn, raises larger questions about the contradictory fashion in which calls to transcend left and right increasingly shape our most salient political controversies

The political center is consistently identified with a site at which ideological controversies are soothed, but finds its only home in an increasingly unbalanced global political ecology that resembles, in Kenneth Burke's tragicomic coinage, "Babel after the Fall."⁴ Along these lines, the political actor who embraces the center will construct a vision of potential unity that remains apparent and unfinished in spite of its claim to be real and complete. Such a vision seemingly includes all, but actually cannot include all, if only because of the inevitabilities of choice in any democracy, not to mention the causes of faction which, as James Madison eloquently argued, are "sown in the nature of man . . . everywhere brought into different degrees of activity, according to the different circumstances of civil society."⁵

Because no political path can lead to all places, because any path must favor some desires and policies over others, there will always be obstacles impeding the rhetorical success of any call to transcendence. Such calls demand choices, and choices have consequences. Not everyone will or even can be persuaded that transcendence has been achieved in a particular case, and so opposition inevitably arises. And the centrist rhetor comes to deal with this opposition in any number of ways—to diminish its significance, to persuade adversaries of their folly, to label them as intransigent, to co-opt their message, and so on. In short, even as it calls into being a space in which transcendence seems possible, centrist rhetoric must enter into the very fray it ostensibly aims to transcend if it is ever to gain adherents and stave off those who might derail its particular goals in a given case. Or, said otherwise, this kind of rhetoric needs to take a side, while at the same time it needs us to believe that, on some level, it has gone beyond the ordinary and conventional taking of sides. It needs to live in Babel and not-Babel at the same time.

THE DOUBLE LIFE OF CENTRIST RHETORIC

How does centrist rhetoric effectively live this double life in different circumstances? Should we see its basic contradictions as signs of bad faith or incoherence? Or is the civic character of the center more elusive than that? Clinton's victory speech to the DLC illustrates the ironies contained in rhetorics of the center, hints at the many insights that Burke will offer about the stubborn and rhetorically productive nature of these ironies, and sets the stage for what will follow.

Drawing from four case studies in rhetorical criticism, *Centrist Rhetoric* argues two basic points. First, Bill Clinton used the center as a complex, mostly tacit figure of argument to advance his political goals, define his adversaries, and overcome key political challenges in the period between 1989 and 1996.⁶ Second, as centrist rhetoric helped Clinton to achieve strategic advantage, it also yielded ambiguous and dense scenes for democratic polity that weaved together forms of identification and division in subtle and important ways. By studying these rhetorical constructions, I seek general insight into the workings of political rhetoric, and a specific appreciation of Clinton's attempts to define and adjust to the political exigencies of this period in the United States. As such, my account joins a small, but growing, effort in communication studies to come to terms with the history and meaning of the Clinton presidency as a rhetorical phenomenon.

No fewer than four edited collections of essays currently exist covering a wide range of topics related directly to Clinton's presidential rhetoric.⁷ Shawn J. Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles have authored a book-length study arguing that the "often contradictory but always intriguing, constructions of his personal and political image" reflect broader patterns of image-making in contemporary presidential politics.⁸ In a different and more traditionally rhetorical vein, John M. Murphy has highlighted Clinton's ability to meld together distinct political and religious traditions, as well as his capacity to offer a coherent model of deliberation focused on cultivating political judgment.⁹ And Jason A. Edwards has brought needed attention to Clinton's foreign policy rhetoric.¹⁰ This is just a sample of the scholarship on Clinton's rhetoric culled from a range of sources that continues to grow and add to our understanding.

Despite the scholarship on the Clinton presidency coming from communication, political science, history, and other disciplines, basic questions about the forty-second president's legacy as an orator have yet to be addressed. By focusing the present study on centrist rhetoric, I point to one such question: How and to what ends did Clinton's public address tap into the longing for consensus, which has long characterized the grammar of America's dominant

political imaginary?¹¹ Attention to a core feature of what Jeffrey K. Tulis has called the “rhetorical presidency” helps to define the terms of this question more precisely.

For Tulis, the rhetorical presidency is not a phenomenon isolated from the dominant cultural and social myths that steered democratic self-understanding in the United States during the last century. Its emergence amounts to more than a “fact of institutional change.”¹² The rhetorical presidency enacts a paradigm of presidential leadership that arises out of what Tulis deems “the promise of popular leadership [that] is at the core of dominant interpretations of our political order.”¹³ To see the presidency in this fashion is to stress its function as a site for fundamental processes of political discourse, ones that generate basic understandings of “how our whole political system works, of the contemporary problems of governance we face, and of how polity ought to function.”¹⁴ Such discourse helps to furnish citizens with “the very equipment they need to assess its use—the metaphors, categories, and concepts of political discourse.”¹⁵

Presidential rhetoric provides not simply instrumental means of executive power, in other words, but constitutive frameworks for citizens to grasp and evaluate the character of democratic governance. If, as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson have argued, any “president must be able to speak for the nation—beyond its partisan divisions,” key cases in the advance of Clinton’s “rhetorical presidency” help us see how this capacity develops in practice.¹⁶ Clinton’s centrist rhetoric offers relevant and sufficiently complex topoi, that is, for engaging a larger problem that arises in trying to judge *any* appeal to rise above division and faction in electoral politics. I define the rhetorical practice behind this problem as the “production of political transcendence.”

THE PRODUCTION OF POLITICAL TRANSCENDENCE

Representative democracies require the ongoing production of abstract and necessarily ambiguous forms of collective identification. For democracies to remain viable in principle, citizens must have, at minimum, the rhetorical resources to imagine themselves not merely as separate units of a society, but as members of a polity, that is, a collective entity capable of collective self-governance over time. Nevertheless, for any call to transcendence to gain adherence in a given case, citizens must also make pleas for assent that inevitably stoke further divisions, if only on the conceptual or semantic level between notions that are always themselves ambiguous and contested—for example, the partisan and the nonpartisan, the particular good and the common

good, and so on. At some level, actual rhetors must fold their appeals to transcendence into *specific* pleas that point to some beliefs and actions over others and that draw power from the emotional attachments, cultural traditions, economic interests, and visions of propriety of those who they aim to persuade. Without the motivating power sparked by rhetoric's ability to tap into and then draw from the divisive conditions of social existence, it cannot move us to believe, never mind to act, in such a way to as to imagine ourselves as a public that can transcend these same conditions.

The tension between these rhetorical trajectories marks one of political rhetoric's most fundamental dilemmas. Thus since antiquity the study of rhetoric has focused, in part, on the means by which civic harmony and strife manage to coexist through rhetoric itself, or as Burke puts it, how when you "put identification and division ambiguously together, so that you cannot know for certain just where one ends and the other begins . . . you have the characteristic invitation to rhetoric."¹⁷ Such a perspective allows the partisan character of democratic discourse to be treated less as a barrier to democratic governance, than as a hermeneutically distinctive starting point from which to engage public address with what Burke calls "complete sophistication," or an attitude that strives to "contain both [the] transcendental and material ingredients" that comprise social action.¹⁸ The difference that it makes to focus on the conflicted character of centrist rhetoric in particular can be shown by reference to a certain understanding of the rhetorically productive nature of transcendence in general and its relation to democratic controversy in particular.

In order to distinguish my rhetorical understanding of the nature and place of transcendence in political discourse, it helps to identify the opposite role the notion has played in most versions of normative political theory. It pays to recognize Bryan Garsten's insight on the role that pejorative definitions of rhetoric play in such theories. Garsten has shown how a "rhetoric against rhetoric" has been integral to the foundation of modern and contemporary political theories. Despite their diversity these theories are routinely characterized by a shared anxiety over the "contentiousness that fuels and is fueled by oratory" and by a longing for a transcendent calculus beyond the contingencies of human judgment.¹⁹ Iris Marion Young argues that "at least since Plato a strain of Western philosophy has tried to theorize modes of rational discourse purified of rhetoric" that could underwrite democratic political order.²⁰ The claim that rationality could purify politics of rhetoric has been supported by the view, says Young, that "rational discourse [can] abstract from or transcend the situatedness of desire, interest, or historical specificity, and can be uttered and criticized solely in terms of its claims to truth."²¹

A rationalist view of the nature of transcendence and its relation to democracy, however, is neither the only, nor the most persuasive view. To this end, what Gerard Hauser has called “rhetorical democracy” is marked by the frank recognition that humans are not entirely rational beings. In politics, “the partisan impulse is present and not easily curbed by criteria of rationality” that offer any neutral way of overcoming differences in perspective.²² As a consequence, while rhetoric’s characteristic understanding of democracy values “the search for solutions to common problems with strangers who share them and who are our partners in relationships of mutual dependence,” it notably does not rely upon the assumption that any impartial perspective could exist apart from a political struggle to provide the grounds that would enable such a search.²³

Instead, the calls to transcendence that so often define democratic discourse are seen, by definition, as strategic productions. They arise not out of a suspension of the partisan, but amidst the wrangling of different partisan positions vying for assent. Thus what Thomas B. Farrell has called “a normative mission for rhetorical culture” involves fashioning a lived capacity for rhetorical judgment that is acutely habituated to the very swirl of partisan divisions and conflicting aims that characterize democracy; partisanship is not a problem to be solved in politics “but a universal feature of being human and therefore a resource to be used.”²⁴

When we start to consider the agon of partisanship as itself a “resource” for the sustenance of the mediatory ground of politics (rather than as something that can be done away with through recourse to universal or self-evident standards), then we can begin to define the particular role played by what I am calling the *production* of political transcendence: such rhetoric produces appeals to transcend division that are never *merely* appeals to transcend division, but structures of argument layered with more complex and ambiguous motives that arise in relation to particular objectives and goals that impose limits and steer value in discourse.

Defining productions of political transcendence as rhetorical creations that follow this logic suggests a loose hermeneutic protocol when examining centrist rhetoric: make explicit the tensions that emerge as Clinton sought to claim the space beyond partisanship. What this protocol also suggests is that for purposes of rhetorical judgment what matters most is not whether centrist rhetoric can be judged inclusive or exclusive, edifying or mystifying, by a single, self-evident standard. Rather, what matters is bringing into discussion how such rhetoric fashions for assent (*produce* rather than simply arrive at) the vantages of transcendence that audiences need in order to draw such distinctions in the first place. To make oppositions in the political field seem resolvable involves the introduction of a point of view—a way of seeing left

and right “in terms of” the center—that exceeds them and that theoretically can elude being drawn into the limited perspectival position of either.

Burke, for instance, defines transcendence as a process of transforming opposites: “When approached from a certain point of view, A and B are ‘opposites.’ We mean by ‘transcendence’ the adoption of another point of view from which they cease to be opposites.”²⁵ The implications for democratic discourse of Burke’s simple definition are as subtle as they are important. Elsewhere, he describes transcendence as involving “processes whereby something HERE is interpreted *in terms of* something THERE, something beyond itself,” leading him to coin such processes “modes of ‘beyonding.’”²⁶ In both cases, Burke defines transcendence as a kind of figural movement (more on that below) that allows for the rhetorical generation of a “higher” perspective.

While such a perspective presumes to exist at a more general and pliable level of discourse than that occupied by simple oppositions, it also seeks to keep such oppositions in play for contrastive purposes. This higher, unified perspective constantly gathers privilege and authority from the force of such a contrast. Burke hints at this twist when he discusses the kind of transcendence that routinely characterizes the liberal democracies of our time:

In the bourgeois body politic, even *politicians* damn an opponent’s motive by calling it *political*; and professional partisans like to advocate their measures as transcending factional antitheses. Candidates for office say, in effect: “Vote for our faction, which is better able to *mediate between the factions*.”²⁷

What Burke seems to be pointing to here is a “mode of beyonding” whose potential for rhetorical success depends not simply on convincing audiences that one has transcended faction. More importantly it depends on effecting a contrastive appeal, an effective hierarchy that leaves “them” seemingly fighting on the plane of faction, while elevating “us” beyond this very fight.

As I will show throughout my analysis, centrist rhetoric repeatedly features this very form of appeal. It argues its position is qualitatively different and better *because it stands in contrast* to division. It produces this alignment against division through form. Centrist rhetoric creates bridges between particular claims and transcendence as a general and vitally democratic value. It defines division between factions as a regrettable state of civic life that can be resolved by reconstituting the frame through which such division is meaningful. For this to work, the movement beyond faction must be felt to exist on a level beyond any faction, in fact, on a level that will continually be able to do a certain democratic work in creating consensus. And yet, this effectiveness can only be possible because of a special connection between the conditions of assent and the contrastive act. The implied addressee of claims that “damn”

any kind of political motive must be thought of, if only by implication, as beyond faction. On the other hand, the rhetorical function of such an imagined addressee is precisely to offer audiences a particular identity that is *not* that of one's adversary but that fits, on some level, with "our faction."²⁸

Thus, unlike the rationalist approach to transcendence as a sheer overcoming of partisan interests and attachments, my approach is fully rhetorical. It treats as decisive the marshalling of rhetorical effects of transcendence in light of factors such as circumstance, exigency, and the available means of persuasion. And, importantly, it understands transcendence as a fundamentally metaphorical process of invention.

ON THE UNIQUE RHETORICITY OF THE CENTER AS AN INVENTIONAL METAPHOR

Transcendence for Burke is allied closely with the inventional function of metaphor, and the center's relation to this function can be seen from three angles. First, like any metaphor, the center involves arrangements of "perspective"; metaphors are "for seeing something in terms of something else."²⁹ Second, like some metaphors, the center helps to arrange rhetorical possibilities not only when invoked explicitly, but when operative tacitly through entailment and negation. Chaïm Perelman has argued that "the idea of the center, to which continuing value attaches in our civilization" emerges, for example, in relation to principles captured by the figure's tie to images of various ways relating a circumference to its essential core.³⁰ We can expect to find the center at work, in other words, even when it is not named as such. Third, because the tacit power of such conceptual metaphors to shape discourse arises in connection to their ambiguous and often "invisible" role, understanding the perspective-making capacity of the center in political discourse requires a balance between close, case-specific analyses, and a broader description of its genealogy.

Reflecting the influence of a pervasive visual taxonomy that has endured for more than two centuries, liberal democracies across the world continue to rely on a left-right schema to represent the basic terrain of social and political division.³¹ This reliance helps to explain why it is the image of a center equidistant from each extreme that most clearly captures the site at which the production of political transcendence typically transpires.

Absent in name from the common touchstones of early-twentieth-century political rhetoric, one can point to 1949 as a pivotal juncture in the rhetorical history of the center in American politics. In that year, the historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. borrowed a passage from W. B. Yeats's famous poem "The

Second Coming” to provide the title for his influential book *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom*. Published amid anxieties about the future of liberal democracy after two world wars and fears about rising antidemocratic forces in the United States, *The Vital Center* called for “a revival of the *élan* of democracy, and a resurgence of the democratic faith.”³² Against the utopianisms of communism on the left and fascism on the right, Schlesinger appealed to “the spirit of the center—the spirit of human decency, opposing the extremes of tyranny.”³³ Schlesinger argued that the nation had to “restore the center, to reunite individual and community in a fruitful union” in order to make democracy safe from the threat of totalitarianism.³⁴

While the bipolar geopolitical paradigm that informed his famous book has faded, Schlesinger’s way of describing the specific attributes of the “vital center” has not, and this durability stands out in at least two primary ways in the cases below. First, Schlesinger uses the center to mark a principled resistance to extremism. The center claims to provide a kind of stability that does not stifle disagreement, but instead allows it to become constructive and transformative, thus delivering on the very promise of democratic politics. Second, the center can perform its unique function because, unlike left and right, it is treated as a preexisting object or “spirit” that is presumptively non-political and nonrhetorical in its nature.

The economist Anthony Downs, writing just years after Schlesinger, offers a representative example of both tendencies. In outlining his influential “median voter” theory, Downs defines a strong center as the *sine qua non* of democratic governance; it is either present or not: “Whether democracy can lead to stable government depends upon whether the mass of voters is centrally conglomerated, or lumped at the extremes with low density in the center; only in the former case will democracy really work.”³⁵ What the center affords Downs’s argument is a way a defining a potential for unanimity that does not arise out of democracy, but is actually its social precondition. As with Schlesinger, Downs uses the center to name a political and social referent upon which democratic politics depends to maintain its stability and legitimacy.

And yet, by treating the center as an object to which language refers, a certain conceptual dynamic is created by Schlesinger and Downs that need not be replicated in our analysis: They treat the center as a univocal “presence” cordoned *off* from rhetorical practice, rather than a site *of* rhetorical practice.³⁶ Although they do not say it explicitly, what is crucial for both Schlesinger and Downs is that an absence of rhetoric at the center allows them to give a concrete and stable form to the possibility of transcendence. Contrary to these ways of defining the center as a stable referent, I treat the center as a protean topos of civic discourse that does not name anything to which language refers

unambiguously. Unlike a political culture, tradition, or ideology, all of which can be at least hypothetically reduced to a set of general claims, the center allows for no such reduction. It is not a proposition about politics but a common metaphor from which political propositions themselves arise and assume various kinds of significance and force.

Defining the center as a metaphor serves us well in supporting an analysis of the center's inventional qualities as a topos. Doing so helps to carve out a perspective that resists the referentialist tendencies of its leading advocates—such as Schlesinger—as well as those of the chorus of critics who find in political centrism a distortion of the true nature of political struggle (more on those critics in the conclusion). By definition, commonplaces can be neither false, nor true in any sense. They do not refer to a preordained reality, but enable and constrain our ways of engaging issues of controversy and of making judgments about such issues. They are what Rosa Eberly aptly calls “recurring inventional structures” which serve as both the “source and limitation for further discussion and deliberation” over matters of mutual concern.³⁷ Considered as a topos, then, we can say that the center helps rhetors to invent a stable, objective presence beyond division that citizens can potentially access *as if* apart from their partisan allegiances.

This last point is crucial. For once we recognize the inventional potential of the center to continually evoke a such a presence strategically, once we come to see that the center, at the same time, cannot exist apart from the field of differences it claims to transcend “in terms of” its imagined higher unity, the topos lends itself to analysis as the site of recurring discourse effects that depend on the ongoing work of rhetoric to succeed. To *be* itself, the center must *become* itself rhetorically; it must constantly align with a transcendence of the contingent field of political division it seeks to address. In national politics, to argue from the center is not simply to acknowledge both sides of a controversy but to transform the profusion of partisan statements, institutions, and identities into a manageable scene in which the dramas of politics seem coherent and resolvable.

JUDGING CENTRIST RHETORIC AND THE DEMOCRATIC CHALLENGE OF “COMPLETE SOPHISTICATION”

As an inventional topos crucial to Clinton's public address, the center grounds the production of political transcendence in the cases I analyze below; it conjures an imagined point of overcoming division, while affording the rhetorical means for gaining strategic advantage. In this role, it reveals how the routine call to move past partisan attachments provides an ideal—perhaps the

ideal—means by which to cloak partisan motives, and, in particular, those of established forms of social order. Framed in this manner (i.e., as both a democratically constructive and ideologically inflected strategic discourse) what I have called the “double life” of centrist rhetoric offers an opportunity to grapple critically with an historical form that attends the search for consensus in American political discourse. The rhetoric that gives life and meaning to such a search is particularly in need of critique, Sacvan Bercovitch argues, because its constitutive duality provides a point of entry into the relation between discourse and history.

In the tension between the “rhetoric of consensus” that has guided America’s dominant political myths, and the inconsistencies such rhetoric has continually attempted to redefine for its own purposes—for example, “when Tocqueville wrote his myth of egalitarian democracy, one percent of Americans owned almost half the wealth of America”—Bercovitch finds a critical compass for understanding. For such rhetoric can reveal the means by which majorities in the United States come to maintain an attachment to the possibility and desirability of democratic consensus despite evidence of continuing division and hierarchy. In its blurring of identifications and divisions, such rhetoric “provides us with a map of social reality . . . [and] locates the sources of social revitalization and integration” in a given era while, at the same time, marking the “terms of hegemonic constraint.”³⁸ In this spirit, I concentrate on how Clinton’s centrist rhetoric reflected such forms of constraint, while appealing to an imagined consensus that was more than simply an illusion.

As Thomas Farrell has argued, public deliberation involves the circulation of a “peculiar kind of consensus” that is “attributed to an audience rather than concretely shared” and thus, strictly speaking, the product of strategic rhetorical acts.³⁹ This attributed and rhetorically fabricated consensus entails not simply a tacit realm of shared understanding or reference, but what Farrell has elsewhere called a “more purposeful consensus, a practical consciousness [that] must be invoked if . . . rhetoric is to play a constructive role in ongoing communication.”⁴⁰ Democracy draws, in other words, from a rhetorically maintained promise that agreements can be reached to transform conflicting preferences into collective warrants that will guide policy and coordinate action. Likewise, my approach to the task of judging particular artifacts of Clinton’s centrist rhetoric keeps in the forefront the role of what Burke has called those “mystifications [that are] implicit in the very act of persuasion itself,” that cannot be eliminated, and that are, at once, detrimental to, and yet necessary for, engaging in democratic deliberation.⁴¹

While programs to rid language of these kinds of mystifications are often supported by rationalist assumptions that I do not accept, my approach

throughout *Centrist Rhetoric* aspires to a sympathetic reconstruction of their democratic value, while also training a politically and hermeneutically suspicious eye on their hidden implications for certain groups, ideas, and aspirations. Burke's "comic frame of motives" serves as a prompt in this fashion, since it emphasizes how critical attitudes and perspectives can align with a certain mode of democratic citizenship.

Burke directly associates his "comic" frame with the very survival of democracy, claiming that "democracy can be maintained only through *complete sophistication*."⁴² In advocating this ethico-hermeneutic stance for the citizens of any democratic polity, Burke is making a foundational claim about democratic politics: It is defined by ironies that debunking misconstrues as somehow deviations from some more perfect form when, in fact, they are constitutive of democracy itself. The debunker of transcendence aims to undercut rhetorical distortions that would benefit some more than others, but, in the process, risks undermining the rhetorical resources for democracy, much like Burke's hypothetical doctor who "would prevent heart trouble by getting rid of hearts."⁴³

In contrast, I strive to keep my heart throughout what follows. For if democracy is comprised of an inevitable mixing of transcendental imaginings with partisan motives, this truth applies in a unique manner to centrist rhetoric's own recipe for success. It cooks up a public address that seeks to particularize the promise of transcendence in such a way as to make it attractive, to stylize specific visions of an imagined consensus, to cut these visions into shapes that are appealing to masses, palatable to dominant ideologies, and appropriate to the unique character of distinct contexts. By seeking out the manner in which an irresolvable duality of public address becomes the enabling condition for a specific discourse, I hope to share with readers if not a method of criticism, at the very least a rough guide to what to look for when encountering similar paradoxes in public life.

Chapter 1 offers a close reading of two early texts that were pivotal to Clinton's ascent to the top tier of Democratic contenders for the nomination. Both texts offer distinct perspective on the rhetorical link between the formation of a centrist ethos, the quest for the presidency, and the reification of democratic polity so important to the New Democrats as an electoral strategy. Chapter 2 moves from this early period to the summer of 1992 when Clinton, who had fallen to third place in the national polls, began his resurgence with a speech before the Rainbow Coalition that singled out the rap artist Sister Souljah for her controversial comments following the Los Angeles riots. Clinton's remarks set off a firestorm of commentary whose rhetorical contradictions mirror those of Clinton's speech, while revealing a curious connection between centrist rhetoric and uses of whiteness in the post-civil rights era.

Chapter 3 looks at Clinton's response to the Oklahoma City bombing in April and May of 1995. I show how in blending his moving encomia to the fallen with an implication of Republicans in the attack, Clinton used centrist rhetoric to advance a case for political transcendence that allowed him to reclaim his power after a disastrous midterm election. Chapter 4 moves to an analysis of two key moments in the rhetoric that defined the final year of Clinton's first term in office and helped carry him to reelection. As he declared an end to the "era of big government" and later signed a popular, if controversial, welfare reform bill, Clinton fashioned a narrative of national community renewed by the end of ideological conflict over social and economic policy. My concluding chapter takes up the larger question of whether Clinton's centrist rhetoric, in light of its internal contradictions and the events of his second term, could be considered beneficial for the future of civic discourse in the United States or, as his critics have argued, ultimately detrimental.

NOTES

1. "Remarks at a Democratic Leadership Council Luncheon," *Public Papers of the Presidents, William J. Clinton, 1996* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996) 2:2184–91.

2. Erik W. Doxtader, "Characters in the Middle of Public Life: Consensus, Dis-sent, and Ethos," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 33 (2000): 338.

3. Todd S. Purdum, "Clinton Promises to Create a 'Coalition of the Center,'" *New York Times*, December 12, 1996, B22.

4. Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 23.

5. See www.constitution.org/fed/federa10.htm (accessed October 26, 2009).

6. The book's focus on events tied to his first campaign and administration is dictated largely by the convergence of political, social, and historical factors in the early 1990s that offered specific opportunities and themes for Clinton to develop and then exploit in the arena of electoral politics. I define these factors below. The scope of the book is also determined by another major factor: much of Clinton's second term was dominated by the Lewinsky scandal, which significantly altered the discursive landscape in Washington and presented a different kind of rhetorical challenge to Clinton than that of establishing himself as a centrist.

7. *Bill Clinton on Stump, State, and Stage*, ed. Stephen A. Smith (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1994); *The Clinton Presidency: Images, Issues, and Communication Strategies*, ed. Robert E. Denton Jr. and Rachel L. Holloway (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996); *Preface to the Presidency: Selected Speeches of Bill Clinton, 1974–1992*, ed. Stephen A. Smith (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1996); and *Images, Scandal, and Communication Strategies of the Clinton Presidency*, ed. Robert E. Denton Jr. and Rachel L. Holloway (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003).

8. Shawn J. Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles, *Constructing Clinton: Hyper-reality & Presidential Image-Making in Postmodern Politics* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

9. John M. Murphy, "Inventing Authority: Bill Clinton, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Orchestration of Rhetorical Traditions," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 83 (1997): 71–89; and "To Form a More Perfect Union," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 8 (2005): 657–78.

10. Jason Edwards, *Navigating the Post–Cold War World: President Clinton's Foreign Policy Rhetoric* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008).

11. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations of the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Frederick Dolan, *Allegories of America: Narratives, Metaphysics, Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955).

12. Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 4.

13. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, 4.

14. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, 4.

15. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, 203.

16. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Presidents Creating the Presidency: Deeds Done in Words* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 13.

17. Burke, *Rhetoric*, 23.

18. Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes towards History*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 166–75.

19. Bryan Garsten, *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 16. For a related argument, see Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

20. Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion* (New York: Oxford, 2002), 65.

21. Young, *Inclusion*, 65.

22. Hauser's argument represents a characteristically rhetorical view of democracy that would see transcendence as both necessary, and yet always in some fashion partisan and partial in its character. Gerard Hauser, "Rhetorical Democracy and Civic Engagement," in *Rhetorical Democracy: Discursive Practices of Civic Engagement*, ed. Gerard Hauser and Amy Grim (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002), 12.

23. Hauser, "Rhetorical Democracy," 12.

24. Thomas B. Farrell, *Norms of Rhetorical Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 100.

25. Burke, *Attitudes*, 336.

26. Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 200. Emphasis is in the original.

27. Burke, *Attitudes*, 79. Emphasis is in the original.

28. Along these lines, Burke has spoken of how “the ideal culminations” of rhetoric are often those in which “their very universality becomes transformed into a partisan weapon.” *Rhetoric*, 23. On how this same dynamic can be seen in terms of Chaïm Perelman’s concept of the “universal audience,” see Antonio Raul de Velasco, “Rethinking Perelman’s Universal Audience: Political Dimensions of a Controversial Concept,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 35 (Spring 2005): 47–64.

29. Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1945), 503.

30. Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, trans. John Wilkerson and Purcell Weaver (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1960), 383.

31. As J. A. Laponce recounts, shortly after the terms “left” and “right” entered the vocabulary of politics during sessions of the French Estates General in the summer of 1789, this figuration of political difference extended beyond the confines of the assembly hall, spread throughout continental Europe, and eventually became what he calls a “worldwide political mythology” (28). See *Left and Right: The Topography of Political Perceptions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981). For a more critical and philosophically informed account of the history of the left-right schema, see Norberto Bobbio, *Left and Right: The Significance of a Political Distinction*, trans. Allan Cameron (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

32. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1949), 251.

33. Schlesinger, *Vital Center*, 256.

34. Schlesinger, *Vital Center*, 256.

35. Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper Collins, 1957), 139.

36. This observation, along with much of the argument I offer in this section, borrows from Jacques Derrida’s understanding of constitutive role of the center in any structure of meaning. See “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Science,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 278–93.

37. Rosa Eberly, *Citizen Critics: Literary Public Spheres* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 5. The literature on commonplaces is vast, and Eberly lays out one of the best cases for their use in rhetorical criticism. For an account of the notion of the topos that shines light on its complex history, see Michael Leff, “The Topics of Argumentative Invention from Cicero to Boethius,” *Rhetorica* 1 (1983): 23–44.

38. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Rites of Assent: Transformations of the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 47.

39. Thomas B. Farrell, “Knowledge, Consensus, and Rhetorical Theory,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 62 (1976): 6.

40. Farrell, *Norms*, 251.

41. Burke, *Rhetoric*, 179.

42. Burke, *Attitudes*, 168.

43. Burke, *Attitudes*, 172.

Chapter One

New Democrat Strategy

Crafting a Vital Center for the 1992 Presidential Campaign

It's not enough to just to say you have moved to the center, trust us. You have to lay out a rationale that says, "This time you can trust us." It's the difference between Bad Godesberg and Brighton.¹

Then-Governor Bill Clinton offered these words on what makes for effective centrist rhetoric at a particularly significant moment in his presidential candidacy. Britain's Labor Party had just suffered an unexpected loss to Conservatives in the parliamentary elections of April 1992, a defeat that crushed their hope to take back power after years of Tory rule. Having prepared a speech commemorating Labor's expected triumph as the first gust in "a wind of change sweeping across the Atlantic," Clinton was forced to scrap the speech and to wonder, instead, why he could not count on such a "wind" to lift his own party to victory in the coming months. Like Labor in the United Kingdom, Democrats in the United States were deep into a process, led in large part by Clinton himself, of revamping their national image after a string of rebukes from voters who had once loyally supported them. And, like Labor, the focus of the Democrats' strategy for renewal was its claim to have moved beyond the ideology of its left wing and toward a "center" that transcended existing political division. As Clinton saw it, however, Labor's centrist rhetoric was ineffective primarily because it lacked credibility. His interpretation is not merely speculative; its practical and strategic qualities are strongly implied. Clinton hints, in other words, that he, as the one soon to become the Democrats' nominee, has the missing ingredient, the one that could make the Democrats' move to the center seem less like a temporary feint and more like a substantive and lasting change whose messengers could be trusted.

By favoring Bad Godesberg (the town by the Rhine where West Germany's Social Democrats dramatically renounced Marxism in 1959 to regain their electoral footing) over Brighton (the town near London where Labor had recently tried to establish a similar break with its past without the same success) Clinton suggests two things about what would be required to make centrist rhetoric work for his own party. First, its effectiveness would depend on Democrats using rhetoric to establish a new identity. They had to learn to define themselves as trustworthy through a "rationale" that could somehow match (and thus help to prove) their claim to have "moved to the center." Those who speak on behalf of Democrats must seem like those who have genuinely moved from one place to another—and will not be going back. Second, this attention to credibility as creating the impression of closeness to, if not identity with, the center would also involve effecting a certain distance not only from the left, but from the past. The line from the left to the center is also one from yesterday to today. The "this time" in Clinton's remarks highlights the importance of appeals that could rearrange wider perceptions of the Democrats' relation to their own history. Clinton seems to argue that openly recognizing the errors of the party's past could become the first step in learning how to convince others of the sincerity of the Democrats' transformation.

In this rhetoric of promises involving movements from one (bad/past) place to another (good/future) one, the "rationale" for gaining trust would thus try to bring together these two elements to make the move to the center seem real, timely, and attractive. It would focus on the ethotic dimensions of its political discourse in order to advance the "new" Democrats' claim to be suited for democratic governance. Their claim to have moved to the center, an act whose success Clinton himself makes synonymous with gaining the trust and support of the electorate, needed to base itself not merely in new policies or personalities, but in the project of reconstituting party identity to become a more effective resource for argument. The main institutional site of such a project in the 1980s and 1990s was the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC).

Chaired during much of this period by Clinton, the DLC was the organizational home for the "New Democrats," a term which identified its members with the party, while distinguishing them, via a temporal metaphor, from those allied with its more liberal factions. Indeed, as Jeff Faux wrote at the time, "the spine of the New Democrats' argument is this: the Democratic Party has been dominated by its extreme leftwing, which is out of touch with middle-class America."² The group defined itself, then, in terms of specifically addressing the party's eroding national standing, while offering a strategy to win the presidency for a Democratic candidate amid such conditions

of erosion. To achieve these aims, the DLC argued against a continuation of the liberal politics of the 1960s and 1970s and sought to supplant memories of Jimmy Carter's failed presidency with a new vision of Democratic, national-political leadership. It was an alternative that, born in the attempt to pinpoint what had caused the party's series of electoral routs and missteps, nevertheless found solace in the belief that though voters no longer confided in Democrats, they were nearly as skeptical of Republicans.

As a DLC proposal that appeared several months before Clinton's entrance into the presidential race saw it, political opportunity could be found in the ability of Democrats to harness voter "dissatisfaction" with *both* parties:

The declining fortunes of the Democratic Party, however, have not yet produced a decisive shift toward the Republicans—and therefore the future for Democrats is not unrelievedly weak. Voters are increasingly dissatisfied with both parties. . . . And rightly so, for neither alternative addresses the real national challenges of the 1990s. This is the opportunity we urge our fellow Democrats to seize. The hard work of revitalizing the Democratic Party begins with the dismal truth of analysis, but it ends with a hopeful new politics that moves our party and our country neither left nor right, but forward.³

To seize such an "opportunity" would therefore be to recognize something specific about voters—their frustration with both parties—and to identify with—"and rightly so"—the basic reasonableness of this frustration. To alleviate such "dissatisfaction," in turn, would be to give voters what they want by occupying those discursive spaces where the potential for political "opportunity" might dwell alongside voter frustration with both left and right. But if Democrats were to do this, argued the DLC, if they were to come out on the other side of this frustration with partisan division that defines American politics, they needed to start with the facts. They needed to come together around, if not a single conclusion, at least a shared belief in the power of "analysis" to unfold the kind of political and empirical "truth" that should, regardless of its "dismal" implications, be accepted. What entices amidst this yielding to analysis is ultimately the presumption that the truth it produces will set off a process that ends with hope and forward movement. A "hopeful new politics" was the DLC's promised outcome to a painful labor of reappraising what before was accepted as political truth. If this work of "revitalization" is trying, it is also civically virtuous, because it transcends the partisan in its move forward, and electorally rewarding, because it has the potential to bring the party back to power. In this scheme, to move left or right is to remain in the world of voter dissatisfaction with democracy; to eschew left and right by moving to the center, in contrast, is to invent a politics that "addresses the real national challenges of the 1990s" while winning back the presidency.

This chapter looks at how and to what ends the basic inventional process that defines these two passages structures the larger centrist discourse of the New Democrats from the same period. I examine two texts—a landmark critique of Democratic politics produced by the DLC in 1989 and a widely heralded speech delivered by Clinton at a DLC gathering in 1991. I show how as the New Democrats sought to revitalize the party and “move” it to the center, they relied on overlapping modes of contrastive, ethotic proof. In doing so, I argue, they sought to produce the vision of a new politics beyond left and right by using the center as a figure of ideal democratic representation and innovation, while at the same time selectively constraining both qualities for their own strategic objectives of garnering the financial support and influence necessary to elect a New Democrat to the presidency in 1992. I start by contextualizing my analysis in terms of the DLC’s emergence amidst internal Democratic conflicts. By sketching a broad outline of how the DLC defined itself in terms of such conflicts, I set the stage for my subsequent textual analysis of the rhetorical moves that structure the DLC’s claim to the center.

BACK TO THE “MAINSTREAM”: THE DLC’S “BLOODLESS REVOLUTION”

The New Democrat message appeals to the vast political center . . . it is a new public philosophy—a synthesis of progressive ideas and non-bureaucratic approaches to governing, grounded in mainstream values.”⁴

The newness of the New Democrats’ “new public philosophy” is somewhat complicated, since the DLC formed at the intersection of an array of existing and differently situated grievances that can be traced to struggles for power that had begun years earlier. In the aftermath of George McGovern’s landslide loss in 1972, the remains of the Democrats’ urban-labor New Deal coalition, its emerging (if fragmented) federation of liberal activist groups, and its white Southern bloc—that is, those who had yet to leave the party—vied for influence. This turmoil created what Bruce Miroff calls “the identity crisis of the Democratic Party” from which the DLC emerged.⁵ The symbolic field of such an identity crisis defined the backdrop of the DLC’s early rhetorical history. Regional, class, racial, and ideological division within the Democratic Party, recrimination over the blame for such divisions, and related clashes over how to redress the party’s resulting electoral slide—all of these conspired to open the way for the DLC’s formation.

In an essay documenting its history, Jon Hale describes a process that started in 1981 soon after Jimmy Carter lost to Ronald Reagan. In January of that year, thirty-seven House Democrats, under the direction of Louisiana

Representative Gillis Long, formed the House Democratic Caucus Committee on Party Effectiveness. Hale calls this group—largely Southern and on the whole more conservative than the House Democratic caucus as a whole—the “first organizational embodiment” of the New Democrats. Its main focus was to win back previously reliable Democratic constituencies that had been swayed by Reagan’s campaign against liberalism and drawn into the wake of the country’s growing conservative movement.⁶ After Reagan was reelected in 1984 with even greater support from these voters, Alvin From, Long’s chief advisor and executive director of the committee, joined a group of Southern senators and governors to form the DLC in February 1985.

As one of its members later told the *New York Times*, the basic purpose of the DLC was “to get out from under the false image that Democrats are weak on defense, have weird lifestyles and are big taxers and spenders.”⁷ Or, as one of its founders Georgia senator Sam Nunn said in announcing the formation of the DLC, the idea was to “move the party—both in substance and perception—back into the mainstream of American political life.”⁸ What this purpose demanded was a rhetoric that could effectively name the forces behind the party’s drift away from the “mainstream,” as well as charting a new identity in contrast to these forces. Both “getting out from under the false image” and moving “the party—both in substance and perception back into the mainstream” describe acts of concentrated redefinition, in other words, the posing of clear rhetorical divisions between false and true “images” of the party, between values and identities deemed within the “mainstream” or outside it, and so on. The group had some early success in proving the electoral savvy of this approach—for example, in 1986, seven of the eleven Democrats who helped their party recapture the Senate were DLC members. They also attracted media coverage, gained the support of elected officials beyond the group’s Southern base, raised significant funds by attracting unrestricted corporate dollars, and succeeded in pushing through major changes in the presidential nominating process.⁹

At the core of this plan was what From, in a memo to Clinton, called, a “bloodless revolution”:

Make no mistake about it, what we hope to accomplish with the DLC is a bloodless revolution in our party. It is not unlike what the conservatives accomplished in the Republican Party during the 1960s and 1970s. By building their movement . . . with Ronald Reagan as their standard bearer, they were able to nominate their candidate for President and elect him, and in the process, redefine both the Republican Party and the national public policy agenda.¹⁰

Aimed at weakening the influence of liberal activists and interest groups in the party, this hoped-for “revolution” imagined a “standard bearer” presidential

candidate who could put their centrist stamp not only on the party, but, like Reagan had ostensibly done, on the nation's politics as a whole. And so it is unsurprising that Michael Dukakis's defeat in 1988—the Democrats fifth presidential loss out of the previous six presidential elections—created a singular opportunity for DLC principals, including Bill Clinton. After Dukakis lost in the fall elections, the DLC found a party more eager than ever to find a clear message that could explain its decline and make the critique of such decline into a spark of resurgence. The DLC could offer both things, and in terms of both policy and strategy. As Kenneth S. Baer points out of the Dukakis aftermath, “Almost overnight, the DLC went from the brink of irrelevance to the center of a debate on how to rejuvenate the Democratic Party.”¹¹

Baer's history of the DLC, *Reinventing Democrats: The Politics of Liberalism from Reagan to Clinton*, picks up where Hale's earlier essay left off, giving readers a comprehensive account of the group's evolution from its earliest days to the end of the Clinton presidency. In a review of the book, however, the rhetorician and Clinton scholar John M. Murphy offers a lament that I share: Baer should have “studied some rhetoric in order to explain” crucial moments in the evolution and success of the DLC's strategy to “reinvent” the party. As an illustration of one such rhetorical moment, Murphy cites the publication of the “Politics of Evasion: Democrats and the Presidency,” which he rightly asserts “played an enormous role in setting the course of the DLC . . . and outlined the rhetorical strategy to be followed by Governor Clinton” in his 1992 presidential campaign. Judging the document “a powerful piece of political rhetoric” that Baer fails to explain as such, Murphy closes his review by calling for a perspective that would ask, in his words: “How, indeed, does one rhetorically invent a Democrat?”¹²

Though offered somewhat in jest, this question intrigues because it directs us to a larger one that plays on the term “Democrat” itself. For while explanations like Faux's, Baer's, and Hale's yield nuanced insight into the personalities, as well as the institutional and historical factors surrounding the DLC's rise to power, they leave undiscussed the actual arrangements of meaning and appeal that fueled this rise. They ignore, in short, the rhetorical effort it takes for a Democratic identity to emerge, if only partly, “reinvented” and thus how this identity could later serve as a resource for persuasion. In particular, they leave out how these arrangements aligned with deeper claims about the ideal character of democratic political representation in the 1990s. Composed of six sections that take up just over nineteen pages, “The Politics of Evasion” offers a good look into this process of alignment.¹³

**DEBUNKING THE LEFT FROM THE CENTER:
"THE POLITICS OF EVASION," MARCH 10, 1989**

A rather insular text, the length, tone, and diction of this document suggest that it was written not for direct consumption by the electorate, but to influence the constituencies the DLC had long targeted for persuasion—for example, the media, corporate lobbyists and donors, party members seeking direction in a time of turmoil, and Democratic elected officials faced with the prospects of a damaged national “brand.” Published with an appendix and over forty-seven footnotes, its central claims are supported by evidence culled from contemporary survey data, statistical forecasting methods, and political science research more generally. It seems, at first blush, to rely solely on such proofs. Appropriately, then, its authors, William Galston and Elaine Ciulla Kamarck, define the purpose of their paper as primarily expository. They promise to “explore three pervasive themes in the politics of evasion” that have contributed to Democratic losses.¹⁴ These “themes” are identified as “myths,” which, over the course of the document, the authors promise to describe and debunk in some detail. There is “The Myth of Liberal Fundamentalism” (Democrats have failed because they have comprised their liberal principles); “The Myth of Mobilization” (Democrats could succeed if only they focused on getting more of their natural supporters to the polls); and “The Myth of the Congressional Bastion” (Democrats still control the majority of offices below the presidency, and so they merely need to find better presidential candidates and improve their tactics).

The answer the text offers as to *why* and *how* these myths have sustained themselves is ultimately contained in how it conjures an image of party leadership against which to establish its own. As the authors state at the onset, the Democrats have failed because “in place of reality they have offered wishful thinking; in place of analysis, myth.”¹⁵ This start, with its quick portrayal of Democrats as fundamentally deluded, as a “they” given to irrational wishes and myths, and thus incapable of sound judgment, reveals another truth about the “Politics of Evasion”: a realist, empirical sensibility enlivens the spirit of a keen polemic focused on discrediting its adversaries’ ability and worthiness to lead. Such a polemic trains its fire in terms of characterological antithesis, with the failings of its chief antagonist working to define the virtues of its own implied author by contrast. It seeks to establish the primacy of its “analysis,” and thus of the DLC, by making the “myths” it debunks a function of the ethical, political, and even psychological flaws of those who ostensibly believe them. The goal of such debunking is an openly confrontational one. As the document reveals at one point, it aims to spark an “active public

controversy that begins today, led by Democrats who are able to move beyond the politics of evasion” to convince voters that the rest of the party has done the same.¹⁶ With the “New Democrats” placing themselves in the category of the “able to move beyond,” the Democrats *unable* or unwilling to do the same were ready to be defined not simply as those caught in “evasion,” but as the reactionary, defensive, and self-interested defenders of the status quo.

Contemporary accounts of the initial presentation of the “Politics of Evasion” by Galston on March 10, 1989 (Kamarck would join him as a coauthor when the piece was published a few months later), at the DLC’s annual meeting in Philadelphia suggest that the group’s desire for a public controversy was satisfied almost immediately. Galston’s presentation was well-covered by major newspapers—for example, the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*—and network news shows—for example, PBS’s the “The MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour” and ABC’s “World News Tonight.” It also provoked an immediate, on-the-scene response from a leading liberal, African American Democrat, thus underscoring a visible rift between the DLC and sectors in the party it had long sought to isolate as politically problematic (more on that response in the subsequent chapter).

At the same time, the “Politics of Evasion” is as interesting for the political fireworks it set off as for how, in Baer’s words, “it quickly became part of the New Democratic canon” and, in particular, the DLC’s increasingly “adversarial stance toward the national party” at the time.¹⁷ In line with this shift, we see acts of contrast and dissociation working in the text, with named and unnamed sectors of the party playing a consistently negative role. And yet, these acts are not simply negative, but harness negativity instrumentally for a larger constructive enterprise. The authors aimed to reinvent a term—“Democrat”—associated with a failed approach to politics and governance and with those who represented this approach. In turn, they needed to provide both themselves and their audience the rhetorical resources to imagine a transformation in party identity. By putting this implicit rhetorical objective into the foreground, we can see one way that language works in the text. We can see how it unfolds and then follows in strategic ways the politically divisive implications of the topos of “evasion” contained in its title in order to establish, via negative example, its claim to the center. Working through a series of recurring maneuvers that draw from evasion’s associations with subterfuge, bad faith, and denial, the text equates its own truth with a more democratically legitimate and strategically wise perspective on democratic representation than that held at the time by the party. Along these lines, a certain kind of authority emerges at the start from the relationship of the text’s implied and actual authors.

Written by two political scientists, each with a foot in the world of party politics, the document presumes throughout that proper answers to questions of political strategy belong to those with the best and most recent survey research on the trends of the national electorate. Such answers belong, additionally, to those with the basic discernment and honesty to confront the ostensibly self-evident implications of this research for public policy and party identity in a democracy. Conversely, the problem the text seeks to solve dwells in those Democrats who are said to *lack* these qualities. Following this logic, a hard skeleton of binaries concerned with describing the mechanics of evasion supports the body of the text. Evidence of this strategy of invention through polar division is apparent throughout the document. But it is most apparent in five particular rhetorical maneuvers that create vivid contrasts between the ethos of the center the DLC attributes to itself and those faults attributed to the perpetrators of “evasion” on the left.

The first (and most important) such maneuver is hinted at in the text’s opening declaration that some in the party—in fact, an unspecified “many”—have been deluded for years. The widespread hope that “once Ronald Reagan left the White House” the party’s problems would “disappear” has proven false.¹⁸ In the next sentence, the “many”—which is, notably, not a “many of us”—then becomes substituted by a more general term—“Democrats”—in an exhortation that covers the party as a whole and that defines the moment it finds itself in as a confrontation of sorts with the illusions of its own self-understanding: “Without a charismatic president to blame for their ills, Democrats must now come face to face with reality.” Encapsulated in this sentence is a judgment that puts into close proximity two allusions. The first is to character—leading Democrats are the *kind* to place responsibility in the wrong place, to look for easy scapegoats “to blame for their ills.” And the second is to perception—because of this character flaw they cannot see reality properly until its true nature is forced upon them. In a word, Democrats engage in a “systematic denial of reality” that defines their political worldview. Denial circulates throughout the party’s basic system of self-understanding. It encourages Democrats to “manufacture excuses for their presidential disasters—excuses built on faulty data and false assumptions, excuses designed to avoid tough questions.” Evasion means that “Democratic nominees . . . and their advisers continue to embrace myths about the electorate that cannot withstand either empirical analysis or political combat”; it has the power to “thwart sober reflection on the relation between means and ends” for seeking racial quality; it “leads its proponents to believe things about the electorate that do not stand up to empirical tests.” Conversely, indeed by definition, the DLC is the “sober” agent that can not only see “reality” in its

proper state in these cases—how else to notice another’s “denial” of it?—but also whose character is such that it does not *need* to “manufacture” anything. Rather, its very disposition is to ask “tough questions” in search of reality by using an approach that will “address the party’s weaknesses directly” rather than evasively.

To “evade” something, of course, is not merely to escape it for the sake of doing so. It is to dodge something for a purpose that can range from the abstract to the concrete. Tax “evasion,” for example, or “evading” arrest, each mark attempts to dodge the enforcement of state law. The end of each may carry a private “reward,” albeit one exacted at a public cost and with risk. As such, to enter into this term’s field of associations invites and creates space for the depiction of what is supposedly to be gained through evasion and whose aims it serves. To charge someone with evasion, in other words, is to raise questions about his or her motive for evading the truth.

In this vein, and in a second recurring maneuver, Galston and Kamarck define evasion as serving “the interests of those who would rather be the majority in a minority party than risk being the minority in a majority party.” Such interests are not only fundamentally divisive—indeed, doubly so, since they spring from a faction within a faction—but also implicitly small bore, petty. The practitioners of evasion evade, the authors assume, not for any valuable cause beyond themselves but for the sake of mere self-preservation within the institutional structure of the party. Worse, in trying to protect their status in the party, such a cohort adheres neither to norms of democratic accountability, nor to those of open debate; they believe “it is somehow immoral for a political party to pay attention to public opinion” and defend their status by charging skeptics with “heresy,” rather than by engaging them in arguments that can be disproven. In discussing the “Myth of Liberal Fundamentalism,” for instance, Galston and Kamarck write: “The perpetrators of this myth greet any deviation from liberal dogma, any attempt at innovation with the refrain ‘We don’t need two Republican Parties’” and have imposed “ideological litmus tests” on voices of dissent. In the service of dogma and ideology, “evasion” becomes an instrument for enforcing cohesion and quelling detractors.

A third maneuver that Galston and Kamarck rely upon involves shades of something similar. Except on this path, the emphasis stays on placing evasion in opposition to various forms and symbols of the “new.” Insofar as evasion constitutes a means to serve the interests of some over others by stifling dissent and discussion, it tends to obstruct change as a corollary of this same purpose: “The most serious effects of the politics of evasion, however, is that it tends to repress the consideration of new ideas . . . suggestions that the traditional Democratic goals may require untraditional means are greeted with moral outrage.” Oriented so defensively toward dissent, liberal funda-

mentalism bases itself in a mindset that “enshrines the policies of the past two decades as sacrosanct” in order to ward off change. It is, by definition, the opposite of innovation: “Whether the issue is the working poor, racial justice, educational excellence, or national defense, the liberal fundamentalist prescription is always the same; pursue the politics of the past.” Importantly, Galston and Kamarck effectively ventriloquize this same line of critique at crucial points. They put their critique into the mouths of others not only to corroborate it, but also to give it an additional kind of credibility. They cite, for example, the judgment of a college senior from Louisiana State University who told the *New Orleans Picayune* that “Democrats seem to be too bound to the solutions of the past. All the creative thinking—for better and for worse—is coming from the right.” As the synecdoche for a prized sector of the electorate—what the document defines as “politically active college students”—that drives party growth and innovation, this student expresses a perception that “spells real trouble for Democrats, if it is as some think widely held.” Clearly, the authors themselves suppose that such a perception is not only “widely held” but also justified.

And yet, the kind of hedging they offer here—“if it is as *some* think”—is more than a perfunctory gesture of qualification. It hints at a fourth maneuver that reappears throughout the text and regulates a central facet of its inventional structure. One finds traces of this maneuver right from the onset, when Galston and Kamarck make a foundational claim they will later support with considerable data: “Too many Americans have come to see the party as inattentive to their economic interests, indifferent if not hostile to their moral sentiments and ineffective in defense of their national security.” The division here between “Americans” and “the party” is then split again with a subsequent claim: “A recent survey shows that only 57 percent of Democrats have a favorable image of their own party.” What is important here is not so much the obvious point about the dismal state of the party’s “brand” among Democrats and non-Democrats alike. Of greater significance is the delicate manner in which the DLC becomes aligned in its critique of party decline with the sentiments of those whose quantifiable aversion to the party—the “too many Americans” and the sizable portion of disaffected Democrats—are its cause. They offer their strategic advice to the party not as members of “the leadership of the Democratic Party [which] has proven unable to shake the images formed by its liberal fundamentalist wing”—but in the name of what the authors later call “the Democrats’ ‘disappearing middle.’” I will return to the question of *how* and *what* exactly this “middle” signifies in its absence. But to do that, I first need to explain what is encouraged by this productively ambiguous, reciprocal relationship between the text’s seemingly objective observations about the electorate’s perceptions and its powerful suggestion

that these perceptions do not merely exist, but are entirely warranted at the level of value and policy.

Such an ambiguity creates opportunities for the DLC—via the political scientists writing in its stead—to occupy the position of an objective observer of the party’s declining public perceptions, on the one hand, while reinforcing the deeper authority of these perceptions, on the other. To both describe and identify with (and thus to give credence to) the perceptions of “the people” in this case creates a circuit through which rhetorical authority passes back and forth between these two spheres throughout the text. Contrast, for example, the authors’ eagerness to define and “come face to face” with the reality that Democrats allegedly *mis*perceive through evasion, with their lack of interest in the distance between the voter perceptions they track (as measured by survey and exit poll data) and the “reality” these perceptions are said to approximate. To the contrary, on this question, such a distance seems not actually to exist.

Take, for additional examples of this maneuver, the following passages. After claiming that liberalism once commanded a strong and vibrant governing coalition that has since atrophied, Galston and Kamarck lament that “worst of all, while insisting that they represent the popular will, contemporary liberals have lost touch with the American people.”¹⁹ The “worst of all” works to transform “evasion” into an offense against democratic governance. The folly is not that of a mere ignorance of “the popular will” by Democrats—that is, the fact that the party appears ignorant of how far it has fallen out of favor—but of their misleading claim to speak in the name of the many in spite of so much evidence to the contrary that theirs are the views of the few:

Since the late 1960s, the public has come to associate liberalism with tax and spending policies that contradict the interests of average families; with welfare policies that foster dependence rather than self-reliance; with softness toward the perpetrators of crime and indifference toward its victims; with ambivalence toward the assertion of American values and interests abroad; and with an adversarial stance toward mainstream moral and cultural values.

The DLC here, as elsewhere, offers rejection by “the public” of “liberalism” as a *true* statement of the “popular will,” in contrast to the “insisting” of liberal Democrats that they represent this will. Stating the truth about the negative things “the public” associates with “liberalism” is, furthermore, a way of aligning with that same public. Like “the public,” that is, the DLC itself becomes identified with this truth; both represent, in different ways, a reality the party denies and that is inherently tied to its capacity to earn the trust of citizens.

We see a similar move near the end of the document, in a section on the role of “racial reductionism” (i.e., the idea that “the major themes of the past two decades, which Republicans have exploited so effectively, are all products of—and codes for—racial divisions”) in the “politics of evasion”:

By concentrating on race alone, Democrats avoid confronting the fact that for years they have been perceived as the party that is weaker on crime and more concerned about criminals than about victims. The institutional tendency of the Democratic Party to be out of sync with mainstream values exists on other issues as well.

Here the nation’s perceptions of the party (which presumably can be changed and may be mistaken) are grounded in the much firmer and more enduring notion of its “mainstream values” (which presumably reflect the historically accreted and reasonable moral horizon of the electorate). It is the focus “on race alone” that has allowed the party to avoid the relationship between these perceptions and the values that inform them.

There are multiple levels at which the underlying charge of having “lost touch with the American people,” of being “out of sync with mainstream values” assumes significance. It can do so as an observation about what certain surveys suggest with regard to what the party must do to increase its dwindling electoral support. Or it can seem a populist objection to the “politics of evasion” based in the notion that in a healthy democracy governed by majority rule it is precisely a nation’s “mainstream values” that all parties should strive to reflect. Or it can seem a principled complaint about the moral valence, regardless of popular perception, of the actual policies and values embraced by the party.

On each level, however, what is always key is how conventionally positive terms—“American people,” “popular will,” “average families,” “self-reliance,” “victims” of crime, “American values and interests abroad,” and “mainstream moral and cultural values”—are dissociated from the party as a matter of popular perception, *but never only as a matter of popular perception*. Indeed, the entirely positive value of these terms remains *intact*—again, without commentary on matters of definition or value—as they are celebrated by the DLC and denied to the Democrats. On each level—be it of empirical accuracy, of democratic accountability, or of moral propriety—the authors undermine the Democrats’ claim to represent anyone but the narrowest of partisans, and position the DLC as arbiters of facts, definers of democratic value, and upholders of the nation’s moral middle ground.

We can see in the text’s fifth maneuver how these levels come together. This maneuver is predicated on various ways of putting that “disappearing Democratic middle” I referred to earlier to explicit and subtle rhetorical

use. The broader, and somewhat ambiguous, discursive function of such a “middle” depends, in larger part, on its combination with (and opposition to) other terms.

For example, the phrase “middle class” appears nine times in the document as a constituency defined by family incomes between \$20,000 and \$50,000 (and thrice associated with “white” citizens) that has left the Democratic Party and that must be brought back into its electoral column. At another point, the authors ask whether the party can prove to “the great middle of the American electorate” that it still has something to offer.²⁰ In this case, there is a valorization of the “middle” that can be taken to mean its numerical superiority (and thus its prize as an object of electoral competition) and/or its status as the quintessence of the nation, as something irreplaceable that balances and orients all the other parts, that exists beneath any and all political division. Elsewhere, this maneuver works via the fungibility of certain metaphoric qualities of the “middle” which allow it to work functionally even when it is not named as such. In other words, these qualities emerge in semantically analogous terms—for example, “the center”—symbolically resonant images—for example, “the heart of the electorate”—and synonyms that share the middle’s associations with being flanked by extremes—for example, “average.” In all these cases, the middle is put to use as the rhetorical device through which the empirical, political, and moral objections of the DLC to the “politics of evasion” can express themselves in a distinct yet internally consistent manner. It serves as an abstraction that allows political discourse to move beyond partisan identity and categorization, while also serving as the mark of something concrete that the party can and must recapture in order for Democrats to “turn around their fortunes in the 1990s . . . [and] set aside the politics of evasion.”

I use the term “recapture” deliberately because the verb is used twice by the authors in this exact way in the final section of the text, titled “The Road Ahead.” At one point, after lamenting the party’s presumed tendency to believe empirically false things about the electorate, and thus to lose elections as a result, they ask: “How can the Democratic Party recapture the center?” At another, in response to doubts about what a move to the “middle” might mean for traditional party principles, they promise that the “Democratic Party can recapture the middle without losing its soul.” In both cases, what matters is the tension between the center as an abstract site of transcendence and a particular site in which an electoral prize dwells. On the one hand, as an abstract site, the center excludes extremes, and thus potentially includes all since it is, in principle, unaffiliated from any party or ideological position. On the other hand, as a particular site, it can be approximated, defined, and demographically targeted for effective “recapture” away from the opposition

party. Indeed, it is in how the center is invoked to advance a contrast between a losing, fringe Democratic Party of the past and a winning, centrist Democratic Party of the future that these reinforcing qualities come together with particular relevance in the conclusion of the “Politics of Evasion.”

In the text’s second to last paragraph, the authors warn of a very specific kind of risk if Democrats fail to heed their warning. If the party cannot move beyond evasion, the GOP will “be able to convince the electorate that the Democratic Party of 1992 is the same as the Democratic Party of 1972,” win the presidency again, and further cement their hold on power. Conversely, what stands in the way of this outcome is a certain kind of rhetorical transformation in which the *anti*–“Democratic Party of 1972” will emerge in 1992. Electoral victory becomes contingent upon averting the possibility of a Republican rhetorical maneuver in which identities that are both different and similar are made to seem interchangeable. The suggestion is that to “recapture the center” will be to preempt this maneuver at every turn. In this light, Galston and Kamarck’s blunt concluding lesson to Democratic candidates might be stated as follows: say things to encourage perceptions of the party that forcefully cut against this invidious (and historically successful) conflation with the liberal insurgency of 1972. To return to the issue I opened with, the “Politics of Evasion” therefore counsels effecting clear distance from the party’s recent past as a way to signal the sincerity of its transformation in the future.

And yet, the rhetorical maneuvers that circulate throughout the text, however sharp in their tone, are neither direct nor uniform in what they tell us about the DLC’s effort to break with this past in the lead-up to the 1992 election. Bruce Reed, one of the architects of the DLC, defines two strains in the group, each of which resided in the different senses held by its Southern leadership. On the one hand, recapturing the center was understood by some in the DLC—such as Georgia senator Sam Nunn—as an effort to prevent, in Reed’s words, a recurrence of “the mistakes that have hurt us so badly over in the last 25 years” with distinct constituencies and in particular regions. For this strain, creating distance from party liberals was an effort primarily of political survival; attacking liberalism was the chief means of this effort, and figures such as Nunn were both ideologically and temperamentally suited to the task. The second strain, however, was made up of younger Southern Democrats—Reed mentions Clinton and Al Gore in particular—who saw themselves less as opposed to party liberals, *per se*, than as the forerunners of what Hale calls “an ideas-based movement” to expand the reach of the party beyond its base.²¹ For this strain, the party’s liberal identity was to be subsumed by a new, broader one; “newness” at the center would come through “innovation” rather than through running against the “mistakes” of other Democrats.

The “Politics of Evasion” shows traces of both of these strains, but tilts strongly toward meeting the political purposes and needs of the first. It draws from the center to call for a new direction for the party, but does so largely in terms of a rhetoric of accusation. By attempting to fix its readers eyes on Democrats for whom “evasion” had ostensibly become a way of life, the document’s polemical qualities gave the DLC and its allies a sharp and compelling language with which to distinguish their ethos as the reasonable stewards of the party’s future. It was thus especially well suited for those such as Virginia Senator Chuck Robb, who used the occasion of its unveiling at the DLC meeting in Philadelphia to engage Jesse Jackson, one of the party’s most visible liberal voices, in a public debate about the main reasons for the Democrats’ power ebb. Headlines for the next two days—in the *New York Times*, “Party Told to Win Middle-Class Vote”; in the *Washington Post*, “Jackson, Robb Tussle over Democratic Strategy”—confirmed the success of the DLC’s desire to stage “an active public controversy” over the party’s future with liberals.²² With the *Post*’s story leading with the observation that “Jesse L. Jackson and key southern Democratic leaders went toe to toe today,” the image was one of Democratic dissension along somewhat familiar ideological lines, albeit with a new organization now in place to redefine, and perhaps resolve, the terms of such disagreement.

In contrast, the speech Bill Clinton would give two years later, on May 6, 1991, to the DLC’s annual meeting in Cleveland marked more clearly the influence of the DLC’s second leadership strain, the one Reed described “as frustrated with the course the party had taken but want[ing] to find a new course that everyone could support.”²³ In this strain, we find a muting of the internecine aspects of centrist rhetoric within the Democratic Party and an attempt to claim an ethos of the center in terms of a broader problem of partisan division that implicated both left and right in a similar “evasion” of popular opinion.

SEE FROM THE CENTER, SEE BEYOND THE “PARTICULAR MYOPIAS OF LEFT AND RIGHT”

The same month that Clinton went to Cleveland to speak before the DLC in his role as chair of the organization and in what was billed as a presidential pageant of sorts, E. J. Dionne’s book *Why Americans Hate Politics* appeared in bookstores calling for a “new center” in American politics. An essayist and journalist who had covered the DLC for the *New York Times*, Dionne wrote of the “particular myopias of left and right [through which] American politics came to be mired in a series of narrow ideological battles at a time

when much larger issues were at stake.”²⁴ Political factions, said Dionne, had become too short-sighted to see beyond their own limited domains and grievances. Left and right had waged combat in ways that had frozen—“mired,” as if in partisan muck—politics, making deliberation increasingly difficult. The leadership of both parties had come to embrace an unsustainable conception of democracy, argued Dionne, that “fails us and leads us to hate politics because it insists on stifling yes/no, either/or approaches that ignore the elements that must come together to create a successful democratic civic culture.”²⁵ Calling to our attention the existence of a public “weary of a politics of confrontation,” Dionne senses in their exhaustion an

inchoate demand for a new center that will draw on the lessons of the last thirty years by way of moving the country forward . . . a demand for an end to the ideological confrontations that are largely irrelevant to the 1990s. It is a demand for steadiness, for social peace, for broad tolerance, for more egalitarian economic policies, for economic growth. It is the politics of the restive majority, the great American middle.²⁶

In his 2004 memoir, Bill Clinton would recall the initial impression made on him by Dionne’s “remarkable” book. He wrote that it had helped him to crystallize a message for the Democratic Party based on “breaking through all the either/or debates that dominated national public discourse.”²⁷ While Dionne’s book did not openly align itself with any candidate or party, his notion of a “new center” that was “progressive in its view of government’s capacity” to remedy social and economic inequalities, while still “moderate in its cultural attitudes,” was far more plausible as the platform for a Democratic agenda in 1992 than for a Republican one.²⁸ And his verdict pronouncing the “inability of liberals to articulate a coherent sense of the national interests” or to address “legitimate sources of middle-class anger” was echoed by a host of books published around this time that supported the DLC’s diagnosis of the Democrats’ central task in the 1990s.²⁹

The importance of these books resides in how each helped to build a context of discourse to validate and bring greater recognition to the premises about the party and the electorate that underwrote the centrist rhetoric that Clinton would later carry into the primary. Indeed, as the players in the struggle for the 1992 Democratic presidential nomination began to make their intentions known, the DLC’s message was gaining increased exposure and credibility. Distinct in emphasis, each book nevertheless helped to validate and magnify in multiple ways the DLC’s concerns about the future of the Democratic Party. Most importantly, however, each presented a scenario whereby a diagnosis of the Democrats’ particular problems could give way to something far larger.

As From put it in 1990, the goal of the DLC was “to make the Mainstream Movement the dominant force in national politics. The first step towards that goal is to make it the dominant force in the Democratic Party.”³⁰ This work of using the center rhetorically to offer a new politics apart from the partisan, and apart from existing doubts about the party itself, dominates Clinton’s speech at the DLC’s Annual Convention in Cleveland on May 7, 1991.

Bruce Reed remembers Clinton scrapping his prepared remarks just moments before taking the stage to deliver what was the meeting’s keynote address. In place of a formal text, “he simply wrote down 20 key words on a piece of paper and built his speech around those 20 words.”³¹ While we do not have access to these words, we know that Clinton would later recall their finished, oratorical product as

one of the most effective and important [speeches] I ever made. It captured the essence of what I had learned in seventeen years in politics and what millions of Americans were thinking. It became the blueprint for my campaign message. . . . By embracing ideas and values that were both liberal and conservative, it made voters who had not supported Democratic presidential candidates in years listen to our message . . . the speech established me as perhaps the leading spokesman for the course I passionately believed America should embrace.³²

As proof of the “rousing reception it received,” Clinton offers how “several people at the convention urged me to run for President” after hearing it and that this response convinced him that he “had to consider entering the race.”³³ Coverage of the speech suggests the accuracy of this assessment. In an otherwise skeptical story on the success of the DLC’s meeting overall, for example, the *Economist* declared that amidst a range of other possible presidential contenders, Clinton emerged as the “unquestioned star of Cleveland,” adding that to his “boyish charm he has now added the ability to deliver a rousing speech.”³⁴ The *Associated Press* quoted a “major party fund raiser” who called the speech “toe-tingling” and a Democratic strategist for a former presidential candidate who judged it “the best Democratic speech I’ve heard in 10 years.”³⁵

Such accolades were not isolated. They attest to how the DLC keynote speech effectively drew positive attention to the prospect of Clinton serving as the party’s nominee, making him an early favorite. In his role as the chair of a group openly critical of the party, however, this prospect would take on a distinct character in the emerging narrative defining Clinton’s political identity as a major party candidate. When coverage in the *New York Times* called Clinton “the man most clearly in the spotlight” at the event, for example, it was in terms of his rhetorical ability to propose something “new” for Democrats. He had, reporter Robin Toner put it, “argued eloquently throughout the

session for a ‘new choice’ that does not abandon the party’s traditional commitment to the poor . . . but that is able to sell itself as the advocate of the middle class as well—and thus return to power.”³⁶ Clinton is here distinguished by the ability of his eloquence to balance “commitments” made to potentially opposed constituencies in the Democratic Party, while doing so in a winning way. This is, of course, a version of the DLC claim that, as Galston and Kamarck put it, the “Democratic Party can recapture the middle without losing its soul.”³⁷ And yet, Clinton’s answer in Cleveland to the party’s electoral problems revealed, in fact, an expansion of this vector of centrist rhetoric, one that made “recapturing the middle” less into an ostensibly simple matter of more accurately assessing and tapping into the preferences of the electorate than of saving the nation from a kind of partisanship that had degraded its political culture and alienated citizens from their government.

A CENTRIST BLUEPRINT FOR RENEWAL: “ADDRESS TO THE DLC ANNUAL CONVENTION, MAY 6, 1991”

Clinton begins by defining the occasion of his discourse as one that offers great promise for the party and for the nation: “We are being given the chance to shape a new message for the Democratic Party, and to chart a new course for our country.”³⁸ And yet, those gathered—the “we” that is the DLC and its allies—are immediately reminded that this “chance” is slim. Clinton grants, for example, that his audience has surely “read all the people who say that the Democratic Party is dead.” He then uses a recent *New Republic* magazine headline (“Democratic Coma”) as a sign of this pessimism, hinting at its dramatic pitch. Clinton manages to call such pessimism into question, however, with an interesting set of proofs that say little about the Democratic Party *per se* (and that might even serve to bolster existing doubts about it) but that actually serve to juxtapose, and so perhaps to accentuate, its weakness against the strength of the DLC as a political force based on a “new choice.”

Clinton rejects such despair over the future of the Democrats as the leader of the DLC, of “our DLC.” This positioning in defense of the party places him—like the organization itself—in a locus of address that is neither too close to the party to be implicated in its current failures, nor too far from the party to seem untouched by them, unable to reverse them, or unauthorized to define a new course of action. Thus, Clinton rejects this despair not because of anything the party has done, but because of the *DLC*’s strong membership base—“over 600 Federal, State, and local elected officials, people who are brimming with ideas and

energy”—and because though the current Republican president is popular, “all is not well in America.”

This start inspires a set of related movements. Clinton will go on to define the DLC’s centrist approach as the single answer both to the electoral problems of the Democratic Party and to a series of partisan divisions that have hindered national politics. He arranges an argument that makes the latter—national political renewal—seem irresolvable without effecting the former—the birth of a “new” Democratic Party—and, furthermore, that makes the former seem destined to lead to the latter. But this rhetorical sequencing cannot gain traction without an appropriate and effective narrative to give exigency to these problems without inviting identification with the various motives of concern, anger, and frustration that underscore Clinton’s case for what he will call a “new choice.”

Thus the first major movement of the speech segues from a lament about the Democrats to an account of national decline or, more specifically, of growing weakness in comparison to America’s peers. Many countries “do a better job than we do” in ranking after ranking, from infant mortality rates to education to health care. And yet, such troubling truths go undiscussed because the nation’s politics is now “a fantasy world” in which major problems cannot be acknowledged. Thus, Clinton argues, while the fate of the Democrats has preoccupied the press, what is far more important is “the future of America.” Serious questions about this future are what Clinton “joined the DLC to find answers to,” thus reinforcing national renewal as the predicate of Democratic renewal, while making the DLC the active subject of both.

At the same time, as the speech begins to fill out its narrative of national decline under the leadership the Republican Party in the 1980s—for example, CEOs cheating their workers, exploding numbers of “poor women and their little children”—Clinton quickly injects another question into the mix: “Why in the world haven’t the Democrats been able to take advantage of these conditions?” This question would seem to assume the at least partial validity of the very criticisms Clinton had earlier said were exaggerated. And it does, except that Clinton raises it not to express panic or alarm with the “coma-tose” state of Democrats, but to direct attention to a specific answer that, in turn, will suggest a specific solution, one that will be of strategic value to the Democrats and of transformative significance for the nation’s politics.

Much like in the “Politics of Evasion” the first answer offered for the Democrats’ failure involves paying more attention to “the people that used to vote for us, the very burdened middle class.” Such voters have lost trust in the party on issues of defense, social values, and fiscal policy, and this loss demands an immediate effort to “turn these perceptions around, or we cannot continue as a national party.” Still, Clinton insists that such an effort is actu-

ally not the most important issue that faces those gathered in the audience. What is most important is that the country needs “at least one political party that is not afraid to tell the people the truth . . . one political party that does not want to be the hunter or the hunted on those 30-second negative ads that have turned so many people off.”

There are two items of note in this arrangement of priorities. First, Clinton reinforces the DLC’s “neither too close, nor too far” position relative to the party with the suggestion that Democrats and Republicans have both failed to be the party of truth. Second, in placing the strategic imperative to win back support alongside the moral one to “tell the truth” and to stop the “negative ads” that presumably lead to apathy, Clinton seems to be saying two contradictory things. On the one hand, there is a kind of “truth” that strikes fear into ordinary politicians, for to tell it would be to risk their chances of reelection. On the other hand, he claims to have a way to approach this same “truth” that will bring back the very voters who had long since fled the party. To resolve this implicit contradiction, Clinton will chart a path of turning “these perceptions around” based in a certain *way* of addressing the “truth” of the nation’s challenges that promises access to a new, and unmediated-by-partisan-politics, civic reality.

Along these lines, Clinton’s speech will demand not merely a courageous owning up to the “truth” of the nation’s problems by those who have caused or ignored them. It will call, more subtly, for a new way to define, communicate, and propose solutions to such problems that transcends the reigning categories and paradigms of political division:

We have got to have a message that touches everybody, that makes sense to everybody, that goes beyond the stale orthodoxies of left and right, one that resonates with the real concerns of ordinary Americans, with their hopes and their fears. That is what we are here in Cleveland to do.

While Clinton earlier applauded the party chair’s attempt to “reach out to the middle class,” this particular call for a new “message” reaches beyond any specific group. Nor does the hoped-for “resonance” of such a message with “everybody” or with the “real concerns of ordinary Americans” depend on any clearly defined principle or discovery. Such a “message” will gain support because it will offer all voters a different *kind* of politics than that to which they are accustomed. Such a politics will be fresh, not “stale,” heterodox, not “orthodox,” centrist, not “left” or “right.” Grounded in a certain assumption about the nature of the problem they face, Clinton thus calls for a recalibration of how Democrats imagine themselves and their goals. This reassessment requires his audience to put labels like “left” and “right” behind them and to reevaluate the appropriateness of the party’s tie to any single location on the ideological grid.

After setting out the nature of his party's "message" problem as its allegiance to "stale orthodoxies of left and right" that no longer matter, Clinton quickly points the way forward: a "new choice that is simple, that offers opportunity, demands responsibility, gives citizens more say, provides them responsive government—all because we recognize that we are a community." The priorities—from "opportunity" to "community"—that comprise the solution are necessarily vague. Though ostensibly unmoored to any specific ideology, this vagueness makes such priorities vulnerable to a range of insertions into a left/right or liberal/conservative political scheme. This is a concern, because the existing "message" problem that the "new choice" is supposed to resolve focuses on a similar kind of vulnerability. If Democrats have proven so susceptible to caricature, one can surmise it is partly because they have ineffectively tailored the discourse that defines their identity to hold back such caricatures. A brief consideration of how Clinton defines and arranges the components of the "new choice" therefore can reveal how his rhetoric aims to narrow its range of possible responses, to forestall being locked into left or right, and to align each term with another into a kind of systematic coherence that one could call a "choice" among other possibilities.

With the claim that "opportunity for all means first and foremost a commitment to economic growth," Clinton begins to move between two levels of address. On one level, he repeatedly affirms the DLC's commitment to broadly accepted principles of economic and social thought in the United States. For example, the belief that "growth" is the foremost way to ensure greater "opportunity" speaks to an enduring tenet of liberal capitalism largely embraced by both parties. On another level, however, Clinton defines the terms that comprise the "new choice" in contrast to (and in light of possible *objections* from) left *and* right. This movement between levels gives his centrist alternative the ability, presumptively, to synthesize and balance the best of both left and right, while ferreting out the worst, including those elements that exacerbate political division.

For example, against possible charges from the right that "opportunity for all" means simply redistributing wealth to the poor, Clinton counters that the DLC believes that "the government ought to help the middle class as well as the poor." Against charges from the left that the DLC's economic policies threaten Democrats' commitment to labor and to the environment, Clinton suggests that these are not mutually exclusive commitments. Thus, although making increased international trade a centerpiece of the DLC's "opportunity" agenda might encourage labor instability or incur negative environmental consequences, Clinton argues that we need not sacrifice growth for fairness or for a clean planet. Rather, we "ought to demand that when we expand [trade] our workers get treated fairly and the global environment is

enhanced, not torn apart.” A similar pattern of strategically arranging values and policy ends in opposed pairs that are then transcended emerges in what follows. Clinton’s exposition of key terms through example and anecdote, as well as his arrangement of their meanings sequentially and inferentially, will strive for a transcendence of left and right that will also be an apparent harmonizing of the best of both.

For in addition to the various meanings used to calibrate the individual terms that comprise the “new choice”—that is, “opportunity,” “responsibility,” “responsive government,” and “community”—the text relies upon additional operations of contrast, qualification, and comparison between them. These operations work to arrange the terms so that each will complement the other in order to form a coherent picture of the party’s new identity. Thus, Clinton issues the following caveat as he segues from “opportunity” to “responsibility”: “opportunity for all is not enough, for if you give opportunity without insisting on responsibility, much of the money can be wasted, and the country’s strength can still be sapped.” In this passage, the success of “opportunity for all” hinges on the political ability to manage and distribute properly “responsibility” among this “all.” The advocates of the “new choice” will have to find ways to encourage the adoption of one value in order to keep the other in tune, so to speak, rather than pushing for one at the expense of the other. The skill of balancing potentially competing aims apart from their insertion into a partisan frame is what seems to be at stake. For instance, Clinton argues that while “we should invest more money in people on welfare to give them the skills they need,” and while he has supported “budgets for the division of children and family services . . . for every conceivable program” for over a decade, these kinds of “opportunities” must entail matching movements associated with “responsibility”—for example, greater limits on eligibility and an insistence that parents who receive aide “assume their responsibilities” or else be “forced to do it if they refuse.”

As Clinton finishes elaborating his “new choice” using similar operations to define the terms “choice,” “government,” and “community,” he abruptly turns to his audience with both a declaration and a question:

Our new choice plainly rejects the old categories and false alternatives they impose. Is what I just said to you liberal or conservative? The truth is, it is both, and it is different. It rejects the Republicans’ attacks and the Democrats’ previous unwillingness to consider new alternatives.

Key to this passage is how it ties together all that precedes it in terms of an ethic of centrist defiance. Said otherwise, a conviction in the rightness and value of defying conventional political labels is what sustains what Clinton earlier calls the “choice that Democrats can ride to victory on.”

Standing in the way of this centrist “choice” is not any specific proposition or group that Democrats can unite against. The adversary consists instead of the existing framework of habits and classifications through which propositions in the political world achieve salience. If such propositions threaten to remain hemmed in by the “old” categories we typically use to assess them, ones that in their ostensible failure to adjust to new circumstances tend to leave citizens with only “false” choices, Clinton’s argument is meant to offer a “different” option. In subsequently offering debates about “civil rights” and “poor children” as examples of controversies for which partisan hardening has led to polarization and predictability, Clinton suggests that each is amenable to the DLC’s approach. In each case, it is precisely how these issues become “either/or” matters of partisan identity—for example, either you support helping businesses fight costly and frivolous lawsuits or you support expanding individual rights to sue businesses for discrimination, either you support “family values” or you support more funding to feed hungry children—that the “new choice” defies, and in this defiance seeks to bolster its case both for its “newness” and for its potential as a governing philosophy and electoral strategy.

Aside from grounding a stance against our continued reliance on the “old” partisan categories, the center assumes additional importance in the speech: It motivates and moralizes scenes of survival and hardship that seem to defy partisan explanation or resolution. Such scenes serve to testify to the need for a “new choice.” The warrant for connecting the need for a “new choice” to the need to reject the “false alternatives” of left and right achieves presence through Clinton’s ability to bring together two narratives. Each narrative provides a distinct proof for the practical irrelevance of stock answers from either major party to the problems of actual people, and each is key to enhancing Clinton’s ethotic power.

From the principle that what is needed is an approach to policy that goes beyond these stock answers, since, for example, “family values will not feed a hungry child, but you cannot raise that hungry child very well without them,” Clinton segues directly to a story of his own impoverished childhood:

When I was a little boy, I was raised by my grandparents, with a lot of help from my great-grandparents. My great-grandparents lived out in the country in about a two-room shack up on stilts. The best room on the place was the storm cellar, which was a hole in the ground, where I used to spend the night with a coal oil lantern and snakes. And they got government commodities—that is what we called it back then—help from the government. They did a heck of a job with what they had. My granddaddy ran a country store in a black neighborhood in a little town called Hope, Arkansas, and there were no food stamps, so when his black customers, who worked hard for a living, came in with no money, he

gave them food anyway and just made a note of it. He knew that he was part of a community. They believed in family values. They believed in personal responsibility. But they also believed that the government had an obligation to help people who were doing the best they can. And we made it.

What can we make of the function of this story in the speech? Clearly, it involves the use of a first-person narrative for political effect. And yet while this kind of move usually entails the speaker's establishing some kind of identification with an audience, things seem different here. Indeed, it would seem odd to imagine Clinton deploying the tokens of his poor and rural upbringing (the "two-room shack," the snake-filled "hole in the ground" that Clinton used to sleep in as a boy, the magnanimous "granddaddy [who] ran a country store," etc.) in order to say "I am like you" to those gathered or to create an "ideal" auditor with which they can relate. Rather, Clinton's family story provides him with the canvas for a specific political thematization that is quite different.

First, the quotidian character and earthy tone of the images seem abrupt given what has come before; such an account thus quickly diverts the speech into a territory in which the speaker's authority springs not from his political standing, but from an intimate knowledge of his own childhood. From this starting point in the vividly personal, in the interior world of a speaker who asks us to consider how he lived as a "little boy," Clinton will then make two related moves. The first involves making the "help from the government" received by his great-grandparents lead into the business successes of his grandparents which have presumably afforded Clinton himself the means to rise above his station. The second involves interpreting this intergenerational story of progress in terms of the exact kind of synthesis and balancing of values contained in the "new choice." Clinton himself becomes the product of transcendence, insofar as his immediate forebears were recipients of "opportunity" who valued their place in a "community," all the while believing in "family values" and "personal responsibility." In this way, the story serves to transform the inhabitants of Clinton's past into the coin of his message. They are asked to demonstrate via illustration a certain principle: the beliefs increasingly held by partisans to be exclusive can and must be reconciled and, further, such reconciliation is precisely what has allowed the most vulnerable Americans in the past to succeed against difficult odds.

At the same time, when seen not simply as the punctuation that follows what has come before, but as the prelude for what will follow, another aspect of Clinton's narrative comes into relief. For while the story of Clinton's ancestors and his childhood may seem a curiously anachronistic way to make the case for a "new choice," its importance makes sense once we see it as one

side of a rhetorically salient contrast. Indeed, after finishing his first story, Clinton pivots immediately to this one:

If you contrast [my childhood] to the situation that exists in so much of America today, it is truly shocking. My wife and I were in Los Angeles a year and a half ago, in south-central L.A. in one of the drug-dominated areas, and we spent an hour and a half with a dozen sixth-graders, most of whom had never met their grandparents, could only imagine what a great-grandparent was, and one of them even told me he thought he may have to turn his own parents in for drug abuse. And do you know what those kids were worried about? They were worried first about getting shot going to and from school, and second, they were most worried that when they turned 13 they would have to join a gang and do crack or they would get the living daylights beat out of them.

The “shocking” contrast Clinton evokes by juxtaposing these two narratives raises both a question of cause—how did the dire “situation that exists in so much of America today” come about?—and a question of response—how can this situation be repaired? Along these lines, Clinton’s artfully crafted picture of his youth works as the setup for a jarring reminder that things are not so anymore. Having established himself in the first story as one who knows the pain of poverty, Clinton offers his second story with the implicit suggestion that he can identify with its subjects, and therefore can uniquely grasp their plight. And what Clinton sees is that rather than being cared for like he was, these children are alienated from their families, vulnerable, and hounded by drugs and violence. The implication is that while Clinton’s family hardships were eventually vindicated as difficult chapters in an otherwise inspiring story of progress, American politics at the dawn of the millennium offers no such hope for these children. On the contrary, it fails them, and though one might alight on any number of cultural or social reasons for this failure, Clinton chooses to focus on one that seems to trump them all.

The specific failure Clinton points to concerns the intensification of a perennial problem in any representative democracy—the gap between representatives and the people they are tasked to represent. And yet, Clinton does not simply call on Democrats to address this problem by listening *more* to their constituents, but by listening *differently*. He implies that they have become prey to a partisan language which cannot measure up to the challenges faced by the struggling citizens they claim to represent:

Now let me tell you something, friends. Those people do not care about the rhetoric of left and right and liberal and conservative and who is up and who is down and how we are positioned. They are real people, they have real problems, and they are crying desperately for someone who believes the purpose of

government is to solve their problems and make progress, instead of posturing around and waiting for the next election. . . . Those people do not care about the idle rhetoric that has paralyzed American politics. They want a new choice, and they deserve a new choice, and we ought to give it to them.

This passage weaves together several distinct characterizations of partisan rhetoric in order to discredit its value and relevance. First, such rhetoric is seen as foreign to the concerns and the cares of the people it claims to serve. Indeed, they do not care about it at all. Second, the passage arranges the master terms of this rhetoric—“left and right and liberal and conservative”—into a compact list with no internal differentiations or stipulations, suggesting that each is as good or as bad as the other. This calls into question the motives behind, and even the purpose of, partisan debate in the first place. Composed of interchangeable parts with little purpose except to distract from solving problems, such debates seem to make problem solving harder than it otherwise might be. Third, Clinton continues questioning the relevance of such debates by playing them against the needs of “real people” with “real problems,” implying that the problems that are deemed important in the agon of left and right are somehow made up or else pale in comparison to those experienced by people in the real world. Fourth, this disconnect from “real people” is linked to a kind of callousness; if “real people” are “crying desperately” for solutions, one can assume that these cries have gone unheard amidst the clamor of politicians “posturing around and waiting for the next election.” Fifth, whereas the image of short-term posturing for electoral advantage at least suggests action of some kind, the notion of an “idle rhetoric that has paralyzed American politics” hints at a dangerous affliction—a paralysis—caused by the rhetoric itself.

From this account of the meanings that cluster together to define what is clearly a climatic passage in the speech, we can extrapolate the speech’s answers to those questions of cause—what is behind the increasingly dismal state of American public life?—and of action—what is to be done?—raised earlier. On the one hand, the cause recalls the earlier “fantasy world” that Clinton blamed for the inability of politics to address the nation’s decline relative to its global competitors. This “fantasy” prevents leaders from seeing “real problems,” allows for their “posturing” to count as debate, and underwrites their deafness to the cries of the people themselves. On the other hand, the action that is required involves puncturing this “fantasy” by making visible and unacceptable the habits and structures of partisan division that maintain it. For if they persist, Clinton argues, it will mean that “we [have permitted] national politics to continue in its present irrelevant track for 10, or 20, or 30 years,” placing the American Dream itself at risk. And yet the confidence that such fate can be avoided, Clinton argues, is itself a

distinctly American attribute. It blends a fundamental belief that the future can always be better with the conviction that “every one of us has a personal, moral responsibility to make it so.” A reaffirmation of this American creed, for Clinton, “is what the new choice is all about. That is what we are here in Cleveland to do. We are not here to save the Democratic Party. We are here to save the United States of America.”

With this return to his initial statement of the dual purpose of the Cleveland meeting, Clinton closes his speech with the suggestion that the “we” of which he speaks has a unique obligation to carry it out. This closing, which enmeshes its “we” in a mix of partisan and national identities, raises questions about the character of the transcendence it promises. In a word, how did the DLC’s rendering of the space beyond left and right—its use of the center as a ballast to define its political identity against partisan division—match with the organization’s more immediate goal of securing greater leverage in the party by electing one of its own to the presidency in 1992?

DEFINING THE CENTER: STRATEGIC TENSIONS IN THE PRODUCTION OF TRANSCENDENCE

There’s a hole in our politics where our sense of common purpose used to be.³⁹

The “Politics of Evasion” and Clinton’s keynote address at the Cleveland convention each argued for a revitalization of the United States’ oldest political party. From a waning institution weakened by infighting and ideological stagnation, the Democratic Party would become a force for political leadership beyond left and right. By abandoning “myths” about the electorate and by moving beyond the categorical nature of partisan political thinking, the revitalized Democrats would help Americans recover “our sense of common purpose.” While the precise meaning and end of this “purpose” was ambiguous, Clinton’s use of the image of a “hole” to give urgency to its absence suggests that this ambiguity stems mainly from the differing character and consequence of the imagined center deemed missing in each text.

In the first text, the center was lost because the Democratic Party, since the McGovern landslide loss of 1972, had ostensibly retreated from the reality of national politics into a world of “evasion.” By allowing partisan dogma to supplant a proper grasp of the desires, perceptions, and values of the majority, party liberals had revealed themselves to be unsuited to the task of winning elections, according to Galston and Kamarck, and to the task of governing.

Grounded in a distinction between liberal “myths” and empirical “reality,” between those Democrats who are subject to the former and those who are in command of the latter, the “Politics of Evasion” evokes a center marked, in the end, by its fidelity to political reality. The labor to produce transcendence is accomplished contrastively. The core charge of “evasion” works to undermine Democrats’ credibility on a host of questions, thereby positioning the DLC in the realm of the “reality” being evaded. As debunkers of partisan “myths,” Galston and Kamarck’s claim to the center, in effect, is a claim to speak for reality itself in the midst of its ostensible distortion by others. Against a party leadership whose character for honesty, good faith argument, accuracy, and moral judgment they found wanting, the New Democrats defined their centrist identity in terms of truthfulness, openness to disagreement, empirical analysis, and identification with “mainstream values.”

In the Clinton speech, the loss of the center is described in a more historically and civically expansive manner: It becomes an event that jeopardizes the future of U.S. democracy, not simply the future of the Democrats. And while Clinton faults his own party for this loss, the contrastive “other” against which he builds his credibility as a centrist is more abstract than in the first text. Clinton links the binary divisions of political discourse—right/left, liberal/conservative, and so on—to increasingly negative, political, social, and economic effects. In opposition to this structure that threatens the nation—“We are here to save the United States of America” is the closing line of the speech—Clinton introduces notions about the political character of those who would move “beyond the stale orthodoxies of left and right” to embrace the DLC’s “new choice,” and those who would not. Clinton’s speech evokes a middle peopled by those who have the perceptual clarity to grasp a new kind of political complexity, “who are brimming with ideas and energy . . . actually solving problems, and somehow getting the electoral support they need to go forward,” and who have the sense to see that “we really are all in this together.” By contrast, what he calls “the idle rhetoric that has paralyzed American politics” is mastered by those who cling to simplistic partisan-based approaches to problems and thus, instead of being good at responding to the cries of the people, are good at little more than “posturing around and waiting for the next election.” In each text, however, we find clues to lurking problems that arise alongside this ethotic trajectory, ones that tie back to the means of using the center to picture a clear, undistorted mode of democratic representation.

In its attempt to reassure voters who had become skeptical of the Democratic Party, the DLC made an explicit rhetorical commitment to turn away from the Democrats’ recent past. This attempt to reassure pulled in two

directions. On the one hand, to construct a Democratic ethos consistent with the “move to the center” meant relying on proofs that conjured the fiction of a univocal, mainstream electorate with which the party had “lost touch.” As an object of discourse, this fictional unity takes shape indirectly in both texts through the use of public opinion survey data, analyses of shifting demographic trends, narratives of historical-political processes, civic exemplars, and personal anecdotes. Manifesting itself specifically in terms of a “forgotten middle class” that is “crying desperately” for representation, a “people” in whose name a New Democrat presidential candidate will speak comes forth in this rhetoric. On the other hand, creating an ethos to match the “move to the center” also involved operations at a different level of discourse. These operations used the center as a topos from which to construct a politics based less on its identification with a singular voice of the people than on its emphasis on contingency and ideological diversity as civic goods. Pulled in this direction, the ethotic requirement entailed constructing a party identity that seemed amenable, unlike the existing one, in Galston and Kamarck’s words, “to adjust to changing circumstances by adopting new means to achieve traditional ends.”⁴⁰ In contrast to remaining caught in an obsolete left-right configuration of political difference in which every public statement can be classified as advancing one side or opposing the other, to “move to the center” could signify a collectively “upward” civic movement away from the anxieties, frustrations, and looming dangers of increasing partisanship. If, as the DLC’s 1991 convention platform stated, “the old ideologies on the right and left are no longer sufficient to realize the aspirations of the American people,” such a claim suggested that these aspirations required a different kind of politics, one that promised Americans a form of political deliberation with partisan transcendence as its hallmark and consensual agreement as its core purpose.⁴¹ Centrist rhetoric’s mode of accruing credibility was grounded in how the DLC constructed its vision of enhanced democratic representation in terms of bringing together these two discursive paths. And yet, it is exactly in this convergence, that problems arise.

We can begin to understand the origin of these problems functionally, by noticing how centrist rhetoric’s transcendent democratic vision for the Democratic Party frequently intermingled with—and served as the crucial variable for achieving—the DLC’s primary goal from its inception, indeed the one that From and others used to convince Bill Clinton to lead the group in the first place: find a way for a Democrat to win a presidential election. From recalls telling Clinton in 1989: “Have I got a deal for you. If you take the DLC chairmanship, we will give you a national platform, and I think you will be the President of the United States.”⁴² Centrist rhetoric emerged from,

and was constrained by, a distinct set of exigencies and incentives related to this goal.

In terms of material exigencies, the DLC needed to secure financial backing appropriate to its aims, and yet had to do so apart from any widespread popular support or even recognition of its existence. The flight of white voters from the Democrats demanded, too, that appropriate and efficient solutions be offered to this problem for any prospective potential candidate. In turn, such exigencies carried with them corresponding incentives. For instance, in terms of securing financing for its efforts to support a New Democrat “standard bearer” for president, there were certainly incentives for the DLC to favor appeals tailored to business interest lobbies—not quite the image of “real people with real problems” suggested in its rhetoric—because such groups could efficiently and immediately provide the kind of dollars that could bolster the group’s capacity for greater influence and sway among elected officials. And, in terms of race and culture, one obvious incentive for highlighting the party’s ostensible neglect of white voters or its “obsession with race” is that such framing resonated with a powerful narrative of white grievance that had played a significant role in the presidential losses the Democrats had sustained.

As rhetorical constraints and incentives operating at the time, these contextual elements were not merely functionally determinative. They were constitutively important; meeting them meant the explicit and tacit imposition of boundaries on the scope and breadth of centrist rhetoric’s democratic vision. In order to achieve the New Democrats’ electoral and ideological goals, the space beyond left and right had to be defined accordingly. Considered in relation to such goals, we see how the “hopeful new politics” for the DLC did not mean one defined *by* voters—there was, in reality, no “mainstream movement”—but *for* them. What this obvious, yet crucial, truth directs attention toward are the rhetorical limits placed on identification with this “new politics” and on the extent of the DLC’s institutional commitment to enhancing the quality and authenticity of democratic representation.

Such limits can become visible, first of all, by noticing how members defined and described what they were actually trying to do. What one later touted as their “intellectual leveraged buyout” of the Democratic Party, implied that, as one reporter put it in an apt extension of this analogy, the New Democrats were acting as arbitrageurs trying to sell “off unprofitable mind-sets to produce a lean and efficient philosophy” for the party to run on.⁴³ Indeed, the language of high-stakes finance is itself quite appropriate here, for it accurately characterizes the centralized manner in which the DLC operated as an organization.

While the DLC used appeals to the center to push change in a vital and historically significant institution of U.S. political culture, it did so almost entirely from the top down. While its members spoke often of the insularity and out-of-touchness of the party's liberal interest groups, they were themselves part of a political operation steered by elites. From its inception with seed money from a small cadre of lobbyists, to its multimillion dollar annual budget by 1992, the DLC's sources for monetary support were also quite narrow. They came largely from interests in the financial sector, as well as from the defense, pharmaceutical, and tobacco industries.⁴⁴ Free from the regulations on donor reporting and maximum contributions that governed official parties, the New Democrats forged intimate ties with leading business interests who not only funded the DLC, but whose representatives were granted the privilege—much like delegates to a party convention might be—to vote on the group's platform during the same annual meetings at which these texts were delivered.⁴⁵ Thus, as John Murphy has argued, the case of the DLC's success illustrates a “troubling feature of contemporary democracy” in which a small group of privately funded political operatives managed to “take over a major political party absent any sort of widespread support.”⁴⁶

There is clearly a strategic tension at work here. The DLC's principal claim to be more “in sync” with the electorate than both major parties implied substantive distance from political elites of both left and right. At the same time, it was not only an organization built by and for elites struggling to maintain power, but also one whose very reason for being was tied to developing a national political strategy for achieving this end—in particular, for electing a president. For example, in 1991 the DLC chartered several state chapters and then organized them under the rubric of a “mainstream movement” whose basic purpose was, according to one DLC staff member, “to provide ‘the troops’ to elect a New Democratic candidate to the presidency.” The idea, according to Baer, was not to expand the DLC into “a large, broad-based popular movement” but rather to present the “appearance of grassroots support for the organization and its public philosophy” in time for the 1992 presidential election when, in fact, such popular support was more hope than reality.⁴⁷

This kind of activity, the kind in which tropes of mass support are being used in suspect ways, leaves the group vulnerable to the charge that its promotion of a more democratically responsive politics beyond left and right was itself a major “evasion” of its own contradictions. Such an evasion can be understood as a mechanism for furthering elite power, a way to obscure the DLC's ties to a small group of economic and political interests for whom the “move to the center” was less about democratic renewal or effective representation, and more about simply “rebranding” the Democratic Party as if

it were a hamburger for voters to consume, rather than an engine for political renewal. As a DLC member and then–U.S. senator from Florida put it of the Democrats’ troubles at the time, “People are increasingly forming their partisan identifications by what they see on television. . . . And when they look at our fast food franchise and they look at the Republicans’ fast food franchise on television, their selecting to buy their hamburgers from another stand.”⁴⁸ From the angle at which claiming to have “moved to center” and claiming to have the better of two hamburger stands become interchangeable, we can begin to see the particular problem in centrist rhetoric in these cases that exists, nevertheless, in the service of a political solution.

The DLC’s vision of a politics beyond left and right was compromised, in short, by the manner and mode in which it was advanced. Given rhetorical presence and urgency in the service of redefining the identity of the party, and thus the quality of its rhetorical ethos, this vision becomes hedged significantly as it strives to serve this objective in both the texts. To be clear, what I have in mind is a contradiction, less than a concealment. It is not that centrist rhetoric disguises the DLC’s particular political motives behind a façade of concern for the general well-being, or that this rhetoric might serve as pseudo-democratic ornamentation for a democracy under strain. Such charges can lead one to surmise, along with Normon Solomon, that centrism was merely part of a “politics of illusion in the Clinton era” that celebrated moderation in the interest of a “national politics that absolutely relies on deception as a mode of governance” and thus serves to underwrite political alienation and an economic system that benefits the few over the many.⁴⁹ Rather, I see the claim to the center in these texts less in terms of the contradictions such a claim disguises, and more in terms of the contradictions it unleashes for rhetorical effect and then asks audiences to resolve in the name of the DLC’s move to change the party and take back the presidency. I want to conclude with an elaboration of this point.

CONCLUSION

In late 1999, founder Al From published a piece in the *New Democrat* magazine urging reflection on the group’s accomplishments. He claimed that after “decades in the political wilderness, President Clinton and the New Democrats now define and occupy the vital center of American politics, where presidential elections are won and lost.”⁵⁰ A text aimed at arguing the case for the continued viability of the New Democrats’ centrist political strategy, it resonates with the two I have already analyzed. What is interesting and

distinctive, however, is how this particular construal of the “vital center” disengages the trope from the presumptively nonrhetorical status it carries most often in New Democrat discourse, and instead acknowledges its rhetorical character.

The “vital center” elsewhere is presumed to escape partisan manipulation because of its independence from the politics of left and right. In such a “neither left, nor right” space the center itself occupies an exceptional space; it is beyond such struggle. What From’s celebratory passage recalls, however, is that the acts of definition and occupation that strive to make the center seem beyond politics must themselves be purposed for rhetorical struggle toward certain ends. The ethotic requirements of the “move to the center” laid out by Clinton reflects one implication of such a purposing. It encouraged centrist Democrats to invent a character suited to a “new politics” of more responsive and effective representation of the electorate, while also arguing *as if* the electorate were simply awaiting representation from those who could hear its cries. By appealing to a preformed, univocal political subject—for example, the “forgotten middle class,” the “real people with real problems,” and so on—in terms of the partisan failure to represent it fully, centrist rhetoric could, as a result, make deliberation appear either a secondary or an ancillary facet of democratic governance. As its presumptive consensus formed in opposition to partisan politics, the DLC invoked not only a polity beyond left and right, but also one seemingly detached from the need to engage in political debate in the first place.

As a defining discursive strategy of the New Democrats’ effort to create a winning presidential ethos for a Democrat in 1992, centrist rhetoric worked on the premise that going beyond partisan divisions could spark a renewal of democracy. Thus, on one level it equated certain rhetorical dispositions—for example, the ability to see complexity in the electorate, the capacity to think apart from established categories, and so on—with political transcendence. And yet, this path was enabled and given a sense of practical possibility by using the image of a consensus *already* beyond politics. In short, the implicit answer to a better form of representation was one with less deliberation toward achieving consensus and more approximation of an already-existing one. As such, the ethos involved in claiming a “move to the center” can merge with one suited more to advertising than to political debate.

To grasp what makes such an answer so problematic, however, is also to see the power of its allure. For its persuasiveness relies on citizens learning to reconcile a vision of their own capacity for achieving consensus with the static image of a presumptive, existing consensus claimed by elites for rep-

resentation. Seen in this way, centrist rhetoric reveals itself to depend on an imagined public that exists *beyond* rhetorical controversy, rather than one that exists *through* rhetorical controversy. Or, more accurately, centrist rhetoric reveals in these cases how the promise of effective democratic representation through transcendence can make voters themselves seem superfluous as agents of such transcendence, since they are presumed to have already arrived at such a place. To think in this way, though, is to risk denying political discourse spaces for accepting the legitimacy of controversy; such thinking seems ill-equipped to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate forms of disagreement, instead lumping them all together. Dionne's plague of "false polarizations" in which "the ideals and interests of the great mass of Americans in the political and economic center" have been hijacked by the "mischief of ideology" are only "false," that is, from the vantage of a decidedly nonpolitical perspective in which the distinction between genuine and fabricated disagreements is deemed self-evident.⁵¹

The finer points of Dionne's phrasing — "*mass* of Americans *in* the political and economic center" — are therefore telling. They suggest how appeals to the center can serve to simplify the rhetorically complex and contested nature of public opinion into something seemingly obvious and empirically plain. This rhetorical simplification invites individual voters to see themselves more in terms of a public will defined by elected officials and party operatives than as active participants in the formation of such a will. From this vantage point, we can see how the two texts above proceeded via an interplay that affirmed *both* the pliability and the fixity of the political center.

Speaking in the name of a national, post-partisan consensus, Clinton and the New Democrats both celebrated and strategically limited the connotations of openness and flexibility associated with the center. An idealized locus of political exchange in which partisan identities are left (at least in principle) at the door and compromise can be found, the center in these also becomes a demographic "reality" to be researched and reached. Based in this particular understanding of the center as a static object, notions such as Clinton's "new choice" become susceptible to a recurring split between their ability to produce arguments that seem to expand the range of democratic discourse beyond existing categories of division, and their corresponding tendency to underwrite political arguments that can move in the opposite direction as well. In the subsequent chapter, I explore this tendency by looking at how centrist rhetoric defined Clinton's presidential candidacy as one that could, at once, appeal to whites disaffected with the Democratic Party, while helping the nation to overcome the politics of racial division.

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43. Lloyd Grove, "Al From, the Life of the Party; The Head of the Democratic Leadership Council, Finding Victory in Moderation," *Washington Post*, July 24, 1992, D1. On one hand, it seems a stretch to overstate the power of the DLC in this way. Even at the peak of its power, the DLC's sway (intellectual and otherwise) over Democrats was never complete, but always limited by competing forces in the party, not to mention the protean political nature of its leading spokesman.

44. As William Greider points out, the DLC generated considerable support from companies such as Dow Chemical, Prudential-Bache, Martin Marietta, and others. At the 1991 convention in Cleveland, lobbyists from such companies were allowed to vote on resolutions brought before the group. Baer reports, too, how, as a 501(c)3 corporation funded largely by the tax-deductible contributions of its board of trustees, the PPI was financed by the likes of Michael Steinhardt, a hedge fund manager who “committed to donate \$500,000 annually for three years. . . . In return, Steinhardt was made chairman of PPI’s Board of Trustees.” See William Greider, *Who Will Tell the People? The Betrayal of American Democracy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 263. Baer, *Reinventing*, 137. On the Cleveland convention, see “The White Men in Suits Move In,” *Economist*, May 11, 1991, pp. 21–22.

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Chapter Two

Centrist Rhetoric, Whiteness, and the Ambiguities of the “Sister Souljah Moment”

The minimum wage people have *maximum vote* and they are our people. Stand with those minimum wage workers, and they're *more white* than black and brown.¹

“Democratic programs that are the legacy of the Great Society are perceived, rightly or wrongly, as programs to help the poor, inner city blacks,” said [Robert] Reich. Less well-off whites doubt that they will benefit from such programs, resulting in what Professor Reich called a “high burden of proof” for the Democrats.²

The juxtaposition of these two quotations helps to illustrate tensions that surround one of the core strategic challenges defined by the DLC that Bill Clinton used centrist rhetoric to address in his campaign: How to cope with white voters’ demonstrated unease with the growing influence of minorities, specifically African Americans, in the Democratic Party.³

In the first passage, Jesse Jackson, the two-time Democratic primary candidate, argues for an approach very different from the one Clinton, informed by the insights of the second, would adopt. Jackson contends that bringing more whites into the party depends less on catering to their identity as white people, and more on a broader, class-based approach. Mathematically speaking, this strategy could not lose; it had the advantage of literally including “more white than black or brown” voters. To speak, of “minimum wage people” as having the “maximum vote” thus invites a Democratic Party presidential rhetoric that would not only look to class identification as a way to win over whites, but also do so in a way that would presumably fit well into the party’s historical advantage with lower-income voters—“they are *our* voters” already. To “stand with minimum wage workers,” while divisive in its implication of

class struggle, is also unifying insofar as taking such a “stand” would also be to rhetorically transcend enduring racial divisions in the name of a better economic life for the majority of Americans. On this count, the call to class struggle is itself one to transcendence that would seem to have a great potential for resonance.

The second passage, however, reveals cause for skepticism regarding Jackson’s approach. It suggests that any class-based rhetoric used to bring back white support would need its own racially sensitive component to address potential white Democratic voters *as white people*, that is to say, primarily in terms of their whiteness, and even more specifically in terms of their concern about black influence. For Reich, who later served the Clinton administration as secretary of labor only to become a critic afterward, the “burden of proof” that Democrats had to unload was heavy with perceptions that proved resistant to the first approach. If the legacy of social welfare policies targeted to the poor was that even “less well-off whites” had continued to see such programs as directly conflicting with their needs and interests, and in many cases as undeserved giveaways, the implication was that Democratic calls to class unity would always confront a barrier. The argument for greater social and economic fairness had, in a sense, become racialized, made to seem less in contrast to oligarchs of any race, *per se*, than in hostility to whites of any class. If whites held a shared perception that “poor, inner-city blacks”—an image stereotypically associated as much with the experience of suffering as with its infliction on others—were at the core of the Democrats’ policy concerns, then one obvious way to change these perceptions would be to dissociate the party’s identity from this core, thus reaffirming the place of whites *as whites*—and not simply as “less well-off”—within the Democratic Party.

Indeed, Clinton critics routinely cite the speech that forms the centerpiece of this chapter, Clinton’s address to Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition in July 1992, as a quintessential example of such an approach. When he condemned remarks by the rapper and activist Sister Souljah that seemed to urge black gang members to kill whites so as to call attention to black suffering, Clinton was judged by some to have stooped to a low. Referring to the Bush campaign’s television advertisement in 1988 featuring a black man who had stabbed a white man and raped his white fiancée while on furlough, political scientist (and former Jackson associate) Ron Walters told *USA Today* in the days following the speech that he had detected something similar: “Everybody had been expecting the Bush people to come roaring out of the blocks with a Willie Horton strategy, and all of a sudden it comes from the Democratic ranks.”²⁴

Walter’s comparison of the speech to the commercial seems tendentious, especially given the convergence of racist trope and factual misrepresenta-

tion contained in the Horton ad, a convergence that tells us much about its despicable character.⁵ And yet, seeing an affinity between the Bush ad and the Clinton speech is hardly unreasonable. After all, each was a strategically crafted campaign message showcasing a candidate's defense of white victims from violence identified with black rage. As such, both resonated with enduring and reliable political strategies for mobilizing white fears. Nor is this form of comparison unusual. Indeed, scholarship focused on the Clinton campaign and the politics of race (in particular left and liberal commentary on the so-called Sister Souljah Moment) often assumes that the centrist approach meant, as Andrew Hacker put it, proving to white voters that in the "new" Democratic Party they would occupy a special position—in effect, one in which they would no longer have to "feel that black claims were competing with their own."⁶ In combination, the New Democrats' eagerness to address white anxiety about the racial allegiances of the party, and their stated commitment to soothing such anxieties as a path to winning the presidency, warrants an approach in search of signs of similar affinities throughout Clinton's rhetoric.

This chapter does not push such an approach to the side. But it will aim to introduce another way to look at Clinton's speech and the rhetoric on race that preceded it during the 1992 campaign. One of the key factors in this broader rhetorical field was less a direct move away from identification with African Americans, than a more indirect construction of an alternately exclusive and inclusive form of whiteness. It was a construction, I will show, that centrist rhetoric, with its cunning and skilled standard-bearer, its contrastive modes of producing transcendence, and its historical grounding in the matrices of Democratic turmoil, made distinct.

In describing whiteness in terms of its construction via centrist political rhetoric, I begin with the insights of a body of scholarship founded in the notion that constructions of whiteness are coincident with the concealment of their power. In short, whiteness is an active social force that is continually hiding its own role as such. As Richard Dyer argues, "White power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything at all."⁷ This claim establishes a tight fit between means of establishing "dominance" and means of "seeming not to be anything at all," which invites a demystifying, decoding critical practice. Since "public political figures avoid mentioning whiteness in their discourse" rhetoricians must, Carrie Crenshaw has argued, try to "make whiteness visible and overturn its silences for the purpose of resisting racism."⁸ As in other critical discourses of power focused on dismantling social asymmetries and hierarchies, the most common approach to studying whiteness hinges on the premise that white identification works to turn differences in pigment into deviations from a presumptive social or biological norm.

“White,” says George Lipsitz, works as an “unmarked category against which difference is constructed,” though one that never has to “acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations.”⁹

Established as an “unmarked” space apart from marked differences—for example, white as the blank canvas upon which “ethnic” and “minority” differences stand out—while also continually entering into this field of differences contrastively—for example, white *against* black or brown—whiteness defines itself through oscillating between invisibility and visibility. This dual effect—performing a contrastive function, while establishing a position that presumes to orient all other positions—shares an elective affinity with the political center’s similarly mixed rhetorical character as a topos, allowing us to study one alongside the other. Whiteness, Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek argue, functions as a strategic rhetoric that works to “to resecure the center, the place, for whites” in a position of social dominance.¹⁰ While explicit legal structures of white supremacy once served to secure the center, in the post-civil rights era, tacit and more ambiguous forms of white power “resecure” this position by coloring it white, so to speak. Nakayama and Krizek advance this line of thought when they argue that whiteness “makes itself visible and invisible, eluding analysis yet exerting influence over our everyday life” from the “normalizing position of the center.”¹¹

This understanding of whiteness as a fluid discourse effect (it seeps into spaces undetected) that nevertheless establishes a fixity of power relations (it keeps in place a legacy of division) from the center allows for us to grasp a contradiction that inheres in Clinton’s treatment of whiteness in the Souljah speech and elsewhere. Whiteness’ symbolic fluidity affords Clinton the means to advance, in the same discursive space, seemingly incongruous aims pertaining to the politics of race. Whiteness does not work unilaterally in his rhetoric against blackness as a social signifier, but in a complex manner that both challenges and “resecures” the center as a place reserved for whites. According to Robyn Wiegman, a similar kind of process defines a dominant formation of white identity in the United States. She describes a form of “liberal whiteness” in which an active “disaffiliation from white supremacist practices” becomes put to “multiple and contradictory political purposes.”¹² When explicit rejections and denunciations of overt racist practices in the name of inclusion can themselves harness and be harnessed by the logic of whiteness’ rhetorical power, we are in the realm of the production of political transcendence.

Thus, there is a limit to presuming a tight fit between “invisibility” and the power of whiteness in contemporary political discourse. Indeed, I argue that amidst a pronounced “disaffiliation from white supremacist practices” Clinton used centrist rhetoric to construct a form of whiteness that was specific and

visible, but which nevertheless assumed a transcendent and invisible function in the Souljah speech. To address this racially significant instance of centrist rhetoric in its fullness requires looking first at the conditions that the Clinton campaign found itself in at the start of June as the New Democrat readied himself to accept the party's nomination a few months later.

SEIZING THE (SISTER SOULJAH) MOMENT

Reflecting on Clinton's speech before the Rainbow Coalition, Shawn J. and Trevor Parry-Giles cite it among several examples of how whiteness could serve for Clinton as a potent "source of political power."¹³ To be sure, Clinton was in need of a boost of power when he arrived at the Washington Sheraton Hotel on June 13, 1992, to address the Rainbow Coalition, a civil rights organization founded by Jesse Jackson six years earlier.

Though Clinton had recently captured enough delegates to win the Democratic nomination, Clinton's weak standing in the general election polls was a concern for his campaign. Independent candidate H. Ross Perot was making headway, surpassing Clinton in a few surveys by spring and putting him in third place in a three-way race. Some began to question the Democrat's viability in the upcoming contest against the incumbent, George H. W. Bush. Accusations of adultery, charges of "draft dodging," and low turnout in the primaries, among other factors, moved observers to question whether Clinton could stave off growing concern within his own party about his place at the top of the ticket.¹⁴ Even high points were low points. When Clinton clinched the Democratic nomination on the night of June 2, eleven days before the Souljah speech, he was nevertheless dejected and demoralized. It was what one aide called "the worst time in the campaign," a time when, in Clinton's words, voters "weren't listening" at all to his message. As official returns came in showing a decisive victory in several states, exit polls indicated more ominously that a number of voters who had voted for Clinton would actually have preferred Perot.¹⁵

We cannot say with certainty the extent to which Clinton's speech to the Rainbow Coalition sparked the reverse in this downward trend that would soon commence and accelerate after the Democratic Convention in late July. When Perot dropped out of the race just four weeks after the speech citing the "revitalization of the Democratic Party" as a factor in his decision, he was, however, responding to a clear shift in the race: after the Coalition speech, the credence of the dominant narrative of party transformation, of "moving to the center," upon which Clinton had staked much of his campaign had begun to strengthen and carry the candidate's message of change forward.¹⁶

Before Clinton gave the Rainbow Coalition speech, according to the reporting of Jack Germond and Jules Witcover, staffers discussed just how and when to call attention to Sister Souljah's words during the campaign. Clinton, had initially planned to discuss the comments immediately after the riots themselves before a group of entertainment industry leaders. According to Clinton aide Paul Begala, the message was to concern the "moral responsibility to speak out when one of their own was advocating racism."¹⁷ Judging such a message inappropriate to the gathering—mostly Democratic fundraisers—Clinton gave his speech without any reference to the rapper at all. Once, however, staff members realized that Souljah was to host a youth workshop the evening before Clinton was set to speak, they concluded that the candidate had to say something in response. The conclusion was driven by the concern that with Clinton and Souljah sharing space on the convention schedule, Republicans would have a field day connecting the two. Again, the memory from past Democratic losses was decisive. As campaign chair Mickey Kantor summarized the consensus, "Not saying anything [would have been] a continuation of the same kind of politics which had led us to get our clocks cleaned in every election." With this electoral consideration in mind, "we dusted off the appropriate pieces of the Souljah speech" for the candidate's coalition appearance.¹⁸

And yet, of course, the speech was hardly *just* a defensive maneuver designed to stave off criticism from the right. There is no record of the campaign requesting that Souljah be disinvited from the Rainbow Coalition activities or of them making any prior public statement about their discomfort with her presence. Such overtures would prove an effort to cope with this image problem minus a public confrontation with the group. Nor did Clinton notify Jackson that he would be saying anything at all about Souljah; he wanted, it seems, to maintain an element of surprise. With these facts in mind, we can see how the speech was not simply about Souljah, but about something more: The opportunity for Clinton to send a certain kind of message about race and his status as a New Democrat, centrist not beholden to party interest groups from the left. His campaign clearly recognized this opportunity. Rather than try to discourage coverage of the event or minimize Clinton's attendance, they tried to draw as much attention to it as they could. In the hours before Clinton arrived to give the speech, top campaign aides altered the press of the coming fireworks. And, in the hours after giving the speech, the future president presciently told top aides George Stephanopoulos and Begala, "Well, you got your story."¹⁹

That his staff wanted the media to use Clinton's criticism of Souljah before Jackson's group to tell a "story" favorable to their interests is, of course, unsurprising; it confirms how central concerns about racial politics were to the

campaign and how much they thought the speech could help them to address these concerns. David Broder quotes “top Clinton aides who told reporters that the meeting with the Rainbow Coalition would be used to show Clinton’s ‘independence’” from Democratic constituency groups.²⁰ And yet, the tale of the speech itself offers a more complex picture of how “independence” emerged. This picture has as much to do with “independence” from Jackson, per se, as with reassuring whites skeptical of Clinton’s concern for *their* well-being. Such efforts, indeed, can be seen as part of a larger strategic response to a prevailing perception among a majority of white voters that Democrats were, as Clinton pollster Stanley Greenberg had summarized it a year earlier in an influential and widely read essay in the *American Prospect*, “too identified with minorities and special interests to speak for average Americans.”²¹

Greenberg’s implicit identification of whiteness with “average Americans” and his division of “average Americans” from “minorities and special interests” is important. For it hints at a larger intersection of centrist rhetoric’s topoi for the production of transcendence—“average Americans,” the “middle class,” and so on—and race-based thinking about how to change the identity and political fortune of the Democratic Party from the center. The “revitalization” that Perot referred to was a process conducted through a rhetorical prism that bent the “move to the center” toward an affiliation with white identity. Through such a prism, creating an impression of the ability to “speak for average Americans” often entailed creating an impression of distance from minority groups. So while Sister Souljah was not a widely known political figure (or entertainment figure for that matter) until Clinton put her on the map, the man whose group she addressed the evening before was quite widely known.

ON THE SYMBOLIC IMPORTANCE OF JESSE JACKSON FOR CENTRIST RHETORIC

At the outset, both Jesse and I saw [the speech before the Rainbow Coalition] as an opportunity to bridge our differences. It didn’t work out that way.

—Bill Clinton²²

Jesse Jackson was, in many ways, the ideal antagonist for the New Democrats’ attempt to define their centrist vision in contrast to the party’s electoral collapse of 1972. Sporting an afro and a dashiki, Jackson cut a striking figure during network television’s coverage of that year’s chaotic convention. His rise to prominence came after a contentious battle in which he replaced

Chicago mayor Richard Daley as chair of the Illinois delegation, an act that, in the words of one columnist at the time, had publicly humiliated and “disenfranchised Chicago’s white ethnic Democrats.”²³ In that act, in which a young black activist in the party boldly challenged and successfully ousted one of its most well-known (and feared) white leaders, Jackson became what Rick Perlstein has evocatively called a “visual symbol of . . . a great party’s civil war.”²⁴

In the DLC’s estimation, it was in large part those on Jackson’s “side” in such a “war”—the young cadre of liberal activists who most prominently backed McGovern’s insurgent candidacy—who, years later, were practicing the “politics of evasion.” Freighted in the mainstream press with connotations of extremism, weighted down by his public association with the Nation of Islam leader Louis B. Farrakhan, and sullied by the taint of anti-Semitism for derogatory comments he had made in 1984, the one-time aide to Martin Luther King and two-time presidential candidate, was an adversary of great rhetorical value to the New Democrats. And, of course, Jackson often helped them along with his own eagerness to cast Clinton’s group as merely newfangled “Dixiecrats” fronting for more racist elements in the party or as “Democrats for the Leisure Class” in the pocket of big business and the rich.

As I discussed in chapter 2, one of the lead stories coming out of the DLC’s annual meeting in 1989 was the loud and public confrontation between Jackson and the white Democratic senator from Virginia, Chuck Robb after the unveiling of “The Politics of Evasion.” The argument was initially reported as a spontaneous tiff between liberal and moderate Democrats prompted by the charges in the document. And yet, its true history is worth recalling, since the event foreshadows the Rainbow Coalition controversy in important ways and hints at a larger, more consistent strategy of using Jackson as a foil.

Unbeknownst to Jackson, the 1989 row with Robb was far from spontaneous. In fact, “the whole spat had been largely scripted at least a month” before the actual event by DLC insiders to drive a very public wedge between the group and the minority-coalition driven liberalism of Jackson and his allies.²⁵ In his role as a high-ranking member of the DLC, Robb chided Jackson before the cameras, making the latter, once again, a “visual symbol” of tensions in the Democratic Party and the country. In Robb’s words, Jackson was an agent of division who had cleft the nation into two sections. He had encouraged the widespread “public perception that [Democrats] are bringing together all who have a greater need and pitting them in some ways against those who are currently successful. . . . There is a perception that it is us against them . . . [these perceptions] are not conducive to the electoral success we are looking for.”²⁶ Jackson’s response that the party had “to determine which side of history we are on” and that it was the party’s shaky record on civil rights that had held

it back electorally seemed to play into the DLC's hands. By invoking shades of the "either/or" language of faction and historical side-taking, what one reporter called Jackson's "sharp-edged politics" seemed resistant not only to unity, but to change.²⁷ The implication of Robb's charge of an "us against them" politics was that Jackson would prefer conflict between races and classes not only over cooperation, but over "electoral success" itself. Taking a different approach two years later, the DLC simply acted as if Jackson had no place at the table. With Clinton as its chair, the DLC publicly barred Jackson from attending its Cleveland convention, while From "happily advertised" Jackson's exclusion from the convention to "anyone who'd listen."²⁸

WHITENESS, THE "MAINSTREAM," AND THE "OTHER COMMUNITY"

Jackson's role as the DLC's personification of divisiveness and electoral failure, however, explains only part of the connotative backdrop behind the Souljah speech. One needs also to take into consideration how the Clinton campaign provided voters with a racial subtext for the party's move to the center in ways that were less obviously about internal politics, and more broadly related to ways that Clinton's whiteness became accentuated more generally over a series of events.

For example, on January 23, in the midst of the New Hampshire primary, Clinton received considerable coverage in the press for presiding over the execution of Rickey Ray Rector, a mentally disabled black inmate on Arkansas' death row, despite protests from Jackson and human rights groups.²⁹ Then, on March 2, eight days before the "Super Tuesday" primary and on the eve of a "mini Super Tuesday" primary, Clinton visited Stone Mountain, Georgia, the home of the founding of the second Ku Klux Klan in 1915. With Sam Nunn beside him, Clinton posed for the media before a group of mostly black prisoners at a state correctional facility, the moment captured on the front page of leading Southern newspapers the following day in time for several state primaries.³⁰ And, on March 21, a story broke that Clinton had, "in a classic gesture of racial separation," according to coverage in the *New York Times*, "played golf several times a year since he became Governor" at the all-white Country Club of Little Rock.³¹ Clinton's apologized and vowed to stop playing at the course, and yet images identifying him as playing at a course that no blacks could use were repeatedly broadcast across the country.

James MacGregor Burns and Georgia Sorenson have pointedly asked, whether things the golf flap were simply coincidences, or part of a more deliberately "stealth message under the radar screen to white Americans" of

Clinton's willingness to buck the sensitivities of the party's black supporters?³² While obvious on one level, Burns's and Sorenson's insinuation about such events is nevertheless problematic when taken in isolation. Reading these signs as easily deniable acts of "dog whistle politics" can be misleading when trying to understand their broader role in shaping how whiteness functions. Assessments like Philip Klinkler's that these events and others demonstrate Clinton's desire to signal his "receptivity to the desires of whites to preserve many of the traditional racial arrangements they found comfortable" can also be tendentially selective.³³ For such judgments ignore compelling and direct instances in which Clinton's rhetoric swung in the other direction—that is, toward challenging "traditional racial arrangements" in American politics. That such challenges arose alongside examples of their opposite invites scrutiny into how (and whether and under what criteria) centrist rhetoric might have managed this simultaneity in ways that are not reducible simply to one trumping the other.

Clinton made a point on the day he announced his candidacy to define his campaign as one specifically committed to ending the political manipulation of white racial fear and grievance by the Republican Party:

For 12 years, Republicans have tried to divide us—race against race—so we get mad at each other and not at them. They want us to look at each other across a racial divide so we don't turn and look to the White House and ask, Why are all of our incomes going down? Why are all of us losing jobs? Why are we losing our future? Where I come from we know about race-baiting. They've used it to divide us for years. I know this tactic well and I'm not going to let them get away with it.³⁴

These are strong words. Invoking a public divided by those seeking to evade responsibility for their own ineptitude, Clinton puts the politics of racial division at the core of this problem, making economic exploitation and neglect it chief symptom. He defines the goal of ending such practices as central to his campaign. Clinton's claim to special knowledge as a Southerner of race-baiting further accentuates the point, as he acknowledges both a sensitivity to the effectiveness of "this tactic" and, by implication, a capacity to not only resist it—Clinton, though a white, Southern politician himself, will not race-bait—but prevent "them" from executing it successfully.

Rhetoric such as this was not isolated. Clinton followed a similar path in a widely covered pair of back-to-back speeches in Michigan during the primaries as well. The first, on March 12, took place at the Macomb County Community College, home to the so-called Reagan Democrats, the name coined by Greenberg to describe white voters in similar locales who had left the party—actually before Reagan came on the scene—largely in response

to social and tax policies they perceived as neglecting whites. In Macomb, Clinton lectured to his nearly all-white audience. He called them to task for the effects of their own prejudice, saying that no program of national recovery could work in the 1990s “unless we are prepared to give up some of the prejudices we all had in the eighties.”³⁵ He took on the disingenuousness of the Horton advertisement directly, calling on his party to “stand and draw the line” on “race baiting.”³⁶ He argued against the scapegoating of blacks during the welfare debates of that decade by correcting the record—“there are more whites than blacks on welfare”—and by returning to his own personal knowledge of the consequences for blacks and whites of division: “My whole region was kept poor and backward because the people who were running the politics knew that as long as they could separate us by race, they could hold us down.”³⁷ This tack continued the following day, March 13, when Clinton spoke before a predominantly black church in Detroit. He pleaded with the gathered parishioners to “tell the people of Macomb County, if you’ll give up your race feelings, we’ll say we want empowerment, not entitlement, we want opportunity, but we accept responsibility.”³⁸ Clinton suggests, it seems, a kind of bargain: on the basis of a shared commitment to progress, blacks and whites each need to play a role in addressing the factors that have contributed to racial tension and division.

In proposing such a bargain, Clinton, to be sure, eschewed the systemic critique of racism and white privilege that Klinkler and other critics would have liked. Too, the “bargain” he proposed in Detroit seemed, on one level, to reinforce the kind of historical amnesia that can sustain such privileges. Given the prominent place of white supremacy in the history of the United States, to suggest equal responsibility for resolving racial divisions is dubious, to say the least. Clinton is either naïve or intentionally obtuse in furthering the notion that simply “giv[ing] up you race feelings” was possible, desirable, or even something that—most likely—many whites did not *already* judge themselves to have done.

And yet, Clinton’s campaign rhetoric on race was hardly meek. It represented a more than passing commitment to speaking out against discrimination, it entailed electoral risk, and it was present throughout all of his campaign discourse. Nor does it stand to reason that Clinton, who dwarfed his Democratic competitors in black electoral support during the primaries, who went on to build and hold that support throughout his presidency with broad backing, and who culminated his second term with an unprecedented “National Initiative on Race,” should be singled out for trying to build a collation that included white voters whose “race feelings” had made them historically susceptible to the politics of racial scapegoating. Such scapegoating, after all, had effectively splintered the base of the Democratic Party since the passage

of civil rights legislation in the 1960s, arguably displacing attention to a host of other matters.

In a sense, then, Clinton's campaign took two paths in its approach to race. On the one hand, as Hacker points out, Clinton and his strategists sought to assuage white voters of their allegiance to such voters *as white* by diligently avoiding "promises specifically aimed at black citizens."³⁹ This strategy entailed, in large part, stressing the candidate's "independence" from minority constituency groups and his willingness to oppose them on issues, such as welfare reform, racial "quotas," and the death penalty. On the other hand, the candidate continually spoke of the need for racial reconciliation and, at key moments, did so eloquently and with warnings of the national cost of enduring asymmetries of race and class. The occasion of the Los Angeles Riots and their aftermath offer, in particular, a good sense of how these dual paths on race—one highlighting the candidate's and the party's distance from blacks, the other focused on speaking strongly against division and for dialogue, even justice—coexisted in the lead up to the Souljah speech.

During and after the Los Angeles Riots, Clinton made all the routine calls for order, for law, and for punishment expected from a presidential candidate. And as things worsened, he clearly sought to stress what he called the "savage behavior" of the "lawless vandals" involved in the violence.⁴⁰ In marked contrast to the other major candidates, however, he spoke of this violence in the larger context of increasing economic devastation, social atomization, and enduring racial injustice. The acquittal of the white police officers charged with brutalizing Rodney King demanded, as he put it in his first public response to the verdict, that Americans "search our national character for a new commitment to justice."⁴¹ Citing Jefferson on slavery, Clinton used a speech to the American Association of Newspaper Publishers to call the riots "a fire bell in the night for our democracy . . . for all of us as citizens in 1992," a warning that the nation needed to start "facing the problem of race more squarely than we have."⁴² Later, Clinton reminded Arsenio Hall's national television audience that the majority of people in South Central Los Angeles were peaceful and productive people, neither threatening, nor idle, but rather the victims of a broader system of exploitation that did not reward their work. They "didn't loot, didn't burn, didn't riot, didn't steal. But a lot of them are still living below the poverty line even though they're working forty hours a week."⁴³ Speaking in Birmingham, Alabama, the day after the riots, Clinton gave a long speech that used the violence not simply to call for the punishment of those who had broken the law, but also to meditate on larger problems of division in the American society. He spoke a memorable phrase that he would include in subsequent speeches, including his acceptance address at the 1992 Democratic National Convention: "There can be no 'them'

in America. There's only 'us.'"⁴⁴ In Birmingham, what preceded this declaration was a quick recap of how "we have been divided in this country for too long between 'us' and 'them'" in which Clinton invoked the higher unity and necessity of an "us" that had no "them."

And yet, Clinton would frequently tuck between his words a "them" that was hardly race-neutral. Such a "them" carried with it a mark of deviance from the norm. It was a "them" defined by its inconsistency with the "mainstream," an inconsistency that rendered it both a threatening and pitiful group to consider. When Clinton traveled to New Orleans, Louisiana, to address the DLC annual convention several days after the riots, he spoke of the mostly black "people who are looting" not as isolated individuals or as people acting uncharacteristically, but as members of a much larger, and thus more worrisome, "them" that was fundamentally "other." He said of those on the streets of Los Angeles, "*They* do not share *our* values, and *their* children are growing up in a culture *alien* from *ours*."⁴⁵ When, later in the speech, Clinton moves to propose remedies for this "culture alien from ours" by stating that it had languished for too long beneath a façade of progress "for those of *us* who live in *mainstream* America," he does so in a telling way. He calls his audience into being as the subjects of a "we" who must come to terms "with *those* who are not part of *our* community, whose values have been shredded by the hard knife of experience."⁴⁶ Recounting the tragedy of a country in which fears of violence with a "black face" are shared by both races and in which "black Americans are leading other black Americans to the slaughter" while whites seem to care little, he challenges his audience to "face our fears and stop running from them," that is, to face the legacy of alienation that has given birth to such violence. He then offers an example. He cites his daughter Chelsea's attendance at a mostly black public high school, saying "She revels in the biracial life she lives, and there has been more hope than fear in her experience."⁴⁷

At the same time, however, he also gives credence to racially tinged fears as salient and worthy of serious attention. He recalls how his daughter will return from her school sometimes to "tell me stories that sometimes cause me to fear," and refers to "white people [who] have been scared for so long that they have fled to the suburbs of America." He says in a simple, declarative sentence: "I understand those fears," giving weight to their emotional reality.

When Clinton here speaks of his empathic understanding of white people's "fears" he is referring unmistakably to white people's fear of violence instigated by black people. And yet, he does so within the scope of a much larger and more pervasive environment of anxiety for which the riots serve as an illustration. It is the anxiety that somehow this nonmainstream, "alien culture" will overwhelm the "mainstream," no matter how much distance

is placed between the two, leaving the nation in chaos. Clinton hints at this possibility when he—seemingly out of nowhere—expands his discourse on black alienation to include all nonwhites, indeed joining African Americans together with a host of minorities in contrast to the “mainstream”:

What of the Hispanics, what of the Asian Americans, what of the other Americans who have come here from different nations? What is to become of them? Will they be part of the mainstream community or the *other* community of America?⁴⁸

Clinton does not answer his own questions, but leaves them hanging in the air for those gathered at the convention to ponder in light of his own campaign for president: “This situation cries out for leadership.”

How does a discourse in which there is “no them,” in which Clinton proclaims to the DLC that the “hard truth” at the root of the riots in Los Angeles is a legacy of discrimination that is itself at odds with the nation’s founding ideals, become reconciled with one that speaks ominously of distinctly nonwhite “alien” cultures, of an “other community,” of a “swelling sea of people who are disconnected from the American mainstream” and who seem to be either hardened criminals or powerless victims, but, in any case, are not “mainstream” and whose identities are defined by the threat that they might never become “part of the mainstream community” without new leadership? What, beyond its affinities with American liberalism’s broader assimilationist discourse, is the character of a rhetoric that looks out on this “swelling sea” with a desire to see it as potentially incorporable into the “mainstream,” but which also consigns those in Los Angeles to a future of despair, as Clinton seemed to do when he cited former Texas governor Ann Richards at the Cleveland City Club, saying of the rioters that though as children they might have been saved, “they are lost to us” now?⁴⁹

One answer is that while the New Democrats and Clinton privately and publicly defined the “mainstream” in terms that made it into a particular demographic constituency that had to be mollified—that is, a white, middle class disaffected with Democrats—centrist rhetoric was able to selectively accentuate and artfully transform this particularity into something greater, while still not losing its identification with whiteness. Depending on various factors—actual and implied audiences, placement among other terms and narratives, and so on—the “mainstream” could seem to include all citizens *potentially*, while always qualifying such inclusiveness in ways that evoked an *actually existing* “them.” In turn, racialized images connected to violence and dependency, and to values and experiences that were dangerously inconsistent with the “mainstream” defined this “them.” Such rhetoric could therefore pivot between defining different political and cultural elements as

apart from the “mainstream,” while also making it seem a *potentially* limitless category. Thus when Clinton, in his acceptance address at the Democratic National Convention, said to the nation, “All of us, we need each other. We don’t have a person to waste,” the meaning of his specific words called on “*all* of us” to join him, while the rhetorical trajectory of his discourse often veered toward another conclusion: namely, that the “mainstream” for centrists was always bounded by a hidden but vital frontier that frequently emerged alongside explicit and tacit markers of white identity.⁵⁰

And yet, as Clinton’s words following the riots suggest, the project of discerning and critically evaluating the rhetorical construction of this hidden frontier is complicated on several levels and in ways that are more challenging to evaluate than might appear. Was Clinton’s consistent attempt to dispel wholesale negative generalizations of the residents of South Central Los Angeles trumped by his rhetoric of “alien” cultures that threaten an ostensibly virtuous and guiltless “mainstream” one? Does Clinton’s expressed identification with white people afraid of violence perpetrated by black people, in the end, provide us with better evidence of the rhetorical character of centrist politics than his explicit condemnation of “race-baiting” and his call on whites to take responsibility for their own “race feelings?” Do we have reason, in short, to conclude that the apparently split character of this rhetoric masks a truer and more singular reality of the Clinton era, one that signifies little more than “a retreat from the struggle against racial injustice,” in the words of Adolph Reed Jr.⁵¹

Reed’s skeptical interpretation is both useful and, like Klinkler’s earlier judgment, limiting. It is useful as a broader, critical framework from which to make sense of the racial entanglements of centrist rhetoric. For Reed, the New Democrats’ way of treating race during 1992 campaign was not isolated, that is, but part of “a rightward shift in the ideological and programmatic consensus of liberal politics.”⁵² Along these lines, we might see the speech to the Rainbow Coalition speech as one episode in a series of political developments on the left in the 1990s that coalesced through and converged in representations of whiteness. Centrist rhetoric did not merely reflect these developments, according to Eric Lott. Rather, Clinton’s election proved to be the catalyst for the gelling of “centrism into a public, self-consciously united force,” bringing together disparate forces with “whiteness [as] their common ground.”⁵³

The limit to this kind of judgment, however, stems from its explanatory ambition. Long in their reach and wide in their historical and ideological scope, the conclusions reached by Reed and Lott necessarily obscure the textual density and situational complexity of the particular arguments about race and political strategy that comprise the broader formations they aim to

criticize. Attention to such factors is important, because only such attention can reveal how these arguments could gain rhetorical currency in ways that did not simply require false consciousness, racist intent, or a concerted effort to redefine liberalism. Working within the coordinates drawn by the likes of Reed and Lott, in short, makes it difficult to gauge the quality and intensity of constructions of whiteness in centrist rhetoric, as well as the limits of such constructions. While modalities of whiteness have been historically appealing to U.S. political actors interested in attracting electoral support—Clinton being no exception to this rule—the power of this appeal is neither the whole, nor the most interesting story of why and how whiteness becomes discursively salient and to what end at this time. To tell such a story, we need to attend instead to the internally contradictory nature of what making “whiteness” into a “common ground” might actually mean in practice for those who come to deploy it. And for this we need to turn to the close analysis of actual artifacts, a turn that promises not to redeem whiteness from its “sins,” but to explain better the tensions in its construction that define its special power.

**BRAGGING ON THE COALITION, WHILE DEFENDING
“GOOD WHITE PEOPLE”: “ADDRESS TO THE RAINBOW
COALITION, JUNE 13, 1992”**

I invited him to promote unity, but he came to promote distance.

—Jesse Jackson⁵⁴

I bragged on the Rainbow Coalition. . . . I criticized divisive language by Sister Souljah. If Jesse Jackson wants to align himself with that now and claim that’s the way he felt, then that’s his business.

—Bill Clinton⁵⁵

A week after witnessing it firsthand, Jesse Jackson called Clinton’s speech to the Rainbow Coalition “insulting to our audience,” a “Machiavellian maneuver” designed to “malign me” in an attempt “to appeal to conservative whites.”⁵⁶ And yet, as Clinton took pains to point out in its aftermath, the speech praises Jackson and his group at length. It applauds the Coalition’s programs directed at alleviating poverty, and makes explicit the candidate’s solidarity with African Americans in general, and especially with those unfairly stereotyped by the recent riots. Indeed, looking at most of the text, it is hard to find grounds for the common characterization of the speech as an attack on Jackson.

Clinton begins his speech by asserting a “remarkable commonality” between the Coalition’s goals and what “I have said from the moment I entered this presidential campaign.”⁵⁷ From this point until the mention of Souljah, Clinton does not grant a single point of disagreement with Jackson or the Coalition. He commends the group “for not just pointing the finger of blame but taking up the burden of responsibility” unlike those people (e.g., Vice President Dan Quayle) he was tired of, those “people with trust funds telling people on food stamps how to live!” Too, against those who would lump together all the youth of Los Angeles with the violent few captured on television during the riots, Clinton counters with what he calls “the real story of Los Angeles,” one which stars *not* the small fraction of rioters, but those who “were sitting in their houses when they could have been looting goods because their parent told them it was wrong to steal from their neighbors . . . they really live by family values. And we ought to honor that.” Aside from extending these honors, the speech also calls (again) for an end to the racial politics exemplified by the Horton advertisement from 1988; accuses the Bush administration of using welfare policy to divide the nation; suggests pointedly that banks and other corporations had neglected predominantly black areas for racially motivated reasons; offers new initiatives for increased inner-city lending targeted at blacks; and argues for community-based alternatives to prison for nonviolent offenders. In many ways, then, Clinton’s speech was the opposite of a rebuke of Jackson’s group or a simple appeal to “conservative whites.”

And yet, it is the incongruity of the rebuke of Souljah near the close of the speech that is central from the standpoint at which the oration’s political significance and rhetorical structure meet. More to the point, what stands out most is how Clinton attempts to resolve the tension raised by his remarks. By identifying with the Coalition in terms of praise and common purpose, he draws the rhetorical authority for his criticism of its decision to invite Souljah to speak. In turn, Clinton uses this criticism as the basis for something beyond itself. He uses it to ground a call to racial transcendence in opposition to her words, and to what she is said to represent. To use Souljah’s comments for this purpose, to make his criticism a prelude to overcoming division, Clinton brings explicit attention to the whiteness of her hypothetical victims. And, in doing so, he suggests that whites are, at a level transcending race, the contemporary counterparts to blacks who have born the brunt of white supremacist rhetoric. From this identification of and with a whiteness under attack before a largely black audience, Clinton will establish a distance from Jackson and Souljah that will segue into a production of transcendence.

Clinton eases into his criticism of Souljah with ambiguity and implication. He moves from the celebratory part of the speech to its critical conclusion

with the force of an adverb—“finally”—that suggests its place at the end of the logical chain constituted by his earlier proofs praising Jackson and his group:

Finally, let’s stand up for what has always been best about the Rainbow Coalition which is people coming together across racial lines. You talked about [Congressman Cleo] Fields, from Louisiana, the other night, a great role model. We don’t have a lot of time to do this. We don’t have a lot of time.

The implied “us” in Clinton’s “let’s stand up” seemingly matches up with the “we” that will later commence the final two sentences of the passage. And yet the phrase “what has *always* been *best* about the Rainbow Coalition” also creates a subtle division that will persist. He defines his audience via a hierarchy of values that presumably binds them, but which is not the same as them. The epitome of this hierarchy, “which is people coming together across racial lines,” is what must be proclaimed by them to reaffirm their own identity, suggests Clinton. Of a different order than any single “we,” the identity of the Coalition bases itself in the deeper value of a universal movement—“coming together”—to which all can aspire amidst the challenges of a context—a world separated by “racial lines”—to which all can relate. Though he salutes a black congressman who spoke earlier as a “role model,” Clinton’s call to action is nevertheless urgent, as if such role models have become a dying breed. Proclaiming the historical commitment of the Coalition to racial harmony in one breath, in the next Clinton hints that there is a kind of expiration date for achieving such harmony—and that such a date looms on the horizon. Time is running out for a “we” to “do” a “this,” which Clinton leaves unsaid, but which links directly back to the “best” of the Coalition’s work.

With a gap created between the “best” of the Coalition and the “we” that must rise without delay to meet it, there arises for the first time in the speech the image of an adversary, other than the previous administration, that resists the changes required to meet this challenge:

You had a rap singer here last night named Sister Souljah. I defend her right to express herself through music, but her comments before and after Los Angeles were filled with the kind of hatred that you do not honor today and tonight.

Clinton defines the “you” he addresses in terms of a contradiction or a tension that Sister Souljah’s mere presence before the Coalition makes evident. This “you,” though the same as the Coalition, grants a hearing to hatred. More subtly, he defines the hatred contained in Souljah’s words in purely negative terms. We know not exactly what “*kind of hatred*” her comments are “filled with,” but are assured that it is the kind the Coalition does “*not* honor today

and tonight.” Clinton thus begins with a premise that opposes the earlier reference to “what has always been best about the Rainbow Coalition” to the actions of a “rap singer . . . named Sister Souljah,” and implicitly to the “you” sanctioning her appearance. In turn, he gives Souljah an identity marked by the consistency of her hatred, a consistency made evident in its capacity to survive “before and after” a seminal event fresh in the minds of those gathered. In other words, her hatred is neither a temporary reaction to the event, nor something that the event altered in any significant way.

This initial abstraction of Souljah’s “hatred” into a certain “kind” is important. To make something one hears into a “kind” is to stress its place within a broader set of concerns and motives beyond circumstance. In this case, such abstraction offers a versatile platform for describing Clinton’s and Souljah’s comments that many will adopt in their response to the event. While this importance will bear itself out as Souljah’s “hatred,” once made into a “kind,” becomes transformed throughout this coverage into a synonym for racially motivated animosity in general, the abstraction becomes concrete rather quickly as such “hatred” acquires its black subject and its white object in the speech itself:

Just listen to this, what she said. She told the *Washington Post* about a month ago and I quote, “If black people kill black people every day, why not have a week and kill white people. So you’re a gang member and normally kill somebody. Why not kill a white person.” Last year she said, “You can’t call me or any black person anywhere in the world a racist. We don’t have the power to do to white people what white people have done to us. And even if we did, we don’t have that low down and dirty nature. If there are any good white people I haven’t met them. Where are they?” Right here in this room. That’s where they are.

Clinton’s evidence for Souljah’s hatred of white people relies on just these two cases; he does not seem to grant the possibility of other factors that might explain the Coalition’s decision to invite her. Too, she becomes isolated in Clinton’s discourse from any larger political purpose or historical context that could help to frame her words. And while Jackson was likely in the realm of hyperbole when he later defended Souljah as someone who “represents the feelings and hopes of a whole generation of people,” it is not unreasonable to assume that her invitation to speak before the Coalition was based on past actions and statements that were less than consistent with those in question and that moved the organization to offer her a place on its program.⁵⁸ Moreover, quoted absent any sense of the words’ immediate rhetorical context, it seems only fair to concede that Clinton’s is a less than comprehensive reading of their meaning. Indeed, there is a case to be made that such a reading would reveal of Souljah’s word a very different

picture than Clinton's literalist, selective interpretation seems to draw for his immediate audience, and, of course, for his national one.⁵⁹

Nevertheless, the gruesome and malignant implication of these words is hard to deny. And, in any case, since the power of these words for Clinton at the time actually came from ignoring the very possibility of much beyond their literal meaning, it pays to study them primarily in terms of this mode of use, a mode which leaves Souljah's provocative comments ripe for appropriation and which allows for Clinton's own whiteness to come into vision in a particularly striking way. To read Souljah's words as Clinton would have us read them (that is, as self-evident in their meaning and intent) is to reveal, in fact, that alongside the generality of the "kind" of Souljah's "hatred," its agent—black people—and its object—white people—in each of these cases is quite specific. Indeed, both tracks, the general and the specific, will remain powerfully intertwined as the speech progresses.

In the first comment, Clinton's plea for attention—"just listen to this"—his use of the authority of a major newspaper as a source—"the *Washington Post*"—his emphasis on the precision of his citation—"and I quote"—prepares the audience for a meaning so obvious that Clinton will need merely to lay it plainly and correctly before them. To do this, Clinton first strategically isolates the frightening connotations—to "kill white people," to "kill a white person"—of her comments, and then establishes Souljah's hatred toward white people as something consistent and durable. He reminds listeners that the second comment he will cite is not new. And yet, he responds to it *as if* it were new, in fact as if they were uttered that very moment and to him directly as a white person himself. When Clinton decides to answer Souljah's rhetorical question from "last year" as if she were standing there beside him, as if she were addressing *him*, he both personalizes the encounter with his audience, while bringing his own whiteness into the moment as a social identity he shares with others who have likewise been targeted for execution. He then pounces on the provocative way she defines whites in terms of their "low down and dirty nature." Declaring himself and the other whites gathered "right here in this room" as proof that "good white people" actually do exist, Clinton confronts Souljah by assuming the aggrieved position of one her potential victims of violence.

Speaking as one of the "good white people" who are "right here in this room," he is angered and aggrieved by a black woman's use of violent fantasies and stereotypes to define him as expendable and inherently "low down":

I know she is a young person, but she has a big influence on a lot of people. And when people say that, if you took the words white and black and reversed them, you might think David Duke was giving that speech.

At work here is a complex field of qualifications, suggestions, and substitutions that were all but lost in the coverage of the speech. While earlier making a point to defend Souljah's "right to express herself through her music," Clinton will not allow her comments to remain defined as expressions of an artistic nature. Because of her assumed reach as a performer, because of her "big influence on a lot of people," her words will be counted primarily as rhetorical provocations with real-life, and possibly violent, consequences. The "people" referred to when Clinton says "when people say that"—with "that" presumably standing for a distillation of Souljah's rhetoric—are both a real and an imagined constituency of auditors. Clinton calls to mind a potential crowd of Souljahs—young, angry at "what white people have done to us," careless in their approach to matters of life and death—who will not only embrace her "kind of hatred," but do so in a way that is hardly different from the racist whites she rails against. I say "hardly different," because Clinton himself creates this gap. He says, "If you took the words white and black and reversed them, you *might* think David Duke was giving that speech." This hypothetical "you" is not just the artifact of a common way of ascribing objectivity to a certain perspective in discourse; it is a racially significant trope. The "you" can, through reversing "white and black," discern a crucial resemblance between Souljah's comments and those of Duke, the former Klan leader. Such a resemblance emerges for "you" the moment a shared style—reductive, incendiary, absolutist—is seen to reveal a deeper alliance of race-based hatred that nevertheless goes *beyond* any racial limit, thus suggesting that to remedy it would require a similar overcoming of the notion that any one race was more or less vulnerable to the effects of racism itself. The less-than-subtle implication here is that Jackson, who had minutes before spoken with pride of Souljah's place on the previous night's program, had, if not invited Duke himself, had invited his black, female counterpart.

But the manner in which Clinton makes his charge against Jackson is actually more nuanced than the force of this analogy suggests. To make the words of Duke and Souljah interchangeable, to posit that a reasonable person would find the vast differences between these two individuals less significant than the resemblances of their rhetoric, is a serious charge, in part because it implies that the Klan (Duke) and the Coalition (Souljah) are also potentially comparable in this same way. That is, considered as opposed poles on a spectrum, each is driven by racially motivated anger. And yet, Clinton adds another layer of ambiguity here with what he says next, and in doing so charts a path to resolution that seems to maintain this logic of comparison, while also using it to make a different kind of point:

Let me tell you, we all make mistakes and sometimes we're not as sensitive as we ought to be. And we have an obligation, all of us, to call attention to

prejudice wherever we see it. A few months ago I made a mistake. I joined a friend of mine and I played golf in a country club that didn't have any African-American members. I was criticized for doing it. You know what, I was rightly criticized for doing it. I made a mistake. And I said I would never do that again. And I think all of us have got to be sensitive to that. We can't get anywhere in this country, pointing the finger at one another across racial lines. If we do that, we're dead and they will beat us.

Can Jackson's decision to invite and then praise Souljah, like Clinton's decision to play golf at an all-white country club, be understood as a "mistake?" Are each suitable to this categorization? If so (and it certainly appears so in Clinton's telling) each serves, above all else, a pedagogical purpose. Each teaches, via counterexample, of a shared duty to "call attention to prejudice." As such, Clinton's own "mea culpa" of his failure to meet this commitment also offers a wider criteria for absolution, one that he expects Jackson to meet. He locates playing "golf in a country club that didn't have any African-American members" and inviting "a rap singer here last night named Sister Souljah" on the same level—as failures to adhere to a common ethical obligation they each accept. Clinton grants that he was "rightly criticized" for his failure, thus implying that Jackson ought to accept the "rightness" of Clinton's own charge against him. Clinton suggests that acceptance of responsibility for one's failure to "call attention to prejudice" epitomizes a certain reciprocal dynamic that should implicate "all of us," not simply whites. Such a dynamic—whites *and* blacks assuming shared responsibility for the implications of their actions and monitoring prejudice wherever they see it—is what Clinton opposes to "pointing the finger at one another across racial lines" and what he counsels will prevent "us" from losing to a "they" who looms.

There is another layer of implication at work as well, one that also both joins and separates Clinton and Jackson before the task of "calling attention to prejudice." For to be "beat" in this passage can mean losing to Republicans—Clinton is before a decidedly Democratic constituency—or, more comprehensively, surrendering to prejudice—represented by Souljah/Duke—and the "kind of hatred" it can provoke. On one trajectory, the message seems to be that for Democrats to win, Jackson and his group need to fess up, like Clinton did, to the consequences of their actions. The error of inviting Souljah must be acknowledged and atoned for in order to ease division, to stop the racial finger pointing from escalating and damaging the party, and to reassure whites that they have a place in a party that Clinton and Jackson both share. On another trajectory, the message seems potentially much broader. It suggests that for anyone committed to "reaching across" rather than "pointing the finger," there is a special obligation to accept responsibility for "mis-

takes” and racial insensitivities. This message seems to expand outward into the realm of epideictic; it becomes a more expansive message than the first, centered less on winning an election, than on the broader civic challenges of difference and the value of diligence in what one says and does. What matters is how this first trajectory becomes gathered into the second as the speech progresses, and as Clinton defines the “they” of which he speaks in personal and historical terms that are nevertheless abstract and amenable to a host of interpretations and alterations in the immediate context of the speech.

In the above passage, “they” is a pronoun that Clinton’s rhetoric indirectly links to Souljah, for she is an epitome of the extremes to which “pointing the finger” can be taken by both blacks and whites. Unlike Clinton, however, she is, like Duke, unrepentant. In challenging Jackson to stand up to a “they” to which Souljah belongs, Clinton brings power to his challenge by appropriating the history of segregation. He includes Souljah in a “they” that includes the ghosts of the Jim Crow South. Clinton claims to know such ghosts intimately, so as to recognize their contemporary manifestation: “I have seen the hatred and division of the South that Jesse Jackson and I grew up in.” Clinton thus pursues his point as a witness rather than an observer, as someone whose perspective can, in a sense, presume to compete with Jackson’s for narrative authority about the costs of “hatred and division.” Clinton has “seen” these things as a Southerner, just as Jackson has seen them as a Southerner. The implication is clearly the Jackson should know better, or, to push further, that Jackson is giving shelter to the same ghosts he once fought against, albeit in a new shape. What matters to Clinton here are not the uneven costs of “hatred and division” in the region or whose suffering was or was not prolonged by its laws and its norms. Clinton demands attention to a different realm altogether, one in which he offers his own upbringing as proof of an *exception* to such “hatred and division,” as itself a lesson to Jackson and to Souljah of how people of any racial identity should *really* act when it comes to these questions. Clinton wants his audience to know that he was raised

until I was four by a grandfather with a grade school education who believed that all people were created equal. Who showed me by the life he lived how to treat people without regard to race and told me that discrimination and segregation were morally wrong.

Against the brash, young and black “rap singer” calling for the death of whites, Clinton offers a humble white man from the Deep South, faithful to the nation’s founding creed, precocious in his racial attitudes, and committed to ensuring his grandson’s moral outrage at “discrimination and segregation.” Clinton defines himself as having “learned more from my granddaddy” about such things than from “all the professors I had at Georgetown and Oxford and

Yale.” What Clinton claims to have acquired is not knowledge. It is something else, what he calls the “wisdom of a working man’s heart.”

Such wisdom—old-fashioned, class-specific, powerfully resistant to circumstance, and yet presumably open to all—emerges as a powerful discursive agent as the speech closes. It elevates Clinton by association. It offers a contrast to Souljah’s “kind of hatred” and suggests that Clinton has *always* been committed to the problem of racial discrimination, that it is “in his blood,” as it were. This wisdom is the kind to make possible the “reaching across” that Clinton lauded earlier, that he opposed to “pointing the finger at one another,” and that he identified with the essence of the Coalition’s mission. And yet, as Clinton laments, it is exactly this kind of wisdom that “many of our youngest people today who are role models no longer believe.” Souljah, referred to here indirectly, becomes not only a purveyor of hatred, but the symbol for a more pervasive sense of loss. In contrast, by invoking his grandfather, Clinton becomes the link to what supposedly has been lost—a belief in the equality of all that speaks through action and that stands in moral opposition to discrimination “wherever we see it.”

After repeating again that “we don’t have a lot of time” to reaffirm such a belief, Clinton continues to draw on his family to provide exemplars of positive action and identity in line with this goal. He closes, in fact, by pointing, as he had in his speech to the DLC after the riots, to Chelsea Clinton:

My little daughter is a seventh-grade student in a public school in Little Rock, Arkansas where she is in the minority. But she’s getting a good education, in life and in books. She’s learning about the real problems of real people, but she’s able to do what Martin Luther King said children ought to do, judge people by the content of their character.

Introduced as “in the minority,” Clinton’s daughter becomes marked as white, but is then quickly used to signify the ability to transcend, if not disregard, her racial identity. At her mostly black school, Chelsea is an updated, post-civil rights version of her great-grandfather. Though just in the seventh grade, she is “able to do what Martin Luther King said children ought to do, judge people by the content of their character.” The strong, almost inescapable, suggestion here is that honoring the character to fulfill King’s call (a character lacking in Souljah but exemplified by Chelsea) is what the Coalition ought to be focused on in the future; the lesson of the anecdote is, Clinton says, “what I close with.”

Such a lesson should remind those gathered, Clinton says, to “think big, be big, do big things” in the coming election and, among other things, to have the “courage to make government work and to challenge people to come together . . . to be one again.” It is this kind of courage that Clinton claims as

his own when he makes the concluding pledge “that every day, in every way, from dawn to dark and beyond, I will work my heart out to make this country what it ought to be.” Clinton’s promise to work toward a goal that the Coalition would implicitly endorse is offered, appropriately enough, however, alongside a qualification. His pledge is *not*, he says, one that should be taken to mean that “we will *always* agree.”

AGGRIEVED WHITENESS AND THE COMMINGLING OF INDEPENDENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE

All this rewriting of history is going on basically to deprive me of the right of expressing my opinion on racial division and divisiveness.

—Bill Clinton⁶⁰

More than simply a nod to his preceding criticism of the group, Clinton’s final qualification in the speech can also function as a general assertion of his independence from partisan influence of any kind. As such, it recalls a structural analogy that largely steered its reception: Clinton’s dissociation from the actions of the Rainbow Coalition is to his centrist identity what whiteness is to the production of political and racial transcendence more broadly; to establish political independence via a willingness to court the ire of a reliable Democratic special interest commingles, that is, with a modality of whiteness that affords the ground for transcendence. The discursive starting point that enables this commingling is a rendering of white identity in the Souljah comments that Clinton highlights and then refashions.

To be white in Souljah’s rhetoric is to become the potential victim of violence at the hands of anonymous black people, while to be Souljah in Clinton’s rhetoric is to become converted into a symbol of something larger: A loss of faith in racial equality and integration among the “youngest people today who are role models.” A black threat to white bodies is used to support the assertion that there is a national crisis of race relations more generally. At the same time, to make Souljah’s potential white targets into the victims of this crisis, Clinton chooses to analogize them to black people threatened by white people in the past; he establishes a point of overlap between blackness as the object of the Klan’s hatred and whiteness as the object of Souljah’s.

How Clinton’s rhetoric weaves together these trajectories—the call to racial harmony, on the one hand, with the plea of an aggrieved white identity battered by black anger—is, in many ways, the story of the speech. This rhetorical weaving allows Clinton to use Jackson’s embrace of Souljah to challenge the latter’s authority to speak credibly on the issue that defines him

and his role in the Democratic Party: the struggle against racial discrimination. Once such authority is placed under a question mark, and once this questioning can be extended in theory to the commitment of *all* blacks to treating whites without regard to their race, Clinton steps into the void that remains. He disregards the specific role of white identity in the history of racial oppression, and instead puts whiteness in a seemingly neutral space in the present. As revealed by the likes of Souljah, Clinton suggests, whites now have clear grounds to claim racial injury as well, indeed a kind that is “in principle” interchangeable with that suffered by many African Americans at the hands of the Klan.

Still, the whiteness produced in the “Sister Souljah Moment” is defined by more than its vulnerability. Clinton’s rhetoric also relies on proofs that implicitly associate this whiteness with a timeless form of racial transcendence, as well as with the most memorable appeal of the most memorable leader of the civil rights movement. Thus, the discursive chain that links the white “I” of Clinton’s speech to “my granddaddy”—who, though a white man in the Jim Crow South, transcended its historical and geographic constraints with a “simple wisdom” that his grandson learned early—and to “my daughter”—who, as a white minority, lives the power of King’s message every day in dealing with her black classmates—joins with the condemnation of Souljah to create a certain effect. Whiteness becomes associated with the receiving end of racial discrimination, hatred, and the threat of violence. As an implied result, this position of vulnerability affords Clinton the authority (potentially available to any white person) to appropriate the standard of equality and tolerance promoted by the civil rights movement to call out those blacks deemed to have strayed from it. Another way to say this is that the threat to whites by blacks captured by Souljah’s words is converted by Clinton into a call for racial transcendence. Importantly, it is a call issued by a “good white” person—Clinton—who, like his granddaddy and his daughter, knows the path to unity, in contrast to a black woman—Souljah—whose words are “filled with a kind of hatred,” and who, like the increasingly worrisome members of the “alien culture” Clinton referred to earlier, knows only more division.

What is stake in the speech is therefore a rhetorical strategy in which two things happen at one time: a condemnation of black anger, which relies on evidence that forms the basis for an attendant construction of white vulnerability, coexists with a call for blacks and whites to fight against prejudice “wherever we see it,” a “wherever” which is confined in the speech itself largely to the words of Souljah, and by extension, to Jackson’s decision to invite her. The rhetorical implications of this mutually reinforcing effect become clear in the reception the speech enjoyed.

One unsurprising factor that emerged after Clinton's speech was the instant interpretation of it as an act motivated by an electoral strategy directed at appealing to white voters. The subtext of this coverage, however, did not typically steer readers toward cynicism as result; the calculation it was said to reveal was understood to be of a virtuous kind. As an editorial for the *St. Petersburg Times* put it a week later, Clinton was speaking not to his immediate audience, but to "white Democrats, who for years have been waiting for someone to deliver them from what had become a quadrennial ordeal: the stroking of Jackson's huge ego." While Clinton was "open to criticism for his political motives," he was not only "right to condemn Souljah's racially inflammatory language," but in so doing had also revealed a flaw in the African American community that suggested an overall complicity in the "poison" that was her remarks. Not only was this "not the first time Jackson had shown a tolerance for bigotry," but it was a shame that "other prominent blacks" had themselves shied away until Clinton spoke up.⁶¹ Similarly, while reporting that campaign officials had wanted "a confrontation with Jackson" to signal to Clinton's independence "from Democratic orthodoxy," the *Washington Post* nevertheless treated the remarks as a demonstration of "his willingness to challenge core Democratic constituent groups and begin to break his image in the public as a 'political person' who would bend to pressure from major forces in his party."⁶²

These results speak to a dominant rhetorical opposition that framed the meaning of Clinton's speech for the nation. To grasp the speech, in a sense, was to see Jackson and "core Democratic constituent groups" as synonymous with a negative kind of "political pressure," while also seeing Clinton, by implication, as one who embraced more positive values like independence in the face of such pressure. Again, an incident that unmistakably marked Clinton as white against Jackson and Souljah as black, also marked him as a centrist insulated from politics and able to move past the constraints of his party. The melding of the two identifications—one racial, one political—implicitly defined the center as a white space, and made reasonable the coinciding of a plea for racial harmony against racial division with an attempt to reach whites—especially current and former white Democrats.

As another reception path shows Clinton's remarks were also understood to serve a different function. On this understanding, Clinton's was a call to interracial solidarity against racism, one that could unite blacks and whites against the likes of Souljah and Duke and move Americans to take full account of a broad spectrum of hate. Take, for instance, stories in the press which emphasized the chorus of black support for Clinton after his address, such as one article headlined "Clinton Finds Biracial Support for Criticism of Rap Singer."⁶³

The reporters for this *Washington Post* article recalled interviews with “a number of prominent black officials” and former Jackson backers who “said Clinton was correct in his criticism of the rap singer and should not suffer” any loss of black support as a result. In support, the article identified Michael White, the mayor of Cleveland at the time, as black before sharing with readers his continuing support for Clinton and his comment that “we don’t need songs of hatred by either whites or blacks. What we need is more understanding and fairness now.” In the same piece, another politician identified as African American, Georgia State Representative Calvin Smyre, argued that the remarks about Souljah had “no malicious intent,” that “Governor Clinton was trying to emphasize his message of bringing people together.” In a segue from these words that suggested an affinity of purpose, the reporters also cited a statement by the white Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia that applauded Clinton for “speaking the minds of millions of people in this country—black, white, brown and other” and reminding citizens that “no race has a monopoly on racist provocation and demagoguery.” In the construal of Clinton’s speech found in this article, the specter of “black racism” as a primary impediment to racial harmony was again raised, placing Clinton in the position of one who could transcend “racist provocation” of any kind by chiding whites and blacks equally for their culpabilities. Similarly, the *US News & World Report* publisher Mortimer Zuckerman called Jackson to task in an editorial for “condoning black racism, which is just as evil as white racism.”⁶⁴ In contrast, he praised Clinton as “a fair-minded American” who was “right to stand up for tolerance and justice,” casting the Coalition speech in terms of a national duty fulfilled: “All Americans must fight against black demagogues and those who indulge them, just as they should against white demagogues and those who indulge them.”

Despite this sort of favorable reaction from leading political and media figures, Clinton often cast himself as the central victim of the controversy. He told a national audience on the *Larry King Live* program that critics were trying to “deprive me of the right of expressing my opinion on racial division and divisiveness” and accused them of “essentially taking the position that, I guess, because I’m white, I shouldn’t have said it.”⁶⁵ That phrase “because I’m white” resonates. It defines whites as vulnerable not only to racial discrimination, but to being unfairly disqualified from opining on discrimination at all. Against Souljah’s claim that “you can’t call me or any black person anywhere in the world a racist,” Clinton asserts the opposite, in effect, even if he does not invoke the word “racist” himself. *Because I’m white*, he seems to be saying, I have been doubly wronged. *Because I’m white* and I stood up to Jesse Jackson and Sister Souljah, I am now being silenced. What we find in these and other comments at the time, is a whiteness that becomes, in

Raka Shome's words, something "particular, full of unique challenges and struggles that need attention."⁶⁶ White-identified people are invited to insert themselves into Clinton's position as a white-identified person under attack by "others" for simply expressing an opinion on what itself was a verbal attack on whites.

On the other hand, this marked and threatened whiteness also becomes the site for a movement toward the transcendence of racial animosity. Whiteness assumes significance, like the center, as an "empty but simultaneously normative space" from which to launch a contemporary fight against discrimination.⁶⁷ Almost imperceptibly, the particularity of whiteness as marker of racial difference is lost only to be found again in a new, mixed form. White identity becomes aggrieved, that is, and then transformed into the ground for a racial transcendence that leads away from both Souljah and Duke and toward the kind of unity that can bring victory in November and change to America. As Clinton said near the end of the speech, "If we can win again and be one again, we can keep the American dream alive. That is our obligation."

In connecting electoral victory for Democrats with a transcendence of the party's internal conflicts, and making each the prologue to keeping the "American dream alive"—a subtle contrast to Jackson's famous slogan—Clinton uses a rhetorical sequence that suggests an interpretation of the motives behind the Coalition speech. This interpretation, which was also common to its reception, suggested that whatever its costs to Clinton's support among blacks, the benefits of the speech could outweigh such costs in the form of increased white support. But did what *USA Today* describe at the time as a "gamble" with black support meant to draw white support actually do what it was intended to do?⁶⁸ Evidence suggests that it might have.

For instance, polling data compiled at the time of the speech showed that among whites the ratio of favorable to unfavorable responses to Clinton's speech was nearly three to one, while among blacks it was the exact reverse.⁶⁹ Too, the most in-depth reporting on the speech and its effects seems to confirm, at least anecdotally, that the "gamble" worked in some respects to woo whites as "Clinton's posture toward Jackson resonated throughout the electorate."⁷⁰ Indeed, 68 percent of respondents to one survey claimed to be familiar with Clinton's criticism of Souljah, more than twice the number of those who knew the basic details of Clinton's economic plan announced just days later.⁷¹ Jack Germond and Jules Witcover quote the executive director of the Alabama Democratic Party applauding the effect that the controversy comments had in improving Clinton's standing—"It was really amazing that one instance worked so well"—and quote a white electrician from North Philadelphia who went on record saying that "the day he told off that fucking Jackson is the day he got my vote."⁷² The tale of election day, in fact, confirms

that white voters eventually delivered their support to Clinton and Bush almost equally—a stunning shift given that just four years earlier, Bush had trounced Michael Dukakis in this demographic by 16 percent.⁷³

At the same time, another reading of these same polls suggests a different story with a very specific kind of political failure at its core: George H. W. Bush was unable to maintain his party's lock on white support in the face of the third-party challenge of H. Ross Perot. Indeed, the presence of Perot contributed to the fact that Clinton actually failed to match Dukakis's 1988 performance in this demographic. Each Democrat managed to draw around the same proportion of support—40 percent for Dukakis; 39 percent for Clinton—from whites who voted, making Perot the chief culprit in Bush's precipitous drop among this group.⁷⁴

Given these factors, it seems odd now to recall a common analysis offered by many top Democrats during and after the campaign. Presuming that Clinton's campaign had intentionally downplayed the candidate's associations with African Americans to appeal to whites, Bernard Parker, a black county commissioner from Michigan, told the *New York Times*, the approach was entirely necessary: "He is trying to reach white middle America. I'm not bothered by his strategy, I think the strategy is paying off. . . . I am bothered by the racism of this country that forced him to do that." Similarly, civil rights luminary and Georgia congressman John Lewis spoke of such a strategy in terms of the need to win in the face of a difficult context defined in terms of white flight from the party: "In the [black] communities I deal with, people want to win, they want to see a Democrat in the White House. . . . They understand that in order to win, it is necessary to bring back those individuals who had left the party."⁷⁵

Such comments suggest a clear political calculus: Beyond the reinterpretation of Democratic principles and policies required for the "move to the center," the similarly "necessary" task of regaining white support was so crucial as to warrant the use of rhetorical practices that were complicit—and acknowledged as such—with racist ideologies. Understood in this way, as a kind of practical, hard-nosed "trade-off" required in light of a stubborn and unfortunate social reality—that is, the notion that racism had "forced" Clinton to campaign in a certain way—and justified by its more noble ends, the strategy can perhaps become morally defensible. Yet, the evidence cited above leans toward the conclusion that, whatever its moral qualities, its political ones were not as decisive in the election as those who endorsed it had promised. And this political limit raises a set of questions.

Underlying the articulation of a need to "bring back those [white] individuals" even if doing so meant appealing to their racial grievances, was the premise that such appeals could effectively accomplish this goal. The belief

that it would work to “bring back” whites was rarely questioned at the time; indeed, the most commonly cited electoral concerns were that it would erode Clinton’s black support. In the end, however, since the evidence available makes it difficult to prove that Clinton’s election to the presidency was attributable to this strategy in any decisive way, then it seems warranted to judge its rhetorical character from a different angle. Less as a trade-off with a concrete and direct political benefit—that is, establish distance from blacks to create closeness with whites, and thus to gain control of the White House—and more as an indirect commentary on the pliability of whiteness and the corresponding problems and opportunities this pliability presents politically.

In the text, the abruptness of Clinton’s move from praising the Coalition as a force of equality to criticizing it as one of division comes through the introduction of an image—“a rap singer here last night named Sister Souljah”—that is then tied quickly to images of violence against whites. Outraged by the decision to feature Souljah, Clinton asks Jackson’s group to reaffirm its prior commitment to “reaching across racial lines” by renouncing Souljah’s attacks on white people and its own role in inviting her to speak. At the same time, such a renunciation is also demanded as an apology not simply *for* Souljah but *to* whites—especially the good ones “right here in this room”—for being maligned by her words. A general ideal of blacks and whites “coming together” and a particular construction of whites as under threat emerge in strategic alignment. Though whiteness defines the targets of Souljah’s rhetoric as the easily identifiable agents of a system of oppression, Clinton redefines these targets strategically by making them both white and not-white; they are raced as white, but also erased from the system that Souljah is so focused on resisting. White and black are transposable in this construction, that is, because both are classified as marks of vulnerability to a “*kind of hatred*” that is presumed to transcend the identities of its potential subjects and its potential objects, a hatred based on race that also stands above all racial difference.

Clinton, at the same time, uses the vivid pathos of (black) suffering that dominates historical narratives of white supremacy to vest Souljah’s potential (white) victims with a certain kind of value. Clinton’s “*kind of hatred*” becomes a bridging device by which to give this pathos of black suffering its white counterpart in the post-civil rights era. In this light, Clinton’s demand that “we call attention to prejudice wherever we see it” assumes new importance, for he makes confronting black animosity toward whites into a *key* standard for fully realizing the project of civil rights, allowing whites to stand in judgment of those who claim to be its standard bearers. By this standard, Clinton suggests, Jesse Jackson has faltered and needs to atone.

Much like Clinton admitted his “mistake” of playing at the segregated club, Jackson—and all who welcomed Souljah the previous evening—now have to do the same. Both in the name of racial harmony threatened by Souljah *and* in the name of the “good white people” maligned by Souljah, Clinton stands before his audience asking, in effect, for an apology.

Putting aside questions about the sincerity of such a request, as well as doubts as to whether Jackson or anyone else could have satisfied it without conceding its loaded premise, the historical embarrassments attending a comparison of Duke and Souljah are substantial and cannot be ignored. Indeed, I agree with David Roediger that the implied equivalence of the analogy risks outright absurdity. Clinton’s comparison of Souljah to Duke is “absolutely perfect nonsense” because, in short, the legacy of white supremacy means that “there is no reverse” to Souljah’s words, that she and Duke are in almost incommensurable worlds when it comes to the broader history of race in America. This conclusion is obvious on one level, and it reflects a mode of analysis that sees racism in the United States as a historically specific, systemic problem of enduring white dominance and enforced black subordination, not simply a matter of hatred or prejudice based on racial difference. As Roediger says, and as we know from the reporting, when Clinton “signaled his whiteness” by attacking Souljah’s harsh words, “he hoped to appeal to the way many whites see” racial conflict—namely, as stemming as much or more from unwarranted black resentment of all white people than from the reality of structural racism.⁷⁶ At the same time, Roediger’s conclusion seems, to me, incomplete. Its snuffing out of the obvious in Clinton’s appeal deflects, I think, from another more subtle set of rhetorical implications tied to the Souljah affair for centrist rhetoric.

CONCLUSION

This so-called “Sister Souljah moment”—a calculated denunciation of an extremist position or special interest group—wrapped Clinton in a warm centrist glow just in time for the general election.⁷⁷

Was the independence from the purported extremism of black political leaders a distinctly *white* glow? One of the most interesting aspects of the speech has been the endurance of its memory in American political discourse. Its reception since 1992, however, has been marked by a muting of its origins in a distinctly racial contretemps. In 2007, for instance, Joan Vennochi, a columnist for the *Boston Globe* interpreted the “Sister Souljah Moment” of 1992 as merely the template for a recurring political forum that itself had nothing to do with race. She wrote of John McCain, Hillary Clinton, and Mitt Romney as each having

had (or, in Romney's case, needing to have) a "Sister Souljah Moment" which she equated with a basic kind of political "theater" meant to signal independence from partisan concerns.⁷⁸ Likewise, the online encyclopedia, Wikipedia, includes an entry for "Sister Souljah Moment" in which the original event is described briefly, before offering what it calls "other examples" of similar instances, including a 2000 speech by George W. Bush in which he seemed to distance himself from Republican social conservatives, as well as Barack Obama's decision during the 2008 campaign to support a domestic surveillance program detested by the liberal base of the Democratic Party.⁷⁹

This muting of the racial aspects of the controversy in retrospect is key because it hints at the significance of a basic gap in centrist rhetoric in which the holding forth of the broader ideal of transcendence—in this case, proving Clinton's "independence" from the pull of a loyal, partisan group—and the uses to which this ideal is purposed cannot be closed completely. This openness explains the rhetorical power, in short, of Clinton's performance to give lasting meaning to the broader civic good of transcendence. Alongside its implication in a whiteness in defense of its own centrality against "others," one finds in the performance an event that can be (and has been) easily analogized to new and quite different political circumstances in the present.

Of course, this reception does nothing to negate the role that race, and whiteness in particular, played in the Coalition speech. The Clinton campaign clearly aimed to soothe and validate white racial grievances with its treatment of Jackson. Its political use of whiteness served to underwrite a call to racial harmony based, ironically, upon marginalizing black-identified voices that, though anathema to many white voters, demanded far more than blanket condemnation or simple analogy to the Klan. On another level, however, the muting of race in the long-term reception of the speech also drives home the substantive importance of ambiguity and paradox attending the production of political transcendence in centrist rhetoric. If whiteness worked in this speech not only to divide, but also to ground a call to transcend racial divisions that more than a few found persuasive, this work can only be reduced to a simple agency of white hegemony by virtue of treating its inner tensions as merely incidental to a more fundamental form. But once they are foregrounded through analysis, these tensions between the call to transcendence and the appeal to white grievance allow for an alternative view to emerge. From such a perspective, whiteness is not merely the invisible manifestation of a form of social power that must be uncovered at every turn. Rather, like the center, it appears as a topos evoked amidst pressures and contradictions that define the limits of its power. As the next chapter will show, this is a power for which the line between forging civic unity and exploiting civic tension must necessarily remain a gray and fading one.

NOTES

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18. Germond and Witcover, *Mad as Hell*, 302–3.
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46. Clinton, "Our American Community," 146–47.

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50. Clinton, "A Vision for America: A New Covenant," 222.

51. Adolph Reed Jr., introduction to *Without Justice for All: The New Liberalism and Our Retreat from Racial Equality*, ed. Adolph Reed Jr. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001), 3.

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70. Germond and Witcover, *Mad as Hell*, 304.
71. Edsall, "Black Leaders," A16.
72. Germond and Witcover, *Mad as Hell*, 304.
73. The *New York Times* provides exit polls conducted by the major reporting services; they cover presidential elections from 1980 onward. See elections.nytimes.com/2008/results/president/exit-polls.html (accessed August 1, 2009).
74. Political scientists continue to debate about the effect of H. Ross Perot on the election. My point is not that Perot "cost" Bush the election in some final sense, or that Clinton would have lost without Perot. I observe simply that the drop in the Republican's share of support from white voters relative to Democrats was not the result of Clinton's ability to attract such support to his candidacy or to the party. The Democratic Party's presidential candidate's share of white support has remained within the same range—39 to 43 percent—from 1992 to 2008, suggesting little in the way of a shift in allegiance within this shrinking demographic even with the disappearance of a strong third-party candidate. For competing accounts of the question of Perot's effect on the election more generally, see Dean Lacy and Barry C. Burden, "The Vote-Stealing and Turnout Effects of Ross Perot in the 1992 U.S. Presidential Election," *American Journal of Political Science* 43 (January 1999): 233–55; and Herb Asher, "The Perot Campaign," in *Democracy's Feast*, ed. Herbert F. Weisberg (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, 1995), 152–75.
75. Edsall, "Black Leaders," A16.
76. David Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* (London: Verso, 1994), 15.
77. Joan Vennoch, "Sister Souljah Moments," *Boston Globe*, September 16, 2007, D9.
78. Vennoch, "Sister Souljah Moments," D9. Important to note is how, prior to the Souljah speech, the Clinton campaign itself had defined this form of "theatre" via the term "counterscheduling," which, as Clinton biographer John Brummett wrote, involved "picking a fight with a friendly audience to send a broader message to people who don't care for the politics of that audience" (28). Brummett cites as another

example of “counterscheduling” Clinton’s address to the 1992 AFL-CIO convention in which he came out in strong support of the North American Free Trade Agreement. John Brummett, *Highwire: From the Backwoods to the Beltway—the Education of Bill Clinton* (New York: Hyperion, 1994).

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Chapter Three

“The Audience for This Is Huge”

Oklahoma City and the Wages of Transcendence

In chapters 1 and 2, I explored the implications of a proposition set forth in the introduction: In the midst of grounding contrastive appeals to advance particular political objectives, the center has long served as a viable topos for the rhetorical production of political transcendence. As it arranges pleas to move beyond faction, centrist rhetoric nevertheless insinuates divisions into public life in a struggle for assent and strategic advantage with other appeals. The broader significance of this claim about the rhetorical tension inherent in the center arises in resemblance to a similar tension found in democratic rhetoric more broadly: inclusions and exclusions, forms of insight and forms of blindness—they all intermingle when democratic imaginings take flight in the agon of political rhetoric.

Thus, as Russell Hanson and others have rightly pointed out, our “ideas about democracy and the practices implied by them [are] forged in and through political rhetoric.” As such, our working assumptions about the character and limits of democracy are not merely “ideas” at all, but situated acts of intervention into the world; they express a transcendent vision, ironically, as they promote “the desirability of particular political institutions or practices” over others.¹ In the vector of the desire for one kind of politics over another, for one set of goals instead of another, divisions take form alongside reaffirmations of the possibility of democratic transcendence more broadly. Centrist rhetoric, I am arguing, epitomizes this rhetorical *mélange* well. As political actors hail a middle space apart from divisions of party, of race, and of class, they engage in discursive practices that chafe against the realization of the very consensuses they seek to forge.

Indeed, the higher refuge from the partisan implied by transcendence is also one from which to attack with purpose, from which to call to task those who will not themselves agree to “rise above” division. This pattern of urging

transcendence while assailing those who seem to contravene transcendence recalls Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s homage to "the spirit of the center—the spirit of human decency, opposing the extremes of tyranny."² Contrasting what he called the "fighting faith" of the center to the "extremes" of left and right, Schlesinger used the center as a point of stability from which to defend democracy against threats, both domestic and international, defined by their intemperance, their devotion to ideology, and their inclination toward violence. Such threats were not only threats to particular policies or objectives, but to reason and democracy.

Did centrist rhetoric in lead up to Clinton's election to the presidency perform a similar "fighting" function? In part, yes. The Cleveland DLC speech used the center not only to form the vision of a "new" politics, but to name an adversary in terms of its perilous power to divide and distort. If the "idle rhetoric that has paralyzed American politics" were to continue, Clinton warned, the American Dream could perish as politics grew increasingly irrelevant to people's deepest needs and wishes.³ In the "Sister Souljah Moment," the threat to democracy came from a different source—a "kind of hatred" based in growing racial animosity—whose power had ostensibly threatened the ideal of equality embraced by King himself, and therefore left the nation vulnerable to fragmentation and violence. Clinton configured divisions of race and culture that threatened a seemingly inclusive "mainstream," that nevertheless established its grounding and strategic rationale via associations with whiteness.

In these cases the tension between the center's putative stability and the centrifugal forces it is called upon to "hold" against affords Clinton a versatile template for rhetorical invention. The positing of divisions is made to invite more than simple compromise; it demands solutions that promise to redefine the very field upon which divisions emerge. Using centrist rhetoric, Clinton argued his case for the presidency not merely as the uniter of a divided people, in other words, but as one capable of transforming how the nation saw division itself. Alluding to great presidents of the past, Clinton told one interviewer that "our system has benefited from electing people who at moments of change were able to be . . . transforming leaders, who could get people to move beyond party and beyond the little boxes in which we normally think and vote and live."⁴

The terms for the work of persuasion in this passage—Clinton promises to "get people to move beyond" things—are in line with a metaphoric of transcendence that yields a distinct sense of value. The center implied here makes it possible to step outside of configurations of "normal" political thought, action, and identity, while also containing and ordering this act. Association with a higher or more fundamental kind of order named simply "our system"

makes this possible. The center is that stability that makes change possible, that grounds the democratic promise of a nation, and that, in turn, allows for its greatest leaders—Clinton cites Lincoln, the two Roosevelts, and Kennedy among his examples—to rise to the challenge of inspiring citizens to move beyond their parochial ways.

Of course, the leaders he cites each met fierce resistance on their way to becoming icons of unity. And each responded in kind. Each was not only denounced for his politics, that is, but was skilled at the art of denouncing, which raises a question in terms of the evolution of Clinton's rhetoric of transcendence once he became president: how did Clinton use centrist rhetoric to deal with the flourishing of dissent and skepticism that beset him upon taking office? In particular, what about those on the right who came to dismiss Clinton's plea to "move beyond" as little more than a ruse designed to conceal a liberal agenda, and who reacted with a fervor that would not abate, really, until he left office?

I begin with these questions as a point of entry into the primary concern of this chapter—explore how Clinton, in response to the terrorist attack in Oklahoma City in the spring of 1995, used centrist rhetoric to construct a defense of democratic order against attempts to undermine not only his presidency, but often the very legitimacy of government. Clinton's response to the attack allowed him to seize a higher ground from which to stave off an emboldened Republican Party. He rebuilt a picture of himself in line with the centrist identity he had embraced as a candidate, but which the right had successfully dismantled almost immediately. Since this recomposition of his centrist ethos was one that began as a matter of necessity, I start by setting out the immediate rhetorical challenges Clinton faced as he assumed the presidency, for these challenges proved to overwhelm any security his election might have offered the Democrats' Congressional Majority.

THE CENTER SLIPS AWAY

Clinton's inaugural address sought to define his election as a sign both of dramatic change and of the continuation of a never-ending process of national becoming in the face of perpetual challenge.⁵ The speech defines this cycle of change as both historical and eternal, a "mystery" that began with founding of the nation itself, but that occupies a time of its own. As Clinton asserted in the very first public words of his presidency:

Today we celebrate the mystery of American renewal. This ceremony is held in the depth of winter. But, by the words we speak and the faces we show the world, we force the spring. A spring reborn in the world's oldest democracy,

that brings forth the vision and courage to reinvent America. When our founders boldly declared America's independence to the world and our purposes to the Almighty, they knew that America, to endure, would have to change. Not change for change's sake, but change to preserve America's ideals—life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness. Though we march to the music of our time, our mission is timeless.⁶

An underlying permanence would give meaning to change, and vice versa. This tension defines a “mystery” of signature importance for the work of “reinvention.” As the celebrant of the inaugural ceremony, Clinton constitutes his audience, his election, his time, and himself in relation to this dual essence. Clinton honors not “change for change's sake” but for the cause of nation's political rebirth. In “the world's oldest democracy,” to reaffirm the possibility of transformation is itself a proof of democratic stability. As Clinton says, “Today, we pledge an end to the era of deadlock and drift—a new season of American renewal has begun.” The “we” who pledges “an end” is one that returns to itself through the transcendence of stasis and inertia.

Clinton's fall from his inaugural's “joyful mountain top of celebration” was steep and abrupt, however. His claim at the time that voters had “raised [their] voices in an unmistakable chorus” reflected his impressive total of 370 electoral votes, but deflected another more relevant truth: Clinton had won barely 43 percent of popular vote. As Charles O. Jones put it, the president came to office with “no blank check, no clear and obvious mandate.”⁷ Clinton's first months in office reflected this lack of clarity; they were characterized by growing uncertainty within his own party—especially among the New Democrats themselves—about the focus of the president's agenda and his ability to advance it. Clinton's early legislative accomplishments—NAFTA, the Family and Medical Leave Act, the Brady Bill, and so on—in the first half of his first term were impressive, to be sure. And yet, they were overshadowed by a series of negative developments and an administrative team that seemed routinely flummoxed. As one reporter put it in her analysis of the Clinton transition: “There was no real plan for what the administration would do after it got to Washington.”⁸ While this observation risks overstatement, the tumultuous first two years certainly reflected a lack of coordination on the part of the White House in shoring up support for Clinton's agenda and image.

Besides facing trouble with new and ongoing scandals (e.g., the Paula Jones sexual harassment suit, the White House travel office firings, and continuing investigations into the Clintons' past financial transactions) and with controversies surrounding some of his appointees, the president faced a set of more conventional failures. The administration mishandled its push to change military policy on gays at the start of his term, and then lost support

for its economic stimulus plan, for its middle-class tax cut, and, finally, most damaging of all, for Clinton's centerpiece health care reform plan.

These setbacks were amplified by an already well-organized opposition. Led by Republican House Whip—and future House Speaker—Newt Gingrich, and fueled by the ascendancy of rightwing talk radio, the GOP confronted the president's missteps at every turn, casting him as prisoner to the same liberal orthodoxy and "McGovernite" legacy he had campaigned against. Clinton thus headed into the 1994 midterm elections a much-weakened president with a vulnerable Congressional majority. To him, however, it was a case of mistaken identity:

I was being portrayed as a man who had abandoned down-home for uptown, a knee-jerk liberal whose mask of moderation had been removed . . . our lack of a clear message made otherwise minor issues look as if I was governing from the cultural and political left, not from the dynamic center, as I had promised.⁹

And so it was that in the first national election of Bill Clinton's presidency, the Democratic Party proved anything by revitalized. Rather, Democrats lost fifty-two seats in the House of Representatives and eight seats in the Senate, ceding control of both legislative bodies to the Republicans for the first time since 1952.

This defeat, which cascaded into state and local elections, was interpreted by the GOP and by many in the press as a clear repudiation of the president and, in many ways, as proof that, upon taking office, he had quickly turned away from the "dynamic center." One headline at the time told of Clinton's "forsaking of the center," another of his need to return to the "center as he seeks a way to govern."¹⁰ These examples point to a dominant story of the midterm elections, a story endorsed heartily by key members of the DLC leadership. Nine days after the election, for instance, DLC founder Al From spoke ominously about a poll the group had commissioned that showed Clinton's standing in steep decline among independent voters: "For President Clinton, there is a pretty blunt message in this poll. It's get with the program or you'll have to pay the consequences."¹¹

Clinton appeared ready to answer these doubts when he chose to make his first major post-midterm election speech at the DLC's tenth anniversary celebration in Washington. During the speech, he apologized for being misunderstood by "the people I ran to help," saying in apparent reference to criticisms of his decision to address the ban on homosexuals in the military: "I think I was right when I opposed discrimination and intolerance, but a lot of folks thought I was just more concerned about minorities than the problems of the majority."¹²

Through the early months of 1995, however, it seemed that Clinton could not do enough to satisfy critics. With attention shifting to the House Republicans' plan to translate their "Contract with America" into law, Clinton was intent both on recapturing the media's favor and on rebuilding his stature. Once Congress took a short Easter recess, staffers scheduled a press conference that was supposed to do both. Instead, it did neither. The president was reduced to having to answer a question about whether he could "make [his] voice heard" given the Republicans' dominance over the terms of political debate. He answered:

The Constitution gives me relevance. The power of our ideas gives me relevance. . . . The President is relevant here, especially an activist President. And the fact that I am willing to work with the Republicans. The question is, are they willing to work with me? I have shown good faith. That's how we got two of those bills in the Contract [with America] that I supported in 1992 signed into law. . . . I have shown good faith. The question is, what happens now?¹³

These are the words of a diminished president. Resigned to asserting, rather than enacting, his own relevance, Clinton presented himself to the world as a victim of the meanness of his opponents and as a spectator—speaking of himself in the third person—to his own presidency. His statement that the future depended on the question of "what happens now?" seemed like a casual question about a weather pattern that could not be altered or acted upon before it happened, but only dealt with after the fact. Ironically, if tragically, this statement proved prescient, when the question "what happens now?" was answered swiftly and terrifyingly just twelve hours after the press conference was over.

RELEVANCE REBORN: THE "INCREDIBLE SHRINKING PRESIDENT" FINDS CENTER STAGE¹⁴

The bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on the morning of April 19, 1995, shocked the nation with images of destruction and death, creating an unstable situation for an already-weakened president. Such instability, however, also created a rhetorical environment disposed to help Clinton address these weaknesses, in particular the sense that his presidency was flailing before a united, Republican Congress. In his White House memoir, Clinton speechwriter Michael Waldman argues that after the bombing Clinton was able to become, if only for a flash, a "reassuring figure rather than an unsettling one" and that "for many people, during those days,

for the very first time, he truly became president."¹⁵ This interpretation of the bombing of Oklahoma City as an event that afforded Clinton a chance to inaugurate his presidency testifies to the power all presidents can draw from the reservoirs of national catastrophe, and to the unique opportunity presented by this tragedy to President Clinton on that April morning.

No longer merely a partisan trying to assert relevance in a debate with Republicans in Congress, Clinton became a leader trying to reassure and rally a nation in the face of attack. Indeed, in his remarks shortly after the blast, Clinton's demeanor from the previous evening was gone.

He spoke not of waiting for others to work with him but of sending a "crisis management team" to Oklahoma City, not of sticky matters of law and policy, but of tasking "the world's finest investigators to solve these murders." In this aspect of his leadership role, Clinton was looking not for consensus with Republicans, but for a group of deadly assassins who would be offered no mercy: "These people are killers, and they must be treated as killers." While this way of naming the perpetrators is hardly remarkable, it did allow Clinton to take on the role of protector from the start, someone who could speak with clarity and confidence of the matter at hand: "I will not allow the people of this country to be intimidated by evil cowards," he declared, adding the term "evil" himself to the remarks prepared by his staff.¹⁶ In a press conference with the Brazilian president the day after the bombing, he said, "What we need to do is to find out who did this and to punish them harshly," and then, three days later in an interview on the *60 Minutes* news program he specified exactly what "punish" meant and the role he had played in making the harshest of penalties for terrorism permissible under the law: "I certainly believe that they should be executed. And in the crime bill, which the Congress passed last year, we had an expansion of capital punishment for purposes such as this. If this is not a crime for which capital punishment is called [for], I don't know what is."¹⁷ Clinton, just months earlier defeated on the basis of his supposed location on the "cultural and political left," was now publicly detailing his role in the "expansion of capital punishment" at a time when revenge was surely on the minds of many and the spotlight was squarely on the president.

Clinton's prosecutorial toughness was counterpoised by a more tender rhetoric fashioned from his repeated emphasis on the nineteen children killed in the blast, which originated in a space directly beneath the Murrah Building's daycare center. This rhetoric found a fertile context of reception in a mediascape in which the photo of a dying, bloodied infant cradled in the arms of a firefighter at the scene came to typify the consequences of the blast.¹⁸ From Clinton's first public characterization of the bombing as "an attack on

innocent children and defenseless citizens,” the White House used references to dead and frightened children to focus its response.

For instance, three days after the bombing the president converted his weekly radio address into a televised appearance with a group of children whose parents were federal employees. CBS News broke into its regularly scheduled children’s programming to air what Bob Schieffer called “a special message to the children and the parents of America about the terrible bombing in Oklahoma City.”¹⁹ The president opened his remarks by saying that he and the first lady had convened the group because “we are especially concerned about how the children of America are reacting to the terrible events.” He instructed parents to inform their children about a pledge that he had made: “Tell them I have promised every child, every parent, every person in America that when we catch the people who did this, we will make sure that they can never hurt another child again, ever.”²⁰ The next day, en route to Oklahoma City to speak at a memorial service, the president and the first lady planted a dogwood tree on the South Lawn of the White House. At the service, Clinton would make a point to recount the story of planting the tree, which he said was “in honor of the children of Oklahoma.”²¹

The president thus vowed to vanquish the “evil cowards” and “killers” of Oklahoma City in light of a collective trauma to the entire nation epitomized by the death of innocent children. In doing so, Clinton managed to create an image that would serve him well in the months ahead: it became possible to see him not as a “shrinking” president, but as a leader uncompromising with America’s enemies and nurturing as the protector of its most vulnerable. In concert with these immediate and fleeting effects, Clinton’s words following the catastrophe also worked to reconstitute symbolically the target of McVeigh’s attack, the federal government, in similar ways. As a synecdoche for the all of the blast’s victims, “the children of Oklahoma” served to define the fallen in a way that most could connect with easily. In turn this move made possible a deepening in the possibility and quality of a broader identification of the victims with “the children of America,” a common symbol both of a nation’s vulnerability and of its hope for the future. When combined with common figures of national and familial identity, in other words, rhetoric about the victims could balance a stress on their status as workers targeted for their service to the state with a stress on their status as ordinary people, as “good parents as well as good workers.”²² It was in his celebrated eulogy at the “Time of Healing” prayer service at the Oklahoma State Fair Arena on April 23, four days after the attack, however, that Clinton mastered this strategy, adding to it new elements that would soon assume greater importance.

**ON PURGATORIAL RESPONSIBILITY: "REMARKS AT A
MEMORIAL SERVICE FOR THE BOMBING VICTIMS IN
OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA, APRIL 23, 1995"**

Clinton began his speech by declaring not only that he was in Oklahoma City to "represent the American people," but that he had also had come with the first lady as "parents, as husband and wife, as people who were your neighbors [in Arkansas] for some of the best years of our lives." This mixture of national, familial, regional, and personal identifications with the victims, their families, and the survivors, sets the stage for a construal of the bombing as an attack not on a single entity—"federal government"—but on many social and communal entities all at once, each of which is inseparable from and simultaneous with the other. Government became not a barrier to freedom, but a site of community amidst a diversity of social identities. McVeigh's attack on the Murrah Building was, Clinton said, a "terrible sin" which "took the lives of our American family." Among such "family" members were those "who worked to help the elderly and the disabled, who worked to support our farmers and our veterans, who worked to enforce our laws and to protect us." Here, government agencies literally secure the goods of community—government makes sure the vulnerable are protected, that the nation has enough food, and that laws of the people are maintained. Those who worked to help, support, and enforce "served us well, and we are grateful" for their work. And yet, as Clinton points out, those who served "were also neighbors and friends. You saw them at church or the PTA meetings, at the civic clubs, at the ballpark. You know them in ways that all the rest of America could not." Central to the definition of the victims of the blast in Clinton's speech is thus a set of positive, social and personal markers that becomes woven into their identity as federal employees. Clinton brings the dead into the present—"you *know* them"—by offering to his listeners a perspective that contrasts with the larger, anonymous "rest of America," which knows them only as employees.

The veneration of the federal employees of Oklahoma City via a dispersal of their collective identity into various roles stressed that, as victims, they were part of a larger social world. This mirrored a complementary move in which the attackers, too, were folded into a larger structure of action and motivation. Clinton quickly began to *repoliticize* the event, in other words, treating a highly unusual and aberrant act committed by an individual, into the most vivid expression of a set of gathering "forces" that promised future calamity and whose signs could be seen everywhere. In this scheme, the bombing was the canary in the cold mine of a slowly building civic crisis.

Defined as such in its causes, the event at Oklahoma City became, in its implications, the catalyst for a long overdue moment of political reckoning:

To all my fellow Americans beyond this hall, I say, one thing we owe those who have sacrificed is the duty to purge ourselves of the dark forces which gave rise to this evil. They are forces that threaten our common peace, our freedom, our way of life.

What justifies Clinton's use of the phrase "those who have sacrificed" in a context such as this? To unite death and sacrifice with duty suggests a cause or purpose of some kind. But for what could so many "innocent children and defenseless citizens" have died? As the victims of "dark forces" that will remain even *after* the perpetrators are apprehended, they died to inspire a nation to assume a "duty" equated with its very survival, its "way of life." Catching, trying, and executing McVeigh would not be enough to justify the "sacrifice" of the dead. As Clinton told an audience in Minneapolis the next day: "We must arrest, convict, and punish the people who committed this terrible, terrible deed, but *our responsibility does not end there.*"²³

Clinton's call to collective "responsibility" was embraced by editorialists across the nation who saw in the bombings the potential for a kind of purging of partisan politics as well. These responses made the event in Oklahoma City into a message not simply about the dangers of the growing militia movement—which had become radicalized in the wake of the violent ends to standoffs with federal law enforcement at Ruby Ridge and the Branch Davidian compound near Waco, Texas—but about the political culture of Washington, DC. The day after Clinton's speech in Minneapolis, for example, David Broder compared the attack to those unpredictable "forces that change our politics in fundamental ways" and wrote: "My hunch is that the Oklahoma City bombing may trigger the next such political shift" away from partisanship.²⁴ Similarly, for E. J. Dionne the bombings were a wake-up call for "mainstream politicians" who needed "to examine their consciences and ask whether their approach to winning political battles may be aggravating dark passions."²⁵ In order to stave of these "dark passions," which echoed Clinton's "dark forces," Dionne proposed what he called "an extended period in which political rhetoric is toned down." This call for less contentious rhetoric was not directed at all parties, however. It clearly singled out a particular group of "mainstream politicians" who, by implication, were being tagged as anything but "mainstream."

A powerful assumption about the bombing emerged rather quickly: Because of its rhetoric attacking "big government," the Republican Party—especially conservatives associated with the emerging right-wing talk radio culture—shared the blame for McVeigh's actions. As Michael Lind wrote

soon after the attacks, "Mainstream conservatives, it can be argued, have helped to legitimate the worldview of the Oklahoma City bombers."²⁶ Or as one evocative headline editorial headline put it, "Gingrich's Reckless Rhetoric Comes Home to Roost with Bombing."²⁷ With these suggestions in the air and with the right rejecting them vociferously, reporters began to ask questions, like this one from Reuters during an exchange with the president just two days after the attack:

Mr. President, there has been a loud, constant drumbeat in this country in recent years: The government is the enemy; the government is bad. Given the way this case seems to be pointing, do you think that in any way contributed to what happened in Oklahoma City on Wednesday?²⁸

Clinton demurred, saying only that he had to wait until the investigation was complete to comment on the matter.

Still, while Clinton was not explicit in making a direct link to the Republican Congress, he hardly discouraged such speculation. (Such conjecture invited repudiation from figures such as Gingrich, who told a reporter that it was "grotesque to suggest" connections between his "Republican Revolution" and the bombing, and from Rush Limbaugh, who promised his listeners that that "liberals intend to use this tragedy for their own political gain."²⁹) In his Minneapolis speech, for example, Clinton spoke ominously of "things that are said over the airwaves," of "loud and angry voices in America today" that "leave the impression, by their very words, that violence is acceptable." He called on those who "do not agree with the purveyors of hatred and division, with the promoters of paranoia" to speak out "against that kind of reckless speech and behavior."³⁰ The connection between "speech and behavior" was more vividly drawn in Clinton's *60 Minutes* interview:

You never know whether there's some fragile person who's out there about to tip over the edge thinking they can make some statement against the system, and all of a sudden there's a bunch of innocent babies in a day care center dead. . . . People should examine the consequences of what they say and the kind of emotions they are trying to inflame.³¹

In bridging a focus that assumes intentional rhetorical incitement on the right—"trying to inflame"—with images of "innocent babies" killed as a result, Clinton offered a audiences a perspective on the event that repeatedly joined its undeniable political motives to its undeniable cost in the suffering and death of actual individuals. This way of seeing could easily extend beyond the event itself, thus disabling the charge of rightwing rhetoric's central negative image—the federal government—via the familial and social associations attached to the victims themselves, especially its most innocent and

blameless. As the journalist and later White House aide Sidney Blumenthal has said of Clinton's speeches in April and May of 1995, their "homage to the positive contributions of federal workers" meant that "the federal government ceased to be a rhetorical trope and became instead the distinct individuals who had been murdered."³²

For Blumenthal, the "federal government" as "trope" was an abstraction with a galvanizing resonance for the Republican opposition, one that depended on a caricature of government stripped of any humanity, and thus of its lived reality. Once Clinton could effectively implicate such a caricature within the context of the bombing itself, this same rhetorical power could then be turned against the right, made into evidence if not of its direct culpability in the act itself, certainly of its complicity in what Clinton would later call the "atmosphere" that made it possible:

So often referred to by the demeaning term "federal bureaucrats," the slain employees had been killed because they served us, helping the elderly and disabled, supporting farmers and veterans, enforcing our laws. . . . Somehow they had been morphed into heartless parasites of tax dollars and abusers of power, not only in the twisted minds of Timothy McVeigh and his sympathizers but also by too many others who bashed them for power and profit. I promised myself that I would never use the thoughtless term "federal bureaucrat" again, and that I would do all I could to change the atmosphere of bitterness and bigotry out of which this madness had come.³³

To source "madness" in an "atmosphere of bitterness and bigotry" is to locate it in the agon of politics and society. Timothy McVeigh's twistedness, argues Clinton, was not most relevantly a disturbance of the mind. It was the artifact of a similarly twisted symbolic and political world with many interconnected parts; the bomber was not alone. He had "sympathizers," people who shared a common vocabulary that gave meaning to a centrifugal "madness" that could move some to target their fellow Americans simply "because" they work for the government. Though different on one level, these "sympathizers" were united with McVeigh in that they drew motive from the same rhetoric, one that dehumanizes those who work for the federal government, that empties the contents of their distinctiveness and compassion with the force of a "demeaning" epithet." It is a rhetoric that has "morphed" decent people into greedy and frightening monsters, made them into the perfect enemies of the deranged. The symbolic product of this morphing is what, for Clinton, wraps together the twisted radicals—McVeigh and his sympathizers—with the self-interested politicians and rightwing radio talk show hosts—the "too many others who bashed them for power and profit." Naming government

as freedom's antagonist, the latter provide a metaphorical landscape of targets—"federal bureaucrats"—for the literal acts of the former.

In the aftermath of the bombing, Clinton thus worked through an explanatory form that took care in connecting the "atmosphere" (a scene) to the violent bombing (an act). Political considerations clearly, and not surprisingly, influenced this constant and strategic pairing of scene and act. As Clinton speechwriter Michael Waldman has written: "[Clinton] saw the political opening the bombing had created, for while Timothy McVeigh was planning an anti-government explosion in the heartland, the Republicans in Congress were proclaiming an anti-government 'Republican Revolution' in Washington."³⁴ Indeed, recounts Elizabeth Drew, Clinton's "approval ratings in most polls shot up" at that time with one aide telling her: "We tried all year to say we're the mainstream and they're the extreme—now we can show that."³⁵

What did strategically constructing appeals—"tried all year to say"—in partisan, contrastive terms—"we're/they're"—pitting the center against the margin—"the mainstream/the extreme"—this demonstration—"to *show* that"—amount to as an epideictic response to the awesome terror of the Oklahoma City bombing? How did Clinton make try to make effective his judgment of the blast as a chance for democratic renewal, one defined in terms of purging the "dark forces" he linked suggestively, but unmistakably, to his political opponents in Congress and on the airwaves?

From a rhetorical perspective, the "political opening the bombing had created" was exploitable only via a certain balancing act: Clinton had to offer a compelling vision of what the bombing required from all Americans to preserve their democratic institutions, find a way to make himself the chief protagonist (and his adversaries the villains) of this same vision, and yet *not* seem to be doing so all the while. Such a vision could not seem reactive or petty, in other words, but had to match the intensity and solemnity of the threat it imagined while calibrating each in the proper dosages. In the midst of its exploitation for political purposes, the event had to seem, for it was indeed, something *more* than a mere "political opening" for the president—especially in light of the immediate sense from the right that Clinton was doing what he was, in fact, actually doing.

The use of the "mainstream/extreme" contrast involved carefully incorporating Republicans into the negative threat symbolized by the "atmosphere" that gave rise to the event. On the other hand, this same contrast had to contain a correspondingly broad, positive force to measure up to the size and scope of the "dark forces" it defined as in need of expiation. The event had to live at the hinge of these two forces in order to become the material for a call to transcendence. What allowed for this rhetorical space of contrasts to

emerge? How did the administration's response work to create dramatic tension between these opposed forces, each of which required its own distinct rendering of the blast's significance in terms of a shared national past and future?

FORMING A CENTER AGAINST DISORDER: "REMARKS AT THE MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT CEREMONY IN EAST LANSING, MICHIGAN, MAY 5, 1995"

Such questions arise as a way to explore how in his effort to exploit a distinct political opening—Drew recounts one aide who snapped his fingers saying, "In Oklahoma, we just hit"—in his struggle with Republicans, the president worked to evoke a unity of purpose against a broad spectrum of threats to the federal government. Such questions arise, specifically, in light of a commencement address Clinton delivered on May 5, 1995, at Michigan State University in which this appeal achieved particular rhetorical clarity and power.

Joe Klein recounts how Clinton told him that "the House Republicans were as much a target of [the Michigan State] speech as were the right-wing militias" and that the speech was described by the president as a "breaking of the ice" that allowed him to go on the attack after years of being on the defensive.³⁶ And yet, as Carol Gelderman points out, despite claims made by the media and political opponents "who accused him of scapegoating and of trying to stifle criticism of the government," Clinton not only dominated the response to the tragedy in a way that helped him politically, but more importantly he "fulfilled one of the major duties of a president, which is to speak out in public about a clear danger to the nation's peace and to take steps to meet that danger."³⁷

While Gelderman cites President Clinton's urging of civility and his demand for new antiterrorism measures as examples of such "steps," my approach to the speech is focused less on these goods than on the underlying form the oration takes. In short, the president's rhetorical art reaches beyond proposing new initiatives or connecting the bombing to incendiary words. Most centrally, it involves asking Americans to unite in seeing the threat to "government" symbolized by the bombing not simply as a threat to themselves, but as a reminder of an historically recurring duty to reaffirm the nation's democratic order. Within such an order, Clinton will argue, claims about government find their proper place; outside of such an order, they constitute a mortal hazard. With its growing militia movement and its connection to the bombing—McVeigh had lived on a farm with his conspirator

Terry Nichols in the town of Decker, about 100 miles away from Michigan State—the state of Michigan had become at the time associated with this threat. Accordingly, Clinton uses the place of his speech to open with a reminder that this association is limited. There is, in fact, another Michigan that is not *of* the militias.

Clinton begins by saying he has “fond memories of Michigan State . . . the site of one of the great presidential debates in 1992.”³⁸ Later, in his peroration, Clinton will draw more explicit attention to the setting of his address, specifically opposing what he deems “the real Michigan”—with a revived “automobile industry,” “the best cherries in the world,” and the “Great Lakes and the ‘UP’ [upper peninsula]”—to the negative “publicity in recent days about Michigan and the militias.” Clinton anticipates this final move when he opens his speech with a more subtle play against the typing of Michigan as home to the militias. Michigan, he recalls, has also been home to a recent presidential debate. In principle, such a ritual reaffirms a government of the people by inviting the nation’s citizens to assess those who wish to represent them at the highest level. Clinton redefines Michigan from the onset as an appropriate place from which to reflect on government itself, its meanings, and its actual role in the lives of the citizens who grant it authority.

Quickly pairing the place and the purpose of his speech into an implicit harmony, Clinton praises two government programs with lessons for the nation as a whole, but with specific origins in Michigan. He wishes that other states would emulate its “tuition guarantee program” and the “Michigan Educational Trust,” for they are examples of government working so that “more people can afford to go to college and stay there until they get their degrees.” And, notably, he praises these initiatives because they are examples of the kind of programs that allowed, in his words, “a person who never, ever, would have had an opportunity to be here today” to become president.

Clinton opens his speech, then, in tacit rebuttal of charges made across the spectrum of antigovernment rhetoric—from the halls of Congress to the literature of the extreme right—that government is mostly ineffective, economically stifling, and distant from the needs of its citizens. He offers locally relevant proofs, instead, of its ability to create “a remarkable set of educational opportunities for young people in Michigan” and to be the decisive factor in helping him to achieve his dreams. Clinton then turns to a living example of how government, through its laws, its courts, and its means of enforcement, can empower citizens to exercise their constitutional rights in the face of violent opposition and vigilantism. He tells his audience that he is “joined today by another Michigan State alumnus who spoke from this platform last year, my friend and fellow Arkansan, Ernest Green,” a member of the “Little Rock Nine” who risked his life “for the cause of school integration

and equal opportunity” in the wake of President Eisenhower’s decision to back up the Supreme Court’s *Brown* decision with force. In his stand against segregation and inequality, Green illustrates something larger than himself and broader than the specific struggle in which he fought. Green, Clinton declares, “made the right choice at the right moment in his life” and, for this, “he is a good model for you, and I hope you will do the same.” For the “you” Clinton addresses to be able to “do the same” as Green is for this “you” to reach beyond the “moment” it is in, while at the same time recognizing its “moment” as something symbolically interchangeable with the one Green found himself in. Clinton suggests that just as Green’s time was one of violent domestic conflict and corresponding attacks against the legitimacy of the state, so is the one that this “you” confronts.

Clinton further emphasizes the interchangeability of “right moments” in which to make “right choices” of a certain kind when he turns to another former commencement speaker, Theodore Roosevelt, who addressed the university during

a time not unlike this time. We are on the edge of a new century; they had just begun a new century. We are on the edge of a new era; they had just begun the dawn of the industrial age. Like us now, they had many, many opportunities but profound problems. And people were full of hope mixed with fear.

Images of thresholds—“edges,” “just begun,” “dawn”—establish the logic of similarity here, as does the presumption of a similarly contradictory essence that defines each “time.” “We” and “they” both straddle historical and technological fault lines; “we” and “they” both live in times of uncertainty. The ambiguities of these “times” are what make the “right choice”—the address’ key metaphor for political judgment—important as an affirming act of citizenship. Associated with the capacity to face ambiguity and uncertainty are a series of qualities Clinton links with “Roosevelt and his generation of Americans.” They were “optimistic,” “aggressive,” and “determined to solve the problems before them.” Such qualities spurred a decisive action, what Clinton calls the “launch” of the progressive era. Clinton accompanies this “launch” with a set of active verbs. The generation that “launched” the progressive era, also worked to “free” market forces, to “protect” the environment, to “keep” our children safe, to “stand strong” internationally. Altogether, these actions are what Clinton will define as “the right choices at the right moment,” ones that not only addressed the “challenges of the present,” but that also “paved the way for a better future, and redeemed the promise of America.”

To redeem something is, among other things, to return it to its proper place from some other place. As such, redemption succeeds and becomes honorable largely in terms of overcoming its antagonists. In the case of the pro-

gressives, for example, the continuation of the promise was resisted by "the heavy hand of monopoly," by those who threatened the environment, by the owners of "sweatshops," and by foreign powers who challenged "America's role in the world." The example of the progressives shows how the potential for succumbing to such barriers—the "wrong" choice—exists not apart from the promise of America, but rather as its counterpart in a broader drama of redemption that is itself always implicated in the politics of the day, and thus subject to its pressures and meanings. If, as Clinton says, "our journey as a nation has never been an automatic march to freedom and opportunity," it is because of the potential for wrong choices; the essence of the "journey" is violable in practice. This potential reveals the fragility of the space of choosing, of the contingency of the center beyond politics, which Clinton rhetorically honors. Proper to the "journey," then, is not simply the telos of "freedom and opportunity," but a recurrent test of citizens' ability to maintain the center amidst conditions of uncertainty and polarization. This imagined space of choosing is what contains and mediates the opposing options that citizens will continually face at key times in the nation's history.

If the "promise of America" is a democratic one that requires redemption through citizen choice rather than through divine order, it must be exercised in the agon of political action. Such a promise therefore requires a space in which to make choices, a stable locus of choosing in which right choices and wrong choices can present themselves for assessment. As an implicit political center, this space of choosing suggests its value to democracy in America, while also suggesting its vulnerability. Making "the right choice at the right moment" is also about choosing to protect the space in which others have made the "right choice" in the past and can have the chance to make it again in the future:

Throughout all 219 years of our Republic, times of great change like this have unleashed forces of promise and threat, forces that uplift us and unsettle us. . . . The basic question before us is as old as our country: Will we face up to the problems and seize our opportunities with confidence and courage?

Were "times of great change" those either of self-evident misery or of clear triumph, in other words, citizens would have little role to play in response; the "basic question" would not really be a question at all, but a matter of following the obvious. Instead, the question here is one that carries with it a "responsibility" to maintain, amidst the mutating "forces" of history, the ordered space apart from history that makes possible the freedom to choose in the first place. What is worse than the negative and unsettling "forces" unleashed by history? The possibility that such forces will overwhelm the drama of redemption so that "choosing right" is no longer even an option in

the future; the agon of choice would be gone, and with it American democracy. To answer Clinton's call to responsibility is therefore to answer a call to maintain the center amidst the possibility of a chaos so powerful that the very cycle of redemption is upset, overcome by the kind of political disorder that knocks the cycle of renewal off its axis.

Once this demand is set, Clinton quickly reveals its many obstacles in his time. Lurking beneath "reason for optimism" domestically and "reason for hope" internationally are challenges to choosing right that seem disparate, but are in fact united in their disordering effects. Although "freedom and democracy" have proven their ability to advance in spite of totalitarian government, they have yet to answer what Clinton calls the "real threat to our security," that is, a world in which "the forces that are lifting us up and opening unparalleled opportunity for us" also make us "very, very vulnerable to the forces of organized destruction and evil."

Though such vulnerability inspires what Clinton defines as "the great security challenge" for the future, Clinton's speech focuses on its present, and on the signs of what the failure to meet this "challenge" have meant already: "The dark possibilities of our age are visible now in the smoke, the horror, and the heartbreak of Oklahoma City." The bombing, in this construction, allows audiences to see the feared future backing itself into the present; something completely unknowable becomes partially known when the event is treated as a sign of things potentially to come. Once the bombing becomes Clinton's device for making "visible" possibilities greater than itself, it becomes amenable to a series of negative associations with violence and otherness that span space and time—the first bombing of the World Trade Center, a nerve gas attack in Tokyo, terrorism in the Middle East, organized crime in the former USSR, and the use of the Internet as a resource for building bombs, even as children use to it "learn from sources all around the world." These are examples Clinton cites to support his claim that Oklahoma City reveals a "threat [that] is not isolated" and that "you must not believe" is isolated.

How has Clinton arrived at this juncture? He started in praise of government initiatives to expand educational opportunity. From this, he segued to two exemplars—Earnest Green (and implicitly the civil rights movement) and Theodore Roosevelt (and explicitly the progressive movement)—of "making the right choice at the right moment" in order to "redeem the promise of America." These redeemers of a promise have each given commencement speeches, occupying the exact role Clinton occupies; they have each spoken from the same "place." Too, Clinton notes, one is a "fellow Arkansan," while the other was also president. A shared participation in points that demand "historic choices for America" is, finally, what cements the coherence of a set of relations between the speakers. This underlying coherence accompa-

nies the speech's capacity to draw disparate audiences into a single vector of purpose that nevertheless spans ages and contexts. The space of choosing, that which contains the possibility of deciding "to go forward or turn back, to reach out or turn inward, to unify or divide, to believe or doubt," is where the possibility of redemption dwells for each generation as they each face their own "point of challenge in change." But this center, this "point," also contains the seeds of its own dissolution. The flip side of the intensified coherence that allows us to see the drama of redemption repeat itself, and to act so as to redeem the promise ourselves, is the "dark possibility" of the fracturing of this space for good.

Insofar as choosing wrong aligns itself, in the case of the Oklahoma City bombing and its related events, with ignoring a global "threat" to the lives of millions and to the institutions of the state, it becomes the same as hastening the end of democracy. To choose wrong is to turn way from a threat to the primary agents of democracy's authority throughout history—the nation-state and the people who underwrite its legitimacy. It is this "threat" that motivates Clinton's call for Congress to "pass strong antiterrorism legislation" along with his warning that

the failure to act will undermine [our constitutional rights]. For no one is free in America where parents have to worry when they drop off their children for day care or when you are the target of assassination simply because you work for our Government. No one is free in America when large numbers of our fellow citizens must always be looking over their shoulders.

In this passage, the stress is on the vulnerability of citizens, in particular parents, children, and government employees, to targeted terrorist violence. Their vulnerability is associated with an undermining of rights, a loss of freedom, and pervasive anxiety; in a sense, Clinton suggests that "no one is free" *already* because government has failed to protect adequately against the "threat." And so what stands between the growing threat of political violence that Oklahoma demonstrates, and those who might become its unwitting victims, is the state's capacity to ensure security for its citizens. Clinton's legislation provides for a "domestic antiterrorism center," for "up-to-date technology" to trace bombs, for "1,000 law enforcement personnel," and for increased penalties for harming "members of the uniformed services or Federal workers." He has insisted that Congress pass it "immediately," since the issue of security is "not and must never be a partisan issue."

It is at this point in the speech, once Clinton has offered what seems to be a concrete way that his audience can "make the right choice" by supporting his plan to combat terror, that the discourse takes a major turn. In a switch from addressing his gathered audience of students directly, and including

himself within its scope, Clinton calls another audience into his speech, one that before was only present in the speech's connotative backdrop. He begins to address those who, for the remainder of the speech, will personify in their words and associations "the dark possibilities" of Oklahoma City, and therefore the broader threat posed to the center. The rhetorical shaping of this audience proceeds through a set of dichotomies that arise between the center as a space of choosing and the threatening "you" that will dominate the second half of the speech.

After referring to the climate of fear the attack has engendered, and to the potential and already-realized loss of freedom it symbolizes, Clinton wants those gathered to keep "this in mind" as the impetus for what will follow. For Clinton begins at this juncture to disregard, seemingly, the people who are before him—the students, faculty, family, and others gathered in East Lansing—and to speak instead to another audience, one both nearby and far away:

It is with this in mind that I would like to say something to the paramilitary groups and to others who believe the greatest threat to America comes not from terrorists from within our country or beyond our borders but from our own Government.

This is the first in a sequence of similar constructions in the speech, all of which entail the speaker referring directly to his own act of speaking, no matter who he addresses: "I want to say this to the militias and to others who believe this, to those nearby and those far away"; "So I ask you to hear me now"; "So I say this to the militias and all others who believe that the greatest threat to freedom comes from the Government instead of from those who would take away our freedom"; "I say to you, all of you, the members of the Class of 1995"; "And I would like to say one word to the people of the United States"; "So, my fellow Americans and members of the Class of 1995, let me close by reminding you"; "Let me remind you once again." Apparently superfluous, the small tokens that unite this form of self-reference are nevertheless rhetorically significant. They work to place *what* is being said into a realm apart from *who* says it. Clinton does not simply "say" this; he "want[s] to say this." He does not simply "say one word"; he "would like to" do so. He does not merely address the militias; he asks them "to hear me now." These small moves in each case paradoxically place Clinton in a realm apart from the conflict he is addressing, while also increasing his ability to define its nature. He exists simply as if to say things that *need* to be said, and thus to put before the eyes of citizens certain fundamental truths about the "you"—the one composed not only or even mainly of "the militias," but of

the nameless "others" who share their antipathy toward government—which threatens to overwhelm the center.

Clinton begins to define the composite nature of the threatening "you" by sequencing two principles of relationship. First, the speaker grants the "you" certain truths about its makeup. The speaker is "well aware that most of you have never violated the law"; that "some of you have recently [made comments] condemning the bombing in Oklahoma City; and that "you have every right, indeed you have the responsibility, to question our Government." These were the common rebuttals used by the defenders of the militia movement at the time, and Clinton accepts them at face value as premises everyone shares. Thus, each time he mentions the "you" in the passage it is, ironically, to place "the militias and all others who believe that the greatest threat to freedom comes from the Government" into the realm of the normal and the lawful, that is, Clinton's realm. He brings the full breadth of the "you," of its general adherence to the law, of its recent words of goodwill, and of its rights under the Constitution, into the foreground. And yet, unsurprisingly, this is plainly a setup for something else. For Clinton quickly follows these words with some far less comforting truths about the "you" as well, ones that hide within its very breadth.

The president also knows that

there have been lawbreakers among those who espouse your philosophy. I know from painful personal experience as a Governor of a State who lived through the coldblooded killing of a young sheriff and a young African-American State trooper who were friends of mine by people who espoused the view that the Government was the biggest problem in America and that people had a right to take violence into their own hands.

Clinton here builds a unity at the level of identity that contains a less relevant distinction at the level of action. The few who engage in acts such as "coldblooded killing" and the many who "have never violated the law" both appear in Clinton's speech as espousers of the same "philosophy," albeit divided in terms of how they put it into practice. And yet, Clinton will, in the next paragraph, work from the principle of the relationship he has just elaborated in order to build another that is similar in its outline, but different in its character.

The initial sequence he develops arranges the "you" into opposed parts, with one nevertheless including the other on some level: those who espouse the notion that "government is the biggest problem" and the minority among them who literally attack state institutions and employees so as to realize the most radical "end" of such a notion. This claim provides the criteria to

make a reasonable distinction between the mostly lawful, sometimes civil, and always constitutionally protected part of the “you” and its lawbreaking, murderous, and rights-undermining counterpart. Clinton will go on to suggest, however, that this particular relation between the two parts of the “you” is far less important than another.

Indeed, for Clinton, the problem of the “you” is not really that of a mostly law-abiding majority close to the center that needs to reign in a radical, extremist fringe on the margins. Rather, the problem entails their mutual implication in a generally hostile stance toward democracy. Such a stance blurs the line between constructive political debate within a system of mutual identification and factional political combat with little regard for its ethical or human consequences. How do we know when such a line has become blurred? When, Clinton suggests, legitimate beliefs about government routinely burst the bounds of democratic process and, instead, become expressed as radically “free” rhetorical incitements to action without any corresponding structure to mediate them.

As such, Clinton will presume it his duty to reassert the force of this line:

So I ask you to hear me now. It is one thing to believe that the Federal Government has too much power and to work within the law to reduce it. It is quite another to break the law of the land and threaten to shoot officers of the law if all they do is their duty to uphold it. It is one thing to believe we are taxed too much and work to reduce the tax burden. It is quite another to refuse to pay your taxes, though your neighbor pays his. It is one thing to believe we are over-regulated and to work to lessen the burden of regulation. It is quite another to slander our dedicated public servants, our brave police officers, even our rescue workers who have been called a hostile army of occupation.

The key difference in each case between what is attached to “one thing” and what is attached to “quite another” hinges on acts that contain two vital steps—“to believe” and “to work”—and those that do not, and so risk the very possibility of democratic self-governance. Clinton begins his chain of antitheses with this combination as a rhetorical device, and then returns to it twice in exactly the same fashion. In each case, Clinton attaches “to believe” to an easily recognizable tenet of mainstream conservatism at the time, providing a model that is explicitly directed at his adversaries. With this in mind, “to believe” becomes a preface not simply to bold expression or action, but to a mundane kind of “work” that will aim “to reduce” or “to lessen” various powers of the federal government, rather than to eliminate such powers. Work, for example, calls to mind associations with process, compromise, and even frustration in a political structure with others. Reduction and lessening, the two acts Clinton associates with the kind of “work”

that legitimately follows from "belief," are complex acts of adjustment through deliberation, not ones of substitution or elimination. They take time, they require diligence, and they can potentially build collective responsibility for policy outcomes.

On the other hand, each "to believe/to work" combination is set against acts unmoored from any such principle—threatening to shoot police, refusing to pay taxes, slandering our public servants, and calling rescue workers hostile. The centripetal coupling of belief and work as the corresponding agents of sustainable self-governance finds its centrifugal foil in a cluster of acts and statements that undermine the very possibility of such governance in the first place. To refuse to pay one's taxes not only weakens the state treasury, it signals disregard for the burdens accepted by our fellow citizens. To "refuse" or to "slander" are also things that require nothing in the way of deliberation with those with whom one disagrees. Thus, when Clinton makes each the representative act of a "philosophy" he connects to examples of "coldblooded killing" he is interpolating into that philosophy (or discerning from it) a fundamental truth about where it leads: steeped in the belief that government is a "problem," the solutions offered by such a "philosophy" tend a way from collaborative acts of construction, and toward individual acts of destruction, tend away from sentiments of collective responsibility, and toward those of resentment and the claiming of unfounded "rights." The "philosophy" becomes, in a sense, unphilosophical, less a set of reasoned propositions about government than a platform for exaggerated grievances that lead to lawlessness and the temptation to violence.

It is in the shadow of such lawlessness that Clinton reveals how the anti-government, unphilosophical philosophy that defines the threat to the center is both redundant and "un-American" in its aims. It is redundant because "our Constitution was established by Americans determined to limit" abuses of power by government, and continues to provide for an exceptional degree and specification of freedom—"This is a very free country." The depth and clarity of this freedom should be appreciated most, Clinton pointedly suggests, by "those of you in the militia movements [who have] broader rights than you would in any other country in the entire world." Clinton then brings this exceptionally American freedom into a consensus narrative of national political identity; he makes it a function of the constraints on governmental power established by the Constitution:

As long as human beings make up our government there will be mistakes. But our Constitution was established by Americans determined to limit those abuses. And think of the limits: the Bill of Rights, the separation of powers, access to the courts, the right to take your case to the country through the media, and the right to vote people in or out of office on a regular basis.

That the threatening “you” seems to take such rights for granted invites questions about its motives. For if these rights are not really what is at stake, then what do “you” desire? What more do “you” want, if not the rights enjoyed by “we in the freest nation on Earth?”

Clinton answers in terms of “rights” that are most certainly not in the Constitution:

But there is no right to resort to violence when you don't get your way. There is no right to kill people. There is no right to kill people who are doing their duty or minding their own business or children who are innocent in every way. Those are the people who perished in Oklahoma City. And those who claim such rights are wrong and un-American.

He suggests not only that it is absurd to claim such things as “rights” but that “those” who would find such “rights” implied in the Constitution are both “wrong and un-American.” At the same time, such behavior is neither historically isolated, nor confined to the militias. Clinton finds analogues to the threatening “you” across U.S. history and society. Others, too have defended their violence as “freedom of political speech”—the Weather Underground of the “radical left in the 1960s resorted to violence,” gang members who justify “taking the law into their own hands” because of the lawlessness of their communities, and “the people who came to the United States to bomb the World Trade Center.” This final analogue seems especially strange to say the least, since it was a foreign terrorist group that committed the act and since Clinton's other two examples are domestic, as are the militias. And yet, foregrounding a link between political violence against the state and foreignness—or, at least, “un-American-ness”—is partly the point here.

Clinton attempts to cast the “you” as a fundamentally negative feature of American identity, a constant reminder of what the nation must never become. What marks “the militias and all others who believe that the greatest threat to freedom comes from the Government” in this instance is a kind of lack, a failure that coincides with an absence of fidelity to the Founders. They cannot grasp how the freedom promised by democracy has always been intertwined with a government's capacity to create and protect spaces for the exercise of democracy. Most odious is their brazen attempt to “appropriate our sacred symbols for paranoid purposes and compare yourselves to colonial militias who fought for the democracy you now rail against.” Clinton implores, “How dare you call yourselves patriots and heroes!” thus rejecting any attempt to equate the militias' actions with an historically righteous form of violent resistance and setting the stage for another layer in his definition of the threatening “you.”

Toward the end of his speech, Clinton strengthens the identification of government with what I earlier called the “space of choosing,” and therefore

moves more clearly to associate threats to the former with those to the latter. In the lead-up to speech's most quoted phrase, Clinton begins his peroration by offering his gathered audience—"all of you, the members of the Class of 1995"—a maxim through which to understand the fundamental deception embedded in the arguments propounded by the militias and others: "There is nothing patriotic about hating your country or pretending that you can love your country but despise your government." This maxim uses the notion of "pretending" to suggest that the claim to "patriotism," like the claim to "rights," has been used to avoid deeper and more difficult responsibilities associated with citizenship. Along these lines, to "despise your government" leads to what Clinton calls "turning your back on America" not only because it encourages the actual targeting of other Americans, but because it paints a false picture of civic virtue, one that ends up destroying relationships among citizens and between citizens and their government.

Thus, in an implicit contrast with the terminology of "revolution" that undergirded both the Republicans in Congress and the militias themselves, Clinton paints an alternative, less martial vision of such virtue. This vision, which resembles the rhetoric of the April 23 eulogy, is a communitarian one based not in the bold acts or statements of the militias, but in the quotidian practices of the nation's citizens that serve to maintain not only order, safety, and progress, but values such as reciprocity and diligence. It is based in what Clinton calls the "responsibilities" of everyday people, those he calls "the real American heroes . . . the citizens who get up every morning and have the courage to work hard and play by the rules." The phrase "work hard and play by the rules" recalls one of the earliest slogans of Clinton's campaign rhetoric from the fall of 1991. Here, as before, it defines citizens who are not only models of discipline and order, but underappreciated heroes who toil invisibly and typically for the benefit of others.

The modest, everyday qualities Clinton's ascribes to his American heroes not only support the realism of his depiction, but they more firmly ground such heroes in a value contrast with those who compose the threatening "you." The "real American heroes" are neither revolutionaries, nor particularly concerned with politics in any outward way at all. And this is key, for their "responsibilities" are not to the ends of a "philosophy" but to the needs of others, that is, to the well-being of fellow citizens near and far. To defend the space of choosing is, in a sense, equivalent to the heroism displayed by millions every day. By "choosing right" in small ways these heroes exemplify an ethic of right choosing that audiences are implored to embrace and to see in opposition to the threatening "you" represented by the militias. Clinton's heroes are overworked mothers who still read to their kids, rescue workers who risk their lives to save the trapped and the injured, and parents who

sacrifice to pay for their children to “have the education that you have had.” In contrast, Clinton describes “the militias and all others who believe that the greatest threat to freedom comes from the Government” in terms of presumptions that inherently weaken our capacity to even define such “responsibilities” in a coherent way. They presume that “violence is an acceptable way to make change” and that “Government is in a conspiracy to take your freedom away,” and thus they feel the need to “treat law enforcement officers who put their lives on the line for your safety every day like some kind of enemy.” These presumptions and forms of action are inconsistent with maintaining the legitimacy of the rule of law, and thus they undermine the possibility of democracy—in Clinton’s words, “Without respect for this law, there is no freedom.”

At the same time, Clinton’s speech is not, of course, primarily about encouraging “respect for this law.” As its conclusion demonstrates it is about respecting a spirit of order, one ensured by the Founders. This order is what in Clinton’s words, allows for the possibility of defeating fear itself: the “Founding Fathers created a system of laws in which reason could prevail over fear,” while the militias explicitly use fear to undermine such a system, and thus to undermine reason itself. Those “who believe the greatest threat to America comes not from terrorists from within our country or beyond our borders but from our own Government,” are the enemies not simply of the government, or even of the nation. They are the unreasonable ones, so deluded in their thinking that they stand for a threat to reason itself, and yet so intimately involved in the history of America that they serve as a constant reminder of civic duty:

We must not give in to fear or use the frustrations of the moment as an excuse to walk away from the obligations of citizenship. Remember what our Founding Fathers built. Remember the victories won for us in the cold war and in World War II, 50 years ago next week. Remember the blood and sweat and triumph that enabled us to come to this, the greatest moment of possibility in our history. . . . Make the choices that Theodore Roosevelt made, that Ernest Green made. Seize your moment. Build a better future. And redeem once again the promise of America.

As in Clinton’s inaugural, a narrative of enduring national purpose becomes lashed to one of enduring democratic fragility. To “redeem once again the promise of America” becomes to “remember” the struggles and successes of others similarly faced with “fear” at moments across history, and then to choose as they chose. And, in turn, to “remember” that the “fear and frustrations of the moment” that Clinton refers to are eternally threatening is also

to remember they can be surpassed with a corresponding power of transcendence that allows Americans to rise from social and political division in order to reaffirm the endurance of their democracy.

CONCLUSION

The closing moments of Clinton's speech thus combined the warning of a threat to common democratic values posed by the blast with a call to unite against this threat in its aftermath. In a piece titled "Toxic Speech" published after the Michigan address, *Newsweek's* Jonathan Alter displayed a similar tendency, suggesting its broader reach.

For Alter, in fact, the president should have acted much earlier than he did. Clinton should have taken "a cue from his Sister Souljah triumph in the 1992 campaign" and made the centrist "denunciation of incendiary rhetoric on both the left and the right a regular feature of his presidency." Because the bombing had forced consideration of such rhetoric to the surface, however, circumstances had demanded that Clinton take the lead from the center—and he had: "Now, finally we're beginning to take a hard look at our whole Vulture Culture the endless shouting and demonizing that doesn't necessarily lead to violence but coarsens and worsens us all." What Alter terms "Vulture Culture" leads to an erosion of "faith in democratic life" in which "anger breeds withdrawal breeds profound alienation and a new, lonelier civic existence." For Alter, the Oklahoma City bombings brought into focus a certain truth that might lead to a new start for American politics: "If we lower our voices, we won't necessarily save any lives. But we may help save our ability to reason and govern together."³⁹

It was along these same lines of interpretation in the weeks and months following the blast, that the actions of McVeigh could be dialectically transformed by the president and others into the impetus for a new order that would cultivate moderation as a civic virtue and resist extremism in the name of democracy. Alter's call for quiet and reasoned voices—a counter—"Vulture Culture"—moves to evoke a concern among audiences for maintaining their own "faith in democratic life" despite evidence that might contravene it. Giving presence to such a concern was central to the president's rhetorical effort. And of its function as an illustration of epideictic, the philosopher and rhetorician Chaïm Perelman would likely have found much to say.

Rather than privileging the deliberative dimension of political discourse, Perelman looked toward "the spiritual unity which the epideictic discourse properly reinforces" as the only way to preserve democracy. It was the ordering

eloquence of epideictic—the stabilizing achievement of a language of community—that Perelman saw as vital:

In order for a democratic regime to function, that is, in order for a minority to accept the decision of the majority, after deliberation, the values common to all members of the community must be considered more fundamental than those which tend to separate it.⁴⁰

The tendency to define democratic legitimacy merely by “considerations of a quantitative order” is insufficient rhetorically to create at least the presumption of commonality—“must be *considered* more fundamental”—required for democratic life.⁴¹ For Perelman, who dreamed it possible to “reason about values instead of making them depend solely on irrational choices based on interests, passion, prejudice, and myth,” the ability, as Alter put it, “to reason and govern together” was contingent upon a kind of rhetoric that itself made democracy possible.⁴² Reasoning and governing were arts contingent upon the values and meanings established by epideictic, for, as Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca asked, “Without such common values, upon what foundation could deliberative and legal speeches rest?”⁴³ What democracy’s advocates too often tended to forget was a certain requirement, in other words. The common desire for transcendence must be evoked so as to cohere the partisan desires of different groups and individuals into some kind a shared space:

We must first want the political order which transcends the particulars and the conflicts of interests, we must want the communion in the church, whatever divergences there may be in the interpretation of sacred texts, in order that submission to the laws, obedience to the authorities, and respect for the established order should prevail.⁴⁴

Perelman does not spell out the source of this “want” for a “political order which transcends the particulars” as something metaphysical or ontological. Rather, one takes from Perelman that such a desire must be sparked rhetorically in practice, as in the case of the Michigan State University commencement address. Citizens must be *persuaded* to “want” order in general if they are to seek to change any order in particular

In Perelman’s account, then, the desire for transcendence through order does not exist apart from democratic politics but within its ambit as its condition of possibility and as one of its key, renewable resources for persuasion. Through recourse to rhetoric praising or defending transcendent political values that are presumed to bind all, this want can take on expression. It can serve as a counterweight to the centrifugal tendencies of democracy, in particular against faction and the refusal of marginal, yet disproportionately

influential, political groups—like the militias—to accede to the legitimacy of law.

And yet, given what we know about the production of political transcendence, and about the White House's thinking at the time, the question of what purposes the call to order would align itself with in the coming months remains an important one. If broad, noncoercive forms of "submission," "obedience," and "respect" for order were truly at stake in the rhetorical response to what was a potentially destabilizing event in U.S. history, to what particular ends would the community Clinton called into being be directed? Although I will take up this question in the subsequent chapter, I want to address part of it here before closing this one.

Invited to "redeem the promise of America," citizens were defined by Clinton as members of a timeless, idealized community. The errand of redemption required unity so as to confront the all-encompassing scenic threat to democracy that had prompted the violent act itself. Respect for the law, justice for the innocent, reverence for tradition, fraternity with one's fellow citizens, and reasoned deliberation over matters of dispute—these were just some of the values Clinton stressed. Each value, in turn, became tied to a "mainstream"—marked in terms of civility, prudence, commonality, and national purpose—against which the "extreme"—marked in terms of violence, recklessness, separation, and national threat—could be isolated. With the range of means available for persuasion that emerged through this contrast, Clinton sought to define the "extreme" not merely in contrast to the "mainstream" but as incompatible with democracy itself. This enlargement of the threat was integral both for its association with the House Republicans, as well as for a construction of its aftermath via analogy with other "moments" of choosing, other "points of challenge in change when critical decisions are made by our people." And yet, what makes the enlargement strategy of Clinton's responses noteworthy is how the intensity of its central division worked to selectively contain other divisions over government *inside* the "mainstream."

This work of containment—of defining one debate over government as *within* the domain of order, while defining another as *between* order and disorder—becomes key in the near future; it will underwrite Clinton's attempt throughout 1996 to claim the center. Such work will help to define the space and meaning of a transcendence of left and right on key issues facing the nation in spite of the considerable political constraints he was under and the fierce, if often tin eared, opposition he faced.

Although it demarcated the sides in a set of fearsome struggles—for example, between democracy and terrorism, government or no government, those who protect children and those who target them for death, and the like—the

border used to distinguish “mainstream” from “extreme” after the blast was, as we know, a strategically ambiguous and contingent one. As Clinton rhetorically drew this border, he would fashion an epidictic transcendence of the ordinary political divisions of the day. Just as important, however, he would also continually return to these divisions from his transcended position in order to give broader meaning to what was behind the attacks and to recommend who should do what to forestall similar events in the future. As such, he both included and excluded his adversaries from the realm of the “mainstream” when it came to the question of government. Command of this ambiguity was decisive. After the blast, it helped Clinton to do two things.

First, it allowed the “distance” of antigovernment ideology from the values of democratic governance to coincide with the “closeness” of Republicans to the institutions of democratic representation. As such, the “extreme” was outside of the “mainstream,” and yet close enough to one of the main political parties to warrant concern. In turn, this “closeness” carried within it the promise of reintegration, of surmounting the “distance” from the center in order to restore stasis—even sanity—to the political system by working with Republicans to shrink the size and narrow the scope of government. After the blast, the president could proclaim the extremism of his opponents, on the one hand, while seeming to be a reasonable steward of their more legitimate claims, on the other. As Clinton’s commencement speech urged audiences to make the “right choices at the right moment” in order to save democracy from antigovernment extremism, it thus pays to ask about what the making of such “choices” entailed in the text for the vision and purpose of “government” that Clinton advocated in the months following.

In asking such a question, we arrive at the shape and limit of this political moment in terms of “government” as an object of discourse, and thus to the limits of the analogies the speech depends on for its heroic vision of “choosing right.” For though the national errand of “choosing right” in a world of threat and ambiguity is exemplified in the speech by two instances of direct and transformative federal intervention into questions of economic, environmental, and social justice, Clinton was in no place politically—nor was he ideologically disposed—to call for a use of “the power of Government” in any way reminiscent of the Progressive or civil rights eras. And this discrepancy is telling, since it reveals how the analogical extension of each moment of choice into the present involved not only reminding Americans to make the “right choice,” but also asking citizens to forget aspects of *how* to do so as well when it came to the how they saw government. Clinton creates a presence of purpose around “choice” in facing threats to democracy. And yet, these stirring illustrations of courage were, for the needs of the moment, drained of their history as well.

To “make the choices that Theodore Roosevelt made, that Ernest Green made” meant joining in a collective struggle animated, in part, by the belief that government could and should be used to bring greater opportunity and equality to the United States. In each, the connection between the federal government, democracy, and national community though complex, involved envisioning the first—government—as an agent through which to expand the national meaning and scope of the second and third—democracy and community—to more Americans. While Clinton may have shared such a belief in government, it was hardly essential to his political identity, nor was it the animating promise of his administration when it came to government, especially in the spring of 1995. By seeking to quell and then to reintegrate the debate over government into such a system, Clinton’s rhetoric after the bombing was, in short, a call to order, with all that entails. If Green and Roosevelt can be said to have “saved” the nation at the “right moment,” their saving was of the kind that sought to extend the benefits of liberal democracy to greater segments of American society by dismantling economic and racial hierarchy. Their “right choices at the right moment” coincided with the end of eras defined by stratification, and the start of ones defined by increasing, however imperfectly, democratization. By contrast, Clinton’s rhetoric revealed less the vision of democracy expanded through struggle, than of community saved through transcendence, and of a renewed relationship between the very ideas of “government” and “community” as a result. As the 1996 election approached, and a budget showdown with Republicans loomed, this vision would gain strength and acquire a guiding purpose beyond the soothing of a rattled nation.

NOTES

1. Russell Hanson, “Democracy,” in *Ideas in Context: Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, ed. Terence Ball, James Farr, and Russell Hanson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 70.

2. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1949), 256.

3. Bill Clinton, “Keynote Address of Gov. Bill Clinton to the Democratic Leadership DLC’s Cleveland Convention,” May 6, 1991, www.ndol.org/print.cfm?contentid=3166.

4. From interview with Burns and Sorenson, *Dead Center*, 13.

5. On Clinton’s speech as an “inaugural jeremiad,” see David E. Procter and Kurt Ritter’s “Inaugurating the Clinton Presidency: Regenerative Rhetoric and the American Community,” in *The Clinton Presidency: Images, Issues and Communication Strategies*, ed. Robert E. Denton and Rachel Holloway (Westport, CT: Praeger,

1996), 1–17. On the “jeremiadic logic” of Clinton’s campaign rhetoric, see Craig Allen Smith’s “The Jeremiadic Logic of Bill Clinton’s Policy Speeches,” in *Bill Clinton on Stump, State, and Stage*, ed. Stephen A. Smith (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1994), 73–100.

6. “Inaugural Address,” *Public Papers of the Presidents, William J. Clinton, 1993* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993), 1:1.

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8. Elizabeth Drew, *On the Edge: The Clinton Presidency* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), 36.

9. Bill Clinton, *My Life* (New York: Knopf, 2004), 520–21.

10. Douglas Jehl, “Clinton Accused of Forsaking the Center,” *New York Times*, December 7, 1994, B10; John Aloysius Farrell, “President Returns to Center as He Seeks a Way to Govern,” *Boston Globe*, December 14, 1994, p. 1.

11. Quoted in Richard L. Berke, “Moderate Democrats’ Poll Sends the President a Warning,” *New York Times*, November 18, 1994, A30.

12. “Remarks at the Democratic Leadership Council Gala,” *Public Papers of the Presidents, William J. Clinton, 1994* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994) 2:2155.

13. “The President’s News Conference,” *Public Papers of the Presidents, William J. Clinton, 1995* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1995), 1:547

14. The phrase “The Incredible Shrinking President” comes from a *Time* magazine cover. The story it touted alerted readers to the fact that Clinton was suffering a lower approval rating than any other postwar president so early into his first term. “That Sinking Feeling,” *Time*, June 7, 1993, pp. 23–29.

15. Michael Waldman, *POTUS Speaks: Finding the Words That Defined the Clinton Presidency* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 82.

16. “Remarks on the Bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents, William J. Clinton, 1995* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1995), 1:552; See Waldman, *POTUS*, 82.

17. “The President’s News Conference with President Fernando Cardoso of Brazil,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents, William J. Clinton, 1995*, 1:558; “Interview on CBS’ *60 Minutes*,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents, William J. Clinton, 1995*, 1:574.

18. See www.oklahomacitybombing.com/oklahoma-city-bombing-pictures-1.html (accessed October 26, 2009).

19. “Reassuring the Children of America,” *CBS News Special Report*, April 22, 1995, www.lexisnexis.com/us/lacademic.

20. “Remarks by the President and Hillary Clinton to Children on the Oklahoma City Bombing,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents, William J. Clinton, 1995*, 1:569.

21. “Remarks at a Memorial Service for the Bombing Victims in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents, William J. Clinton, 1995*, 1:573–74. All references to Clinton’s address at the memorial service come from this transcrip-

tion, which can be searched online at www.gpoaccess.gov/pubpapers/wjclinton.html.

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23. “Remarks to the American Association of Community Colleges in Minneapolis, Minnesota,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents, William J. Clinton, 1995*, 1:580. Emphasis added.
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26. Michael Lind, “Understanding Oklahoma,” *Washington Post*, April 30, 1995, C1.
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28. “Remarks and an Exchange with Reporters on the Oklahoma City Bombing,” in *Public Papers of the Presidents, William J. Clinton, 1995*, 1:568.
29. Peter Applebome, “Terror in Oklahoma: Radical Right’s Fury Boiling Over,” *New York Times*, April 23, 1995, A33.
30. “Remarks to the American Association of Community Colleges,” 580.
31. “Interview on CBS’ *60 Minutes*,” 574.
32. Sidney Blumenthal, *The Clinton Wars* (Plume: New York, 2003), 132.
33. Clinton, *My Life*, 652.
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Chapter Four

The Pliability of Community

Rhetorical Idealism and Transcending the “Era of Big Government”

Oklahoma City turned the entire United States into a community. In fact, it turned us all into a family. We somehow found our better selves in the horror of what had happened to people with whom we identified.

—Bill Clinton¹

Any performance is discussible either from the standpoint of what it *attains* or what it *misses*. . . . A way of seeing is also a way of not seeing—a focus upon object *A* involves a neglect of object *B*.

—Kenneth Burke²

In the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing, the work of centrist rhetoric—of constructing a “way of seeing” the event through a defined cluster of judgments, analogies, and images engaged in the production of political transcendence—sought to solidify a certain perspective from which to grasp what had happened. From this vantage, the notion of a national “community” called to save democracy from disorder was present at every turn; it provided the ground for seeing what was at stake in the political divisions over government. To see from the angle of “community” was, however, to see in a mixed way. It was to see division from a remove that, paradoxically, coincided with a sense of the nation’s stark vulnerability to the effects of division. Said otherwise, the more intense this vulnerability in the present was made—through its association with the crises of the past, through its link to the bombing, through its identification with the militias, and so on—the more abstract and generalized the call to “community” became as a “way of seeing.” And for Clinton, this intensified abstraction of “community” was key

both rhetorically and politically in helping him to manage the complexities of his political situation.

For as the generality of the call to “community” after Oklahoma City became shaped by the mainstream/extreme contrast, it became a means by which to rebuild the broader centrist ethos of the one making it. As we saw in the previous chapter, reasserting the president’s centrist identity after the midterms was a rhetorical task already under way when the attack happened. (Indeed, the consultant Dick Morris—whose notion of “triangulation” I take up below—had been brought on to help in just this regard.) And, as we also saw, the administration saw the “opening” created by the bombing very much in terms of, as Michael Waldman put it, gaining the offensive against “Republicans in Congress [who] were proclaiming an anti-government ‘Republican Revolution’ in Washington.”³ To judge the politics of the GOP and the motive behind the bombing from the same vantage involved creating both a pliable and a concentrated “way of seeing” the ongoing political tensions over government from the standpoint of an imagined “community.”

Attained from this standpoint was a range of possibilities for dramatizing the political scene as a battle not primarily between liberal and conservative ideologies, but between right and wrong ways of engaging political controversy. Using the call to “community” as a political strategy against Republicans entailed creating moral and stylistic judgments about *how* to argue over government constructively without eroding the shared ground upon which such arguments could hope to move toward consensus. Clinton assigned value to the principals in the scene not only in terms of their culpability, but in terms of their responsibility to rebuild and reaffirm the contours of democratic polity in the wake of the worst domestic attack yet in the nation’s history. The call on audiences to make the “right choice at the right time” was therefore pitched less in protest to the ideology of limited government, *per se*, than to the stridency and aggressiveness with which the various agendas collecting under its banner advanced their complaints.

Thus, on the one hand, Clinton’s claim that antigovernment rhetoric—that is, the “loud and angry voices in America today” that “leave the impression, by their very words, that violence is acceptable”—contributed to the attack on Oklahoma City amounted to an excoriation of such “voices,” a charge that implied their general unfitness for democracy, and that seemed to extend all the way to the Republicans in Congress. Just as important, however, was how alongside this charge of rhetorical unfitness, Clinton also stressed his *own* version of the Republicans’ critique of the liberal state, an approach to the dismantling of “big government” that could exist without a violent byproduct and that he deemed both valid and necessary. For example, though heralding the power of government and the work of federal employees in his Michigan

State address, he argued that government was “still too cumbersome and outdated” and that under his presidency it was “growing smaller, more flexible, less wasteful and more effective.”⁴ As a result of such statements, Clinton was able to establish a position from which to selectively differentiate the right’s critique of “big government,” which pictured government as something to be diminished, from his New Democrat one, which pictured government as something to be “reinvented.” Such a finessed position was not only in keeping with Clinton’s campaign rhetoric, but appropriate to the menu of rhetorical options he had in 1995.

Indeed, despite an uptick in his popularity after the blast, several factors still constrained the president given the collapse of his party’s congressional majority in November 1994. The Democratic leadership still had reason to be skeptical of his chances for reelection, remained more ideologically liberal than Clinton, and had fewer incentives than he did to work with Republicans to move any major legislation forward. The electorate remained in flux ideologically, which made building on Clinton’s already modest popular support—he had won 43 percent of the popular vote and his approval ratings were hardly better—an intricate task. Within two years, Americans had switched parties controlling the Congress and the presidency, each time seeming to favor starkly different visions of government. A united Republican majority posed the most pressing challenge. Though lacking the numbers to enact legislation over his veto, the GOP could deny Clinton any accomplishments of his own, while investigating him relentlessly as he moved toward reelection.

Within this particular set of constraints, two primary and related rhetorical exigencies arose for President Clinton. He needed to keep in the foreground the “extremism” charge, a charge upon which he had been able to destabilize his adversaries at an intense point of partisan disagreement. At the same time, because of his political precariousness and fragile base of support, he needed to offer an equally compelling “way of seeing” how to transcend such disagreements that, at least potentially, could include some of these same adversaries. This chapter examines how the resources used to accomplish the first task become incorporated into the second via the rhetorical pliability of “community.” I describe the rudiments of this process by examining two speeches—Clinton’s 1996 State of the Union and his remarks after signing sweeping welfare reform legislation into law—to show how the idealist solutions offered *by* “community” in the State of the Union become visible as materialist problems *for* “community” in Clinton’s rhetoric of welfare reform. In a word, the transcendent generality of the first reveals its limits and embarrassments in the second.

Indeed, the advantage of claiming the center arises, as we have seen in the previous three cases, in proportion to the general intensity and scope ascribed

to the conflicts particular centrist claims purport to address. In the aftermath of Oklahoma City, Clinton grounded his production of transcendence in opposition to a traumatic threat to “our common peace, our freedom, our way of life.” When Clinton spoke of a “duty to purge ourselves of the dark forces which gave rise to this evil,” this “duty” called to mind a “community” fighting for its life. And yet, from this precarious position of a national “community” pictured as torn by the question of “government,” the president also found the wherewithal to proclaim with well-received conviction a vision of national-political progress in the months ahead that focused specifically on this same question, and that helped carry him to reelection.

How did centrist rhetoric manage this double movement? What did the oscillation between a rhetoric of national crisis over government and one heralding a longed-for transcendence on that same issue work to produce? And what, in turn, did this vision attain and miss by positioning “community” as the agent to overcome divisions over “government?” To answer these questions I look to press conferences, individual speeches, interviews, and to accounts focused on the composition and reception of White House rhetoric at the time. In terms of its composition, I pay particular attention to background statements made by the political consultant Dick Morris—whose influence was decisive on the State of the Union—in order to make visible some of the broad assumptions about politics, public opinion, and centrist rhetoric itself that informed Clinton’s discourse at the time. Since, the political dynamic created in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing was crucial in determining the shape and function of “community” for the remainder of his presidency, I begin with a focus on how Clinton began to use this dynamic with great success in the summer and fall of 1995.

MAINSTREAM/EXTREME: FROM OKLAHOMA CITY TO THE GOVERNMENT SHUTDOWN

“War is politics with blood; politics is war without blood,” said the Speaker [Newt Gingrich], citing the late Chinese Communist leader Mao Tse-Tung.⁵

What they really want is to end the role of the federal government in our life, which they, after all, have been very open about. I mean, a lot of them will be happy about [the shutdown] because they don’t think we ought to have a government up here anyway.⁶

The core contrast that dominated the White House’s response to Oklahoma City guided its subsequent confrontation with the Republican congressional

majority over the federal budget. Clinton sought to make the budget debate a choice not between competing fiscal policies, but between competing political identities, that is, between a mainstream, moderate president seeking community and consensus and an extreme, intemperate Republican congressional majority bent on advancing a narrow ideological agenda at any cost. In early November, the Republican Congress took a step in the confrontation that would help the White House to add another layer of vivid proof to support their preferred contrast.

Rather than pass funding to keep governmental agencies open as their negotiations with the White House proceeded, Republicans passed a bill that did not provide such funding unless the president agreed to their terms for a balanced budget. Thus, on November 13, Clinton, facing what he called “extraordinary tactics” guided by “extreme and misguided priorities” vetoed a proposal which would have cut taxes, while achieving fiscal balance through cuts in social programs and a slowing in the growth of Medicare.⁷ The veto meant that parts of the federal government would not open for business the following morning. That same evening the president spoke to the DLC.

White House speechwriters included the opening passage of “The Second Coming” by W. B. Yeats at the end of the speech to show how the budget fight would “be a test of whether the center can hold.”⁸ In introducing the quotation, Clinton referred to violence in Iraq and Israel as each part of a global contest between “the forces of integration, which offer so much hope . . . [against] the people everywhere who would sow discord over harmony” before quickly segueing to the conflicts in Ireland and then to the words of its renowned poet:

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.⁹

Two aspects of the inclusion of this famous passage in the speech stand out. The first is obviously the choice of the center as a figure of safety and national stability, as the core of a centripetal force responsible for bridging the growing divisions of American democracy. If “things fall apart” in politics when the “center cannot hold,” then the upcoming halt in the government’s basic functioning would necessarily be a contest between the center and “anarchy.” The second aspect that stands out is the association of “passionate intensity” with a centrifugal and violent threat. Anticipating these lines, Clinton’s

speech had earlier warned that the Republicans' plans to cut government spending had pushed Americans to

face a choice that will be a test of our values, a test of our vision, a choice that goes to the very heart of our identity as a nation and to the very core of the future we will chart. What is the vision of the congressional Republicans as manifest in their budget? Their budget would render our Government incapable of supporting our values and advancing our common interests. It is bereft of the simple understanding that we rise or fall together. They would support policies that would make us far more a divided, winner-take-all society, a community with fewer connections and less common purpose, in which we say to all Americans without regard to opportunity or obligation, fend for yourselves.

This perspective on the nature of the budget conflict—"the simple understanding" of interconnection against its lack, a government capable of "supporting our values" against one incapable of doing so—pertained as well to the process of achieving "balance." Notably, Clinton sought to elevate the term "balance" beyond its tie to the budget in the speech, connecting it instead to a higher and more lasting goal. The president argued that "this great debate in Washington is not, is not, about balancing the budget [a technical feat of calculation]. It is about balancing our values as a people." On these grounds, Republicans—a "they" which aims to divide and to weaken the nation—sought to balance the budget in an *unbalanced* manner. As such, "they" were unable to forge any "common purpose," since "instead of following a path of reconciliation, they have gone their own way and brought the Government to the brink" of defaulting on its short-term obligations—thus destabilizing interests rates at a difficult time economically—and destroying what he told the DLC was "30 years of bipartisan Republican and Democratic commitments to protect the environment and the public health."

Although the government was reopened in six days, once Clinton and the Congress agreed on a timetable to balance the budget, the government was shut down again after another veto of another bill. Using the same pen Lyndon Johnson had used to sign Medicare into law, the president executed his second veto on December 6 telling the nation that he was "acting to protect the values that bind us together in our national community."¹⁰ While committed to a balanced budget, he argued that such a goal needed to be achieved in a way that "honors the commitments we all have and that keeps our people together." Clinton asked the nation to see his veto more as an existential necessity than as a political choice.

The approach was effective in putting the Republicans on their heels. When a month later an agreement was reached to reopen the government as negotia-

tions proceeded—a clear concession by the Republicans that Clinton quickly accepted—a *New York Times* analysis summed up the political rationale behind the decision by Republicans to abandon their previous approach:

Strong in numbers and steeped in their principles, Republicans in the House nevertheless looked as though they had seriously overreached after three full weeks of using a crippled government to pressure Mr. Clinton into a budget deal . . . by the end, the shutdown had boomeranged into a powerful force against Republicans, who were seen as wreaking havoc on Federal workers and innocent citizens to score political points. And Mr. Clinton's stubborn refusal to cut a deal, seen all last year as evidence of political weakness, suddenly began to look like courage in the face of an enemy siege. . . . Against this backdrop, Mr. Clinton has sought with some success to play the role of reasonable grown-up.¹¹

The perception that the GOP had forced the shutdown had made it quite easy to speak of the Republicans in almost the same terms used to link them to the blast months earlier. Indeed, in successfully playing the role of a “reasonable grown-up” forced to contend with havoc-wreakers trying to “score political points” by targeting federal workers, Clinton was continuing along the path cleared in the days after Oklahoma City. It was an approach he returned to regularly in December 1995 and January 1996.

In one national address, for example, the president argued that the GOP was willing to “sacrifice our children to balance the budget,” in another that some House Republicans were “happy” to see the government closed, since it was the logical endpoint of their basic ideology to begin with.¹² Similar language would be picked up in the press just days before the president's State of the Union. One piece spoke of the House Republicans' relentless “ideological appetite” and of their perception that government shutdowns were effective “weapons” of political combat. Importantly, anyone who wanted to paint the GOP in such a light often received help from Republicans themselves. Gingrich was quoted in the same story saying that the House freshman “really think this is life and death for them, and think that their careers are trivial in the balance, and mean it with all sincerity,” while Representative Steve Largent of Oklahoma described the Republicans' approach to legislation as a “military exercise.”¹³

That some voters began to see the right “as wreaking havoc on Federal workers and innocent citizens,” and as part of “an enemy siege” of the president testifies to the extent to which the terms of debate on government—as well as overall perceptions of the president—had shifted after Oklahoma City. And this shift testifies, in no small part, to the successful efforts of Dick Morris to steer Clinton's rhetoric throughout 1995 in the lead up to the State of the Union address.

DICK MORRIS AND TRIANGULATION AFTER THE MIDTERMS

According to Clinton confidant George Stephanopoulos, “From December 1994 through August 1996 . . . no single person more influenced the President of the United States than Dick Morris.”¹⁴ An itinerant political operative with ties to candidates from both parties, Morris was a long-time confidant from Clinton’s Arkansas gubernatorial campaigns. To the consternation of Clinton’s Democratic advisors, Morris came to exert considerable control over political strategy and speechwriting in the White House after the 1994 midterms.

With the “Republican Revolution” having decimated the Democrats’ majority in Congress, Clinton warmed to Morris’ approach, which directly recalled the beyond left and right rhetoric of the DLC. Morris advised the president to define a

position that not only blended the best of each party’s views but also transcended them to constitute a third force in the debate. [While talking to Clinton] I blurted out the strategy in a single word: triangulate. I found myself shaping my fingers into a triangle, with my thumbs joined at the base and my forefingers raised to meet a point at the top. “Triangulate, create a third position not just between them but above them as well. Identify a new course that accommodates the needs the Republicans address but does it in a way that is uniquely yours,” I counseled.¹⁵

The task of defining this triangulated “third position” for Clinton seems simple enough in theory. At the time, however, it was hardly easy in practice given the weakened state the president found himself in after the collapse of 1994 and the short amount of time he had to recover before reelection. Indeed, Morris had little to show for this approach for the first four and a half months of his tenure, a fact supported in part by Clinton’s rather lowly state on the evening before the Oklahoma City bombing.

What the blast allowed for, however, was the formation of something Morris’s plan lacked in theory—the instant backdrop of a powerfully negative force of division focused directly on the central issue of the day: the future of the federal government and its powers. With the threat of this divisive force in play—and later kept in play both subtly and not—Clinton could begin to craft a unifying “third force in the debate” in contrast to this threat, a loose symbolic field open for strategic manipulation. If the attacks had demonstrated the extent to which ideological and political divisions could lead to catastrophe, Clinton could—and would—begin to rhetorically define the moment of

his presidency in terms of a broader counternarrative of transcendence whose telling Morris sensed had become newly possible after the event.

On April 27, eight days after the explosion, Morris presented the president with a memorandum that outlined a series of short-term polling “gains” the attack had made possible. At its conclusion, however, the memo ventured a prediction of more lasting significance: “Permanent possible gain: sets up Extremist Issue vs. Republicans.”¹⁶ Morris here interprets the impact of the bombing not just tactically, but strategically. The mainstream/extreme contrast could be potentially expanded, that is, from its use in organizing a short-term response to the militias, into the basis for a centrist narrative defining the larger purpose of his presidency in the lead up to the 1996 campaign. Indeed, while Morris counseled that the “apex” position defined by the president at the top of the triangle between the views of each party was necessarily a “temporary” one subject to conditions, he also used the notion of triangulation to frame certain conclusions that the electorate had ostensibly arrived at and that Clinton could lay claim to from this higher position.

Morris envisioned the president moving the nation not simply beyond the bombing, but beyond a series of partisan divisions on key issues—from abortion to governmental regulation—that had come to obscure a deeper unity he deemed a “new consensus.” Along these lines, the center became a figure not simply for the absence of “extremism” nor simply for a median position, but for an existing but hidden political reality that Clinton could claim to represent. Thus, as Morris saw it, the

strategies that helped Bill Clinton [to be reelected] were not just tactical moves on a chessboard. They reflected key conclusions about what America wants. The move to the center—triangulation—articulated a deeper and broader consensus in America than we have seen for decades. No matter who runs for office in the future or where events take us, this new consensus will continually reassert its domination over our politics.¹⁷

Although Morris was known for using daily polls to help fine tune the president’s rhetoric, the manner in which he refers to the “new consensus” calls to mind something different. The “conclusions” he cites are said to be self-evident ones that are beyond dispute and that necessarily transcend any flux picked up in his surveys. To claim the “move to the center” from this perspective was to conjure the existence of a unanimity “deeper and broader” than anything in the recent past, and then to claim allegiance to it; it was to discern something that exerted “domination *over* our politics,” and then to express one’s desire to follow it. Indeed, the term “domination” here connotes a positive force against which circumstances—“no matter who runs for office in the

future or where events take us”—could not prevail. To connect with such a force was to connect with an abstract national sentiment seeking to transcend partisan politics—at one point Morris compared it to a “renewed sense of spiritual concern, one incompatible with rigid dogma” defined by “massive majorities” that “rejected the doctrinaire views of left and right”—and yet one highly specific in its policy implications—for example, the consensus imagined was one embracing “an amalgam of conservative and liberal positions” that could be empirically demonstrated, as he put it, “in virtually every poll” conducted at the time.¹⁸

From this rendering, one can see Morris seeking to define the contours of a relationship: The “amalgam”—a term that suggests separate elements mixing into a new whole—and the moment of Clinton’s presidency can each become identified in terms of “conclusions about what America wants.” And each together symbolizes both an end *and* a beginning. As he told an interviewer in July 1996, it was this aspect of Clinton’s presidency—its capacity to represent a culminating transcendence of left and right that would take the nation to a new reality—that convinced him to take a public role on the president’s campaign team:

I had to ask myself, Is his presidency worth defending? And I decided it was. He is the end product of the debate between Democrats and Republicans in this century. By marrying the Democratic doctrine of opportunity to the Republican doctrine of responsibility, Clinton could achieve a Hegelian synthesis.¹⁹

No doubt, Morris is here playing the role (and with considerable zeal) of any publicist, and yet this role-playing, whatever its historical and philosophical dubiousness, whatever its hyperbole, is highly revealing in rhetorical terms.

In telling an ostensibly authentic personal story of “deciding” on Clinton, he suggests the form our decision should take as well. Why is Bill Clinton someone Americans should *want* to reelect president? Because, Morris asks us to believe, he is uniquely suited to harmonize and then move beyond opposing “doctrines” and because from that newly woven, conceptual unity, he can propose policies and solutions that reflect the nation’s common values, not its separate parties. The name Morris gave to this ideal harmony was deceptively simple—a “positive values” agenda—and, in the blast, he identified the spark that ignited the president’s own ability to drive it: “The president’s concentration on positive values began with the Oklahoma City bombing of April 1995. . . . He spoke as an American president, not as a partisan.”²⁰ If the bombing “began” something for Clinton because it allowed him to speak “not as a partisan” this beginning was aided by certain picture of the electorate and its relation to such “values” that steered the preparations for the 1996 State of the Union.

**GIVING FORM TO THE “NEW CONSENSUS”:
“ADDRESS BEFORE A JOINT SESSION OF THE CONGRESS
ON THE STATE OF THE UNION, JANUARY 23, 1996”**

There was no spacing between the paragraphs and practically no margins. In a few hours it seemed, Morris had frenetically typed up a new draft of the State of the Union. . . . It was, frankly, brilliant.²¹

In Morris’s earlier rendering of the postpartisan “new consensus,” history had brought the American people to a rare moment of transcendence. The president was imagined along similar lines as the “end product” of a long process of debate between Democrats and Republicans. The picture of the “new consensus,” however, was less of Americans united on any one thing, than of “massive majorities” with uniformly mixed views on many things. As a result, partisan debate had become detached and hardened in its categorical oppositions. Representing this consensus required a way to hold this mixedness together that left and right lacked. To define the “third position,” Morris would thus offer concrete examples related to social and economic policy in which conventionally opposed positions on key issues could coexist in the same affirmative statement. For instance, the “new consensus” on the issue of abortion: “Keep it legal and safe, but regulate it, require parental involvement, and encourage adoption.” On the issue of welfare: “Require recipients to work, limit the time on the rolls, but provide day care, job opportunities, education, and training to be sure those who can work, do.”²²

Though basic, the balanced form of how Morris represents the ambivalent attitude of the “new consensus” is structurally key. Because its beliefs on issues of mutual concern eschew the most extreme doctrines of either left or right, this “consensus” requires a politics that defines itself first in opposition to such extremes. Such a politics involves discerning shared priorities, building positions apart from ideological extremes, and then rising to a plane where policies can then be refined in light of competing desires and demands. It is this politics that the speech promises, and the means by which it resolves this failure of the partisan in terms of a threat to the nations’ “values” can be seen by looking to the composition of the speech itself.

Clinton speechwriter Michael Waldman offers the most detailed and reliable account currently available of the writing process behind the State of the Union.²³ After White House staff solicited suggestions from an array of parties—from cabinet agencies to Democratic members of Congress—these ideas were passed on to Morris, who added his own ideas and incorporated them all into an extensive poll targeted at laying a foundation for crafting the speech’s various proposals. In announcing the broader lesson of the polling—which took place in early January—Morris confidant Mark Penn concluded

that “the biggest worry on the part of a growing number of Americans was not the economy. It was a sense that their values were under threat . . . by a coarse and commercialized culture.”²⁴ Working from this sense of a broader “threat” felt in key and persuadable sectors of the electorate, the group began to “suggest useful chunks of rhetoric” to Penn, who would then poll these chunks “to see if the tuning fork vibrated,” in Waldman’s words. From such an exercise—poll, formulate rhetoric, poll again—the speechwriters would then pick and choose from key phrase combinations—for example, “America must return to its core values” or “This new era will be a time of peace”—that seemed to resonate with the targeted categories and that could begin to serve as “organizing principles” for the address.

As the collaborative process of writing the speech moved to the drafting stage, however, Morris rejected the results as inadequate and quickly revised the speech himself. As Waldman recounts, Morris faxed the new draft directly to the president, who later sent word that he approved. While Waldman concedes that Morris’s new draft bore the unmistakable signs of its author’s immersion in the language of surveys—“it also read, it must be admitted, like a series of poll questions”—he singles out two aspects that provide relevant points of entry into a close analysis of the finished product that Waldman would judge “frankly brilliant.”

The first was Morris’s use of a “staccato, condensed” form in which “no idea was carried more than a sentence or two” and transitions between ideas were almost nonexistent. Though this aspect could draw attention to the disjointed, “laundry-list” of policies the speech contained—thus seeming to detract from the more holistic aims of communicating a national “values agenda”—Waldman points to how dozens of these short paragraphs were arranged anaphorically—they each began with the same phrase that united them under a single command repeated by the president: “I challenge.” This unifying device, I argue below, proved crucial in the structure of the speech. Alongside another recurring term—“work”—this device had the capacity to extend the scope of the “values agenda” into a call to “community” that would claim to move the nation into a new political era.

Second, Waldman also noticed a radical revision Morris had made to one particular paragraph that addressed the ongoing controversy over the federal budget. Waldman had included a longish statement alluding to the limits of government that ended with Clinton declaring, “We don’t need a program for every problem.” Morris’s revision of the statement read simply: “The era of big government is over. But the era of every man for himself must never begin.” While the second phrase—“era of every *man* for himself”—would later be altered at the request of a staffer for its sexism, Morris’s first phrase remained intact.

That phrase, of course, would later be taken by many as a clear sign of the left's surrender in the debate with right over the role of government.²⁵ And yet, Morris's actual construction, I will argue, anchors a complex and ambiguous set of arrangements that defies such clarity. These combinations of meaning and value not only comprised the rhetorical artistry of the speech, but can also help to bring into focus the more lasting implications of Clinton's pronouncement for the legacy of his presidency. The positing of a recently finished "era" was actually part of a three-act progression of "eras" in the evolution of the nation's relation to the federal government, while "over" the "era of big government" was not extinguished in such a narrative. The claim became instead the statement of a need that the speech itself deigned to fulfill: set the tone and define the possibility for a *third* and culminating stage of transcendence that learns from the other two.

Of note, this possibility would take form in the image of a "community" explicitly *distinguished* from "government" at the onset. From the Constitution's requirement, in Article II, Section 3, that the president from time to time "give to Congress information of the State of the Union and recommend to their Consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient" Clinton starts by claiming what he calls a "duty" to speak. He makes the claim a bit oddly, however. He seeks definitional clarity for his audience by reminding them what the text gives him the authority to "report on" by reminding them of what it does not say. He specifies that the Constitution obliges him to

report on the state of the Union—*not* the state of our government, but of our American community; and to set forth our responsibilities, in the words of our Founders, to form a more perfect union.²⁶

A subtle expansion of the president's constitutional obligation follows the semicolon in this passage. Clinton cites, from the preamble, the Founders' statement of their own purpose so as to claim something which notably does not appear in Article II itself. This is superfluous. The history of the State of the Union demonstrates that presidents have used it in any number of ways, thus obviating the practical need to claim any special need or authority to do one thing or another in this case. At stake, then, is another kind of purpose.

Such a purpose involves configuring a relationship between several key words in this passage—namely, "government," "community," and "responsibilities" so as to situate the president's rhetorical persona in a certain way. The move from "union" to "community" is supported by their mutual dissociation from "government." The domain of the president's rhetorical authority before the Congress becomes, in such a formula, distinguished by the

contrast between an expansive scope imagined by the founders and a more limited view, which Clinton must dispel.

Once “government” as a domain of rhetorical authority becomes explicitly distanced from “community,” Clinton’s discourse assumes an implicit and additional liability: the duty to define the ambiguous relationship between “community” and “government.” This authority is key, for the confusion Clinton alludes to will show itself soon as the recurring barrier to citizens and the Congress discharging the “responsibilities” they have to form a “more perfect union.” It is only as subjects of “community” that these responsibilities can be met through “government,” Clinton will go on to suggest, for it is only through this sense of belonging that a proper grasp of the place of government can take root between two extreme poles that had predominated up until that point.

This tension between “government” and “community” works throughout the text as a source for invention. Just moments into the speech, in fact, the tension steers the first use of Morris’s famous phrase:

The era of big government is over. But we cannot go back to the time when our citizens were left to fend for themselves. Instead, we must go forward as one America, one nation working together to meet the challenges we face together. Self-reliance and teamwork are not opposing virtues; we must have both.

This passage directly follows one which unites the president and the Congress into a “we” who knows for certain two things: “We know big government does not have all the answers. We know there’s not a program for every problem.” And from this knowledge, “we” have already acted and should continue to act. Clinton says, “We have worked to give the American people a smaller, less bureaucratic government in Washington,” and “We have to give the American people one that lives within its means.” When one takes this previous sequence into account, one notices something important in its movement from a negative orientation toward “big government” to its invocation of a transhistorical perspective that can then judge and define this negativity to move beyond it. One sees how Clinton’s proclamation, oft-cited as proof either of an ideological capitulation to the right or of a cunning appropriation of conservative tropes for progressive ends, participates in something more rhetorically dynamic in its idealizing of “community.”

It pays to read closely what defines the presidential/congressional “we” whose knowing and acting and promising allow for Clinton to declare an end to “the era of big government”: a presumed sense of agreement on basic questions of government that coincides, at once, with an *incompleteness* that is equally as powerful. The “we” rejects a presumption about government’s self-evident efficacy—that is, that it has both “all the answers” and can solve

“every problem.” In turn, this “we” works to lessen “bureaucratic government in Washington,” as well as to provide a framework for the ongoing negotiations over what “living within its means” will look like in the coming years. Opposed to “big government,” the agreement invoked is one that wraps together a certain kind of *doxa* that will presumably guide the deliberation of the Congress going forward. And yet, this current *doxa*, as Clinton defines it, is clearly not enough. I can and must itself be judged by a higher and more common and enduring standard. By invoking such a standard in the form of a three-part, historical, and political narrative progression ending in “community,” Clinton sparks a chain of movements that will carry its resonance through the speech.

There was once a state of destitution—“citizens were left to fend for themselves”—Clinton declares in a revision of Morris’s original formulation that not only removes its gendered pronoun, but also locates this “era” more concretely in the past—not simply a hypothetical to be avoided, but a real experience from which to learn and adjust. It was from this state that the very phenomenon of “big government” arose in dialectical response. Thus “fending” became replaced by “big government” over time. They exist as stages in an historical narrative, not simply as opposites. We might translate the narrative as such: American society proved unable to meliorate the suffering and stratification that accompanied its earliest achievements. And yet, the statist approaches that arose to resolve these problems, though successful in some areas, were imperfect, sometimes detrimental, and eventually created their own set of unmanageable contradictions and fissures. Indeed, the narrative suggests, ideological divisions that hardened during this historical transformation now require resolution in the present because they have come to threaten national unity (and, as we will learn later, the basic functioning of the government). And yet, while the nation provides the unifying substance required to defeat this threat—“one America” is what “we go forward *as*”—the principle of movement in the passage defines itself somewhat differently. Rather than appealing in terms of a model of unity, this principle appeals in terms of a mode of *balance*. To “see” from such a space is to see how the competing perspectives and desires that define each previous “era” might coexist to provide the materials for the coming one.

To construct this vantage for the speech, Clinton uses three primary devices—an arrangement of “I challenge” statements that serves to bring together various constituencies, policies, and exhortations under a single heading; a punning on the polysemy of the term “work” to meld images of dignified labor with those of cooperation, negotiation, and efficiency; and, lastly, the example of a federal worker in whom the proper relation of “community” to “government” becomes embodied. Each of these devices

combines to establish a transcendent vantage from which to pair mutual “challenges” with a mutual “working” toward their resolution. It is from this center vantage that the need for “teamwork” and “self-reliance” to coexist in the present becomes set against the “burdens of yesterday,” the partisan loyalties that remain and hinder the nation’s ability to “have both.” The speech thus promises to become a stage upon which the contradiction between “fending” and “big government” can become transformed into a dynamic tension between “teamwork” and “self-reliance” in the new era. Central to the rhetorical production of this stage is the ambiguous and subtle function of the term “challenge.”

Challenge

America has always sought and always risen to every challenge. Who would say that, having come so far together, we will not go forward from here? Who would say that this age of possibility is not for all Americans?

The term “challenge” appears fifty-one times in the speech. Mostly, when appearing as a noun, challenges “present” themselves to the president, so that they can then be “faced,” “sought,” “risen to,” and “met” by the people and the Congress.

Early on, an unspecified bundle of “challenges” links itself to the phrase “of today and tomorrow” as something the Congress must “look to” in order to get “beyond the burdens of yesterday.” In this instance of the speech, rhetoric transforms accepting the “challenges” of the future into a civic act; rhetorical assent proves the motivation for and power to transcend. To accept responsibility is to acquire the resources for shedding the weight of the past—its “burdens”—by looking to something “higher” in the future. Though acknowledging the difficulty of such a transformation, Clinton nevertheless strikes a tone of defiance. The “challenges are significant,” he concedes. But then, as if someone had just responded that the “challenges of today and tomorrow” were insurmountable, or that the nation was founded on “promises,” Clinton issues a reminder. Some may think the “challenges” are too much,

but America was built on challenges, not promises. And when we work together to meet them, we never fail. That is the key to a more perfect Union. Our individual dreams must be realized by our common efforts. Tonight I want to speak to you about the challenges we all face as a people.

Of note, “challenge” is here not only made consistent with the founding substance of the nation, but like the separation of “government” from “com-

munity,” it is a term the president explicitly dissociates for audiences from another they might mistakenly imagine in its place. As such, to stress “challenges, *not* promises”—an echo of John F. Kennedy’s similar turn of phrase when he accepted the Democrats’ nomination in 1960—is not merely to negate, since any definition negates. It is to stress and draw attention to the *act* of negating one scene of citizen obligation in favor of another. In this categorical arrangement, civic excellence historically resides not in citizens demanding the fulfillment of national “promises” but in overcoming the “challenges” they face as Americans. Identifying such “challenges” thus becomes key for the speech, though perhaps not as important as displaying the form and reach of the speakers’ power to assign who will be charged with meeting them.

Indeed, the story behind the rhetorical power of the term “challenge” assumes most importance when the speaker becomes not only a describer of “challenges” but their maker, when he shifts from using “challenge” as a noun, to using it performatively as a verb. After declaring that his oration will be “about the challenges we all face as a people,” Clinton delivers the speech in seven subsequent sections, introducing each with seven similar propositions that define a distinct “challenge.” From the challenge “to take our streets back from crime and gangs and drugs” to the challenge “to leave our environment safe and clean for the next generation,” Clinton classifies an array of social and economic problems under the rubric of “challenges” that face the nation. In each case, however, he will also do something else with “challenge.”

Recall how one of the more notable traces of Morris’s influence on the speech was his organization of an anaphoric structure based on the command, “I challenge.” Through this device, the speaker could shift from describing issues to be resolved as “challenges” into a mode of exhortation, epitomized by the repetition of “I challenge” twenty-five times, and its context-specific entailments—for example, “I urge,” “I invite,” and so on. Whereas in the mode of description a “challenge” names a set of shared burdens that implicates all Americans and that seems difficult in its character to resolve, in the mode of exhortation an “I challenge” aligns itself with a different, and often more vivid, constellation of political personae and presumed truths. It is through the mingling of these modes of naming and exhorting, tied together within the sphere of the term “challenge,” that the text vests the speaker with the power to order an otherwise scattered *mélange* of small and large, anonymous and highly specific, social, political, and policy claims. In turn, each section folds its description of its distinct “challenge” into a range of “I challenge” statements, each with a different antagonist to meeting a “challenge.”

The first—and longest and most detailed—“challenge” that Clinton defines is “to cherish our children and strengthen America’s families.” The section

that begins with this proposition illustrates a larger tendency in the speech, and is worth close examination as an exemplar of this broader process.

After defining its “first challenge” as such, the text states the assumption upon which the connection of this challenge to “community” depends: “Family is the foundation of American life. If we have stronger families, we will have a stronger America. . . . All strong families begin with taking more responsibility for our children.” Protecting the vulnerabilities of the young and trying to strengthen the nation are here linked by the notion of “responsibility for our children,” a phrase which is then repeated and made into the unifying element for a host of roles that individuals simultaneously occupy:

So all of us, not just as parents, but all of us in our other roles—our media, our schools, our teachers, our communities, our churches and synagogues, our businesses, our governments—all of us have a responsibility to help our children to make it and to make the most of their lives and their God-given capacities.

What taking “responsibility for our children” means will be various and sometimes contradictory, but what it does for Clinton rhetorically is more consistent. Acceptance of “responsibility” will be proven by the willingness of various people to do various things in line with an assent to the speaker’s “I challenge.”

Who must do what in response to Clinton’s sequence of “I challenge” statements in this section in the speech? The passage breaks down as follows:

- The “media” must create only content “you’d want your own children and grandchildren to enjoy.”
- Tobacco company executives can market to adults, but must “draw the line on children.”
- The “broadcast industry” must rate their content “in ways that help parents to protect their children.”
- The “leaders of major media corporations in the entertainment industry” must “come to the White House . . . to work with us in a positive way to improve what our children see on television.”
- People “on welfare” must answer Clinton’s “challenge to make the most of this opportunity for independence.”
- “American businesses” must also his answer his “challenge to give people on welfare the chance to move into the work force.”
- A “challenge to all of us and every American” is made by Clinton to join “a national campaign against teen pregnancy.”
- “American men and women in families” are asked “to give greater respect to one another” as part of a “challenge [to] America’s families to work harder to stay together.”

- Clinton will “challenge the fathers of this country to love and care for their children.”
- Congress receives a challenge to “pass the requirement for a V-chip in TV sets” and a “challenge to send me a bipartisan welfare reform bill that will really move people from welfare to work and do the right thing by our children.”

The pattern created in this section reveals two central things about the speech as a whole.

First, it reveals the elasticity of the “I challenge” trope, how it allows the speaker to spread rhetorical authority over various domains, weaving their key actors into a harmony of positive potential responses to the “challenge” in question. This use of authority produces distinct ways for “responsibility to our children” to be demonstrated by different and often overlapping constituencies in direct response to a specific “I challenge.” The “I challenge” to Congress, for instance, involves specific bills which a majority of the Congress will or will not pass. The speaker makes a plea for concrete actions by a deliberative body, actions that his signature can effectively put into law. Whereas the “I challenge” to parents to make them “work harder to stay together” involves a quite different kind of opportunity of demonstrating “responsibility to our children”; the speaker appeals to a kind of “work” that entails a series of small, private actions that cannot themselves be evidenced or measured with clarity. Connected to the duty to build of a “stronger America,” these small, vague actions become nevertheless tokens of national pride. In both cases, what is key is how the “I challenge” allows Clinton maintain control over such varied fields of social and political reality, while asking principals in each to do very different things, with different levels of sacrifice and effort required.

Second, connected to this manifold rhetorical authority enabled by different applications of the “I challenge” emerges a corresponding pattern of oppositions. This pattern matches, on the one hand, centripetal images and propositions to the task of discharging the “responsibility to our children.” For example, in one scheme the speaker’s “I challenge” can be fulfilled by entertainment creators who link the vulnerability of their own “children and grandchildren” to that of every other American child. In another, a broadcast industry that joins with parents to “help” them protect the nation’s children is key. The text also features in its vision of meeting each “I challenge”: leaders of “major media corporations” who will “work with [the White House] . . . to improve what our children see on television”; a Congress that writes a bill with a V-chip requirement that “has bipartisan support” and that will “send me a bipartisan welfare reform bill”; American businesses who come to see

“people on welfare” not as obstacles to their profitability, but as fellow Americans deserving of a “chance” to work; citizens—“every one of us”—joining “religious groups and others who care for the poor” and “community efforts across our country . . . against teen pregnancy”; American “men and women in families” who will learn to “give greater respect to one another.” Elements of separation and alienation are matched, on the other hand, to eschewing “responsibility” and, therefore, to refusing the “I challenge.” For example, connected to the refusal of the speaker’s “I challenge” are those who use the fear of “censorship” to hinder parents’ access to the V-chip; media executives who resist a president who proclaims himself “ready to work with you”; cigarette manufacturers who continue to market to children, thus ensuring that “three hundred thousand of them will have their lives shortened as a result”; members of Congress who keep in place a “welfare system [which] has undermined the values of family and work, instead of supporting them”; families who do not “stay together”; and fathers who do not “make the decision to help raise your children” and thus shirk what the speaker calls “the most basic human duty of every American.”

By focusing on a contrast between ways of uniting to meet and ways of refusing to meet the “I challenge,” Clinton establishes an inventional structure in which a unified picture of movement toward cooperation, respect, and empathy becomes set against multiple barriers. As a result, “I challenge” statements are answerable primarily in terms of various constituencies transcending divisions—between parties, between motives, between roles, and so on—so as to “preserve our old and enduring values as we head into the future.” Transcendence thus becomes aligned with answering the “I challenge” in the affirmative, making the speaker the actor who both consolidates and motivates these various movements.

Consider, in addition to the preceding analysis of how this alignment coalesces in the first “challenge,” similar alignments from the speech. Answering Clinton’s “challenge” on education will require a national “partnership” bringing together “industry, educators and parents”; on crime it will require overcoming hostilities between police and the communities they serve, the establishment, Clinton says, of “community partnerships with local police forces” and stronger “bonds of trust between citizens and police”; on the environment, it will require recognition that “this is not a partisan issue”; on foreign policy, it will require an engagement in the world consistent not with taking sides—“we must not be the world’s policeman”—but with breaking down barriers—“but we can and should be the world’s very best peacemaker”; on the challenge to “make our democracy work” through campaign finance reform, it will require “Republicans and Democrats alike [to] show the American people that we can limit spending and open the airwaves to

all candidates”; and on “economic security,” it will require employers and employees to cooperate so that as workers increase their hours and their productivity, companies make sure those on the payroll get “the skills they need and share the benefits of the good years, as well as the burdens of the bad ones. When companies and workers work as a team they do better, and so does America.” In each case, to refuse the speaker is not simply to refuse an “I challenge,” but to step away from the “work” required to achieve transcendence, a kind of “work” which varies from case to case. In seeing how “work” varies, we can also see it ordering a coherent host of diverse judgments and ideal scenarios that define the scope, limit, and tone of transcendence.

Work

When Americans work together in their homes, their schools, their churches, their synagogues, their civic groups, their workplace, they can meet any challenge.

The term “work” appears seventy-two times in the speech. The subjects of the verb “work” are many; its meanings and rhetorical functions circulate within a range of combinations as well. The speech starts with a lament about “work”: “While more Americans are living better, too many of our fellow citizens are working harder just to keep up, and they are rightly concerned about the security of their families.” A similar grouping of dedicated “citizens” is described, a few sentences later. They are called “Americans who are willing to work” for the “American Dream of opportunity for all.” The inability to find such “opportunity” faced *even* by those who are “willing to work for it” raises what is, in Clinton’s words, a fundamental “question” for the coming decades: How will Congress and the president resolve this dissonance, thus honoring “work,” those “willing to work,” and those “working harder” than ever? In these two instances, a narrow, yet commonly understood and experienced sense of “work” as gainful employment for adequate compensation establishes a clear starting point for argumentation that will, in turn, seed a range of interpretations and inflections on the broader moral and civic value of “work.”

In the first instance, “working harder just to keep up” means more than just laboring to survive. If “more Americans are living better,” the reminder that there are still those “working harder just to keep up” strives to make this discrepancy into the symptom of an injustice. In the second instance, too, it signifies more than just a willingness to trade labor for money. More importantly, it unites an identity with a privilege: to *be* an American “willing to work” for the “American Dream” is to earn the right to demand an answer from Congress and from other Americans to the “question” that Clinton earlier raised: “How do we make the American Dream of opportunity for all a reality for all Americans who are willing to work for it?”

To construct an answer to the question, Clinton relies on a series of combinations joining “work” with other terms and purposes:

- The “workplace” is a site from which to support the success of our “new, smaller government.”
- “Working families” are a special kind whose taxes must not be raised.
- Because of the increased demands of the “new economy,” “people who work hard still need support.”
- “Tough work requirements” define a set of unprecedented rules for people who receive federal aid.
- The “workforce” names a socio-economic grouping that must constantly improve and attract new members.
- Phrases like “work-study” and “work their way through college” bridge working and learning into a harmony.
- The president supports tuition or training vouchers “for unemployed or underemployed workers.”
- For those “working hard without a raise” Clinton calls for a new minimum wage.
- For all “parents who work full-time,” he touts a tax cut that ostensibly lifts their children from poverty.
- For “those who work for our federal government” he offers a “special word” of thanks for “working harder and working smarter than ever before.”

All of these combinations, which draw resources for description and amplification from the figure of “work,” nevertheless remain grounded in the term’s connection to instrumental labor in the economic realm. Where this connection becomes explicitly woven into politics, however, is in the manner in which two additional combinations of “work” also come into play.

The first combines “work” as a verb for deliberation (often between branches of government and political parties) with “work” as an adjective for the successful result of collaborative, civic activity.

- After telling congressional Republicans that “we ought to resolve our remaining differences,” Clinton promises that he is “willing to work to resolve them,” making resolution the predicate of “work.”
- Community policing “is clearly working” as a result of partnership between local communities and law enforcement.
- Reinventing government is meant to “make democracy work.”
- The Clinton “administration is working hard to give the American people a government that works better and costs less.”

The term “work” attaches itself to a cluster of political meanings in a second manner as well. When Clinton first declares the “era of big government is over,” he uses two key phrases that involve “work.” He refers to “one nation working together” (a phrase that unites an identity with the act that sustains it) and to “teamwork” (a value defined by actions that exists, ideally, in proper ratio to “self-reliance”). Each phrase relates to different facets of a transcendence that could move citizens “beyond the burdens of yesterday,” thus completing the third stage in the speaker-constructed historical narrative I mentioned earlier from destitution to stagnation to an uncertain present. In this sense, “work” becomes an agent of progress; something without which the transcendence of the “era of big government” will fail.

With “work” striving to contain and execute this variety of functions as the speech nears its conclusion, Clinton again declares,

The era of big government is over. But we can't go back to the era of fending for yourself. We have to go forward to the era of working together as a community, as a team, as one America, with all of us reaching lines that divide us—the division, the discrimination, the rancor—we have to reach across it to find common ground. *We have got to work together if we want America to work.*

What we see in the above passage is a crystallization of the “work” trope’s possibilities into a rich cross-section of political discourse. The implied obligations, assurances, and rewards of “work” become arranged in a salient and effective fashion that reveals a structural feature of the speech.

It pays to note that there are not only three distinct “eras” named in the passage but that each is constituted and purposed differently in the lead up to the concluding sentence. The first “era,” “the era of big government,” is placed into the past—made “over”—enthymematically. Drawing from a consensus on “government” that the speech has already recounted in terms of things “we know,” “the era of big government is over” serves to summarize and bring into fruition this consensus. The second “era,” the “era of fending for yourself,” has a different function. It serves an ethical purpose (depicting something to avoid) and an historical one (explaining the origin of the “era” that has just ended). With these two “eras” serving as negative terms, the positive term in the passage—the yet to come “era of working together”—attaches itself to a host of referents to stake its claim as the name for a redemptive national future. What qualifies as “work” in the “era of working together” are acts undertaken in terms of abstract identities that are then made consistent with “reaching across these lines that divide us” in the present. The text defines these lines—“the division, the discrimination, the rancor”—in terms that mirror, if not map on to the tripartite scheme—“as a

community, as a team, as one America”—of curative identities introduced before. Moreover, the speaker sees beneath “these lines” a powerful force of division, a single thing (an “it”) that currently defines a chasm—a place where there is no center—across which citizens must somehow “find common ground,” thus not only transcending their differences on specific issues, but also moving beyond previous, developmental stages of social and political existence in American life.

This observation about the different functions of each “era” shows how the two uses of “work” in the final sentence, which I have italicized above, serve to culminate a distinct process, one that draws together each “era” into a structure of rhetorical possibilities. As a result of this process, there emerges a developmental sequence, that is, between a recent “era” declared over, a distant “era” used as the sign of something to avoid, and a future “era” that acquires its identity by completing that which is missing in the first two. What “working together” claims for itself, in relation to this range of “eras,” is thus the ability to motivate a sequence: to “work” is to bring the undefined and unstable present that erupts with the end of “big government” into a new order. The “work” trope acquires this ordering ability in three significant ways.

First, it establishes a key resource for political division. References to “work” in speech tacitly invoke real and potential social and economic conflicts. To notice this, we need only recall those “willing to work” (against those *unwilling* to do so), those “working harder just to keep up” (against those “living better” than ever), those who will adhere to the “tough work requirements” supported by the president (against those who refuse to do so), those who have been “working hard without a raise” (against those in Congress who voted recently against giving them one), and so on. Second, “work” associates in the speech with a dense cluster of terms for unity that range from the mundane “team” to the sublime “America,” terms, too, that suggest the labor of deliberation to reach consensus among potentially conflicting entities—for example, inside the Congress itself, between the Congress and the president, among local, state, and federal governments, between labor and management, between fathers and mothers, and so on. Third, “work” acquires further meaning via its capacity to serve as an intransitive verb defining functionality within a given system of expectations and desires—for example, government bureaucracies, specific policies, and even “democracy” itself are all things which are described in degrees of working or not working.

Ultimately, “work” serves to allow all to answer the “challenge” of bringing the nation into a “new era” in which the relation of “government” and “community” will become redefined. Clinton offers a living example of how “work” can do this as he reaches the end of the speech.

Richard Dean

I'd like to give you one example. His name is Richard Dean.

As an "example" used to honor a "federal workforce composed of Americans who are now working harder and working smarter" than ever to serve others, Clinton introduces Richard Dean,

a 49-year-old Vietnam veteran who's worked for the Social Security Administration for 22 years now. Last year he was hard at work in the Federal Building in Oklahoma City when the blast killed 169 people and brought the rubble down all around him. He reentered that building four times. He saved the lives of three women.

Upon hearing this story, Congress turned toward the gallery and gave Dean nearly a full minute of sustained, standing applause. And yet, after telling the story, Clinton had more to say once the clapping stopped:

But Richard Dean's story doesn't end there. This last November, he was forced out of his office when the government shut down. And the second time the government shut down he continued helping Social Security recipients, but he was working without pay. On behalf of Richard Dean and his family, and all other people who are out there working every day doing a good job for the American people, I challenge all of you in this Chamber: Never, ever shut the federal government down again.

What connotations does the selection of Dean as an exemplary member of the "federal workforce" activate at the close of the oration? As he stands with his eyes full of tears, while the president recounts his bravery and commitment, how does Dean become an element of persuasion not simply for a congressional audience, but for an "American people" to whom Dean appears to have given so much?

Dean's long and consistent record of "work" for and within the federal government becomes proof as much of Dean's good character as of the possibility that such character exists across the federal bureaucracy. Clinton strives to make Dean's exceptional courage a quantitatively unique expression of a qualitatively shared ethos of commitment exemplified by action. He not only risked his life in combat, but he recently "saved" several federal workers from death; then, amid the chaos of a government "shut down" by Republicans and rendered unable to function, he demonstrated selflessness as he "continued helping Social Security recipients" even though he knew that he would not be paid.

As a picture of Dean emerges in this matrix of ordinary governmental service highlighted by definitive acts of bravery and sacrifice for others—defending against communism, rescuing people from death, and “helping” the elderly—his exemplarity becomes ripe for selective analogy and extension beyond his particular case, that is, into a broader field of “work” that surrounds a subsequent “I challenge” to “all of you in this Chamber.” As the text bridges Dean to “his family,” then to federal workers as “people working every day,” and then to the “American people” as their servant, his presence warrants not only emulation, but also caution as to the stakes of the ongoing debate. To “challenge” on “behalf” of Dean, as the president does, is to do so “on behalf” of this fragile, yet vital, circuit of connections upon whose smooth functioning—such a circuit must “work”—the nation relies.

The “challenge” to “all of you in this Chamber” in this moment in the speech recalls the most recent and vivid instance of a debate over “government,” and it positions Clinton momentarily on a plane apart from how the debate has proceeded in Washington. He stands with Dean, in whose person the effects of both the blast and the shutdown were so acutely felt, and for whom its live-and-death stakes were self-evident and undeniable. The “I challenge” to the Congress ties together Clinton, those who “work” for the people, and the people themselves into a relation of reciprocity and common desire for a “working” government that “you in this Chamber”—inclusive of both parties, but suggestive of one in particular—have recently made *unworkable*. Indeed, the “never, ever” command, delivered just as Republicans are returning to their seats after applauding a hero Clinton quickly turns against them, suggests an orator in strong command of his own political and rhetorical power. (Clinton would later recall, with some satisfaction, the effect Dean had in humbling the president’s adversaries: “The Republicans, knowing that they had been trapped, looked glum. I didn’t think I had to worry about a third government shutdown; its consequences now had a human, heroic, face. Defining moments like that don’t happen by accident.”²⁷)

Attending to Clinton’s rhetorical use of Dean, whose “work” at the “Federal Building in Oklahoma City” involved acts of “saving” and “helping” other Americans, offers insight into a rhetorical form central to the speech’s production of transcendence: The attempt to reposition the relationship between “community” and “government.”

Whereas they were dissociated categorically at the start of the speech, they are now recombined into a new relation that Dean encapsulates in an ideal form. With “big government” over, the government of “today is the smallest it has been in 30 years, and it’s getting smaller every day.” Such shrinkage, however, has gone *unnoticed*. “Most of our fellow Americans probably don’t

know that,” Clinton offers, because of those who, like Dean, are “working harder and working smarter than ever before to make sure the quality of our services does not decline.” Here, “harder” and “smarter” are terms associated with “work” that achieves a stated strategic end: Maintain the efficient and stable operation of government—status quo, that is, on the receiving end of “services” rendered—in the midst of the end of “big government” so that “quality” is maintained. Both terms are also associated with labor done in a spirit of commitment to other Americans—“quality of *our* services.”

Once dissociated from “big government” this “getting smaller every day” government becomes open to becoming the corollary and extension of “community” rather than its categorical opposite. As the one called to “report” on the state of “our American community” and to “set forth the responsibilities” for its perfection, the president thus issues his “I challenges” so as to *expand* the kind of “work” that will complete this movement from an opposition of “community” and “government” to an apposition of the two. Whereas one “era” defined itself by debates over “big government,” the new “era” would start by assuming “big government” had failed. Instead, the new “era” would define itself by harnessing together common values like “responsibility” and “community” to figure out how to make “government” work for all Americans. But how would this ideal vision of “community” end up practice? In the next section, I take up the question of what the refusal to “work together” to meet the president’s “challenge” for “community” amounted to in light the welfare reform legislation he would sign eight months later.

CENTRIST RHETORIC, WELFARE REFORM, AND THE DISPLACING OF DEBATE

Remarkably restrained, relatively nonideological, almost bipartisan in tone, Mr. Clinton’s words sounded an appeal to the political center.²⁸

Though pilloried for months and plagued by scandal—the first lady had just been subpoenaed to appear before a grand jury—Clinton gave a State of the Union that seemed to exist on level apart from such consternation. As R. W. Apple put it, the president “gave a front-runner’s speech tonight, the speech of a candidate confident that he is ahead. . . . He sounded almost as if the fight was over.”²⁹ Since the projection of confidence is a rhetorical effect produced artistically, what can be gleaned from the kind of confidence projected in the speech that a partisan “fight” had *already* ended? How does this specific art of symbolically placing controversy into the past coincide with the ability to define the form and limit of its resulting consensus?

Placed in opposition to a politics of “competing virtues,” centrist rhetoric in the State of the Union imagined a politics of interrelation and balance hinged on the notion of “community.” Since neither “fending for yourself” nor “big government” proved sustainable, “community” became the name for an ideal of transcendence. The promise that the new “era” would surpass divisions depended on citizens answering the “challenge” to “work” *so that* the policies of the government resulting from the transcendence of the partisan could succeed for all. Indeed, with its exhortation to “hold high the torch of citizenship in our lives,” Clinton’s performance in the State of the Union sought to provide the assurance that transcending “the era of big government” would *not* simply be a replay of or return to “the time when our citizens were left to fend for themselves.” The centrifugal possibility hinted at by Clinton that changes to social programs could leave destitution in their wake—the specter of the “era of fending for yourself”—required “community” to become an authoritative symbol of reassurance, as well as an exhortation to the “responsibility” of each to make the transition from “the era of big government” a success.

We can observe this hybrid role for “community” most acutely in how centrist rhetoric contained and arranged various positions in the contentious debate over the future of the Food Stamp (FSP), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) programs, collectively known as “welfare.” A brief synopsis of the importance of this issue to Clinton’s centrist identity provides the necessary background to understand its role in the lead up to his reelection in 1996.

Foregrounding “welfare reform” as a central national priority was one of the key ways Clinton, from the moment he announced his candidacy, sought to give authority to his claim to the center. The first ad of the Clinton-Gore campaign, for example, called them part of “a new generation of Democrats” who “don’t think the way the old Democratic Party did.” The first piece of evidence to support this claim: “They’ve called for an end to welfare as we know it.” The “end of welfare as we know it,” a slogan authored in the fall of 1991 by Bruce Reed of the DLC, was a staple of Clinton’s rhetoric.³⁰ And it was typically accompanied by a dual vision of what such an “end” could mean for recipients.

In the Clinton-Gore ad, for instance, the idea was to “end welfare as we know it, *so that* welfare can be a second chance not a way of life.” As such, a “second chance” became the beginning of a new life after the “end” of welfare. Likewise, when Clinton accepted the Democrats’ nomination in 1992, he did so to lead “an America where we end welfare as we know it” by offering recipients “the opportunity, through training and education, through child care and medical coverage, to liberate yourself.”³¹ As such, “opportunity”

offered by the government was what enabled the possibility of liberation—rather than destitution—after the “end” of welfare.

The pledge to reach an “end,” however, also involved a punitive counterpoint having less to do with the hope than with coercion. For example, while Clinton touted things like education and childcare as key to the success of welfare reform, he also spelled out the conditions under which spending on such programs might fail: “We can invest all the money in the world, and if people will not do right, it will not do what it is supposed to do.”³² The hyperbole here—spending “all the money in the world” without success because some “people will not do right”—emphasizes the incorrigibility of some against the uprightness of others as a determinative variable in the success of “welfare reform.” This wedge of distinction revealed how defining the limits of “welfare reform” could also serve as an opportunity for describing its consequences in terms of choices made individuals. Those who refused to work even after they were offered training under Clinton’s proposal were put on notice. Thus, as a candidate, Clinton would make statements on the stump, such as “if we help train you and you still refuse to work, then no more welfare for you,” and at another time identifying with the frustration of a small business owner opposed to the cost of social programs who believed that “if you don’t work, you don’t eat.”³³ Clinton, who was answering questions on CBS’s nationally televised show “This Morning” days before the 1992 election, capped his response to the man by saying, “I agree with you. We can’t—if the people don’t work, they sh—if they can’t work they shouldn’t eat.”³⁴

The productive tension in the promise to “end welfare as we know it” thus combined a vision of national transformation with a language of warning to those who refused to go along. On the one hand, reform involved a collective vision of a renewed solidarity with the poor. Grounded in the notion that anyone deserves a “second chance” and that Americans must see each other as so deserving, the “end” promised a new beginning for millions, one supported by initiatives in job training and education. On the other hand, reform depended as well on the guarantee that the willingness to work would be gauged so as to distinguish those who merited support from those who would choose an imprisoning “way of life” over a liberating “second chance.” To be denied continued support by the government was to be the consequence of a self-evident lack of initiative to “do right,” a shirking of one’s responsibility to reciprocate the promised efforts of the state to offer support. On both these fronts, centrist rhetoric appealed to the notion of “community” as a container of the values which authorized both the doling of “opportunity,” in the form of the promise of federal support, and the enforcement of “responsibility,” in the threat of its loss.

While the pledge to reform welfare during the campaign was central to Clinton's claim to be a New Democrat, it did not prove predictive of his priorities upon taking office in 1993. This later became a source of regret in the White House. The decision to put the administration's weight behind health care reform before welfare reform as its first major domestic policy initiative was later blamed by Clinton and others for the losses of 1994: "We might not have lost either house," Clinton has argued, "if I had announced a delay in health care . . . and had taken up and passed welfare reform instead."³⁵ Determined to fulfill the pledge, yet confronted with a Republican majority whose ideas of reform did not include many of the safety-net and job retraining initiatives he sought, Clinton was further constrained. He ended 1995 vetoing a GOP bill, yet in so doing left himself vulnerable to the charge that his promise on welfare—so key to the move to the center—had not been a serious one.

With the promise unfulfilled, and the election approaching, the 1996 State of the Union nevertheless projected an air of confidence, belied by the recent veto, that an agreement was close:

The Congress and I are near agreement on sweeping welfare reform. We agree on time limits, tough work requirements, and the toughest possible child support enforcement. But I believe we must also provide child care so that mothers who are required to go to work can do so without worrying about what is happening to their children.

Though an agreement would soon be reached, this passage—comprehensive and highly specific in detailing new restrictions for recipients, limited and oblique in its request for new forms of support—points to how such an agreement would signal a quite different "end to welfare as we know it" than had been envisioned during the campaign.

As Martín Carcasson has argued in his longitudinal study of Clinton's welfare rhetoric, by 1996 the discourse had shifted in key ways. No longer establishing a harmony of "responsibility" and "opportunity," Clinton's call for "opportunity decreased as time went by," and "his requests to provide opportunity were often drowned out by his calls for personal responsibility."³⁶ Carcasson grants that this development signaled a clear retreat, on one level, since Clinton would go on to "sign a bill into law that included few of the opportunity-based provisions" he once deemed critical to the success of welfare reform.³⁷ Indeed whereas Clinton's campaign proposal actually required an investment of \$9.3 billion over five years, the legislation he actually signed was estimated to cut \$55 billion over seven. Carcasson, however, concludes with a favorable judgment of Clinton's rhetoric on the basis of how it provided "a certain interpretation to adopt concerning the impact of the legislation itself."³⁸ "As a "catalyst of rhetorical change,"

this interpretation could alter “the rhetorical climate” surrounding anti-poverty efforts. Against the notion argued by Robert Asen, that the law sent a message of “retreat from community, from a national commitment to one another’s being,” Carcasson argues that Clinton’s rhetoric actually pushed in the opposite direction.³⁹ It provided, he suggests, a model discourse on poverty and community in the wake of significant changes to social policy, one that might “spur the creation of a stronger national community effort toward helping the poor.”⁴⁰

While Carcasson’s defense of his claim that Clinton spurred a “rhetorical transformation of the anti-welfare culture” is complex and qualified, it essentially hinges on a version of similar argument for welfare reform made by Morris to Clinton days before the president signed a bill that was opposed by nearly every one of his top aides and party liberals alike. Morris recounts pushing the bill to Clinton, who worried about cuts that went far deeper than he had planned, as something that would actually

usher in a sixties-like era of commitment to helping poor people. The burrs under the saddle that drove America mad—the welfare mothers who don’t look for work but collect checks, the high crime rate with token punishments—these irritants are fading. And the normal American spirit of generosity and equality is winning out.⁴¹

To support this assertion, Morris cites poll data from “two identical samples” on the willingness of voters to back increased funding for “poor people and inner cities.” Though demographically the same, one sample showed a fifteen-point edge in support for such funding. The difference in this sample was that those surveyed were told in advance to assume that Clinton had signed a “welfare-reform bill requiring welfare recipients to work and setting time limits for how long people can stay on welfare.” For Morris, the difference in the two questions confirmed the reliability of a future connection between the “end to welfare as we know it” and the unleashing of a “spirit of generosity and equality.” To remove the negative imagery of welfare from the national discourse on poverty would be to wipe the stigma of blame from the poor in America. In turn, with the stigma gone, the poor would no longer be scapegoats, which would clear the way for their inclusion in a national “community.” This inclusion would make possible subsequent actions that could *not* presumably have happened with welfare still in place; providing “opportunity” could now hinge on the fruition of a “community” inspired to begin “helping poor people.” As such, the individual “responsibility” of the poor to “do right” in order to receive “opportunity” from the state shifted to the collective obligation of “community” to “do right” by providing “opportunity” to the poor.

In a sense, Clinton was forced to make this pivot. Congress was unwilling to fund the “opportunity” elements of the reform proposal he set out in the campaign, but eager to support and intensify the “responsibility” ones. As one commentator put it, Clinton “had made a pledge [on welfare reform] when the Congress was in Democratic hands. Now . . . he had to deal with harsh reality of a Republican Congress.”⁴² Yet, in another sense, this shift in emphasis was already implicit from the start, and with reform central to Clinton’s reelection campaign, the move to “community” became rhetorically key in discussing the broader meaning of such legislation as a way to move the nation beyond divisions over government.

It was “community” that could step in to fill in the gap left by the end of one kind of discussion (“what to do about welfare?”) and the beginning of another (“what to do about the poor and the jobless?”). As Clinton put it in the State of the Union, passing a law, “even the best possible law” was just “a first step. The next step is to make it work.” Thus to “end welfare as we know it” was to conclude a debate between Democrats and Republicans, but to begin a test of the mettle of “community,” a test whose terms would be defined by Clinton’s “challenge” to Americans when he signed the “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity” act on August 22, 1996.

CONCLUSION: “REMARKS ON SIGNING OF THE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND WORK OPPORTUNITY RECONCILIATION ACT, AUGUST 22, 1996”

Clinton signed the welfare legislation with just one week to go before the Democratic National Convention, and less than ten weeks to go before the November election. He called it a bill crafted to “overcome the flaws of the welfare system for the people who are trapped on it.”⁴³ The trap metaphor—a recurring feature of Clinton’s welfare rhetoric—suggested confinement in a “way of life” associated with what welfare had become, not “with what it was meant to be: a second chance.” And yet to be freed from such confinement was not simply to become free to have a “second chance.” It was to become reintegrated into something from which one had been cut off. Clinton spoke of the welfare system as way of separating recipients from the nation, of “exiling them from the entire community of work that gives structure to our lives” and of promoting “the almost physical isolation of huge numbers of poor people and their children from the rest of mainstream America.” To end welfare meant to answer the “great social challenge” of citizens shut out from “work,” or what Clinton, quoting

Robert F. Kennedy, called their estrangement from “the meaning of what this country is all about.” Such an answer would replace “the never-ending cycle of welfare” with “the dignity, the power and the ethic of work” that defined “community.” At the same time, Clinton expressed doubts about what he was about to sign.

Calling the bill imperfect—“we strongly disagree with a couple of provisions”—Clinton emphasized that he would seek to reverse its cuts in certain programs. This caveat, while weakening Clinton’s case for the legislation on the surface, nonetheless became a resource for invention. As he qualified his support for the bill in terms of the need to correct its policy flaws through further legislative action, he carved out a discursive space in which this particular need could then become expanded into a wider set of obligations. In this way, objections to the policy elements of the bill could be granted, but strangely as a way of to strengthen and intensify to the core argument the president used to interpret its meaning for the nation as a call to transcendence.

Clinton connected steps taken by “government” to end welfare with those required by “community” to complete a larger process: “This is not over; this is just beginning. The Congress deserves our thanks for creating a new reality, but we have to fill in the blanks.” To define the “new reality” created by the bill as incomplete without additional action from the national “we” is thus to see what is negative about the legislation as small against what passing it means for some larger purpose: “We can change what is wrong. We should not have passed this historic opportunity to do what is right.” In the text, Clinton builds this frame of acceptance by emphasizing and connecting two sequences that recall earlier illustrations of centrist rhetoric.

The first sequence visualized the transformation of a partisan terrain of division and distortion over welfare into one of unity and clarity on the need to address poverty. On this plane, whereas the politics of welfare had once dominated deliberation about the poor, it would do so no longer. The second sequence stylized this overcoming as a form of renewal, aligning the movement toward unity in the future with a return to the essence of America as a “community” committed to the well-being of all its members.

For instance, Clinton spoke of the bill as “an historic chance where Republicans and Democrats got together” to “recreate the nation’s social bargain with the poor.” In another instance, he spoke of the bill in terms of its ability to reengineer political discourse so as to bring about a new era of cooperation: “We’re going to try to change the parameters of the debate. We’re going to make it all new again and see if we can’t create a system of incentives which reinforce work and family and independence.” Indeed, Clinton spent much

of his speech articulating a connection between the notion of renewal and a political rationale for its signing:

There's something really good about this legislation: When I sign it, we all have to start again, and this becomes everybody's responsibility. After I sign my name to this bill, welfare will no longer be a political issue. The two parties cannot attack each other over it. Politicians cannot attack poor people over it. There are no encrusted habits, systems, and failures that can be laid at the foot of someone else. We have to begin again. This is not the end of welfare reform; this is the beginning.

And in another case:

Today we are ending welfare as we know it. But I hope this day will be remembered not for what it ended but for what it began: a new day that offers hope, honors responsibility, rewards work, and changes the terms of the debate so that no one in America ever feels again the need to criticize people who are poor on welfare but instead feels the responsibility to reach out to men and women and children who are isolated, who need opportunity, and who are willing to assume responsibility, and give them the opportunity and the terms of responsibility.

And in answering a question from a reporter afterward who asked what Clinton would say to Democratic "core constituencies" who were "furious" about his signing the bill, the president said:

We saved medical care. We saved food stamps. We saved child care. We saved the aid to disabled children. We saved the school lunch program. We saved the framework of support. What we did was to tell the State, now you have to create a system to give everyone a chance to go to work who is able-bodied, give everyone a chance to be independent. And we did—that is the right thing to do. And now welfare is no longer a political football to be kicked around. It's a personal responsibility of every American who ever criticized the welfare system to help the poor people now to move from welfare to work. That's what I say.

Each of these passages links the politicizing of welfare with a failure to mobilize support and sympathy for the poor. And in each case, the act of breaking this link becomes lashed to the promise of its polar opposite: to remove welfare from the field of political debate becomes merely the preface to an errand of collective action to ameliorate suffering.

Each passage performs this function in slightly different ways. In the first, the "something really good about this legislation" is defined in terms of making joblessness "everybody's responsibility" rather than that of only some; of realizing a future in which "welfare will no longer be a political issue" but one discussed apart from politics; of guaranteeing that "the two

parties cannot attack each other over it” and that “politicians cannot attack poor people over it” instead of allowing welfare to continually ignite such hostility; and of leaving behind the “encrusted habits, systems, and failures” of the past that could be blamed on some in favor of a way to “begin again” that includes all.

In the second, the occasion of the signing becomes the focal point, as Clinton constructs it retrospectively from the vantage of the future. This construction allows the uncertainty and division associated with “ending welfare as we know it” in the present to become minimized in light of what such “ending” may yield in the future. In turn, to privilege the character of “what it began” over “what it ended” is to situate the “it” in question—the “day”—as an act of almost mythic significance for a polity *yet to come*. Here, to “change the terms of the debate” via legislative action is not simply to allow for new ideas or coalitions to form, but foremost to eliminate a certain kind of desire, even compulsion, so that “no one in America ever feels again the need to criticize poor people on welfare.” Replacing this urge to criticize—an urge Clinton attributes largely to the presence of the vocabulary that surrounds the policies he is about to change—will be the urge to help, an actionable sense of “responsibility” to “men and women and children who are isolated, who need opportunity, and who are willing to assume responsibility.”

And in the third quotation, an impromptu answer that emphasizes first what would *not* be sacrificed, Clinton shifts to a suggestion of what, as a result, would now be expected and from whom. The “no longer a political football” statement is linked to a test not only of “personal responsibility,” but also of good faith in argument. In short, Clinton poses as he who will with one hand grant the critics of welfare their criticism, while with the other demand they now prove that they were more than simply criticizing. To have been a critic of welfare in the past is thus to carry a special burden in the future.

The circuit of related terms, identities, and temporalities that unites these specific passages is revealing, especially when set against the connection between “community” and “government” upon which the State of the Union’s production of transcendence was based. In that speech, “the era of big government is over” invoked a bipartisan consensus on the appropriate purpose and scope of the state. Such a consensus, however, required the notion of “community” in order to reach beyond its negative conclusion. If the consensus on “big government” was taken as an agreement about what was over, that is, the notion of “community” served as that which would steer the dialectical transcendence of each previous “era” so that the future—the “era of working together”—could be seen in terms of something—“the era of working together *as* a community”—that could give it purpose and salience. To avoid the return to a time of “fending” or of “big government,” various

sectors, classes, and divisions of American society would have to become more closely aligned *as* a “community”; such alignment could prevent both the dystopia of no government and the hypertrophy of “big government,” instead arriving at a new reality beyond each.

The State of the Union’s articulation of “community” as a site of transcendence begins with a certain kind of problem that this coming reality is poised to resolve. Clinton declares the end of part two in a three-act drama, and then names the era of “community” as the key and final act. By pronouncing one era over, he fashions the authority to define the terms of the next one. As each “I challenge” piles onto the next in the speech, the “new era” of “community” takes form as an edifice built on presidential exhortations yet to be answered but that *must each be answered in certain way*. A list of disparate duties, big and small, concrete and abstract, achieves power in connection to a “community” that is defined by its *need* to be named as such, by its incomplete character. If “the era of big government is over” granted a consensus on the need to shrink government’s material power and influence, the “era of working together as a community” signaled something quite different. Such a phrase drew attention not to a past defined by its negation, but to a future made manifest in citizens who acted in terms of a metaphor of identity. Citizens *had* to work together “*as a community*” once “big government” was over; and Clinton’s many and varied “challenges” were, in a sense, instructions for how “work”—as labor, as commitment, as deliberation, as efficiency—could acquire the substance of “community” so as to meet this task.

The “community” called on by Clinton in the State of the Union was thus sublime in its coherence. As the container for an array of “challenges” to be answered, “community” subordinated each to a shared structure of civic responsibilities that balanced a range of acts and identities. The solution to the end of “big government” was not to replace *it* with “community,” that is, but to redefine *ourselves* for a new “era of working together *as a community*.” And as if to dare us to refuse its allure, Clinton concludes his speech with these words ideally extending the “age of possibility” to “all Americans”:

Who would say that, having come so far together, we will not go forward from here? Who would say that this age of possibility is not for all Americans? Our country is and always has been a great and good nation. But the best is yet to come, if we all do our part.

Seen in light of his subsequent remarks on welfare reform, the qualitative importance of the “if” to the “yet to come” stands out as a refuge for lingering questions about the political terms of this “age of possibility.”

When it came to addressing the plight of the persistently unemployed among, the duty to “do our part” meant a requirement to expand and deepen

“our” sense of moral identification with “*all* Americans” beyond its current limits. To become a “community” was not a matter to be debated; it was a “challenge” to be met *especially* by those who had once used welfare as a “political football.” In explaining welfare reform, Clinton spoke of the “personal responsibility of every American who ever criticized the welfare system to help the poor people now to move from welfare to work.” The call on the critics of welfare to accept a “personal responsibility . . . to help” relies on a narrative of individual and collective transformation to give it meaning.

Indeed, if the success of the legislation hinged on a form of transformation blocked by “welfare as we know it,” the proper “end” of that system would require a change in not just the lives of former welfare recipients. (They had, of course and by design, little choice *but* to demonstrate their “responsibility.”) Rather, its success called, more interestingly perhaps, for a dramatic change in the attitudes of Americans *least* subject to the economic and social forces driving the need for social assistance in the first place. From this angle, Clinton’s focus on “every American who has ever criticized the welfare system” can be read as a hypothetical example of the depth and quality of transformation called for by “every American” period. From the disparagers of a system, they become those who will voluntarily “help” people who will, by definition, suffer without such “help.” As such, these critics-turned-helpers become the imitable exemplars for a spirit of renewal and interconnection that all can partake in.

In this case, the strength of the idealist solution offered by the appeal to “community” reveals, at the same time, its material embarrassments. The idealist solution contained in the promise of welfare reform involved a transcendence of social and political antagonisms in order to make up for recipients’ losing material support from the state. The promise of such transcendence was particularly key once the bill became stripped of many of its “opportunity” provisions. For Clinton, that is, the flaws in what the bill *said* in terms of policy were to be seen alongside what it *meant* in terms of politics. Removing a flawed program and negatively charged symbol from the political scene would making everything “new again.” Newness would come from a depoliticizing of poverty that would also entail a destigmatization of the poor—that is, in Clinton’s words, “They are human beings. And we owe it to all of them to give them a chance to come back.” Morally speaking, as “they” adhere to the rules of reform, “we” could come to see “them” as deserving of “a chance.” In turn, “they” and “we” would become joined in the “era of working together *as* a community.”

Such a solution requires projecting confidence in the possible harmony between centrist rhetoric and the social world it seeks to alter; the latter will come to yield, however imperfectly, to the former’s vision of “community.”

Clinton constantly projected such confidence in his return to the basic presumption that his claiming of the center could do something exceptional, that it could reposition Americans into seeing beyond the divisions that had so long constituted their images of one another. This confidence requires belief in the potential for a deliberative “community” whose susceptibility to such antagonisms will be lessened, if not vanished, as a result of rhetoric itself.

It is, however, in the courting of this belief that centrist rhetoric finds both its most powerful allure, and its most problematic element. For what lies outside of this possibility of “community” becomes missed by a “way of seeing” that attains so much from the promise of a transcendence always on the horizon. Such constraints on “community”—the blind spots and exclusions that arise as some answer the call and others do not, as some are already privileged to give help and others to receive, and so on—is not only what the idealist solution misses, however, but what it must also inevitably *encourage* rhetorically. As I will argue in the conclusion, it is in terms of judging the proper mix and quality in which the encouragement of blindness comes to arise alongside the production of transcendence that we can best evaluate centrist rhetoric in the Clinton presidency.

NOTES

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19. Eric Pooley, "Who Is Dick Morris?" *Time*, September 2, 1996, p. 28.
20. Pooley, "Who," 209.
21. Waldman, *POTUS Speaks*, 107.
22. Morris, *Behind the Oval Office*, 208.
23. Waldman, *POTUS Speaks*, 92–114.
24. Waldman, *POTUS Speaks*, 99.
25. For example, the subsequent cover of the conservative *Weekly Standard* magazine exclaimed, "We Win!"
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Conclusion

For that's the ultimate effect of this lugubrious ballet, that it seems somehow to recoil from the scene it should be celebrating—a bit like in those anamorphoses, where all you need is a mirror, or a change in the angle of your gaze, to deform the whole tableau, in this case the whole Clinton era. His famous legacy suddenly seems altered by the reflected light of this gloomy, twilight, graceless day. What are the final results of the Clinton era, after all?¹

It rained hard on the banks of the Arkansas River on November 18, 2004. That was the day that Bill Clinton's presidential library, located just yards from the river's edge, was officially opened to the public. Barely two weeks had passed since Senator John Kerry conceded defeat in a close election fueled by passionate liberal opposition and conservative support for the sitting Republican president, George W. Bush. After commending those who had gathered for the ceremony despite the rain, Clinton turned to Bush and thanked him, in particular, for coming: “[You have] been very kind and generous to my family, and I thank [you] for that. *Today we're all red, white and blue*” (emphasis mine).²

By following his words about Bush's kindness and generosity with a sentence that combines the imagery of the national flag with the red/blue color coding of the left/right ideological and partisan divide, Clinton takes the specific instance of Bush's personal demeanor and uses it implicitly as a centrist metaphor. He raises the possibility that “red” conservatives and “blue” liberals might somehow see themselves not as opposed factions, but complementary ones. Later in the speech, alluding to the politicians who were

sitting on stage with him, Clinton defined the scene of the early 1990s as a time when a similar kind of bipartisan synthesis was in order:

America has two great dominant strands of political thought; we're represented up here on this stage: conservatism, which at its very best draws lines that should not be crossed; and progressivism, which at its very best breaks down barriers that are no longer needed or should never have been erected in the first place. It seemed to me that in 1992 we needed to do both to prepare America for the 21st century.

Standing "here on this stage," "conservatism" and "progressivism" (although they are opposites) appear like always reconcilable family members who share the same essential ground. Politics exists as a feat of ambidexterity in which the ideals of "conservatism" and "progressivism" are weighed against each other and then applied in carefully measured doses to different challenges as they arise.

Clinton then referred to the New Democrats and their own mixture of "progressivism" and "conservatism" in this way:

Now when I proposed to do both, we said that all of them were consistent with the great American values of opportunity, responsibility and community. We labeled the approach "New Democrat." It then became known as "the Third Way." It was embraced by progressive parties across the world.

In linking the "to do both" fusion with the "great American values of opportunity, responsibility and community" Clinton folds the first abstract-synthetic unity ("conservatism" and "progressivism" as national-political counterparts that can be joined together) into a series of values that are themselves identified with the essence of a great "America." That parties "across the world" in the 1990s embraced these values—making them seem both "American" and universal—Clinton suggests, should motivate citizens after the 2004 campaign to return to such an approach.

The image of "bridging" differences and epochs has always been vital to Clinton's preferred narrative of his presidency, and thus it logically informed the construction of his library:

Yes, this library is the symbol of a bridge, a bridge to the 21st century. It's been called one of the great achievements of the new age, and a British magazine said it looked like a glorified house trailer. And I thought, well, that's about me, you know? I'm a little red and a little blue.

In the text of Clinton's remarks available on the library's website, the transcriber has inserted a small note indicating that there was laughter in response

to these remarks. Clinton's was an ironic apposition of incongruous judgments on the library's aesthetic value: it can be seen *both* as a groundbreaking architectural achievement *and* as "a glorified house trailer." But this incongruity was more than funny. Clinton used it to frame a similarly favorable "both/and" description of *himself* as somehow synonymous transcendence. It is as if Clinton is saying, "I am an embodiment of a truly *United States*, one which does not merely contain differences, but which can fuse a little of each into something greater." In this role, he finds the authority to offer a conditional promise, using the "bridge" metaphor in combination with a joining of red and blue: "So I tell you we can continue building our bridge to tomorrow. It will require some red American line-drawing and some blue American barrier-breaking, but we can do it together. Thank you and God bless you."

To end his speech on a note that envisions political progress as a series of interlocking moves of "line-drawing" and "barrier-breaking" is to see politics from a certain standpoint. Such a perspective not only denies the isolation of either moiety in this pair, but converts the impression of Clinton's own power to see beyond their opposition into a distinct and renewable resource for persuasion. In cultivating this resource, centrist rhetoric's paths of conversion—its ways of producing and harnessing political transcendence covered in the previous chapters—make stories and symbols of division always into the preludes of synthesis.

It was in the constant debunking of the practical possibility, ideological substance, moral sincerity, and political motives of such a synthesis that critics of Clinton's centrism from all quarters found their surest footing. I turn to these critics to show how their skepticism of political centrism resembles a common criticism of rhetoric itself. I show how in revealing the fundamental limits of such criticism, however, we can begin to see with more clarity the center's rhetorical character.

BOGUS CENTER/VITAL CENTER

The dedication of the Clinton library was an event that attracted international attention. It was attended by former heads of state and celebrities. Members of the band U2 performed. There were speeches from otherwise unknown citizens who spoke earnestly of how Clinton's policies had changed their lives. Appropriately, then, the national media sometimes treated the celebration as something more than the opening of a new museum.

ABC News' Peter Jennings introduced his newscast that evening by saying that the attendance of each of the former presidents "emphasized this is one America, as if they had agreed beforehand that they had to do something

about all the anger in the country.”³ Jennings’s affection for the ceremony’s bridging of presidential differences was not isolated. It was matched by his competitor at CBS News, Dan Rather:

After so fierce a presidential election campaign, it was a striking scene today in rainy Little Rock, Arkansas. Like old college buddies, present and past occupants of the Oval Office gathered to smile and joke and honor a member of their exclusive club. It was the dedication of President Bill Clinton’s Presidential Library.⁴

What is most remarkable about Rather’s “like old college buddies”/“exclusive club” analogy is not simply its comfort with the presidency as, literally, an old boys club. What stands out about his comments is that audiences are supposed to be *reassured* by this image of executive chumminess: the after-effects of “so fierce a presidential election campaign” are said to be ameliorated by the jocular ease and camaraderie of the four men on the stage.

What can be made of this celebration of the image of political transcendence? For one thing, as the anchors themselves stressed, it was an atypical image, not a representative one. Identified by its rarity, transcendence was marked off as something to aspire to amidst division. Making the aspiration, need for and imagery of transcendence central to the dedication of Clinton’s presidential library was, of course, by design. As Skip Rutherford, the president of the Clinton Foundation, told reporters, “I thought the four presidents showed the true bipartisan, nonpartisan spirit of presidential libraries. I really thought it was an American moment that we could all be proud of.”⁵ And yet, the “pride” that audiences were supposed to feel about the “true bipartisan, nonpartisan spirit” of the dedication ceremony was deemed valuable by Clinton and the press in relation to its other. Dan Rather makes the “divisiveness” of 2004 campaign and the “unity” of the library ceremony in its wake, for instance, comparable as polar opposites. And it is through the exchangeability of one with the other (the “fierce” campaign is located along the same axis of reality as the library ceremony) that audiences are invited to ponder what could be a sign of things to come.

When it came not to his library but to his presidency, however, charting the rhetorical path of transcendence for Clinton was another story. Apart from the pomp of ceremony, centrism could engender recurring skepticism about its motives. Clinton’s “third way” was, for one, distrusted from the start (and even more so as his presidency matured) by many on the left. Christopher Hitchens’s 1999 polemic, for instance, *No One Left to Lie To: The Values of the Worst Family* echoed a more persistent sentiment among some liberals at the end of his second term that Clinton’s centrist approach had effectively denied them a voice. Hitchens writes in thanks of “all those on the Left who

saw the menace of Clinton, and resisted the moral and political blackmail which silenced the liberal herd.”⁶

Critics pieced together, from early on, Clinton’s reputation for mendacity and ambition with his consistency in triangulating on key controversies. In doing so, they saw him as a uniquely talented panderer—one primary opponent memorably tagged him the “pander bear”—someone lacking backbone and looking always to the wind for political guidance.⁷ From the right, this same charge was sometimes accompanied by a kind of glee, suggesting that Clinton’s centrism had nicely provided the “words” to cover for the “deeds” of the right:

Since 1994, Clinton has offered the Democratic Party a devilish bargain: Accept and defend policies you hate (welfare reform, the Defense of Marriage Act), condone and excuse crimes (perjury, campaign finance abuses) and I’ll deliver you the executive branch of government . . . Clinton makes speeches, [Treasury Secretary Robert] Rubin and [Federal Reserve Chairman Alan] Greenspan make policy; the left gets words, the right gets deeds; and everybody is content.⁸

In the charge that he lacked fixed political convictions, that he used language to conceal rather than reveal the truth, that he was fine merely making speeches while others made policy, and that he was someone who congenitally spoke out of both sides of his mouth, Clinton became the target of a specific kind of negative judgment has been leveled at the teachers and practitioners of rhetoric since its emergence.

Charges of pandering and demagoguery are routine when it comes to battles over ethos in democratic politics; such charges are themselves reflective of a kind of anxiety that always accompanies even the image of popular rule. Either way, critical discourse surrounding the Clinton presidency constitutes a special case. His detractors gave salience to their objections to his person *in general* in terms of his centrist rhetoric *in particular*. More importantly, their skepticism was couched in a manner that reflected doubts about the very *idea* of a political center that could serve to transcend political binaries. In this regard, that is, in his role as an advocate of the political center, Clinton played a part that rhetoricians should immediately recognize.

As Herbert W. Simons has noted, “to philosophers of polarities, such as Plato, rhetoricians have traditionally suggested a third way (and sometimes a fourth and a fifth), usually one that was situated, local, responsive to circumstances.”⁹ For Simons, what allows “Rhetorical Man,” a phrase he borrows from Richard Lanham, to avoid being hemmed in by doctrinal certainties and the kinds of categorical binaries they inevitably engender are two related dispositions.

First, the skilled rhetor has been habituated in the art of treating conventionally opposed terms—for example, in this case, those associated with leftwing or rightwing, liberal or conservative positions—not as mutually exclusive propositions, but as “situated truths, each with its own limitations.” Second, what this consciousness of the contingency, limitation, and pliability of perspective encourages is a capacity to “construct arguments out of opposing themes, and sometimes to devise strategies that *transform the very grounds of opposition itself*” (emphasis mine). Simon notes how in even the most difficult of dilemmas, when no easy resolution avails itself from a range of seemingly contradictory options, the skilled rhetor “can still devise arguments and select framing devices that help mitigate” dilemmas of political choice thus opening paths for progress, and possibly compromise, through rhetorical innovation. Turning to Clinton, was not the center a “framing device” for the kind of “rhetorical innovation” he used to make a case for the presidency? For the promise that he could, in a sense, “transform the very ground of opposition itself?”

And yet, it is precisely due to how the center so often functioned *as* such a device that Clinton was met with such suspicion by leading critics. For these critics the main problem with the center was that its supposedly “vital” democratic identity was merely an alibi for the workings of nondemocratic power.

In Norman Solomon’s words, Clintonian centrism was synonymous with a broader “politics of illusion.” The center fits such a politics because it provides everyday citizens with an appealing, yet entirely false, image of democratic consensus—a “centrist dream,” as he put it—that induces civic quiescence and social apathy.¹⁰ On this reading, centrism sustains a dominant (and unjust) order by masking social and economic contradictions that benefit some over others, thus closing off possibilities for a more agonistic, transparent, and robust democratic politics. While criticisms of political centrism worked at different levels of analysis and with distinct critical inflections, they each followed the same basic path as Solomon’s. Centrism was illusory, manipulative, incoherent.

Just months after Clinton left office, for example, his former secretary of labor, Robert Reich, argued that a politics focused on the center deflected citizens from the kind of “sharp, open debate about what a nation needs to do, and why.”¹¹ Recounting similar criticisms, Stephen Skowronek has noted how Clinton’s “Third Way” proposals were “apt to be portrayed as clever tricks masking rear-guard resistance to real reform.”¹² At times this objection to “clever tricks” involved the fear that centrism has been so effective as to have robbed progressives of any clear identity. In his book *The Disappearing Liberal Intellectual: Or, How the Left Became the Center*, for example, Eric

Lott, channeling Hitchens, argues that centrism in the 1990s “created the fog that obscured the left from view and produced the disappearance of a liberal alternative to hawkish conservatism” in contemporary U.S. politics.¹³ Slavoj Žižek takes up a similar line of argument when he rejects the notion of a *radical* center as absurd, since its adherents—he mentions Clinton and Tony Blair—advocate merely an “administration of social matters that remains within the framework of existing socio-political relations.”¹⁴ Taking issue with what she calls Clinton’s “post-political” perspective, Chantal Mouffe criticizes centrists for disregarding “relations of power and their constitutive role in society,” while Stuart Hall has likewise taken them to task for speaking as if “there are no longer any conflicting interests which cannot be reconciled” in capitalist societies.¹⁵

Notwithstanding their diversity, these criticisms share an assumption about how centrist rhetoric gains assent: it does so through forms of distortion that use the image of the center to construct a pseudo-consensus that coerces audiences into identifying with a fundamentally false kind of transcendence. “The political ‘center’ is bogus,” Reich tells us, and “dangerously misleading.”¹⁶ This sense of its ability to “mislead” is what moves Mouffe to call the center, in Clinton’s case at least, a highly effective “instrument of electoral propaganda.”¹⁷ James McGregor Burns and Georgia Sorenson title their history of the Clinton years *Dead Center*, because, they argue, the center had no use *other* than to advance Clinton’s own strategic ends. In a nod to Schlesinger, they criticize Clinton for his failure “to frame a coordinated policy program that would make of his centrism not just an electoral strategy but a vital center of change.”¹⁸

As an “electoral strategy,” centrist rhetoric brought discernable “change” not only to the leadership of the Democratic Party in the 1990s, but also to the presidency. What we have here is thus a dissociation of “change.” There is a potentially *real* “vital center of change.” And there is an *apparent* kind that exists as “just an electoral strategy.” The metric Burns and Sorenson use to apply the “*just*” to “electoral strategy” reveals something of significance in all of the above critiques. Each finds offense in the ambiguity that allows centrist rhetoric to solidify an existing system of political arrangements, by appropriating and then shortchanging the promise to transcend that same system. Centrists, argue Burns and Sorenson, “can *deal* and *bargain* and *transact* from the center; they can gain incremental changes from the center; they cannot *truly lead* and *transform* from the center.”¹⁹ On the one hand, you have give and take within the status quo that can yield electoral rewards and produce “incremental changes.” On the other, you have rupture with the status quo through the power of those presidents who can “truly lead and transform” a polity.

The concern of nearly all of centrism's critics hinges on how it seems to cloud the distinction between these two versions of "change"; its success as "*just* an electoral strategy" that can bring about "changes" works inversely in proportion to its potential to make hollow a potentially *radical* space of "change." Burns and Sorenson make it a point to clarify "the difference between the truly 'vital center' that Arthur Schlesinger Jr. wrote about years ago and the mainstream, bipartisan, flaccid centrism of the 1990s."²⁰ With Clinton clearly of the latter kind, they gibe: "No wonder some Americans considered him neither a fox nor a lion, but a chameleon."²¹

Thus, what makes centrism "just an electoral strategy" within the current hegemony is allied with what makes it "bogus" in its claim to transcendence; what makes it effective as "propaganda" for one party over another is also what makes it "absurd" as anything radical. It is in this blend of granting its strategic effectiveness, while stressing its potential for mystification, that critics of centrism find the grounds to argue that claims to the center are, in the end, merely the claims of an either stagnant or confused political hegemony that undermines democracy.

For Reich, "moving to the center implies a politics responsive to the immediate and unreflective desires of constituents," which is, he claims, fine for "Washington strategists and pollsters" but "hardly how politics should be practiced in a deliberative democracy." Searching likewise for a different politics than the one she sees, Mouffe finds a deep and troubling form of surrender and apoliticism arising in the "claim that notions of Left and Right have become obsolete." She fears that the promise of a "'win-win' politics where solutions could be found that favored everybody . . . has been accompanied by the mistaken belief that it meant abandoning any attempt at transforming the present order." In the move to the center, the promise of transcendence thus arises as the means of continuing the "present order" through forms of appeal that lead to what she calls "the sacralization of consensus, the blurring of the frontiers between Left and Right, and the move towards the Centre."²²

These critiques merely reveal the flip-side of the problem they aim to bring into discussion. As the center promises unity, they recall the divisions that remain. As the center promises clarity, they recall the blurring such clarity hides. As the center promises a transformative future of cooperation, they recall its abuse in present-day electoral competition. And as the centrism of the 1990s promises bold innovation, they recall examples from the 1950s of what a "truly" vital center really means in contrast.

Each of these critiques has value, and yet each leaves us unsatisfied. In pointing to the illusive and interested aspects of the center in negotiating and defining the terrain of political power, they confirm where we must begin any rhetorically sensitive analysis of political discourse, but then leave us with

little to do *but* debunk such discourse. This is not enough, however. A better idea is to balance what Burke calls “the virtues and limitations of debunking” with a more dynamic engagement with the center’s rhetorical necessity as a deep figure of democratic argument.²³

“THIS ALCHEMIC CENTER”: FROM DEBUNKING TO LINGUISTIC TRANSFORMATION

If the center is “bogus,” both its pretense and its form nevertheless circulate throughout political discourse as a resource. And the use of this resource, as told through the four cases that comprise *Centrist Rhetoric*, reveals a more or less coherent blending of qualities.

In appealing to a space beyond the “idle rhetoric of left and right,” the DLC and Clinton challenged the Democratic Party to face its challenges and become more responsive to the needs of the electorate, but in so doing they furthered the notion that such needs were themselves uncontested, thus making citizen deliberation seem superfluous; the center became open to elite appropriation once it became the telos of electoral victory.

Transcendence in the case of the “Sister Souljah Moment” likewise served as a way of promising with one hand only to take away with the other: arguably, Clinton’s success in blending whiteness with a center space beyond racial division in order to denounce Souljah deflected attention from the structural and historical factors involved in racism and seemed to give cover to those who would deny such factors entirely.

In the deftness of his response to the Oklahoma City bombing, President Clinton recaptured his relevance as a leader after a near fatal midterm collapse, brought needed pressure on violent militia groups, and eloquently remembered those who died in the blast. And yet, his defense of government against the forces of “extreme” disorder worked to contain within the “mainstream” objections to and hostilities toward government that, though less threatening, were nevertheless significant and substantial.

Indeed, as Clinton’s reelection approached, and he declared “the era of big government is over” and the “end of welfare as we know it,” these divisions came to be contained within a narrative of “community.” Such a narrative promised to reestablish the relation of “community” to “government” into one of complementarity not opposition. In helping to ease the movement forward through “eras” and beyond the divisions of the partisan, however, the focus on “community” could also promote a kind of blindness to what was left out of such an equation. In the president’s pleading for Americans to “help the poor people” survive despite the coming reductions in government

assistance, one glimpses in all its fragility and contingency the same “community” he looked to for transcendence.

Such are the tensions of the center that they suggest an approach that does more than debunk the promises of centrist rhetoric, and that instead looks to how this figure of transformation can be more appropriately and practically harnessed. If the cases I have examined teach us anything, it is that productions of transcendence become appealing on the basis of addressing anxieties about division that, whatever their particular origin and inflection in each case, are endemic to democracy and rhetoric. As such, taken to its logical conclusion, debunking transcendence leaves us stuck in a position whereby democratically motivated arguments for social cooperation (as opposed to exploitation) and equality (as opposed to hierarchy) become undermined.

It is this potential that worries most, since it has organized the patterns of opposition to centrism. The negativism of debunking, Burke tells us, can make the socially binding power of a notion such as the center perpetually “dissolved out of existence.”²⁴ Burke’s concern about debunking suggests more than a cautionary proviso; we can see his concern extending into a larger, though largely implicit, Burkean insight about the connection between rhetorics of criticism and rhetorics of democracy that assumes relevance here. Namely, while the former can always find opportunities to debunk terms central to the latter—for example, “the people,” “equality,” “liberty,” and so on—democracies cannot maintain cooperation without two vitally linked discursive movements—abstraction and ambiguity—that are themselves ideal instruments of rhetorical mystification.

The first involves the capacity to remove language from history (and thus to bracket differences for the sake of some rhetorically fashioned “higher” purpose or ideal) through acts of selection and, inevitably, exclusion. The second, feeding off the first, involves the capacity to exploit the inherent pliability of language (and thus the potential to transfer values and meanings from one political context to another) through acts of rhetorical manipulation amid conditions of division. A central dilemma of democracy, as a result, is that the rhetorical conditions for its basic survival as a form of social organization are alloyed with those of its continual distortion. While debunking would demand exposing calls to the center as euphemisms for the work of hegemony or simple trickery, Burke reminds us that for such a term to coordinate action, audiences *have* to leave its “‘euphemistic’ nature as a motive intact.”²⁵ In other words, critics must strive to see how the rhetoric which allows the euphemistic use of a term such as “solidarity”—Burke’s example—to remain “intact” as a form of mystification is inseparable in form and content from that which allows it to induce cooperation in the first place.

To leave the center “intact” in its promise of transcendence, while being mindful of its simultaneously “bogus” claims to self-evidence, recalls the insights of Burke’s “comic frame of motives.” Achieving the balance required by this frame requires the cultivation of critical attitudes and perspectives, and implicitly modes of democratic citizenship, that appreciate how *all* symbolic acts “contain both transcendental and material ingredients, both imagination and bureaucratic embodiment, both ‘service’ and ‘spoils.’”²⁶ Burke’s is not a solution to the problems of the center recounted above, as much as it is an acknowledgement of their more basic implication in the interstices of rhetorical activity.

A Burkean approach to centrist rhetoric and the production of political transcendence thus encourages attention to the symbolic means by which rhetors use the resources of invention contained in the center to transform divisions into unities, and vice versa, in the midst of specific situations, with specific aims. It is the argument for a deliberate and artful attention to how rhetors seek to build support, define choices, and make salient distinctions to build consensus *even* as each of these acts creates new dilemmas. And it is one that points to the resources of invention suggested by the ambiguity of the center itself.

In *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke argues for the necessity of an imagined center at which “transformations take place” and without which “transformation would be impossible.” For Burke, the distinctions drawn in any discursive realm “have been thrown from a liquid center to the surface, where they have congealed.” As such, they participate in the kind of commingling of unity and difference, blindness and insight, that marks centrist rhetoric in particular. The center is what allows for arguments to form, to adjust, and to incorporate their opposite. It is where divisions can be “remade, again becoming molten liquid. . . . So that A may become non-A.”²⁷

Burke’s metaphor of an “alchemic center” provides a way to overcome the limits and predictabilities entailed in merely debunking the political center, without being sold entirely by the “euphemistic” promises transcendence offers. As a corrective both to the presumed purity of the “vital center” and to the presumed incorrigibility of the “dead center,” the “alchemic” center suggests an imagined space for argument that is *always* moving and shifting in relation to circumstance and power. In this sense, Burke’s metaphor proves suitable as a way to envision the alembic that was the centrist rhetoric of Bill Clinton.

If productions of political transcendence are neither reducible to their partisan motivations, nor compelling as instances of nonpartisan civic discourse, this dynamic forces us to focus on judging how rhetors such as Clinton prove capable of using discourse wisely to approach as closely as possible their implied promises of transcendence, even as they routinely limit and even undermine

these same promises to persuade. With its grounding in paradox and in the comic, centrist rhetoric not only invites such an approach, but also recommends it to politics more generally. It reminds us of rhetoric's dwelling in a space close to those "lugubrious regions of malice and the lie," while suggesting ways we might come to feel at home there.²⁸

NOTES

1. Bernard-Henri Lévy's account of the dedication of Bill Clinton's presidential library. "In the Footsteps of Tocqueville (Part Three)," *The Atlantic Monthly*, July/August 2005, p. 94.

2. A searchable transcript of Clinton's library speech is available from www.clintonfoundation.org/111804-nr-sp-pc-goc-re-wjc-at-presidential-center-dedication-ceremony.htm.

3. "Bill Clinton Library Ceremony in Arkansas," *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings*, November 18, 2004, www.lexisnexis.com/us/lnacademic.

4. "Presidents Past and Present Attend Library Dedication for Bill Clinton," *CBS Evening News*, November 18, 2004, www.lexisnexis.com/us/lnacademic.

5. Andrew Demillo and Jill Zeman, "Center Gets Grand Salute: Structure Is a Symbol of What He Did, Clinton Says," *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, November 19, 2004, front section.

6. Christopher Hitchens, *No One Left to Lie To* (London: Verso, 1999), vii.

7. The late Massachusetts senator Paul Tsongas quoted in Richard Berke, "Saying Clinton Is Cynical, Tsongas Goes on the Attack," *New York Times*, March 7, 1992, A11.

8. David Frum, "When the Economy Turns," *The Weekly Standard*, February 1, 1999, p. 26.

9. Herbert W. Simons, "A Dilemma-Centered Analysis of Clinton's August 17th Apologia: Implications for Rhetorical Theory and Method," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 86 (2000): 443. All subsequent references to this essay are drawn from the same page.

10. Normon Solomon, *False Hope: The Politics of Illusion in the Clinton Era* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1994), 161.

11. Robert Reich, "The Political Center, Straight Up; It's Bogus: Real Leaders Don't Take People Where They Already Are," *Washington Post*, June 17, 2001, B1.

12. Stephen Skowronek, "The Risks of 'Third Way' Politics," *Society* 33 (1996): 13.

13. Eric Lott, *The Disappearing Liberal Intellectual: Or, How the Left Became the Center* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 26.

14. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London: Verso, 2000), 199.

15. Chantal Mouffe, "The Radical Centre: A Politics without Adversary," *Soundings* 9 (1998): 13; Stuart Hall, "The Great Moving Nowhere Show," *Marxism Today* 1 (1998): 10.

16. Reich, "The Political Center," B1
17. Mouffe, "The Radical Centre," 12.
18. James McGregor Burns and Georgia Sorenson, *Dead Center: Clinton-Gore Leadership and the Perils of Moderation* (New York: Scribner, 1999), 328.
19. Burns and Sorenson, *Dead Center*, 330–31.
20. Burns and Sorenson, *Dead Center*, 331.
21. Burns and Sorenson, *Dead Center*, 329.
22. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2001), xiv–xv.
23. Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 168.
24. Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes towards History*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 74.
25. Burke, *Attitudes*, 74.
26. Burke, *Attitudes*, 167.
27. Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), xix.
28. Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 23.

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