

'We've made real progress'

Bill Clinton mulls the meaning of his work and his predecessors' fates

With his first year in office drawing to a close, President Clinton met in the Oval Office last week with U.S. News White House correspondents Kenneth T. Walsh and Matthew Cooper. Excerpts:

■ **The first year.** I got elected on a commitment to try to change the way government works, to try to restore the economy and bring the American people together more and move us together towards the 21st century. And I believe we've made real progress there. On the other hand, I think I underestimated the importance of the president's voice—just being able to speak about these issues in a coherent, clear, forceful way. Whereas along toward the end of this year with the speech kicking off the [North American Free Trade Agreement] campaign or with the speech in Memphis [on violence and families], in a number of other settings the opportunity to speak turned out to be action in itself because it seems to galvanize the energy and concentration of a nation.

■ **A "Clinton coalition" in Congress?** It will depend in part on what the party leadership decides to do on the Republican side and on the extent to which we can get a majority of our folks to keep voting for change. For example, there are some things that didn't acquire a lot of notice that I think are really worth looking at. There were some nice stories today in the press on the national service program, how it's really getting off to a good start and the interest in it. They had a pretty fair number of Republican votes for that and a big majority of the Democrats. The more we can adopt the change measures with a bipartisan coalition, the better off it is. I think the people out here in America like it better. If you look ahead to the health care issue, we ought to be able to get a bipartisan majority.

■ **Should laws extend to Congress?** One of the interesting things for you to watch will be the political reform questions.



Reaching out. He says bipartisan coalitions are the best.

There is a whole package of legislation that will start in the House. The most important bill—I think, for the average American—is that the Congress will, if this bill passes, commit itself as an employer to living under the same laws it imposes on the private sector, which I think definitely ought to get passed.

■ **The Washington nominations game.** There are two big problems with it. Unconventional people are too big targets and the process is entirely too long and bureaucratic. We've had some conversations with some of the people who worked on personnel with President Bush, for example, to discuss it. I just now talked to some people in town here about whether there is some way next year maybe I could ask a group of people, equally divided between Republicans and Democrats, to take a look at just what has become of the

whole nominating process. If you take the [Supreme Court Nominee Robert] Bork case where I filed testimony against him, I worked for 60 hours myself personally on that. However, I liked him personally and I was outraged that they looked into the movies he checked out and things like that. I mean, he's an interesting, unconventional man. There ought to be some interesting people in public life in America.

I have no reason to believe at this point that I shouldn't go forward with the nomination [of Assistant Defense Secretary Morton Halperin]. Yes, he may have done or said some controversial things in his life, but on balance he's a good person for this job.

■ **President Kennedy's assassination.** There's just been another book written, right? Called *Case Closed* or something like that. I read a little bit of that book. I thought it was pretty persuasive.

■ **Newly released tapes on Lyndon Johnson.** You think we ought to start taping our conversations? [Laughter.] We are not doing any of that. You know I feel bad-

ly about Johnson, I admire him so much and in so many ways, and I think that if he could have been president at a slightly different time, he might have done so well. When you read the biographies of these guys—I'm almost done with August Heckscher's biography of Woodrow Wilson, which is an interesting book that a friend of mine sent me—you realize that the success of a president, in part, is going to depend on the time that they're in. And some of our failed presidents, had they been president at a different time, might have actually been quite good. And some of our greatest presidents were great just for the moment at which they lived. Had they served at a different time, they might have fallen in another category. Johnson was remarkable, though. He had a way of talking and dealing with people that was just fascinating. He got a lot done. ■

Clinton's journey inward

He seeks answers to the nation's spiritual crisis as part of his own quest

Every Saturday, when he has a few quiet moments late at night, Bill Clinton conducts what he calls "a little ritual." He makes his way to an East Wing study and dials the home phone number of the Rev. Rex Horne, his longtime pastor at Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock. "We talk about his family, mine, where we are," the president explained to *U.S. News*. "He tells me that they're going to pray for me in church the next day. And I laugh and tell him how much I need it." The conversations frequently delve into domestic policy issues and troubles around the world—anything that is on Clinton's mind. "The president could not be more open to me," Horne says. "I never feel that anything is off limits."

That extraordinary ritual, which will come as a surprise even to senior White House aides, is part of a little-known but increasingly important facet of Bill Clinton's presidency: his quest for spiritual fulfillment. Hillary Rodham Clinton's introspections have drawn more attention because of her "politics of meaning" speech in Texas last April, but the president's metaphysical journey is just as compelling. Friends say he has always been religious, attending Sunday services since he was a boy and singing regularly in Horne's choir while he was governor of Arkansas. But while Mrs. Clinton has not addressed the issue in such a dramatic way since last spring, her husband has become newly engaged. Aides say the escalating violence he sees around the country, especially crime involving children, has turned the president inward. He is, they say, more convinced than ever that what America needs is not just a batch of new programs but a spiritual renewal that emphasizes shared values, including hard work, self-discipline and commitment to family.

Bully pulpit. One of the most important lessons of his first year, Clinton told *U.S. News* last week, is that he can



DOUG MILLS - AP

SEARCHING FOR SOLACE Bible-toting Bill and Hillary Clinton emerge from Foundry United Methodist Church in Washington, one of three churches they attend regularly.

be effective in shaping national debate on such spiritual matters. "I think I underestimated the importance of the president's voice," he said, "just being able to speak about these issues in a coherent, clear and forceful way. . . . The opportunity to speak turned out to be an action in itself because it seems to galvanize and mobilize the energy and the concentration of a nation." He was particularly pleased by the favorable reaction to his November 13 speech at the Church of God in Christ in Memphis, when he decried "the great crisis of the spirit that is gripping America today." "I feel better," Clinton told *U.S. News*, "when I'm in an environ-

ment in which I think there are people who are humble enough to know that not all the answers can be found in the exercise of power or with some purely rational solution of a problem."

Despite the amorphous nature of his quest, he is finding some answers. Clinton, aides say, has found at least one model for success in the way African-American churches have traditionally combined the spiritual and the secular in caring for their communities. Clinton told *U.S. News*: "The black church and what it's done to hold the country together—to help provide opportunity to African-Americans and to keep things from getting a lot worse than they would have

"Sometimes, all of the answers have to come from the values that speak to us from within."

—Bill Clinton
Nov. 13

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been—is astonishing.” Clinton recalls visiting an inner-city school where the children told him their biggest fear was getting shot on the way to class, and their second biggest fear was being forced to join a gang. He thinks black churches can go a long way toward stabilizing such communities, and says he wants, somehow, to encourage the process.

Welfare reform is another area where he believes the spiritual and the secular can intersect. And there are elements of a religious crusade in the Clintons’ preoccupation with health care reform. “They see it as the crowning achievement of their lives,” says a White House adviser. “a way to help every American. There is a missionary zeal.”

Clinton admits he is still “working through” where his spiritual journey will take him and the country. But he has begun a series of prayer breakfasts with small groups of religious leaders to discuss moral and social issues; last week’s session focused on helping victims of AIDS. His advisers are arranging for various theologians, historians and university presidents to hold similar conversations with the president on other topics over the next few months. His fascination extends to recent books, like Yale Law Prof. Stephen Carter’s *The Culture of Disbelief* and George Washington University Prof. Amitai Etzioni’s *The Spirit of Community*, which talk about the need for spirituality in modern life.

It is increasingly evident in his own. The night before the historic signing of the recent Middle East peace accord on the White House lawn, Clinton stayed up until 3 a.m. reading the Book of Joshua and rewriting his speech to make it more inspirational. He told aides he was fascinated that one sliver of land had produced so many great religions and said that he hoped some day to understand why.

Clinton is often called the first New Age president, a sort of Iron John in the Oval Office. To some extent, that perception is true. He began his administration with a staff retreat at Camp David, organized by a professional “facilitator,” where the new president talked openly of the pain he endured as an overweight child when

playmates mocked his appearance. His I-feel-your-pain sensitivities emerged again last week when an AIDS activist interrupted his speech at Georgetown University Hospital. Clinton said he didn’t take the outburst personally. “I’d

rather have that man in here screaming at me,” he said, “than have him give up altogether.” Later this month, the president will participate again in the annual Renaissance Weekend at Hilton Head, S.C., where invitees express their innermost thoughts in private “bonding” sessions.

But those who know Clinton best say the New Age image is overdone, accurate only to the extent that

Clinton is a gregarious, emotional man who likes people and enjoys talking about his feelings. “This stuff is garbage,” says a close friend who has seen Clinton participate in Renaissance Weekends for many years. “He practices New Age politics in that he is future-oriented, but he’s not New Age personally in terms of Shirley MacLaine and believing in crystals and beating drums in the woods. My God, he’s a

Southern Baptist from Arkansas. That’s really the key to understanding him.”

“Dealing with lives.” Longtime Clinton associates say that while he does shift with political trends, he is more socially conservative than is generally understood. “I’m afraid he’s been perceived as more of an advocate on some issues than he is,” says Horne, who observes that Clinton has gotten into trouble with other members of his congregation for his apparently liberal positions on abortion and allowing gays in the military. “On the homosexual thing, I never heard him say [allowing gays in the military] is an endorsement of a lifestyle,” Horne says. “And he is pro-choice, not pro-abortion. He is portrayed as being further left on these issues than I believe him to be.”

Horne says Clinton told him abortion was the most difficult issue he’s ever had to deal with, and he approached the problem from a theological perspective. “You’re dealing with lives, a mother and an unborn baby,” the pastor says. “That’s one he struggled with and I wouldn’t be surprised if he still is struggling with it. He believes abortion should be safe, legal—and rare.”

Another tough issue was the death penalty. Horne says, “He’s worked through it. He has come to the point where he certainly sees reason as far as society is concerned, and for biblical

“Let us be willing to remold society by redefining what it means to be a human being.”

—Hillary Clinton
April 6



REV. REX HORNE The president’s unofficial chaplain converses with Clinton every Saturday night by phone from Little Rock. “I never feel that anything is off limits.”

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Crime -
Death Penalty

■ U.S. NEWS

reasons he sees where death might in some cases be appropriate."

The fact is that for most of Clinton's life, the spiritual and the secular have intertwined. Associates say that he framed a revealing line from one of his

up." Clinton would jump to his feet. "We understood that government was right alongside the ministry and being a teacher," Staley says. "We thought they were sister callings."

In that environment, self-help became almost a religious credo for Clinton. When he was a small boy, his

ference and perform some service to people," says the Rev. Ed Matthews, pastor of Little Rock's First United Methodist Church and Mrs. Clinton's long-time minister. To Matthews, Mrs. Clinton's much-quoted speech calling for a politics of meaning was simply an echo of Methodist founder John Wesley's call for humankind to give service to God.

Yet Matthews adds that Mrs. Clinton, like her husband, has a strong sense of pragmatism. The minister once told her that he did not believe in capital punishment, arguing that no person had the right to take the life of another. But Mrs. Clinton replied that society would no longer accept that notion because crime had inspired such widespread fear. People, she said, prefer the ancient dictum "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," and well-meaning political leaders needed to take that feeling into consideration in order to hold on to the power that would enable them to do good works.

In another conversation, Matthews declared his opposition to the Persian Gulf war but failed to dissuade Mrs. Clinton from supporting it, partly because she was realistic: The American public strongly endorsed America's involvement in the conflict. "She knows how to balance," Matthews says, "how to keep her religious position open to her and still keep her leadership going."

Where all this will ultimately lead is anyone's guess. But both Clintons seem intent on continuing their spiritual journey. Their ministers urge them on. Horne says the president would best serve the country if he were to make his quest for renewal as public as possible. He could, Horne suggests, inspire millions of people to join him. "There's a certain amount of apprehension that it may be looked on as raw politics," the Little Rock pastor says.

"I don't think he feels the balance yet. But he should be himself and let things fall where they may."

BY KENNETH T. WALSH



REV. ED MATTHEWS Mrs. Clinton's spiritual counselor says she has learned to balance her convictions with a strong sense of how they need to accommodate political reality.

own speeches on the wall of his Little Rock office. "The only way you can save your soul," the slogan read, "is with public service." A second framed slogan reflected the resilience that has become a trademark of his presidency. It was a saying from his grandfather: "It never hurt a really good man to take a few 'unfair lickin's.'"

Patriotic duty. Carolyn Staley, who graduated from Hot Springs High School with Clinton in 1964, recalls how in those days the future president wrapped himself in the rich tapestry of church, school, home and friends. Their principal, Johnnie Mae Mackey, was an active leader of the state American Legion Auxiliary, and she lectured her students that patriotism was a duty and politics a noble endeavor— notions reinforced at the national level by President Kennedy. When the Stars and Stripes would appear at football games, the principal would stomp her high-topped, lace-up "grandmother shoes" and shout, "If there's a red-blooded American at this football game, stand

mother and grandfather would put flashcards on a wall and drill Bill in letters, words and numbers. It all worked so well that some friends think Clinton has come to see a quasi-religious element of destiny in his life. "I think he believes his own life is a miracle," says an associate. "Here is a kid whose father died before he was born, who had an abusive stepfather, who grew up poor, who was lucky enough to have strong, smart women around him from an early age, who became a Rhodes scholar, then governor, then president."

One of those strong, smart women, of course, is Hillary Clinton, who not only reinforces the president's compulsion to perform good works but also shares his strong desire for midlife renewal. "Hillary feels in the marrow of her bones that she should make a dif-

ferred America's involvement in the conflict. "She knows how to balance," Matthews says, "how to keep her religious position open to her and still keep her leadership going."

"We need our faith . . . as a source of humility, to remember that, as Bishop Sheen said, we are all sinners."
— Bill Clinton
Feb. 4

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