Bill Clinton's Promise

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Paradoxically, this has turned out to be the most popular and least popular Presidential campaign in years. It's the most popular in the sense that a great many citizens are paying close attention. The debates, and political television generally, have been drawing big audiences, and voter registration is up almost everywhere.

It's the least popular campaign because the voters don't much care for the candidates. Even at this late stage in the campaign, only 4 out of 10 of each candidate's supporters strongly favor their man. Thus in 1992 the usual question — Which candidate is best? —has changed to, Which candidate is disliked least?

Meanwhile, history and circumstance make this a pivotal election. It could mark a national turning point; a Democratic victory would bring undivided government to Washington. And it will certainly mark a global turning point: It is the first election since the end of the balance of terror.

President Bush has been a sensible steward of America's foreign interests. But now, with the cold war over, he seems completely stumped by the need for leadership to move the country out of economic stagnation and spiritual unease.

Ross Perot, self-made billionaire, charms voters by, as he might say, talking turkey. But he torpedoed his credibility in July by jumping his own ship for two months. For all his businesslike confidence, he seems bereft of the skills needed to manage the grinding collisions of political interests.

Bill Clinton, though highly regarded by other governors, has not previously been tested on the national stage. He has, when pressed, shown a discomfiting tendency to blur truthful clarity. But he, much more than his rivals, manifests qualities of leadership: intellect, years of immersion in government, the capacity to attract first-rate people and the perseverance that has carried him through a brutal campaign. These concrete characteristics equip him to be a good President. With his instinct for ordinary people's concerns and for social unity, he could be even better.

President Bush

The President can rightly claim credit for substantial accomplishments, including domestic legislation like the Americans With Disabilities Act. His successes, however, have been mostly international.

In his finest hours, he orchestrated the remarkable Desert Storm coalition that triumphantly reversed Saddam Hussein's aggression against Kuwait. Though suspicion now swirls about previous relations with Iraq, Mr. Bush managed the enterprise with a virtuosity and resolution that make his domestic dissembling look all the sorrier.

He deserves unstinting credit for launching the Israeli-Arab peace talks. He had an important hand in Germany's unification. He has been a constructive if sometimes grudging force for the transformation of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. His Administration worked capably to end violence in Central America.

Just a year ago, largely because of his diplomatic achievements, President Bush was overwhelmingly popular. People chuckled over his often wacky diction. ("We're enjoying sluggish times, and not enjoying them very much.") But now, many voters turn away impatiently, repelled by his contradictions.

In 1988 he proclaimed the seminal six words of his Presidency: "Read my lips: No new taxes." Yet in 1990, to avoid amputating great chunks of government, he repudiated that pledge in a budget agreement with Congress. Then last March he repudiated *that*, thus denying himself any plausible leadership path.

With such slow growth in this nearly stagnant economy, many Americans feel the pinch of tough times. Yet Mr. Bush has done little to show that he understands the pain or that he has a reasonable idea of how to respond. Even if his deepest instincts tell him that government should keep its clumsy hands off the economy, why not say so, as part of a cogent policy plan? For a generation now, even Republican Presidents have accepted the idea that Washington should try programs to stimulate a flagging economy. All Mr. Bush offered were some timid little remedies in his State of the Union speech and some incoherent promises to the Republican Convention. Not till after Labor Day did he issue an "Agenda for – about a year late. American Renewal" -If the President's economic management is thus exasperating, his positions on individual rights are often infuriating. In a climate that cries out for racial healing, he derided even a modest civil rights law. In the AIDS plague years, a time that cries out for somber sensitivity, he aligns himself with intolerant convention speakers eager to disparage, as Pat Robertson did with a sneer, ho-mo-sex-uals. Bitter differences over abortion rights have divided the country for a generation. Mr. Bush has carried his right-to-life position to radical extremes, like his veto in June of a bill to permit use of fetal tissue transplants in research on Parkinson's disease. Mr. Bush's high-level appointments have sometimes caused even loyal Republicans to wince, starting with his choice of Dan Quayle as Vice President. Mr. Quayle is not the featherweight he's often made out to be, but since when is mediocrity a standard of choice for a standby President?

The imminence of other Presidential appointments means this election will determine the future of *two* branches of government. Mr. Bush is determined to appoint justices who will push the Supreme Court hard to the right, well into the terms of several future Presidents. It's an alarming prospect considering Clarence Thomas, his latest nominee. Justice Thomas has shown himself to be so ideological that he attacks even conservative colleagues with slogans. Yet Mr. Bush voices pride in this appointment, and promises more like it.

George Bush is an admirable American — war hero, entrepreneur, devoted father and grandfather, who has given thousands of endless days to public service. He has often been a prudent manager. None of that, however, makes him a good President. Lacking leadership, his capacity to govern has collapsed.

Ross Perot

George Bush came to office with a superb public service résumé; Ross Perot's governmental experience has been slight. Yet he possesses an important quality of leadership. He can sell himself and his ideas. He conveys inspirational appeal to many voters, radiating conviction with folksy force.

But the man who said in July that he could conquer the deficit without breaking a sweat undermined his budding support by suddenly dropping out of the race. Now he's back again, on the ballot in every state and promising to spend \$60 million of his own money. But he further diminished his plausibility by choosing as his running mate retired Vice Adm. James Stockdale, an admirable officer but palpably unqualified Commander in Chief.

Mr. Perot has already won himself a reputation as national civics teacher, educating the public to the need for shared sacrifice. His testiness, however, shows how completely he lacks the give-and-take skills needed to make government work. His whimsical candidacy remains merely a refuge for romantic voters who wish politics could be as simple as business and who wish bitter differences could be resolved on command.

Governor Clinton

In contrast to on-again, off-again Ross Perot, Gov. Bill Clinton of Arkansas has distinguished himself by his tenacity. He needed it. Not well known when the campaign began, he was vulnerable to one controversy after another.

He has also shown another, less attractive characteristic, a propensity for evasive ambiguity when challenged, either on personal matters like the draft or on policy.

There is justice in what President Bush says of his position on the Mexican free-trade treaty: "You cannot come down on both sides of the issue and call it leadership." By endorsing the treaty, Mr. Clinton stands up admirably against provincial special pleaders in his own party; that makes it all the more dismaying when he attaches strings to the treaty that could strangle it.

Likewise, last week he rightly ridiculed Mr. Bush's "read my lips" pledge. But in the next breath he issued his own promise not to raise taxes on the middle class — even if that meant suspending his own public investment program.

In general, however, Mr. Clinton has taken strong and consistent positions, often notably more moderate than those of traditional liberal Democrats. For instance, he says to deadbeat fathers who fail to pay child support: "Take responsibility for your children, or we will force you to do so." Note the words *responsibility* and *force*.

Governor Clinton's choice of Senator Al Gore as his running mate created a confident contrast with the unprepossessing Dan Quayle. Mr. Clinton is an unquestioned leader of education reform and an enthusiastic advocate of initiatives like the police corps, in which students can pay back college loans with service. He knows how much good can be done by ingenious programs like small community development banks. Most important, he offers the public a coherent. visionary program to conquer stagnation. He identifies America's crucial need: a well-trained work force. Yes, he says, stimulate private investment, but also recognize the need for public investment in education, infrastructure, the environment. Republican skeptics worry that "more public investment" would turn into, simply, more pork. They say his program does not add up, and they may be right. But so what? No October plan adds up in January; what counts is the vision it sets out. Mr. Clinton's vision inspires hope. He speaks passionately and consistently for tolerance and racial unity. As he told the Democratic Convention, politicians have for too long said that "what's really wrong with America is the rest of us. Them. Them the minorities. Them the liberals. ... There is no them; there's only us." He stirs the conscience when he says, "We need each other." Governor Clinton's knowledge of government puts Ross Perot's oversimplifications to shame. The promise of his program makes George Bush's belated agenda look paltry. And Bill Clinton's devotion to social justice makes both his opponents sound like auditors. Voters rarely have perfect choices for President, but this year, in Bill Clinton, they have a clear one.

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