

Opening of Bill Clinton's library: a sordid gathering of the "fat cats"

David Walsh

20 November 2004

The opening of the Clinton Library in Little Rock, Arkansas Thursday was a miserable affair, from any number of points of view. The event, with 30,000 people on hand, including masses of media personnel as well as a number of film stars, resembled nothing so much as the opening of a gaudy, empty theme park, with the former president as "celebrity-in-chief."

The establishment of a presidential library, within a few years of the White House resident leaving office, has now become an unavoidable ritual. It matters to no one apparently that an institution known as the "Ronald Reagan Library," for example, is indisputably oxymoronic.

The more insubstantial the figure, apparently, the larger the library. The collection at Clinton's library is drawn from 80 million pages of presidential records, 79,000 museum objects and almost 2 million photographs. And it adds up to nothing much at all.

The collection of Abraham Lincoln Papers at the Library of Congress consists of approximately 20,000 documents, among which one might find a draft of the Emancipation Proclamation, a draft of the second Inaugural Address and a vast number of letters, speeches, notes and printed material. Lincoln's writings and the commentaries on his life and actions would fill up a library worth visiting.

On hand for the overblown festivities in Little Rock were the present occupant of the White House, George W. Bush; former presidents George Bush and Jimmy Carter; former vice president Al Gore; the defeated Democratic candidate for president, John Kerry; and countless other luminaries of the American political scene. They chatted and chummed it up for the cameras, going out of their way to praise one another and present a picture of unity and cordiality.

This was obviously not accidental. In his remarks, Clinton reflected concerns about the sharp divisions in the US, revealed in the recent election campaign. No doubt, the former president, in his usual self-important manner, thought the launching of his library might be the occasion for a festival of national political "healing."

He made every effort along those lines, asserting, "Today we're all red, white and blue," alluding to the divisions in the elections between "red states" (Republican) and "blue" (Democratic). Sagely, Clinton went on, "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."

Clinton returned to the theme time and again: "I once said to a friend of mine about three days before the election—and I heard all these terrible things. I said, 'You know, am I the only person in the entire United States of America who likes both George Bush and John Kerry, who believes they're both good people, who believes they both love our country and they just see the world differently?' What should our shared values be? Everybody counts. Everybody deserves a chance. Everybody has got a responsibility to fulfill. We all do better when we work together. Our differences do matter but our common humanity matters more."

This is all hogwash. Clinton may imagine that he can dissolve the political conflicts with his banal phrasemaking, but this only reveals the extent to which he and the rest of the Democrats and Republicans are unaware of the forces driving the divisions in the US—above all, the vast social polarization—and the consequences of their own right-wing policies.

In reality, Clinton, a self-proclaimed member of "the top one percent," Bush, Kerry, Gore and the rest of the leading lights on hand in Little Rock are representatives of the financial oligarchy that thoroughly dominates American life. It is not so much "common humanity" that binds Clinton, Bush and the rest together as their "common" (and vast) *wealth*. Karl Marx, at his most deterministic, could hardly have imagined a crowd of politicians so conscious of their own immediate, material, class interests as the gathering in Little Rock.

In the past, American politicians who became rich in office were generally assumed to be crooks, having accumulated wealth through bribes, graft and the "emoluments of office." Today, outright thievery is not even necessary. US politicians are generally millionaires to begin with, and, in any case, they and their adjutants make a seamless transition from the White House or other places of power to the media, the upper ranks of private enterprise and so forth. They make millions as pundits on television, as consultants, speakers and "people in the

know.”

Clinton’s ability to pal around with the Bush crowd is an indication of the essential unseriousness of official American politics. Millions voted against Bush and for Kerry out of outrage against the Iraq war, corporate corruption and the ferocious attacks on constitutionally guaranteed democratic rights. Vast numbers of Americans consider Bush and his cabinet a cabal of criminals.

Not Clinton. In his address to the assembled, he began by thanking Bush, who had spoken previously, “for your generous words and for coming to the opening at all.” He joked, “I mean, after all, you just delayed your own library opening by four years.” Clinton gratuitously praised Bush as a “good politician” who had been “very kind and generous to my family.”

The Bushes returned the favor. The president told the crowd, “President Bill Clinton led our country with optimism and a great affection for the American people. And that affection has been returned. He gave all to his job, and the nation gave him two terms.” The former president called Clinton “one of the most gifted American political figures in modern times.”

The ability of the assembled politicians, less than three weeks after the conclusion of a bitter election campaign, to rub shoulders and pat one another on the back says a number of things about contemporary American political life.

First of all, it reveals that, when all is said and done, the differences between the Democrats and Republicans on issues that matter to the ruling elite are minute. How else is this mutual admiration society to be explained? After all, there is no indication that James Buchanan ever spoke to Lincoln again after the latter’s first inauguration in March 1861. Herbert Hoover detested Franklin D. Roosevelt and refused to speak to him as the pair rode to inauguration ceremonies in March 1932.

There was a nearly provocative element about the manner in which the various Democrats and Republicans hobnobbed and found common fellowship. This is entirely appropriate. The great divide in the country is not between the leaders of the two bourgeois parties, but between the mass of the people and the entire ruling elite, including these politicians. The latter do not speak to or for broad masses of people, whom they exclude and deliberately deceive; indeed, their social base is ever narrowing.

Moreover, one has the sense that the garden variety politician these days, as a practical concern, is eager to “keep the lines of communication open” in case his or her erstwhile electoral foe should one day be in a position to quash a scandal or even criminal charges. It always helps to have friends in high places.

Clinton’s approach to the impeachment drive—dishonest, cowardly and, above all, class-conscious—underscores the peculiar nature of the relations within the ruling elite. During his tenure in office, the Republican right wing set as its task the destabilization and ouster of the twice-elected president. They very nearly succeeded, and in the process certainly laid the groundwork for the stealing of the 2000 election.

For all intents and purposes, in toadying to Bush, Clinton was cozying up to precisely the political forces that made every effort to smear, undermine and drive him from office. He knows this perfectly well. In an interview with Peter Jennings of “ABC News,” Clinton responded heatedly to a question concerning his supposed lack of moral authority, saying: “You don’t want to go here, Peter. You don’t want to go here. Not after what your people did. And the way you—your network—what you did with Kenneth Starr. The way your people repeated every little sleazy thing he did. No one has any idea of what that’s like.”

Clinton also told Jennings, “No other president ever had to endure someone like Ken Starr indicting innocent people, because they wouldn’t lie, in a systematic way, and having respectable news outlets... parroting everything they leaked. No one ever had to try to save people from ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, and people in Haiti from a military dictator that was murdering them, and all the other problems I dealt with, while every day, an entire apparatus was devoted to destroying him.”

Clinton will make this type of accusation, attempting both to defend himself personally and maintain his credibility with his supporters, but then refuse to draw any larger conclusion.

He was attacked—so what did he do about it? He appeased his attackers and failed to expose their reactionary political agenda, lulling the American people to sleep and clearing the way for the right-wing rampage that followed his terms in office. Even now, Clinton draws no wider lessons from the experience or issues any warning about what is to come from the second Bush administration.

In so doing, Clinton expresses his greater loyalties, to the class interests of the “fat cats.”



To contact the WSWWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)