

A Man of Little Visions



President Clinton has proven to be a man of little visions—dozens of them. He is too prone to substitute compromise for creativity, fiddling for fixing, polling for principle, and symbol for substance. Let me count the ways:

- ◆ A year ago tax reform was the major issue of the Republican presidential primaries, but congressional Republicans let it slip away by proposing an incoherent package of minor tax cuts. Instead of making his own tax reform proposal, unfortunately, Clinton responded to the con-

gressional Republicans with more restricted proposals for a child credit and a capital gains cut.

- ◆ Medicare Part A is already running a cash deficit. Instead of fixing Medicare, however, Clinton chose to fiddle with it—shifting home care from Part A to Part B, an accounting maneuver that makes the Part A trust fund look solvent but has no effect on the budget. Instead of changing the benefit structure, he proposes to save money by continuing to squeeze the providers of medical care. The most recent fiddle is to pay New York hospitals \$400 million *not* to train so many new physicians.

- ◆ More fiddling. The Family and Medical Leave Act is perceived to be popular, even if trivial, so Clinton proposes to expand the right to take unpaid leave to go to a PTA meeting or take one's dog to the vet. In the rush to adjourn last summer, Congress mandated that all health insurance policies provide for at least 48 hours in a hospital after bearing a child, and both Clinton and the congressional Republicans are now considering more such mandates. No one has yet explained how restricting terms of employment and insurance contracts makes anyone better off.

- ◆ Clinton recognizes that 12 years of mediocre public schooling is not enough to provide marketable job skills. Instead of supporting the necessary measures to improve primary and secondary schools, however, he proposed broadening the entitlement to 14 or 16 years of mediocre schooling. This is only one example of the broader pathology of indefinitely deferring responsibility. The fact that 29 percent of college freshmen must take one or more remedial courses suggests that many young people are not yet ready for college. Moreover, the primary effects of Clinton's proposed tax credit and tax

deduction would probably be a windfall to those who would go to college anyway and an increase in college tuition, with little effect on the number of qualified students who attend college. The most absurd example of the triumph of symbolism is Clinton's apparent belief that public schools can emulate the advantages of private schools by requiring students to wear school uniforms.

- ◆ NAFTA is a mutually beneficial trade agreement with our immediate neighbors and major trading partners, and the weak side agreements on labor and the environment seemed like an acceptable price to win congressional approval. Clinton is wrong, however, to believe that more of the same would be desirable. Broadening NAFTA to other countries in the Western Hemisphere is more likely to be trade diverting than trade creating. And stronger side agreements, in effect, would create a government cartel on economic policies.

- ◆ NATO was the essential alliance that made it possible to pre-

vail in the Cold War. That should have led our government to organize a grand victory parade and bring the troops home. In the absence of any apparent adversary, however, Clinton proposes to broaden NATO, a measure that is likely to provoke the Russian fears of insecurity that first led to the Cold War.

**“Dear Mr. Clinton:
You are no longer a candidate. Tell
the political consultants and pollsters to
go home. Select the four or five most
important objectives for your second
term. Seize the day!”**

On net, Clinton's second term strategy may be politically adept. Members of Congress will be less resistant to partial accommodations to their own parochial proposals and to incremental expansions of the welfare state in the name of helping children. And Clinton's little visions are less threatening than the grander visions of the vice president and the first lady and may be preferable to his last Republican opponent's apparent lack of vision.

The primary problem with Clinton's strategy is the missed opportunity for the important reforms that would establish his historical reputation as a problem solver rather than a continuous candidate. Tax reform, fixing Medicare for the long term, a broad start on school choice, locking in a multilateral commitment to free trade, developing a foreign and defense policy that reflects the end of the Cold War are all important and politically feasible objectives for Clinton's second term.

—William A. Niskanen