

Wagish Bhartiya on Bill Clinton

I have chosen to study the life of William Jefferson Clinton (Bill) for my leadership biography. Love him or hate him, Bill Clinton has had a profound impact on US politics, policy, and the office of the President. Indeed, the basis for his selection is because of the fact that he is an inherently flawed man and leader whose troubled personal history and talent-laden professional life are undeniably intertwined. For this reason his life story offers many lessons for avid followers of politics and casual students of leadership to learn from. The following blog post will have 4 sections:

- A description of Clinton's major accomplishments in life
- A brief biological sketch
- A description of how Clinton integrated the different parts of his life for mutual gain
- An explanation of how I intend to apply lessons learned from Clinton's example

Bill Clinton's most significant achievement was being elected 42nd President of the United States at the age of 46. The former five-time Arkansas governor served as commander-in-chief from 1993 to 2001 or as the Cold War was ending. He remade the national image of the Democratic Party and is credited with modernizing Democrats in ways that undermined the "Reagan Revolution". He is also credited with overseeing one of the largest economic expansions in US history – although it would be reversed by his successor George W. Bush.

Since his time in office has ended, Clinton has maintained his presence on the national and international stage via his numerous speaking engagements and by penning his own memoir. However, his most impactful work has been on the philanthropic side. In addition to heading up the relief efforts following the Asian tsunami in 2005, and joining forces with President George H.W. Bush to establish the Bush-Clinton Katrina Fund, Clinton created the William J Clinton Foundation to address issues of global importance including public health, climate change, poverty alleviation, and religious and ethnic conflict. A key program of the Foundation, the Clinton Global Initiative, works to foster public-private partnerships to devise innovative solutions to these problems.

Born William Jefferson Blythe III, Bill Clinton was born and raised in Hope, Arkansas – a town with a population less than 8,000. His father – William Jefferson Blythe – died in a car crash three months before Bill was born leaving him to be raised by his mother and his grandparents. His grandparents, disciplinarians by nature, instilled in a young Clinton the importance of education. They also inspired him by being surprising non-racist in the segregated South. While none of his family was religious, Clinton became a devoted Baptist from a very young age and attended church services by himself. He was especially drawn to the gospel music performed at his church and took up the jazz saxophone.

His mother remarried a man named Roger Clinton when Bill was just four years old and moved the family to Hot Springs. Over the next decade, Clinton's personal and student-life diverged. Clinton would excel in school, become a leader in student government, and become the best saxophone player in the city. However, at home Bill was constantly defending his mother and step-brother from his step-father's drunken and abusive tirades. At the age of 14, Bill confronted his step-father telling him "If you want them, you will have to go through me."

Two early influences shaped Clinton's political ambitions. First, in 1963 he took a trip to Washington DC as a delegate to Boys Nation. It was on this trip that Clinton had the chance to shake hands with President John F. Kennedy, a political idol. Later that same year Clinton would watch Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech by himself. He was moved to tears by the speech and memorized it. Clinton went on to graduate Phi Beta Kappa from Georgetown University and earn a Rhodes Scholarship. He would follow by attaining a law degree from Yale where he would meet his future wife Hillary Rodham.

Clinton would return to Arkansas after Yale to pursue his political ambitions. A consolation for losing his 1974 Congressional election despite his tireless campaigning, Clinton would become Attorney General in 1975. In 1978 he was elected the youngest governor in Arkansas history. Considered overly ambitious and inexperienced, he would lose his re-election effort in 1980 but would rebound in 1982.

Clinton's success in the professional domain was greatly influenced by his personal values and early family life. His troubled childhood gave him a clearer sense of purpose and a deep-seated desire to serve the interests of others as he had for his mother and step-brother. "All my life I've been interested in other people's stories," he wrote in his 2004 memoir, *My Life*. "I've wanted to know them, understand them, feel them. When I grew up and got into politics, I always felt the main point of my work was to give people a chance to have better stories." He was able to draw from his unshakeable personal convictions throughout his professional and political life. He credits his uncanny ability to connect with others, even strangers, as resulting from his childhood feelings of loneliness. Indeed, his ability to thrive in multiple environments, easily adapt to shifting realities, and utter determination are steeped in his personal domain. After all, he was forced to serve as mediator at home at a very young age.

However, his childhood and early adulthood also gave birth to Clinton's ability to live "parallel lives" which ultimately bled into his family and professional domains. As Bill himself later observed, however, "No one can live parallel lives with complete success". Much of tragedy in Clinton's family life can be attributed to the fatal combination of his insatiable need for others to be part of his life (Clinton once infamously invited friends over to watch him do a crossword puzzle) and his superior ability to make people feel close to him. His numerous affairs and encounters with women throughout his adult life are evidence of this dichotomy. Clinton's standing as a world-class politician was undoubtedly disrupted when he was impeached by Congress for lying about his affair with Monica Lewinsky.

Clinton's family domain did positively reinforce his political life as well. Hillary Rodham was perhaps the perfect political spouse. Rodham was very smart, unquestionably supportive, and ambitious. Indeed, she was one of the most active First Ladies in the history of the White House. She turned into one of Clinton's most trusted policy advisors and advocates. Her most prominent involvement came early in Clinton's first-term in the fight to overhaul the US healthcare system. It can be argued that Clinton's meteoric rise to political prominence is in part due to Hillary's presence at his side. Similarly, both the Clintons did a masterful job of not letting the advantages of political office influence the upbringing of their only daughter Chelsea. Bill was quite protective of his daughter and the two maintain a very special relationship to this day despite the various instances of adultery.

There are 3 main lessons that I hope to extract from the life of Bill Clinton. First, I hope to apply the power of my personal convictions, values, and beliefs to propel my career forward. Clinton's success in politics is not the result of luck or fortunate breaks. Nothing in his life was handed to him. He struggled and overcame in large part because his core beliefs could not be shaken by life's circumstances. His desire to work tirelessly to improve the lives of others is derived from who he is as a person. I feel like I too share a set of values that put a premium on improving the lives of those around me. I must not relinquish the passion and fire with which I go about living up to this value of service to others even when I encounter overwhelming obstacles. I must use the potency of the self domain to drive my performance in the professional domain. It must be the fuel that powers my actions.

The second lesson from Clinton's life that I hope to apply to my future journey is the power and importance of self-control and restraint. Clinton's ambitions and impact on society were cut short due to his inability to control his personal demons and desires, nothing more. Regardless of how hard they tried, his political enemies were unable to disrupt Clinton's rise to power and impact on every day citizens because of the unparalleled power of his will and narrow-minded focus. That said, his chaotic internal world and emotional turmoil proved too much

to overcome. His personal domain sabotaged his family and professional domains. This was the sad reality for a man as brilliant and talented as Clinton. Where does this leave the rest of us? In order to have the impact on the world that I hope to have, I must be able to satisfactorily address my fears, inadequacies, and irrational desires. I must spend time and energy understanding the self domain in order to unlock performance in my family, community, and professional domains. Indeed, I must never lose sight of their subtle interconnectivity. The self domain can be a source of limitless power but also of tremendous pain.

The third learning I have gleaned from Bill Clinton is the power of aligning one's passions / values, one's abilities, one's career choice, and one's life partner. As an outsider, it can be argued that Clinton maximized his potential by entering into politics. His deep-seated interests in others and his vast analytical and interpersonal skill set mapped perfectly to the demands and purpose of political office. Indeed, it is almost too easy to believe that Clinton was destined to become President. But I assert that meeting and marrying Hillary Rodham was an equally critical piece to his journey. She buoyed him in ways that complemented his personal abilities. She made him a better man and a better politician. Thus, I must seek this type of meta-alignment in my life. Where do my interests lie? What would I fight for? What areas am I the best in? Where can I have the most impact? What types of careers / activities does my wife support? Having this type of conversation on a regular basis with myself and with my spouse will be important to creating a congruent life. And it is only through congruence that real impact is achieved.

References:

<http://www.biography.com/people/bill-clinton-9251236?page=1>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_Clinton
http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/5944.Bill_Clinton
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/biography/clinton-bill/>
<http://www.philgerbyshak.com/connection-from-president-bill-clinton/>
<http://millercenter.org/president/clinton/essays/biography/1>