

The Best of Times, the Worst of Times

A sanguine public assesses Bill Clinton in crisis

By Frank Newport

Bill Clinton received the highest job approval ratings of his administration during the Lewinsky/impeachment controversy that stretched from January 1998 to February 1999. As the Lewinsky revelations became public, Clinton's ratings went up, not down, and they remained high for the duration of the impeachment proceedings. Consider the following figures:

For the first quarter of 1993 through the first quarter of 1999, Bill Clinton's mean job approval rating was 54%. For the five years preceding 1998, it was 51%, and in 1998 it was 64%. Thus, the president's average job approval rating for 1998 was 10 points above the overall average for his administration to date. It was also 13 points above his administration average for the five years preceding 1998, and 6 points above the previous year, 1997, which in turn was higher than any of the four years that preceded it. In addition, Clinton's job approval rating for the first quarter during which the Lewinsky scandal became public (the first quarter of 1998) jumped 6 points compared to the immediately preceding quarter. The two quarters during which the House and Senate debated impeachment and conviction—the fourth quarter of 1998 and the first quarter of 1999—saw the public give Bill Clinton the highest job approval ratings of any of the 25 quarters of his administration to date.¹

Taking a broader view, the average approval rating for the entire 40-year period from 1953 to 1992, encompassing eight presidents, from Eisenhower through Clinton's immediate predecessor George Bush, was only 56% (see Figure 1). Bill Clinton's 1998 average of 64% was both significantly above this 40-year average and higher than all but 11 of the 40 years served by the eight presidents who preceded him. Finally, Clinton's 1998 average was a full 39 percentage points higher than the last year of the only other president in this century for whom impeachment was a serious possibility, Richard Nixon; his job approval rating in 1974 was 25%.

Future historians, analyzing a graph of presidential job approval ratings from the last half of the twentieth century, might be excused for asking what it was that Bill Clinton did that was so popular with the American public during 1998. Similarly, they might be excused for displaying puzzlement over the high job approval ratings upon being reminded of Clinton's yearlong battle to escape being the first president in US history to be constitutionally removed from office.

Frank Newport is editor-in-chief, the Gallup Poll.

Certainly one explanation for this paradox lies in the fact that, in large part, the social, economic and international conditions of the country—factors which usually are directly related to the public's evaluation of the job being done by a president—were unusually propitious during this time period. Americans throughout 1998 registered high levels of satisfaction with the way things were going in the country. Ratings of Bill Clinton's handling of the economy shot up to as high as 81% during this time period, and the basic ratings of the economic conditions in the US were extremely high. Personal financial well-being measures were at one point as high as they have been in Gallup's history of measuring them, with 7 out of 10 polled in March 1998 saying they anticipated being better off over the next year. A substantial percentage of Americans (71% in one



January 1999 poll) said that this was the best economy of their lifetime.

In the context of these measures of the population's general satisfaction with the way things were going and the country's almost giddy happiness with the economy, the trend in Clinton's job approval ratings would be expected and wholly understandable, everything else being equal.

But of course, these positive conditions occurred at a time when everything else relating to Bill Clinton was decidedly not equal. Throughout this period, in fact, the American public indicated high levels of awareness of Clinton's moral transgressions, and in many instances were as quick as both the press and Clinton's detractors to believe the accusations and charges were true. In other words, the high job approval ratings were not bestowed upon Clinton in a news blackout or a period of inattention or denial, but rather with full awareness of the issues which prompted his impeachment.

By February 1998, 63% of Americans felt that Clinton definitely or probably had had sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky, and by April, 60% felt that Clinton had lied under oath while president, a percentage that grew to 74% by August. Also in August, 53% of Americans felt that Clinton had definitely or probably participated in an effort to obstruct justice while president. And, more generally, in a January 1999 poll, a majority of the public agreed with the two impeachment charges brought against Clinton by the House, including 79% who agreed with the perjury charge.

The data also did not suggest that the American public condones or approves of the types of things Clinton did. In the abstract, for example, Americans clearly feel that adultery is wrong. A November 1998 Gallup update of a longstanding NORC-GSS trend found 76% of Americans agree that “a married person having sexual relations with someone other than their marriage partner” is “always wrong,” while another 15% said “almost always wrong.”

Americans are less strong in their feelings about lying, but majorities say it would be wrong to lie in either of two hypothetical situations posed in the same November poll. One question asks, “Can you imagine a situation where it would be all right for you to lie to someone who is not close to you, someone at work or in a business or store, or do you think it would always be wrong to lie to them?” The answer: 40% say they could imagine such a situation, while 57% say they could

not. When asked about lying “to someone who is close to you, either a family member or friend” 54% say it would always be wrong.

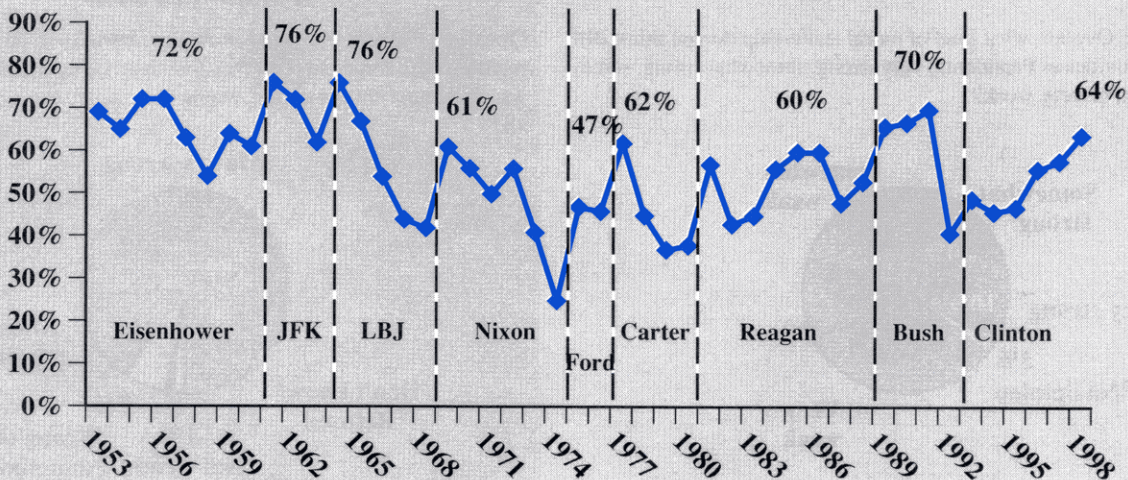
The conclusion that the public did not like or approve of Clinton’s moral and ethical lapses was strongly underscored by Americans’ consistent downgrading of Clinton on a wide variety of personal and moral dimensions as the year of scandal progressed. Less than 50% of Americans had a favorable opinion of Bill Clinton “as a person” in most of the months during which the Lewinsky/impeachment crisis continued. The percentage rating him as “honest and trustworthy” was at only 44% in January 1998, and that number slowly dropped to 24% by January 1999. When asked if the President “shares your values,” substantially less than half of the public said that he did—a figure which dropped from 42% in January 1998 to 35% in January 1999. Far less than half said that Bill Clinton showed good judgement, and, in a September 1998 poll, sixty-eight percent said that Bill Clinton provided somewhat or very weak moral leadership as president.

It would appear, then, that the public was able to maintain a fairly complex, two-dimensional portrait of Bill Clinton in its collective mind, giving him high job approval ratings at the same time at which there was widespread disapproval of the accepted fact that he had had sex in the Oval Office and lied under oath about it. This is perhaps the most important finding to come out of a consideration of the public opinion aspects of

Figure 1

Clinton in Context Presidential Job Approval 1953 to 1998

Question: Do you approve or disapprove of the way... is handling his job as president?



Note: Each data point represents the average approval rating for that year.
Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization.

the impeachment crisis. The American public apparently made the decision to divorce Clinton's moral failings from its evaluation of his ability to do his job.

Figure 2 puts these data in perspective. It displays the trends on three key measures of Bill Clinton: his overall job performance rating, his handling of the economy, and his rating as honest and trustworthy. Over the course of his presidency, from 1996 on, the public gave Clinton increasingly positive ratings on his handling of the economy, increasingly negative ratings on being honest and trustworthy, and improved ratings in terms of his overall job approval. These data suggest that the economy drove the approval rating, and that the growing perception of Clinton as dishonest did little to mitigate this powerful relationship.

The most intriguing finding derived from Figure 2 is the strong negative correlation between Clinton's honesty rating and overall job approval; that is, as the public's assessment of Clinton's honesty and trustworthiness was declining, its approval levels of the job he was doing as president across the first six years of his administration steadily increased.²

This is not to say that the impeachment crisis had no impact on Clinton's job approval ratings. As the Lewinsky scandal became public, there was a subtle shift in the relationship between the public's rating of Clinton's

handling of the economy and his overall job performance rating. As 1998 began, the public for the first time evaluated Clinton's overall job performance at a lower level than his handling of the economy. Figure 3 shows a similar change in the relationship between the public's favorable/unfavorable rating of Clinton and his overall job performance rating at this time. In January 1998 the public's evaluation of Clinton's job performance began to be higher than its favorable rating of Clinton.

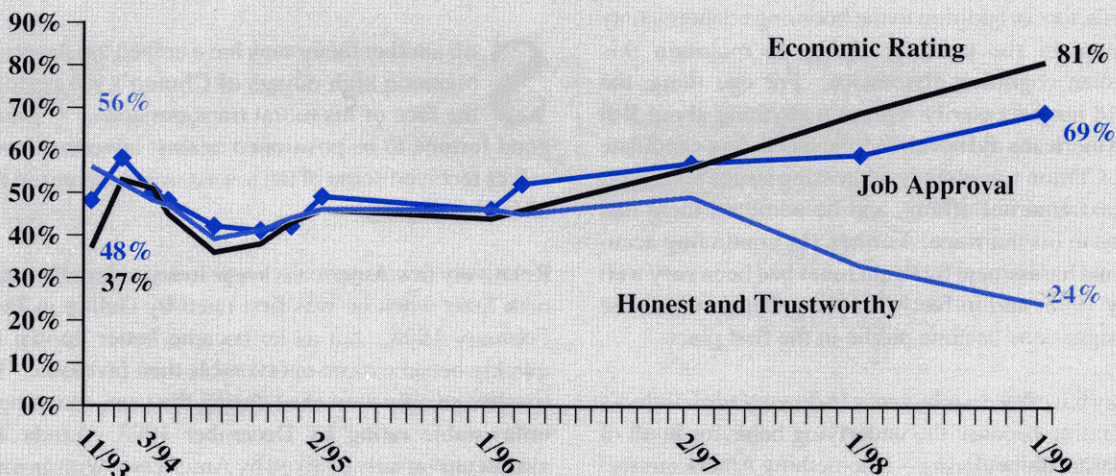
These findings suggest that Clinton's job approval rating began to underperform compared to the public's rating of his handling of the economy in 1998, and overperformed compared to his favorability rating. Had his job approval maintained its "normal" relationship to his economy rating, and had his favorable rating stayed higher, Clinton's job ratings had the potential to be even higher than they were.

The fact that Clinton's job approval rating straddled his economic rating and his honesty rating also suggests that the public may, in effect, have been averaging these two aspects of Clinton in their overall evaluation. This, in turn, can be interpreted to mean either that the positive economy prevented the low honesty rating from further hurting Clinton's overall job evaluation, or that the low honesty rating prevented the high economy score from further boosting it.

Figure 2

Moral Character and Economic Prowess— Clinton Assessments Diverge

Questions: Do you approve or disapprove of the way Bill Clinton is handling his job as president?... Do you approve or disapprove of the way Bill Clinton is handling the economy?... Do you think Bill Clinton is honest and trustworthy, or not?

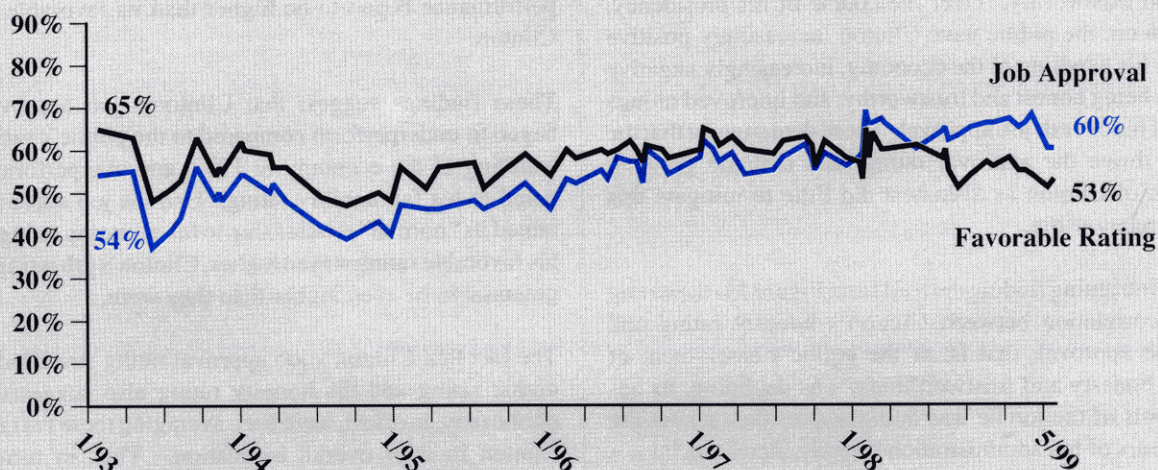


Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization for CNN/USA Today.

Figure 3

Clinton Job Approval vs. Favorability Ratings

Questions: ...Please say whether you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of this person... Bill Clinton... Do you approve or disapprove of the way Bill Clinton is handling his job as president?



Source: Surveys by the Gallup Organization for CNN/USA Today.

In any case, and this is the crux of the matter, *Americans simply did not allow their assessments of Clinton's moral failures to downgrade his job performance as much as they could have.* They maintained a distance between these two aspects of Clinton. They did not like his sexual behavior and his lying about it. They expressed this negative evaluation in the low marks they gave him when asked appropriate questions about his morality and character. They did not, however, feel that for this president, at this point in time, the sex and lying were so damaging to his ability to perform his job as president as to lead to lower job approval ratings, or to make him unqualified to serve as president.

Several factors in addition to the booming economy may help explain the public's ability to maintain this Clintonian cognitive dissonance. For one thing, the revelations did not necessarily represent anything about Bill Clinton that Americans did not already suspect. As a candidate in early 1992, Clinton was already addressing issues relating to his reported extramarital affairs, and he admitted there had been problems in his marriage. Further, the continuing accusations of sexual harassment by Paula Jones had been very well publicized by 1998, and in fact were the primary reason the Lewinsky assignments became public in the first place.

There also may have been a reluctance to downgrade Clinton's job approval rating because the underlying behavior in all of this—extramarital philandering—is something Americans feel is highly prevalent in their society, even among presidents. In a 1997 Gallup poll, 79% of Americans said that half or more of

married men had committed adultery, and 52% said they had a close friend or close relative who had had an extramarital affair. In a different poll, 59% of Americans said that "most" presidents have had extramarital affairs while in the White House. Additionally, while 85% said they believed that President John F. Kennedy had had extramarital affairs while he was president, 77% still approved of the way he had handled his job—the highest rating of any of the five ex-Presidents tested using this retrospective approval measure. And, when asked to choose among three characteristics as most important in rating how a president is handling the job, 55% of the public cited management ability and 22% said position on the issues, while just 16% chose moral values.

Still another factor may have helped the American public maintain high ratings of Clinton's job performance in the face of his moral transgressions. Clinton had the good fortune to be positioned against adversaries who themselves received some of the lowest image ratings in the history of Gallup polling.

Relatively few Americans knew Independent Prosecutor Kenneth Starr when he was first rated by Gallup in January and February 1998, but as he became better known his image quickly became more unfavorable than favorable. This negative image only worsened during the year, dropping to a 58% unfavorable rating by December 1998. Linda Tripp was almost universally disliked by Americans, with an unfavorable rating of 75% by December 1998. Monica Lewinsky's unfavorability rating in the same December poll was 82%. The

Republican Party's image suffered vis-à-vis the Democratic party as the year progressed. By December 1998, immediately after the House vote to impeach, only 31% of Americans said they had a favorable opinion of the Republican Party, compared to 57% who had a favorable opinion of the Democratic Party.

Moreover, there may have been a paradoxical "rally effect" generated by the image of Clinton bravely persevering and moving forward with "the business of the country" while these negatively rated people were trying to bring him down. The rally effect is usually associated with international events, such as the taking of the hostages in Iran, the invasion of Cuba during the Bay of Pigs, or the Persian Gulf War. But it is possible that the same type of phenomenon could have been at play domestically in 1998.

For example, data from January 1998 show that Clinton's State of the Union address had a galvanizing effect on his overall job approval rating above and beyond the impact of the more positive ratings Clinton had been receiving on his handling of the economy. A significant uptick was apparently directly associated with the address, or other events which were contemporaneous with it. Clinton's job approval rating shot up immediately after his State of the Union address on January 27, 1998, and remained high for the following 14 months.

All of this suggests that the State of the Union address itself (perhaps coupled with Hillary Clinton's "vast right wing conspiracy" pronouncement on network television), was a catalyst event that served to crystallize the public's assessment of Bill Clinton in a classic "rally" manner. It allowed Bill Clinton to be the primary focus of attention as the head of state rather than as the subject of sexual rumors. It certainly reminded people that they might not want to hurt the country's chances of success. It provided Bill Clinton with the opportunity to look masterful and evoke patriotic reactions among the people. And the State of the Union address highlighted Clinton's apparent ability to fight on in the face of a widely disliked opposition.

Some observers have suggested that the willingness of the American public to divorce their acknowledgement of Bill Clinton's sexual misconduct and subsequent attempts to cover it up from their willingness to keep him in office (and to give him high approval ratings at the same time) represents a decline of morality or virtue on the part of the American public, and augers a time when adultery, lying, and other transgressions on the part of public officials will be routinely accepted and ignored. But such generalizations or predictions about the moral future of the republic probably should be made cautiously. It is important to remember that 1998 and early 1999 represented a specific set of circumstances involving a unique president in a unique time.

Without Clinton's pre-existing and acknowledged persona and background as a man living on the sexual edge, without the extraordinary economic and social well-being which provided the context for the impeachment drama, without the hugely negative perceptions of those who sought to penalize Clinton for his moral failings, and without Clinton's unique ability to create the image of a wronged man bravely fighting on in a battle against adversity, the situation might well have turned out differently. Future presidents who commit the same pattern of offenses as Clinton did may well find themselves turned on by the public and drummed out of office in quick order. One conclusion from the 1998 experience was that hypothetical "If you knew that..." scenarios did not accurately predict what would happen when those hypotheticals became real. It may be necessary to await the next set of similar real-life circumstances—not necessarily a situation to be desired, of course—to test many of the hypotheses which arose during the past year and a half about the complex ways in which the American public evaluates its president. ●

Endnotes

¹Unless otherwise noted, data polls cited in this article were conducted by the Gallup Organization for CNN and *USA Today*.

²The correlation is -.49.