THE LEGACY

On Being a 'Clinton-Hater'

BY BRETT STEPHENS
Wednesday, October 1, 2003 12:01 a.m. EDT

JERUSALEM--I saw Bill Clinton the other night, at the "after party" for Shimon Peres's 80th birthday. Little wooden doves of peace were mounted on poles; colored lights lit exotic foliage. Everyone was there: F.W. De Klerk and Pnina Rosenblum; Terje Roed-Larsen and Ron Lauder; Lord Levy and Achinoam Nini. Also, there was a young lady in a J-Lo number with glitter sprinkled suggestively from her sternum to her navel. But I didn't catch her name.

Anyway, Mr. Clinton was there. Already he had brought the crowd to its feet at the Mann auditorium in Tel Aviv, singing John Lennon's "Imagine" with a group of Arab and Israeli schoolchildren ("Imagine there's no countries / It isn't hard to do . . ."). Now he had something personal to say. He had been in Srebrenica the day before, he said. There he had met a woman who was burying her husband and six children. He told us to be mindful that ours was not the only country visited by horror. He told us that Mr. Peres was a man who knew that vengeance belonged to God, not man.

He said all this in a hoarse and mournful and significant tone of voice. I wanted to puke.

I belong to that camp of Americans known as "Clinton-haters." At The Wall Street Journal, I wrote Clinton-unfriendly editorials. On the day of his impeachment, I radiated joy. Once, over dinner at New York's Metropolitan Club, Jean Kennedy Smith told me I was mentally ill. Others have told me that Clinton-hatred is a sexual thing, mixing frustration, envy and dysfunction.

Maybe this is true, although the Lewinsky business never bothered me; there's something endearing about Bill's taste for zaftig women. But perjury is no less a crime than burglary, and there's no question Mr. Clinton perjured himself in his deposition to Paula Jones's lawyers. If you think Nixon deserved to go down, then so too did Mr. Clinton.

But that's hardly why Clinton-haters hate Mr. Clinton. The Clinton-lovers are right; l'affaire Lewinsky was just something we could nail him with. With a different president, a different man, we might have been tempted to join the camp of apologists in saying: It's just sex, and everyone lies about sex.

But Mr. Clinton was not a different man. To his supporters, he was the shaper of the new American center, the brightest Democratic light since John F. Kennedy, the toast of European elites. To people like me, he was a hollow and posturing and feckless man who embodied that side of America that was also hollow and posturing and feckless. And he was the bane of people for whom American fecklessness was a matter of life and death people like that woman in Srebrenica who buried her family.

Let me try to explain this in a way the Clinton-lovers might understand. In 1992, I voted for Mr. Clinton. I even persuaded my more conservative parents to do so as well. My arguments were, first, that Mr. Clinton was good for Israel; second, that he was a sane version of the Democratic Party; third, that George Bush didn't deserve to be re-elected; and fourth, that Mr. Clinton was the man who talked about "the high cost of remaining silent and paralyzed in the face of genocide."

This last item was especially important to me. Like so many young people at the time, Bosnia was one of those things I cared about, at least in the way one "cares" about political things as a young man. It shamed me somewhat that the first Bush administration treated Balkan concentration camps as if they were none of America's concern. I wanted a president like Truman, a man who acted on humane instinct when his heartstrings were pulled.

That's not how it turned out. Mr. Clinton's policy on the Balkans was indistinguishable from his predecessor's. "It's tragic, it's terrible," he said, "but their enmities go back 500 years, some would say almost 1,000 years." Meaning, there's nothing you can do with these savages but let them go on slaughtering each other.

It was worse than that. In 1993 Mr. Clinton sent Secretary of State Warren Christopher to consult with the European allies as to what was to be done. Nothing was to be done, came the reply. So nothing was done. The U.N. had imposed an arms
embargo on the former Yugoslavia. The Bosnian Serbs were amply supplied via Belgrade. The Bosnian Muslims were left to their own devices.

It was only in the summer of 1995 that Mr. Clinton began to take notice. U.N. peacekeepers were being held hostage by the Serbs, and it seemed Mr. Clinton would have to make good on a casual pledge he'd made to get them out. Meanwhile, so called "safe havens" like Srebrenica and Zepa were under siege from Serb militias. Jacques Chirac proposed to Clinton that French troops could be used to relieve the towns, but he needed American airlift. Mr. Clinton never acted on the suggestion. Seven thousand Muslims were murdered in a scene recalling the Katyn Forest.

It was then that Congress, under the leadership of those great ogres Bob Dole and Newt Gingrich, voted by veto-proof majorities to end the arms embargo. By autumn, the rearmed Bosnians and Croats had turned the military tide, and by year's end the Serbs had to sue for peace. The Dayton accords, which the Clinton administration cites as one of its finer achievements, served mainly to save the Serbs from complete military failure.

So much for Bosnia. There was Rwanda, where the Clinton administration went to great pains to distinguish between "genocide," which they denied was taking place in Rwanda, and "acts of genocide," which they acknowledged were taking place. This was in order to avoid having to intervene. There was Sierra Leone, where the Clinton administration's idea of diplomacy was to send Jesse Jackson to limb-chopper Foday Sankoh's political rescue. There was Kosovo, where Mr. Clinton did get around to doing the right thing, though he wouldn't hazard a single American life to do it.

None of these, I should stress, were necessarily bad policy. There are perfectly sound strategic reasons for the U.S. not to wade into faraway ethnic conflicts. Nor is the fact that Clinton overpromised reason to hate him. Every politician does as much. President Clinton might even be praised for mastering the foreign policy prudence that Candidate Clinton lacked.

But Mr. Clinton was a New Kind Of Democrat. Unlike the first President Bush, he would not pay the "high cost of remaining silent and paralyzed in the face of genocide." Not only did he promise the most ethical White House in history, he was also going to pursue the most ethical foreign policy. These were pledges that, in 1992, won over political centrists like me.

But that's not what happened. And it didn't happen because there never was a "President Clinton." There were, instead, two incarnations of Candidate Clinton: first the challenger, then the incumbent. In both cases, no such thing as "policy" could be said to exist; Mr. Clinton moved where political convenience dictated. Among other consequences (not all of which were bad), one is the mass graveyard of Srebrenica, which Mr. Clinton, with truly mind-boggling shamelessness, now employs for rhetorical effects.

The late Jim McDougal, a partner of the Clintons in the Whitewater real-estate deal, once observed that Bill and Hillary were "like tornadoes moving through people's lives." Maybe in Arkansas that was no big deal. In Bosnia it was.

Now, shall I explain again why I'm a "Clinton-hater"?

Mr. Stephens is editor in chief of the Jerusalem Post, where this article first appeared.