

ARTICLES.

■ CLINTON ALREADY?

The Manufactured Candidate

ANDREW KOPKIND

Manchester, New Hampshire

It was said of Belgrade after World War II that there was nothing in the shops except dead flies and pictures of Tito. So it is this winter in Manchester, minus the pictures. There are enough empty storefronts on Elm Street to serve as headquarters for a hundred candidates in the February 18 presidential primary. Once home to the biggest textile mill complex in the world, Manchester seems to have no future save as a theme park about the devolution of America. In this Decline World, factories have flown, malls are empty, condos are bankrupt, banks are failing, the service-sector boom of the Reagan 1980s has gone bust and unemployment has almost tripled since the 1988 primary. And the elms are all dead.

On a damp Sunday morning in January, Elm Street is a dead zone. Traffic lights blink on and off gratuitously to lanes devoid of cars. Torn sheets of green plastic flap idly around an abandoned construction site. Except for a posse of transient advance men, handlers and media persons gathered to start the day campaigning with Bill Clinton, only one local citizen is visible, a tall, disheveled youngish man with a graying beard, camouflage cap, tattered parka and dark aviator glasses. His hands are plunged in his pockets and his shoulders seem permanently hunched against the cold.

"Going down, isn't it?" he says suddenly as we pass, in front of a shuttered porn mart the Clinton people call "the adult book store."

"It looks that way," I agree tentatively.

"Going down," he repeats, and walks away without turning.

In many ways, Bill Clinton is the prophetic candidate of decline. The young and personable Arkansas Governor begins his basic rap—at house parties, club meetings, nursing homes and wherever else a crowd is collected—with a litany of economic deterioration. "We [candidates always assume the identity of the places they seek to represent] used to be the world's banker, now we're the world's biggest debtor," he says. "American workers used to be the best paid, now we're tenth. We used to be eighth in income equality, now we're dead last. The Fortune 500 have announced 300,000 layoffs in the last thirty days." Infrastructure is crumbling, education doesn't work, pollution is pandemic, there's no health system to speak of, manufacturing is disappearing: Clinton counts the woes.

Clinton is arguably the most articulate and certainly the best informed of the candidates chronicling decline in this recession season, when economic failure provides the context for politics. It is not unreasonable, however, to ask, "Com-

pared to what?" Mario Cuomo might have done it with more zing, but he has assigned himself the role of kibitzer rather than player, and that vastly diminishes his impact. Jerry Brown has a strong but one-note message about a single "incumbent party" and the "corruption" of the political system, Paul Tsongas is passionless and unpresidential, Tom Harkin is bombastic and unattached to any populist movement he pretends to lead and Bob Kerrey is fixated on his own war record and sinking fast.

That leaves Clinton in front of the pack (already preshrunk by the departure of Douglas Wilder and George McGovern) and perhaps unstoppable except by an obstacle of his own erection. The experience of 1988 suggests that Democrats are eminently capable of destroying their own campaigns, both by suicidal behavior (Gary Hart's philandering, Joe Biden's plagiarism) and by sudden blackouts of imagination (Dukakis's collapse after the party's national convention). The primary season has just begun (it doesn't end till June), and a slip of the tongue or a fall on a banana peel could derail any one of these characters.

Barring such disasters, Clinton has a clear shot at the nomination. He is now winning the all-important "first primary"—fundraising—after pulling ahead of PAC-man Harkin in the December sweeps. It's true that mainly the money and political elites—not the masses—are giving him initial momentum, and that leaves an opening for a candidate who can rouse the common man somewhere down the line. But already the media are swooning in his wake: Joe Klein of *New York* and Michael Kramer of *Time* act as if they're part of the campaign (Klein actually "spins" for Clinton and explains his policies to reporters on the trail; he maintains for all to hear that Clinton is "the smartest politician I've ever met"). *The New York Times* is employing another pro-Clinton tactic by bashing Kerrey for his personal business practices. Economics columnist Bob Kuttner of *The Boston Globe* detects "a genuine bandwagon" for Clinton, "a Democrat . . . who is not only adroit as a candidate but who also might govern competently." He neglects to say he helped assemble said wagon. Even *Times* columnist William Safire, an anti-Bush Reaganite, is boosting Clinton, for his uncompromising defense of Israeli demands on the U.S. Treasury.

The enthusiastic support of political intellectuals has been the key to Clinton's success so far. While Harkin had some Big Labor, Tsongas some high-tech business, Wilder some blacks and Brown some self-identified progressives, Clinton organized the opinion-leaders and gatekeepers in the cool center of the political establishment. It didn't happen by accident. A founding member (and recent chair) of the centrist Democratic Leadership Council, he directed the development of an ideology to support his campaign. As Clinton and friends begat the D.L.C., so the D.L.C. begat the P.P.I., the Progressive Policy Institute, a Washington think tank that fires off neoliberal proposals like a Salad Shooter spews lettuce shreds.

Not only that, but P.P.I. heavies and adherents have converged on Op-Ed pages all over the United States in a deliberate drive to legitimize Clinton and the ideology of Clintonism

that the institute has created. For example, Elaine Ciulla Kamarck, a P.P.I. senior fellow and Clinton groupie, is now a regular contributor to both the *Los Angeles Times* and *Newsday*. Her first effort posed six "killer questions" for candidates, all of which only Clinton would answer to her liking; the second was an out-and-out endorsement of Clinton's "centrist ways" as the best antidote to Bush. In a similar conceit, the op-edible Abe Rosenthal of *The New York Times* listed ten "errors" he said Bush made in foreign policy, virtually all of them on the "left" side of the issues (failure to devastate Iraq fully and murder Saddam, skepticism on Israel). Clinton, among all the Democrats, is on the Rosenthal side.

What Kuttner calls "an astonishingly broad diversity of Democratic activists" have reported for duty in Camp Clinton. Harold Ickes, son of F.D.R.'s Interior Secretary of the same name and four years ago a Jesse Jackson stalwart, is shepherding Clinton around New York City and organizing local labor leaders for his cause. He has already attracted some key unionists, such as Stanley Hill and Dennis Rivera (co-chairmen of Jackson's drive last time); Rivera likes Harkin but is helping Clinton too, his aides say, for the "winnability" factor. James Carville, the political consultant who scored the season's first hit by masterminding Harris Wofford's senatorial victory in Pennsylvania, is always inches away from Clinton's ear. Liberals like pollster Stanley Greenberg (out of Senator Christopher Dodd and Governor Jim Florio), media man Frank Greer (Fred Harris in '76, et seq.) and campaign manager David Wilhelm (Senator Paul Simon's ex) have moved to the right and into the Clinton center. Such swarming of the columnists, academics and political mandarins recalls the time thirtysomething years ago when the likes of Joe Kraft, the Alsop brothers, Arthur Schlesinger, Walt Rostow and the future knights of Camelot bought their tickets to ride with John Kennedy into the White House.

The more America declines, the better will Clinton's chances be to become President. If the recession is as deep and intractable as now seems the case, the candidate who can give voice to suffering citizens and provide clear plans for action at least stands a chance against the expected Bush blitzkrieg.

The only problem for Clinton at this point is Clinton himself. His policy papers have great preambles and solid introductions, but then they go blank. If there are no second acts in Americans' lives, there are no second pages in Clinton's proposals. Take health care (*please!*). Clinton begins with an eloquent statement of the problem: "We are the only advanced nation in the world that doesn't provide health care to all its citizens and doesn't take the lead in controlling costs. In the first year of the Clinton Administration, Congress and I will deliver quality, affordable health care for all Americans." And then? There is no then, then. He says he'll base his health system on models in Hawaii, Germany and "Europe." He promises coverage for the uncovered but doesn't say how much or what kind. He vows to control costs with vague notions of "insurance reform" and the elimination of "administrative waste" and "billing fraud." To solve the elder-care crisis, he would provide "choices" for old people who

still have a lot of money. And to cap off his health plan, he swears he won't increase taxes. Read his lips.

His long-term economic strategy is, if anything, even more indistinct. The devastating statistics of decline he cites do not lead to ideas of equal weight. He does give New Hampshire audiences a taste of his short-term plans for the economy: speed up work under the new transportation bill (which Bush signed in Texas before he flew to Asia), help small businesses with capital gains and investment tax breaks, beef up federal housing loans and, tastiest of all, cut "middle class" taxes by 10 percent, giving the average family about \$400 to spend "paying off credit card loans" and, perhaps, sending the kids to Yale or buying a new Buick.

The United States is the only major country in the world without an economic strategy, Clinton points out, and that's why manufacturing is dwindling, the Japanese are winning and wages are dropping. His solution is to "deliver quality, affordable health care," encourage manufacturing, reduce interest on the national debt and train young people for skilled work. Is it my imagination or is the dog chasing its own tail? Everything is dependent on a contingency. American cars, he says, have more than \$700 in health insurance costs "built into them," while Japanese cars roll off the line with only 200 health care dollars in each chassis. Provide cheaper health care and Detroit will boom and spark a significant reindustrialization of America, Q.E.D. Tax revenues will rise and the debt will decrease. There will be skilled jobs at high wages for young people who go through Clinton's apprenticeship program. Cut military spending and spend the "peace dividend" on social improvements. But wait. Re-examine the premise, and the logical train is derailed before it leaves the station.

Like Michael Dukakis in 1988, Clinton refers to the marvels of his home state as models for national action. Duka-



his promise of "good jobs at good wages" had as its basis the high-tech, service-rich "Massachusetts miracle," fueled by the Carter-Reagan military expenditure extravaganza and by the explosion of consumption in the 1980s. Elect Dukakis, we were told, and the whole country will experience Massachusetts' *Wirtschaftswunder*. Unfortunately for the Duke, the Iowa caucuses had not yet been held when the *Wunder* started to go under. A year later, when Dukakis assured his voters he would not stand again for Governor of the state he helped run into the ground, Massachusetts was the basket case of the country, and it soon brought the rest of New England under with it.

Clinton offers no evidence that he can reverse the decline of politics in America.

Clinton also promises a "high-wage, high-growth, high-opportunity society" and he refers to many programs in Arkansas as models for his national plan. But even a cursory look at his state shows that his investment strategy over eleven years as Governor there has been the opposite of what he claims. Arkansas is essentially an anti-union state with a "right to work" law that depresses wages and benefits for workers and inhibits the expansion of a skilled labor force. The vaunted Arkansas Industrial Development Commission, the incarnation of Clinton's investment strategy, paves the way for low-wage industrial growth by keeping the state union-free. Clinton has never sought to change the anti-union climate. Nor has he even gone the short distance toward curbing factory flight that Dukakis traveled in enacting a law mandating that workers be notified if their companies shut down. Quite the opposite: Clinton joined anti-union forces in endorsing President Bush's "fast track" negotiations with Mexico for a free trade treaty that would undoubtedly accelerate flight.

When New Hampshire voters recently made redundant by factory flight Clinton what he'd do to stanch the job hemorrhaging, he answers that increased productivity (e.g. speedup), quality control of goods and better management will neutralize the wage benefit offered by the *maquiladoras* of Mexico and the sweatshops of Singapore. "German manufacturing workers work shorter work weeks, earn 20 percent more [than American workers]"; they are provided with child care, parental leave, universal health care and other benefits by the state. And why? "They work smarter," they're better "organized." Not as in "organized labor," of course, but as in organized by management. No mention here of the absolutely crucial role of the militant unions (and their social democratic political allies) in Germany, which really accounts for the workers' prosperity.

Arkansas's tax structure gives enormous breaks to both new and established businesses, while maintaining a regressive and antiworker sales tax on groceries and nonprescription drugs. Clinton has said he's against that tax, but he opposed its re-

peal by voter initiative and by legislative action. And his bid to be the "environmental candidate" rings hollow when seen against his state's dismal record. The current "Green Index" of America's environmental health lists Arkansas forty-eighth among the states in overall environmental practices. Businesses looking to relocate in Arkansas must be pleased to find such an unregulated atmosphere.

In the end, every Clinton position seems to have a "trap door," as an Arkansas journalist who has followed him for a long time observed. Like this escape hatch: Clinton says he's for women's reproductive choice, but he ducks out of the abortion struggle by opposing Medicaid assistance for most poor women seeking abortion (in Arkansas) and by supporting some "parental notification" legislation, effectively limiting choice in a population that badly needs that right just to survive.

Bill Clinton offers no evidence that he can reverse the decline of politics in America that seems to have accompanied the decline of economics. Like Dukakis, he has embarked on a campaign that will contract the electorate rather than expand it. Reports from his pollsters and focus group leaders recommend that he never speak of the poor, of blacks or Latinos, of women or gays, of labor unions, of cities, of the working class, of power. He is permitted to mention the unemployed only if it is clear that he is speaking of the temporarily unfortunate. Welfare is considered a problem, like AIDS for Bush, to be solved by changing the behavior of the afflicted. Clinton projects a spurious idea of "unity," "personal responsibility" and "citizenship" that codifies middle-class manners and interests.

For two decades, Democrats have debated electoral strategies. Some have suggested that only a campaign that brings nonvoters—the young, the poor, minorities and the uneducated—into the polls can create a new majority to overcome the white middle-class suburban vote for Republicans in national elections. Others, like Dukakis (until ten days before the 1988 election) and now Clinton, seem to have given up on democracy for the many and concentrate on appealing to the relative few who do vote. The idea is to grab the so-called white, Southern and disaffected blue-collar "swing vote" away from the Republicans and return it to the Democrats who lost it long ago because of an invidious association with civil rights and peace. At this writing, there can be no proof that either strategy will be successful. Expansion has really never been tried, and no Democrat has managed to trash blacks, the poor and the peace people enough to please a sufficient number of swing voters. It remains for Clinton to try again.

Barring an accident (and as William Burroughs said, there are no accidents), Clinton's campaign will demand the attention and energy of everyone within the Democratic Party's ambit for the next nine months. For progressives and the left, it will not be an easy gestation period. Although Clinton does have a valid claim to a personal history in progressive politics, he has abandoned all but a few of its traces in the discourse he now employs. His trajectory is a lot like Gary Hart's. Both moved from the McGovern campaign of 1972 into a fuzzy neoliberal project that spoke of "new ideas" but decried "spe-

cial interests"—that is, the insurgent constituencies that gave both of them their start.

It is virtually impossible for the remaining progressives within the Democratic Party to have much influence on Clinton's political direction. They will console themselves along the way with arguments that he is "better than Bush," which is certainly true when it comes to certain social and economic issues, although not necessarily the case in some foreign policy spheres, particularly the Middle East. But in terms of making any meaningful change in the way America works—from the delivery of health care to the redistribution of power—Clinton offers nothing of interest. The transformative moment that seemed at hand four years ago has passed. This is a status quo election. America is still a one-party state.

Clinton's success must be counted in the devalued currency of American politics. His is a masterpiece of manufacturing, a triumph of positioning rather than positions, an encyclopedia of first pages and a political dictionary of few words. "It's prime meat," a veteran liberal activist said of Clinton's campaign in New Hampshire last month. "The voters will be drawn to it like dogs to sirloin steak. But it may be *too* good, too perfect. Then they'll sniff for a long time, and walk away." □

■ WORLD ARMS MART

It's Business As Usual

MICHAEL T. KLARE

Scarcely two weeks after the United States pledged in London to restrain its arms sales to the Middle East, U.S. corporate and military officials began negotiating a \$5 billion sale of seventy-two McDonnell Douglas F-15 Eagle fighters to the Saudi government. Washington is not expected to approve the sale of all seventy-two fighters at once, but the Saudi wish list will eventually be filled—one of many multibillion-dollar arms transactions in the Middle East as U.S. arms makers seek to reap the benefits of America's role in defending Saudi Arabia against Saddam Hussein. With other arms-producing countries looking for a share of the lucrative Middle East military market, sales to the region are likely to reach record levels—thereby sabotaging the proclaimed U.S. policy of limiting conventional arms exports to areas of conflict.

For thirty-five years, the major military suppliers—Britain, France, the former Soviet Union and the United States—have been providing their allies and clients in the Third World with billions of dollars' worth of advanced weaponry every year. In the 1980s alone, total arms acquisitions by Third World countries amounted to \$427 billion (in constant 1988 dollars),

with the great bulk of this equipment going to the Middle East and South Asia. These acquisitions have stimulated local arms rivalries, fueled regional conflicts and fed the hegemonic aspirations of emerging powers like Iraq. And while exports of nuclear and chemical weapons have long been prohibited by international treaties and agreements, only recently have major world leaders begun to consider the imposition of significant restraints on *conventional* arms transfers.

The goal of curbing conventional military sales was first brought to priority status in the fall of 1990, when it became palpably clear that uncontrolled arms exports in the 1980s had turned Iraq's war machine into a powerful behemoth. Once the Gulf War commenced, U.S. and other coalition officials announced that the adoption of such constraints would be a major objective in the post-conflict period. "The time has come," Secretary of State James Baker told the House Foreign Relations Committee on February 6, 1991, "to try to change the destructive pattern of military competition and proliferation in [the Middle East] and to reduce the arms flow into an area that is already very over-militarized."

On May 29, President Bush announced a "Middle East Arms Control Initiative" aimed at curbing the spread of nuclear and chemical munitions, ballistic missiles and conventional weapons. In announcing the initiative, Bush indicated that his goal was "halting the proliferation of conventional and unconventional weapons in the Middle East, while supporting the legitimate need of every state to defend itself." He also said the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council (the "Big Five") should consider the adoption of mutual "guidelines" for the control of foreign military sales. This proposal was accepted by the other nations involved, and on July 8-9 representatives of the Big Five met in Paris. After several more months of negotiations, they met again in London on October 17-18 and adopted a preliminary statement of the proposed guidelines.

According to the final communiqué of the London meeting, the Big Five promised to avoid arms transfers that would be likely to:

- (a) prolong or aggravate an existing armed conflict
- (b) increase tension in a region or contribute to regional instability
- (c) introduce destabilizing military capabilities in a region
- (d) contravene embargoes or other relevant internationally agreed restraints to which they are parties
- (e) be used other than for the legitimate defense and security needs of the recipient state

In addition, the Big Five affirmed their support for the establishment, under U.N. supervision, of an annual "register" of all international arms transactions.

If rigorously followed by all parties involved, these guidelines could produce a significant reduction in the export of high-tech munitions to areas of conflict and tension. However, the proposed guidelines do not constitute a binding agreement, nor do they establish any mechanisms for insuring compliance. The major producers are free to go on selling weapons as before so long as they can claim to be following the London guidelines—and when has any government ad-

Michael T. Klare, Associate Professor of Peace and World Security Studies at Hampshire College, is the defense correspondent of The Nation.

Copyright of Nation is the property of Nation Company, Inc.. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.