



Bill Clinton, Republican Hero

Who says those allegedly narrow, highly partisan, and bitterly divisive ideologues in today's Republican Party refuse to take a bipartisan approach to problem solving? In just the past two weeks the Grand Old Party has "disappeared" George W. Bush and embraced Bill Clinton.

Bush either chose or was persuaded not to attend his party's convention in Tampa last week and, apart from a five-minute video paying tribute to both Bush and his father, President George H.W. Bush, there was scarcely a mention of either Bush. But during this week's Democratic convention in Charlotte, Republicans heaped so much praise on former President Clinton, one might have thought they had nominated *him* and not Mitt Romney to run against Barack Obama.



Knowing that Clinton was to deliver a ringing endorsement of Obama Wednesday night, Republicans began singing the praises of Clinton's bipartisan approach to balancing the federal budget and even creating surpluses, in order to contrast his record with that of Obama and his trillion-dollar deficits. "Bill Clinton was a different kind of Democrat than Barack Obama," vice presidential nominee Paul Ryan [assured](#) viewers in an interview that would air Wednesday on CNN.

"When it comes to the state of the economy, President Obama just can't match President Clinton," was the tribute to the former president in a statement issued by Romney campaign spokesperson Amanda Henneberg. Former New Hampshire Governor John Sununu, who was White House chief of staff under the first President Bush, suggested in a conference call to reporters that Clinton might steal Obama's rhetorical thunder and leave the incumbent to play second fiddle.

"What they might end up with at the end of the day is everybody in there screaming, 'We want Bill!' We want Bill!' and they may have to take second billing coming out of this convention," Sununu said. That didn't happen, of course, but who knows? Maybe Republicans will take up the chant. They may even want some recycled Clinton bumper stickers, former Arkansas governor and 2008 Republican presidential hopeful Mike Huckabee [suggested](#) in an interview on ABC's *This Week* back in June.

"I think the pragmatic way in which Bill Clinton governed as president makes even Republicans want to get the bumper strips that say, 'I miss Bill,'" Huckabee said, "because he understood that in governing you do have to sit down and work out your differences."

It was not that long ago that Republicans missed Clinton the way reporters were supposed to miss Richard Nixon, another "comeback kid," after he lost the election for governor of California and promised the ink-stained wretches they wouldn't have "Nixon to kick around any more." It was only four years ago that Huckabee was asking voters in Iowa and New Hampshire not to "hold that against me,"



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when he mentioned he hailed from Hope, Arkansas, Clinton's hometown.

So whatever happened to the bad Bill Clinton, the one Republicans loved to "kick around" in their speeches and press conferences — the president who asked for and signed "the largest tax increase in American history"? Bob Dole, then the Republican leader in the Senate, grudgingly gave Clinton and the Democrats points for consistency. "It's pretty much what they promised — more taxes, more spending," he said. Rep. Christopher Cox (R-Calif.) likened Clinton's fiscal policy to assisted suicide. "This is really the Dr. Kevorkian plan for our economy," he said.

Do Republicans really miss Bill and his "pragmatic approach" to gun legislation? Is there nostalgia in Republican circles for the president who championed and signed into law the Brady Bill, with its five-day waiting period for gun purchases, and the Assault Weapons Ban? What of the president who waged an unconstitutional war in the Balkans without congressional approval and in spite of a House-passed resolution calling for the removal of U.S. armed forces from the conflict? And oh, yes, there was that little matter of impeachment over perjury charges stemming from the Monica Lewinsky scandal. And now Republicans "miss Bill"?

And they forget George. The *New Hampshire Union Leader* arrived Wednesday morning with an [op ed](#) by Sununu under the heading, "Don't be fooled, Barack Obama is no Bill Clinton." It used to be that when a Republican said someone was "no Bill Clinton," it was meant as a compliment — and not to Clinton. But Clinton's appearance at the Democratic convention should "remind the world of a time when the leadership of the Democratic Party took fiscal responsibility seriously," wrote Sununu. "It might even induce nostalgia for the days of balanced budgets and bipartisan accomplishments such as welfare reform."

Somehow the Republicans have made it all sound as though we had gone at once from Clinton's "balanced budgets" and "fiscal responsibility" into the abyss with Obama and those trillion-dollar deficits, with no years of Republican extravagance in between. Those years have been consigned to the "memory hole." There is apparently no "nostalgia" for the Bush-era "compassionate conservatism," with its No Child Left Behind Act, its unpaid-for prescription drug benefit, and two wars with years of nation-building in far-off lands to follow.

Nostalgia is a funny thing, though. It used to be when Republicans praised presidents of the other party — FDR for winning the war, for example, or JFK for cutting taxes — they would pick Democrats who were dead and thus unable to reject the posthumous embrace. Even that wasn't always safe. In the vice presidential candidates debate in 1988, Dan Quayle got dressed down for daring to point out that he was the same age and had the same years of experience in Congress as John F. Kennedy had when he ran for president in 1960.

"Senator, I knew Jack Kennedy," a seemingly indignant Sen. Lloyd Bentsen (D-Texas) replied. "Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. And Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy." It was a great applause line for the Democrats, and it was all anyone ever remembered about that debate.

On September 5, Clinton delivered a robust defense of Obama and took on the Republicans, aiming some of his ridicule quite pointedly at Ryan. But that didn't cool the Wisconsin congressman's zeal for praising the former president. On Thursday, Ryan was at a Republican fundraiser in Beverly Hills, that sordid bastion of Hollywood leftists.

"What's happened over the past four years was not a Bill Clinton Democrat," Ryan [said](#), referring to Obama. "Bill Clinton gave us welfare reform, Bill Clinton worked with Republicans to cut spending and



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to get a good budget agreement in place.”

But Clinton and the Republicans, who became the majority party in Congress midway through Clinton’s first term, did not cut spending. Not unless smaller increases in anticipated spending are counted as cuts, as they are in Ryan’s latest budget plan, which promises a balanced budget in 28 years. Clinton’s first budget, with \$1.52 trillion in spending for Fiscal Year 1994, called for “a 34 percent increase in federal revenues and a 21 percent increase in federal spending over five years,” according to the [Tax Foundation](#). His last budget, for FY 2001, pegged spending at \$1.835 trillion. That’s not an explosion of spending like we saw in the Bush years that followed, but an increase of slightly more than \$300 billion in eight years is not a cut in spending.

The balanced budgets and surpluses boasted of by Clinton and frequently cited by his bipartisan admirers were the result of a great many factors having little to do with fiscal restraint, and much to do with an increase in Social Security taxes and the sudden surge in technology companies that produced a gusher of revenues from the dot.com bubble of the 1990s. And they were the result of some creative bookkeeping that included borrowing from more government trust funds than most Americans knew existed.

Sununu reminded readers that it was Clinton who declared in his 1996 State of the Union Address, “The era of big government is over.” Republicans, then in control of both houses of Congress, sprang to their feet and cheered wildly when the president uttered that line. With Clinton as a born-again conservative, congressional Republicans, under the leadership of House Speaker Newt Gingrich, would usher in a new era of small-government conservatism. It was the dawn of a day that never came, the beginning of the “Gingrich Revolution.”

It didn’t take long for the budget cutters to lose their machetes. The departments of Education and Energy, which the Republicans had been promising to eliminate since 1980, did not wither but grew larger under the Republicans’ verbal assaults. Even a planned “defunding” of the Public Broadcasting System collapsed when Democrats accused Republicans of wanting to deprive little children of the educational services of Big Bird. Big government has gotten bigger ever since and has produced some strange and unexpected “benefits.”

It has even given Republicans “Clinton nostalgia.”

Photo of Bill Clinton at Democratic National Convention: AP Images



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