



# **William J. Clinton**

## **Presidential History Project**

### **Briefing Materials**

**David Kusnet**

**March 19, 2010**

**Prepared by Victor Nemchenok, Research Assistant**

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## DAVID KUSNET NEWS TIMELINE

Prepared by Victor V. Nemchenok

Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, 1/07/2010

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**1984** Kusnet works as a speechwriter for Walter Mondale's presidential campaign. (*Christian Science Monitor*, 04/07/1992)

**1988** Kusnet works as a speechwriter for Michael Dukakis's presidential campaign. (*Christian Science Monitor*, 04/07/1992)

**1992**

*April* Kusnet's *Speaking American: How the Democrats Can Win in the Nineties* is published. Kusnet argues for greater attention to the "working people" and "the middle class," contending that the Democratic Party's electoral success depends on the use of populist rhetoric and ideas to appeal effectively to middle-class voters. The book brings him to the attention of the Clinton campaign. (David Kusnet, "Teaching Progressives to 'Speak American'," in Matthew R. Kerbel, *Get This Party Started: How Progressives Can Fight Back and Win*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1992, p. 132; *The New York Times*, 7/8/1992; *The Washington Post*, 07/12/1992)

*July* Democratic presidential nominee Bill Clinton delivers his acceptance speech, drafted by Kusnet and Paul Begala, at the Democratic National Convention in New York. (*Newsweek*, 01/04/1993)

*October* Kusnet is assigned the task of writing Clinton's speech in support of NAFTA, in spite of his reservations at the lack of strong labor and environmental regulations. (John R. MacArthur, *The Selling of "Free Trade": NAFTA, Washington, and the Subversion of American Democracy*, New York: Hill and Wang, 2000, p. 164)

**1993**

*January* Kusnet, George Stephanopoulos, and Michael Waldman meet with Clinton at the Governor's Mansion in Little Rock for preliminary discussions concerning the inaugural address. Clinton suggests a theme of political renewal and retaking government from special interests. (Michael Waldman, *POTUS Speaks: Finding the Words That Defined the Clinton Presidency*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000, p. 29)

A few days before the inaugural address, several of Clinton's literary friends, including Tommy Caplan and Taylor Branch, visit the White House to help polish the speech. (Waldman, p. 35)

Kusnet is appointed a deputy assistant in the White House Office of Communications and begins to serve as Clinton's chief speechwriter. (*The New York Times*, 01/15/1993, 02/14/1999)

Robert Rubin convinces Clinton to pursue deficit reduction. (Waldman, p. 40)

*February* Kusnet begins drafting Clinton's address to Congress, which will be delivered on February 15. Waldman is asked to work with Kusnet in writing Clinton's upcoming speech to Congress. The address will announce the Administration's economic plan. Waldman notes that the process is very disorganized. The speechwriters are not told the focus of the plan is shifting from an investment-oriented to a deficit reduction-oriented speech. On the 16<sup>th</sup>, Deputy Assistant to the President for Economic Policy Gene Sperling begins to work with the speechwriters on policy. Bruce Reed, Deputy Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy, is brought in to provide the "New Democrat" perspective. (Waldman, pp. 40-42)

## **1994**

*December* *The Washington Post* staff writer Al Kamen reports that Kusnet will be leaving the White House at the end of the year to serve as a visiting fellow at the Economic Policy Institute and to write a syndicated column for Creators Syndicate. (*The Washington Post*, 12/02/1994)

## **1995**

*February* William Safire writes an essay in *The New York Times* that alludes to the centrist direction of the administration as a factor in Kusnet's departure from the White House. (*The New York Times*, 02/13/1995)

## **1996**

*November* Kusnet co-authors a piece in *The Washington Post* following the presidential election urging the new administration to adopt "Worker Liberalism" instead of "centrism" as its policy agenda. (*The Washington Post*, 11/10/1996)

## TIMELINES

- David Kusnet News Timeline, prepared by Victor V. Nemchenok, Miller Center, University of Virginia, 01/11/2010.
- Timeline of the Clinton Presidency, prepared by Robbie Robinson, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, 05/30/2002.
- “The Clinton Presidency: Eight Years of Peace, Progress, and Prosperity,” *U.S. National Archives and Records Administration*, <<http://clinton5.nara.gov/WH/Accomplishments/eightyears-02.html>> (06/12/2002).

## SELECTED WRITINGS AND PUBLIC STATEMENTS BY DAVID KUSNET

- William J. Clinton, “1992 Nomination Speech,” 07/16/1992, *The American Presidency Project*, <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=25958>>.
- William J. Clinton, “1993 Inaugural Address,” 1/20/1993, *Public Papers of the President: William J. Clinton* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1993) pp. 1-3.
- William J. Clinton, “Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on Administration Goals,” 02/17/1993, *Public Papers of the President: William J. Clinton, 1993-2000*, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1993) pp. 113-122.
- David Kusnet, “Teaching Progressives to ‘Speak American’,” in *Get This Party Started: How Progressives Can Fight Back and Win*, Matthew R. Kerbel, ed. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2006) pp. 129-133.
- David Kusnet and Ruy Teixeira, “Tuesday’s Secret Result: A Winning Brand of Liberalism,” *The Washington Post*, 11/10/1996.
- David Kusnet, *Speaking American: How the Democrats Can Win in the Nineties* (New York: Avalon, 1992).

## SPEECHWRITER

- Dan Balz and Ruth Marcus, “The Windup For the Pitch; How Clinton’s Team Drafted Game Plan to Sell Program,” *The Washington Post*, 03/07/1993.
- Daniel Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years: The Fifties and the Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2004) pp. 14-15.
- Kurt Ritter and Martin J. Medhurst, eds., *Presidential Speechwriting: From the New Deal to the Reagan Revolution and Beyond* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 2008) pp. 14-15.
- John R. MacArthur, *“The Selling of “Free Trade”: NAFTA, Washington, and the Subversion of Democracy* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001) pp. 164-165.
- Michael Waldman, *POTUS Speaks: Finding the Words That Defined the Clinton Presidency* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000) pp. 28-41.
- Robert Schlesinger, *White House Ghosts: Presidents and Their Speechwriters* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008) pp. 402-12, 418-19.

## **DAVID KUSNET SUGGESTED TOPICS**

*Prepared by Victor V. Nemchenok*

*Miller Center, University of Virginia, 01/11/2010*

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### ***Joining the Campaign***

- How did you come to work for the 1992 Clinton campaign? How prominent a role did the publication of *Speaking American* play in your initial involvement with the campaign?
- Discuss your role and responsibilities during the campaign.
- How would you characterize your early relationship with Clinton?

### ***Deputy Assistant and Chief Speechwriter in the White House Office of Communications***

- What was the relationship between the speechwriting staff and President Clinton's policy advisors? How did that influence your approach to writing the President's policy speeches?
- How did "the Clearance System" affect the way you approached your speechwriting responsibilities?
- How important a role did the speechwriting staff play in the internal debates over the importance of values versus economic factors in the administration's public message?
- Discuss the difference between writing speeches during a campaign and writing speeches during a period of governing. What were the challenges you faced in transitioning from writing speeches for a presidential campaign to one of the President's speechwriters?
- Discuss your relationship with the President as Chief Speechwriter. What role would Clinton play in the writing of a major speech such as a State of the Union? How would Clinton prepare to deliver a major speech? How did your understanding of Clinton's speechmaking style affect the way you wrote for him?
- Discuss your involvement in writing for the President in areas concerning national security and defense. What role did the National Security Council and other defense-related agencies play in that process? Did you feel a special responsibility, in your position as chief speechwriter to Clinton, in helping craft the President's message?
- Discuss your decision to end your tenure as Chief Speechwriter at the White House. What led you to decide to make this move? When did you make the decision to leave?

### ***Clinton Presidency in Retrospect***

- Evaluate President Clinton as a public leader, a legislative leader, and a world leader.
- What role did presidential rhetoric play in the Clinton presidency? How effective was Clinton's use of the bully pulpit?
- How would you characterize Clinton's decision-making style? How did Clinton respond to adversity and setbacks?
- What were the strengths and weaknesses of the Clinton Administration?
- What features of the Clinton Administration were missed or misunderstood by the press? How should the Clinton presidency be viewed by history?