

# VQR

---

LINCOLN, CLINTON, AND VAULTING AMBITION

Author(s): MATTHEW PINSKER

Source: *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, SUMMER 1997, Vol. 73, No. 3 (SUMMER 1997), pp. 420-431

Published by: University of Virginia

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/26439057>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



University of Virginia is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Virginia Quarterly Review*

JSTOR

# LINCOLN, CLINTON, AND VAULTING AMBITION

BY MATTHEW PINSKER

*I have no spur  
To prick the sides of my intent but only  
Vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself  
and falls on the other.*

—Macbeth. I.vii

**A**mbition is a subject more easily described than discussed by political scientists and historians. Scholars of American politics have developed broad theories of ideology, culture, and voting behavior, but not ambition. Even most political biographers prefer to explain the ambitions of their subjects with details and particulars rather than with abstract theories. Admittedly, some have borrowed psychological concepts to explain the ambitious, but such analysis is the exception, not the rule, in American political history. There are a variety of factors that might explain this development. More than anything else, however, it appears that ambition lacks the nuances necessary to fuel serious academic debate. The consensus is that all politicians are ambitious—to win reelection, to wield power, to achieve fame—without much to distinguish their desires. The well-known philosopher John Rawls, for example, suggests in his classroom that political ambition is like the “x” factor in algebra; it can be factored out of discussions without affecting the result.

Every generation or so, however, an American political figure emerges whose aspirations dwarf those around him. The greatest political figures dominate their times, because their will to dominate seems to defy time and place. What drives such people? Is it possible that they are just luckier than the rest? Or is their vaulting ambition somehow different than the garden variety desire for a seat in

Congress or 15 minutes of fame? Two recent biographies of Abraham Lincoln and Bill Clinton, written by David Herbert Donald and David Maraniss respectively, suggest the beginnings of an answer. Although neither author set out to write a study of ambition, the nature of their subjects makes such an outcome almost inevitable. If Lincoln's ambition was "a little engine that knew no rest," according to his longtime law partner, then Clinton's must be a mid-sized nuclear reactor. Rev. Jesse Jackson, no wallflower himself, says about Clinton, "there's *nothin'* he won't do." Comparing the experiences of Lincoln and Clinton, especially during their rise to power and with careful attention to the observations of their peers, reveals at least some of the characteristics of ambition in its most intense state. While it may not be advisable to launch a full-fledged theory of ambition from only two case studies, the Lincoln-Clinton parallels suggest a curious dichotomy within the most ambitious between intense drive and passive fatalism and bring to mind the story—and lessons—of Macbeth.

There are more than enough biographical similarities between Lincoln and Clinton to provoke an animated parlor game. Both were born in the South to working-class families. The Lincolns were prairie farmers from Kentucky, while the Blythes (and later the Clintons) were the nurses and salesmen of little towns in Arkansas. Each son had a troubled relationship with his father figure. Lincoln felt estranged from his father Thomas and chose not to see him before the latter died. Clinton's relationship with his step-father Roger was more affectionate but also stormier and involved at least one physical confrontation. Both Lincoln and Clinton entered electoral politics at just about the earliest possible age. Lincoln ran for state representative at 23 and Clinton for Congress at 27. Both were attorneys who married strong-willed and intelligent wives. Yet Mary Lincoln and Hillary Clinton may be the only First Ladies who have been the object of hostile congressional investigation. There are numerous other parallels—unpopular war protests, curious land deals, lack of Washington experience—that only add to the aura of provocative coincidence.

The more relevant parallels, however, are less obvious and require a richer understanding of their respective lives. Here is the value of

reading the Donald and Maraniss biographies together. Donald is a Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer who has written extensively on Lincoln and his contemporaries. Despite the abundance of Lincoln literature, the impending arrival of Donald's biography was much talked about within historical circles and the book was widely expected to become the "definitive" treatment of the Great Emancipator's life. Although gossiped about within a more narrow Beltway, Maraniss' book was equally anticipated. Maraniss was one of the journalists responsible for the *Washington Post's* Pulitzer Prize-winning coverage of the 1992 presidential campaign. Many pundits darkly predicted that his book would reveal the true Clinton, hinting at an expose of scandal and embarrassment.

That Donald and Maraniss disappointed some of their critics is not only ironic, but also revealing. Donald found Lincoln to be essentially passive as president. He begins the biography with an epigraph from Lincoln: "I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me." Throughout the book, but especially during the presidential years, Donald demonstrates how Lincoln's refusal to set policy and his abundant patience helped achieve goals. This judgment struck many readers as counter-intuitive and bloodless, leaving the mythical Lincoln shorn of his greatness. By contrast, Maraniss discovered nearly the opposite character traits in the young Clinton who was, as the title of the biography indicated, always determined to be "First in His Class." Maraniss opens by showing how the now famous handshake between President John F. Kennedy and the 16-year-old Clinton was the result of extensive maneuvering and a set of sharp elbows. With excruciating detail, Maraniss dissects the Clinton method of networking and self-promotion, a relentless process that surprised many who find Clinton to be little more than a brilliant but undisciplined charmer.

## II

Yet, in their common debunking of conventional wisdom, Donald and Maraniss create portraits that look remarkably alike. Donald's deflated Lincoln and Maraniss' inflated Clinton merge to form a vision of near equals in style, if not in achievement. This result would

undoubtedly please Clinton, who embraces the Lincoln mantle whenever possible, citing him frequently as inspiration and role model. However, the result clearly disturbs the Lincoln faithful and probably accounts for at least some of the cool reaction to Donald's previously much heralded effort. Most Americans are reluctant to believe what the Bill Clinton character asserts near the end of the novel *Primary Colors*. "You don't think Abraham Lincoln was a whore before he was president?" asks Governor Jack Stanton, "He had to tell his little stories and smile his shit-eating, backcountry grin. He did it all just so he'd get the opportunity, one day, to stand in front of the nation and appeal to 'the better angels of our nature.'" This is the exasperated cry of the politician confronted with the smallness of his daily enterprise and the enormity of his compromises, not presumably the credo of the Great Emancipator.

And yet some of Lincoln's contemporaries would have grumbled that it was accurate. Donald describes Lincoln's devotion to his craft, both as politician and attorney, with meticulous care. He is the first major Lincoln biographer to uncover a fascinating newspaper account of a 38-year-old Lincoln meeting his constituents as a first-term congressman. According to the Boston journalist, who was traveling through Illinois, Congressman Lincoln "knew, or appeared to know, everybody we met, the name of the tenant of every farm-house, and the owner of every plat [sic] of ground." The cynical reporter found Lincoln's elaborate country charm hilarious. "Such a shaking of hands—such a how-d'ye-do—such a greeting of different kinds, as we saw, was never seen before; it seemed as if [Lincoln] knew every thing, and he had a kind word, a smile and a bow for everybody on the road, even to the horses, and the cattle, and the swine." It is not difficult to imagine a big city columnist like Joe Klein writing such a description about Bill Clinton on the campaign trail in Arkansas.

This fleeting snapshot of Lincoln in 1847 might be the single most important piece of evidence concerning Lincoln's political style before his presidency. It captures the essence of his networking method from a neutral, if bemused, contemporary source. Without addressing the charge that Lincoln was "a whore," this scene does confirm that he did "smile his shit-eating, backcountry grin" on at least one occasion—and certainly many more. Such presumably

minor discoveries are actually quite important. Those who study ideology, culture, and voting behavior have physical documents to examine—speeches, letters, journals, election returns. Those who study politics in the back rooms and on the campaign trail must seek out observations, often buried in unrelated documents or distorted through clouds of memories. Donald deserves enormous credit for pulling together as much of this elusive evidence as he has.

Although Maraniss' job is somewhat easier than Donald's since interviews with contemporaries remain an option, he also deserves credit. Journalists can manipulate contacts or rely too heavily on anonymous sources with axes to grind. Instead, Maraniss uses the same hard work and preparation that made Donald a great historian to turn his interviews into powerful investigative tools. He explores multiple perspectives, only uses verifiable information, and checks his sources against each other. These are common sense skills, but rare enough in both journalism and biography.

One sign of Maraniss' commitment to his craft is that he refuses to waste much time exhuming Clinton's sexual past and spends infinitely more effort on understanding how Clinton cultivated his network of friends or "F.O.B.'s" (Friends of Bill), as they have come to be called. No doubt this decision hurts book sales, but it provides more relevant insight into Clinton's success. Maraniss introduces a parade of characters from Clinton's past who recall with numbing similarity their expectations that he would one day become governor or senator or president. As much as Clinton charmed people with his warmth or easy-going intelligence, what emerges from these testimonials is more a sense of investment than friendship. Their collective judgment is perhaps best embodied by a former German exchange student who met Clinton briefly while the latter was an undergraduate at Georgetown. The German visitor told Maraniss that he left the United States forever connecting Clinton with an old German saying: "from this wood great politicians are carved."

Of course, such observations come easier with hindsight. However, Maraniss provides such a thorough account of the Clinton devotion to networking that there is little room to doubt these impressions. Clinton always worked with enormous discipline when the object was the advancement of his own political career. He served as co-director

of George McGovern's 1972 presidential campaign in Texas, along with future historian Taylor Branch. At the time, however, Clinton was enrolled at Yale Law School. Following McGovern's landslide defeat, Clinton lingered at the Austin headquarters without giving much noticeable thought to returning to class. Instead Maraniss reports that Clinton was "seen carefully going through all the mailing lists and files and letters, transferring names and telephone numbers to his growing personal file of index cards."

No matter how stereotypical this devotion to personal acquaintance seems in aspiring young politicians, it is striking nonetheless to find such similarities between Lincoln and Clinton. The comparison goes beyond mere style. Anyone can shake hands or keep shoe boxes full of three-by-five cards. What separates Lincoln and Clinton from the rest is that they appeared to thrive upon this contact from their youth. Moreover, their evident joy in the process mitigated the effects upon those being manipulated. "Clinton was the master of the soft sell," writes Maraniss, and one imagines that Donald would concur for Lincoln. That they actually enjoyed the process is what many observers, ambitious for other prizes and lacking such personal charm, can never seem to understand or respect. "Two thirds of what we do is reprehensible," says Jack Stanton (Bill Clinton) in *Primary Colors*. "This isn't the way a normal human being acts." That is simply Joe Klein, not Bill Clinton, talking. There is nothing reprehensible about saying a friendly "how-d'ye-do" as long as you mean it. During their rise to power, there is no reason to doubt that Lincoln and Clinton always meant it.

### III

From such driven beginnings, one might expect presidents of even greater intensity as they seize their historical day. Instead, Donald reports that Lincoln exasperated his contemporaries with his apparent disregard for old friends and frightening lack of direction. "My policy is to have no policy," the Civil War president repeated often. Lincoln, who had assiduously cultivated his own network of friends from Illinois, quickly appeared to abandon them after becoming president. He selected a Cabinet absent of any close political allies

and often ignored the wishes of his former associates in the distribution of patronage. "We made Abe," barked Joseph Medill, the editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, "and by God, we can unmake him." Radical Republicans became infuriated with what they considered to be the glacial pace of Lincoln's emancipation policy and later objected bitterly to his lenient views on Reconstruction.

Although Maraniss concludes his account with Clinton's 1992 announcement as a presidential candidate, any quick search of NEXIS would probably reveal hundreds of citations for "Clinton" and "lack of focus." The Clinton strategy of "triangulation" (devised by consultant Dick Morris) suggested to many of Clinton's former allies that he had labored to become president for himself and not for any set of greater principles. Triangulation referred to Clinton's need to position himself at a distance from both the Republican and Democratic party leaders on Capitol Hill to form, in effect, a triangle of political interests in Washington. That meant moving away from many of the ideals and goals of the Democrats and liberals who had long considered themselves friends of both Bill and his values.

Nothing better illustrates the shared dynamic of the first Lincoln and Clinton terms than a comparison of the 1864 Wade-Davis bill and the 1996 welfare reform bill. Senator Benjamin F. Wade (R, Ohio) and Representative Henry Winter Davis (R, Maryland), both fierce radical critics of President Lincoln, introduced a bill in the spring of 1864 that asserted congressional control over Reconstruction. It was a dark period for the Lincoln Administration and the North. Despite more than three years of bloody war, the Confederates seemed far from capitulation. The Army of the Potomac had recently lost more than 32,000 men during the Battle of the Wilderness. Nevertheless, the North was steadily advancing into Confederate territory and Lincoln had been proposing generous terms to reconstruct captured states into the Union. The Congress, dominated by Radical Republicans, was in a less conciliatory mood. The Wade-Davis bill required 50 percent, rather than Lincoln's proposed 10 percent, as the threshold of loyal voters necessary to reconstitute rebellious state governments. The bill also outlined a more aggressive loyalty oath than Lincoln envisioned, making the passing of any threshold less likely. Lincoln received the bill as



Congress adjourned for the summer, and thus, by refusing to sign it, was able to employ a "pocket veto," a little used constitutional strategy which meant that the unsigned bill never became law.

The politics of Wade-Davis pitted Lincoln against members of his own party. He was attempting to keep a coalition of Republicans and War Democrats together long enough to ensure his reelection in November. To many Republicans, Lincoln appeared to betray his own party and his own principles. He reacted angrily to this charge, saying about some of his colleagues, "They have never been friendly to me and I don't know that this will make any special difference as to that." Lincoln, however, refused to concede that he had abandoned any principles. "I must keep some consciousness of being somewhere near right: I must keep some standard of principle fixed within myself." However wise, this statement seemed to many as a forlorn retreat from the days when Lincoln had warned boldly that a house divided against itself would not stand.

During the spring and summer of 1996, President Clinton also tried to keep "somewhere near right" on the issue of welfare reform. Polls repeatedly indicated that a majority of Americans supported dramatic change in the system of Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC), a Depression-era program initially designed to help widows. Subsequently, welfare, as it is known, has become a resource to support single, sometimes teenage, mothers, who cannot find well-paying or steady jobs. In 1992, Clinton campaigned as a "New Democrat" who promised to "end welfare as we know it." However, President Clinton subordinated the issue to other priorities until the Republican-controlled Congress passed a dramatic welfare reform bill in the spring of 1996 that converted the federal AFDC program into bloc grants for the states. Clinton vetoed two initial efforts out of concern that ending the federal guarantee of aid to the poor would hurt children. However, as the 104th Congress prepared for its summer recess, Clinton found the political pressure too great to resist. Over the objection of liberals and some prominent Democrats, such as Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D, New York), Clinton signed the welfare reform bill in August.

The politics of welfare reform also pitted Clinton against members of his own party. Like Lincoln, he was attempting to keep a coalition

of moderates and liberals together to ensure his reelection. Lincoln had justified his decision by insisting that his principles were “fixed within myself.” This was a justification that many only accepted after hearing the elegant words of the Second Inaugural; “With malice toward none; with charity for all.” It is still too early to tell if Clinton has his own principles fixed within himself. Still, earlier in his life, he indirectly addressed the topic in a letter that Maraniss quotes from in his biography. “You cannot turn from what you must do—it would for you be a kind of suicide,” he wrote as a law student to another young politico, “But you must try not to kill a part of yourself doing them either.” History will judge whether Clinton has killed a part of himself on welfare reform.

Clinton and Lincoln are not the only ambitious leaders who have exhibited an intense will to power followed by an almost fatalistic exercise of leadership. This was one of the principal subjects of Lincoln’s favorite play, *Macbeth*. Confronted with supernatural prophecies of his own greatness, Macbeth feels the “future in the instant” and commits regicide to secure his destiny. Ultimately, however, guilt and mortality block his “vaulting ambition,” and Macbeth is left to ponder the futility of life’s “brief candle” before his own death. Most readers focus on the evil in Macbeth, but what drives him (and Lady Macbeth) is ambition more than pathology. At least, that is how Lincoln viewed the play. “I think nothing equals Macbeth,” he wrote in a letter where he also cited Claudius’ speech in *Hamlet* as his favorite Shakespearean soliloquy. That speech concerns the question of ambition run amok and the attendant guilt. “O my offence is rank,” says Claudius as he offers to return “My crown, mine own ambition and my queen.” Clearly, Lincoln saw in *Macbeth* a dark parable of his own career.

Donald has suggested that Lincoln could “easily identify” with Macbeth “because he had that kind of ambition.” By that remark, Donald meant simply ambition on the grandest scale. However, it may be possible to construe even more. I would divide ambitious politicians into three categories: those who want, those who need, and those who know. Those who want are ambitious because they feel they deserve success. They achieve if their timing is good and circumstances permit. Political figures who seem to fit this descrip-

tion are men such as George Bush and Dwight Eisenhower. Those who need are ambitious because they fear they might deserve failure. They achieve because they are relentless and driven. Political figures who seem to fit this description are men such as Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. Finally, there are those who know. They are ambitious because they believe it is their destiny. They achieve because their faith in themselves is so unshakable. Lincoln was one who knew. Clinton may be another. Macbeth was one who knew too much.

## IV

Although such categories might appear contrived, there are signs that at least Lincoln, and possibly Clinton, would recognize them immediately. At the age 23, while running for a seat in the General Assembly, Lincoln offered an unsolicited perspective on his own destiny in his first campaign circular. "Every man is said to have his peculiar ambition," Lincoln stated, "Mine is that of being truly esteemed of my fellow men, by rendering myself worthy of their esteem." Lincoln added that how well he would succeed "is yet to be developed." Compare that sentiment to lines from Clinton's notorious letter to Colonel Eugene Holmes, also written at the age of 23, concerning his desire to "maintain my political viability" while avoiding the draft. "For years I have worked to prepare myself for a political life," the young Clinton wrote, "characterized by both practical political ability and concern for rapid social progress." He added with the same transparent false humility as Lincoln, "It is a life I still feel compelled to lead."

Such mature visions from such young men suggest a kind of political epiphany, a Macbethian moment, where they had seen their "future in the instant." This would explain many initial bursts of energy, as the two men vaulted toward what they believed to be their destiny. It would also explain the ambivalence each demonstrated once in power as they realized the price of their dreams and futility of their most ambitious designs. Perhaps only someone who has "no spur/To prick the sides" of his intent could understand the wild scope of such unrestrained ambition. In 1838, Lincoln offered a frightening glimpse into the power of such ambition. Speaking to a young men's

society about the need to end mob violence and preserve the rule of law, Lincoln digressed to discuss the motivation of the most ambitious. "Many great and good men," he said, aspire "to nothing beyond a seat in Congress, a gubernatorial or a presidential chair," but "such belong not to the family of the lion, or the tribe of the eagle." He ominously predicted that "men of ambition and talents" would arise to disturb the peace of the Republic. "Towering genius disdains a beaten path," he said, "Distinction will be his paramount object." Several Lincoln scholars have found in these foreboding lines projections of his own future. In 1862, Lincoln wrote, "My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union." The echo to the "Towering genius" who seeks "Distinction" is unmistakable, even if accidental.

That Lincoln could so easily dismiss those who aspire to "a seat in Congress, a gubernatorial or presidential chair" as not belonging to the "family of the lion," while he was nothing more than a member of the Illinois General Assembly is stunning testimony to the scope of his ambition. What drives such a man? Is it possible that Lincoln experienced a Macbethian moment on the Illinois prairie that convinced him he was destined to become a "Towering genius?" Did Clinton experience such a moment in Hope or Hot Springs while listening to his Elvis records and day-dreaming of his meeting with President Kennedy?

The answer is almost surely not so dramatic. It doesn't need to be. Democratic elections are nothing but a series of Macbethian moments that offer regular tests of ambition and prophetic encounters with the future. Each contest offers ambitious young figures like Lincoln or Clinton a version of the meeting with the Weird Sisters. It is interesting to compare their reactions to their first major "electoral" victories. Lincoln was selected by his peers in a public vote to become captain of his regiment in the Black Hawk War. Clinton was elected after high school to serve as a Boys Nation senator for a week in Washington. Lincoln later said about his selection that it was "a success which gave me more pleasure than any I have had since." Following his selection in 1963, Clinton said, "It's the biggest thrill and honor of my life." One can hear in both voices the same sheer joy of winning an election. This is a joy that is for

some reason purer and more powerful for them than it is for the vast majority of others. This spirit carried Lincoln and Clinton through years of speechmaking and handshaking that others would find abhorrent.

Now, Clinton faces a second term creeping in the "petty pace" of daily scandal and flickering like Macbeth's "brief candle." According to Dick Morris, the fallen advisor, Clinton frets openly about his place in presidential history, dissecting various "tiers" of greatness. Yet, for someone who has always been "first in his class," Clinton seems surprisingly unable to seize the initiative. Instead, he attributes the rating of greatness to the times, not the man, a formulation that clearly would not have suited Lincoln's "Towering Genius." Whether or not Clinton's ambition has overleaped itself or will reemerge to carry some principle—and himself—toward greater distinction hinges on his capacity to reject this Macbethian fatalism.

While it may be impossible to explain exactly why some young men and women find happiness in winning an election and others do not, it seems that ambition is not an "x" that can or should be factored out of political equations. There are surely nuances evident in careful biographies, like those by Donald and Maraniss, that suggest the ability to draw general conclusions as others have done for ideology, culture, and voting behavior. What historians and political scientists now describe as "fire-in-the-belly," might soon become broken up into categories reflecting both intensity and direction. Whether or not this would represent an improvement is debatable, but it will surely provide ambitious young scholars with material for conferences and footnotes for years to come.