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The Book on Bill Clinton

A Look Back at News Coverage of the Clinton Presidency

Bill Clinton's publication of his memoir "My Life" led to a public reappraisal of his presidency. But how did the media treat him compared to his time in office? This issue of *Media Monitor* examines Mr. Clinton's media image from 1992 through 2001, based on CMPA's content analysis of his coverage on the broadcast network evening news.

Major Findings:

Strike Two

Bill Clinton's best selling memoir "My Life" received overwhelmingly negative reviews in the national press. Similar reviews followed him out of the White House three ears ago, along with a trail of accusations. *Page 7*

The Candidate

In 1992 Clinton got the worst press of any Democrat in the primaries...

But he got far better press than George Bush and Bob Dole in the 1992 and 1996 general elections. *Page 2*

The Incumbent

Clinton got mostly bad press during his first 100 days as president and his first year in office...

but no worse than other recent presidents. Page 3

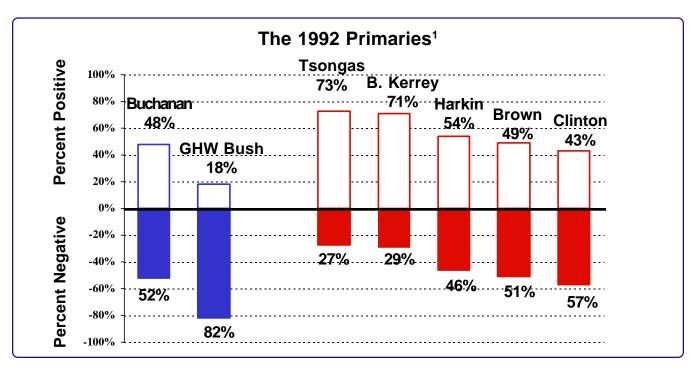
The Scandals

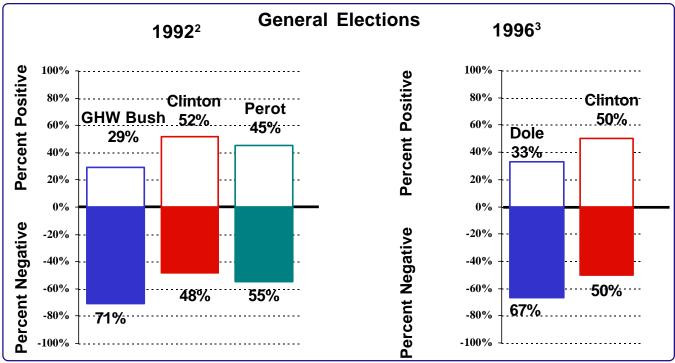
During the Whitewater, "troopergate," and Monica Lewinsky scandals, Clinton consistently got better coverage than his accusers did. *Pages 5 & 6*

The Comedian's Friend

Late-night TV comics have told three times as many jokes about Clinton as any other public figure since 1992. *Page 8*

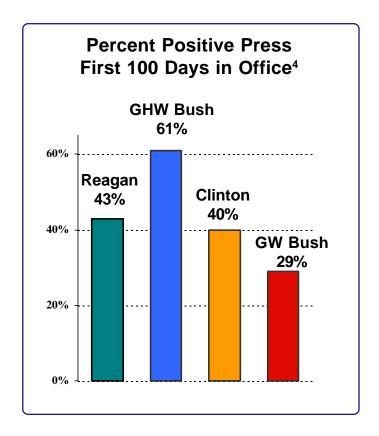
Tone of TV Coverage -- Election Coverage





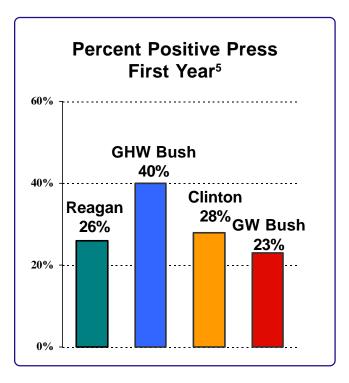
Bill Clinton got the worst press of any major Democratic candidate in the 1992 presidential primaries (although President Bush fared even worse against Republican challenger Pat Buchanan.) But overall, Clinton outpaced his GOP opponents in both the 1992 and 1996 general elections.

Tone of Coverage--The Presidency

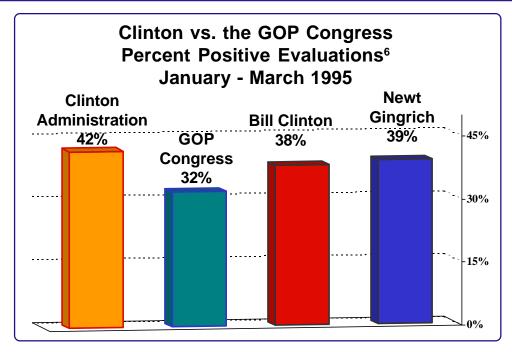


Presidential honeymoons are passé in our age of network negativism. Since 1980 only George H.W. Bush has gotten a majority of positive press during his benchmark first 100 days in office. Bill Clinton's coverage was 3 to 2 negative, similar to Reagan's but better than that of his successor George W. Bush.

TV news has quickly soured on every recent president. During their first year, the Clinton, Reagan, and George W. Bush administrations all received roughly three times as much criticism as praise. Bush senior had a 3 to 2 ratio of negative to positive press.



Tone of Coverage -- Versus Congress



After the Republicans unexpectedly gained control of Congress in the 1994 elections, the media treated the 104th Congress and House Speaker Newt Gingrich almost like a new president and his administration. The Clinton administration got better reviews than the incoming GOP Congress, but Clinton and Gingrich received about the same proportion of negative comments.

Examples of Evaluations:

"If he's going to cheat on his wife, he's going to cheat on America."
—voter, NBC, 2/11/92

"He spent much of the last decade making things better in Arkansas."
—Richard Threlkeld, CBS, 1/14/92

"Bill Clinton represents the best hope that this nation has for a brighter future."
—voter, ABC, 1/17/93

"The president [looks] indecisive, his staff incompetent."
—John McWethy, ABC, 6/4/93

"He got away from the values that made him seem like one of us."
—Joe Klein, CBS, 6/1/93

"Even some Democrats say the White House still looks like the gang that can't shoot straight."
—Andrea Mitchell, NBC, 3/11/95

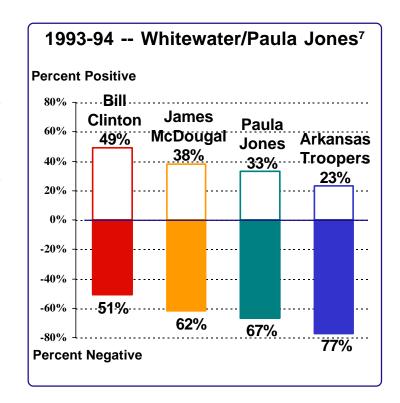
"He should... resign and let somebody in there that's got morals."
—voter, ABC, 9/13/98

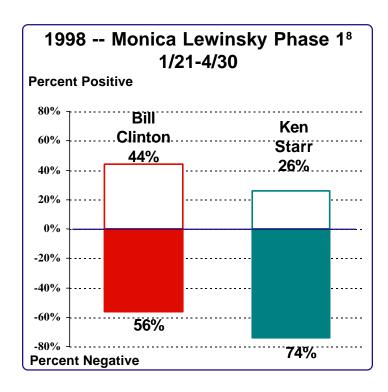
"The fact that he's more human actually is more comforting to me."
—D.C. Tourist, ABC, 1/31/98

Tone of Coverage--The Scandals

The first of the "Clinton scandals" emerged in December 1993, with a surge of media interest in charges that Bill and Hillary Clinton had improperly benefitted from their financial dealings with the Whitewater Development Corp. in Arkansas. That same month Paula Jones publicly claimed that one of Governor Bill Clinton's Arkansas trooper bodyguards had solicited her for sex on behalf of the governor.

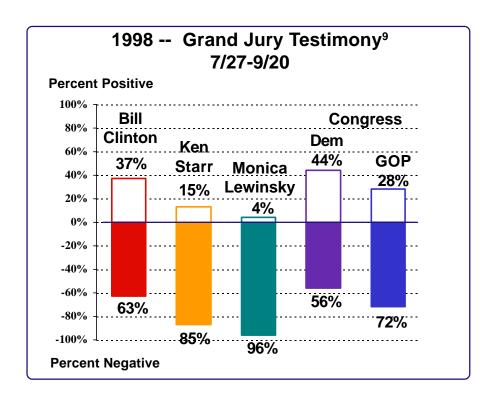
Ms. Jones' subsequent sexual harassment lawsuit, and continued developments in the Whitewater affair, dominated TV news coverage of the president throughout the spring of 1994. But the coverage had a silver lining for Clinton: Despite receiving heavy criticism, he fared better than his opponents.

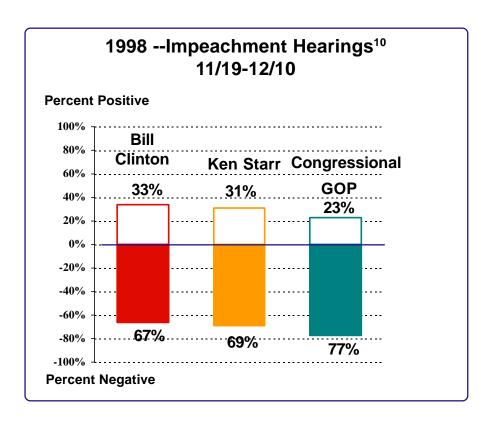




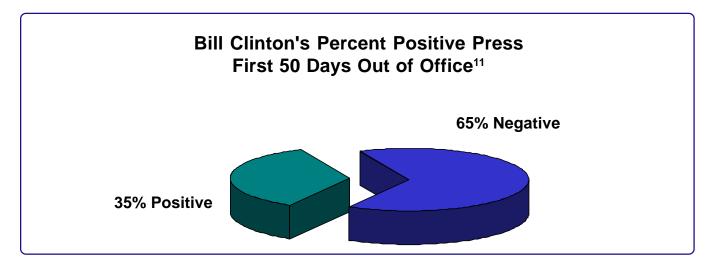
Charges that he had an affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky again fueled criticism of President Clinton. But he consistently got better press than his accusers. From the time the scandal broke in January 1998 through the impeachment hearings in December, Clinton's media coverage sagged but remained more positive than that of Ms. Lewinsky, Special Prosecutor Kenneth Star, and the Republican Congress.

Tone of Coverage--The Scandals

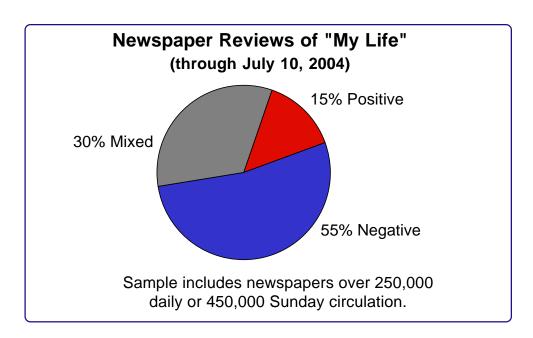




Tone of Coverage -- The Ex-president



Bill Clinton left office as he entered it, amid a swirl of partisan controversy. Questionable lastminute pardons and charges that he took gifts and other items that were government property contributed to a 2 to 1 ratio of bad to good press.



Only 4 out of 27 reviews in major newspapers of former President Bill Clinton's memoir "My Life" were favorable.

∧Media Monitor

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Number of Jokes -- The Comedians Friend

Top Joke Targets

1992-2004

of Jokes 1. Bill Clinton 6,851 2. George W. Bush 2,221 3. Al Gore 1,194 4. OJ Simpson 986 5. Bob Dole 868 6. Hillary Clinton 834 7. Monica Lewinsky 653 8. Ross Perot 464 9. Dan Quayle 458

439

10. G.H.W. Bush



January - June 2004

	# of Jokes
1. George W. Bush	425
2. John Kerry	159
3. Bill Clinton	146
4. Howard Dean	68
5. Dick Cheney	63
6. Michael Jackson	43
7. Martha Stewart	42
8. Ralph Nader	33
9. Dennis Kucinich	30
10. Arnold Schwarzenegg	er 29

Ever since he stepped onto the national stage, Bill Clinton has been the favorite target of comedians on TV's latenight talk shows. Sin 1992, Jay Leno ("The Tonight Show") and David Letterman ("Late Night") have made Clinton the butt of 6,851 jokes, over three times as many as anyone else has suffered. At his rate of about 500 jokes a year to date, George W. Bush will need more than a second term to topple his predecessor. Despite being out of office for over three years, Clinton is third on the 2004 joke list, trailing only George W. Bush and John Kerry.

Examples of Jokes:

"Doctors say President Clinton has injured his back. He was doing a handstand when he found out Hillary was moving out."

-Letterman, 1999

"President Clinton has a new program to teach sexual abstinence to young people. Well, those who can't do, teach"

-Letterman, 1997

"Just like Hillary, Bill Clinton recently had an imaginary conversation with Eleanor Roosevelt. Now she's suing him for sexual harassment."

-Leno, 1996

"O.K., ma'am, step out of the car, put your hands on the governor."

-Letterman, on Arkansas troopers' arrest techniques, 1994

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References

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