

Challenging Bill Clinton

During the final days of the 2004 presidential election and after his recuperation from heart surgery, Bill Clinton triumphantly joined the John Kerry campaign. Everywhere he went, he was greeted as an American hero—the Comeback Kid who spoke with the ease and eloquence that so many Democrats yearned to hear again. Earlier in the year, another former president was lauded as he was laid to rest. But were Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton heroes during their presidencies, and if not, why do we remember them as such?

The voices in this chapter speak to the opposition that arose to many of the domestic and foreign policies of the Clinton administration. They remind us that in a democracy, it is important that the people be vigilant and vocal when examining the leadership of their sitting presidents. And we must be equally as inquisitive about their legacies. Under the Clinton presidency, whom did the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) really serve? How and why did the number of prisoners in America double? What are the contemporary consequences of our foreign policies with Afghanistan and Iraq? Why did the United States continue to impose the Cuban and Iraqi embargoes? While it will be years before historians have enough distance to provide any definitive answers to these questions, our students can begin to address them by listening to the voices of dissenters who dared to step forward while the policies were being made.

Document-Based Questions

BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN

1. Do you think the experiences of the people of Youngstown were typical of the 1990s? How and why?
2. How and why are the lyrics of the people in both of these songs evocative

of what the Joad family experienced in John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*.

3. In "Sinaloa Cowboys," the father tells his sons that "for everything the north gives it exacts a price in return." What does the North give, and what is the price for Mexican immigrants?

LORELL PATTERSON

1. Does Lorell Patterson's description of the strikes make a believable comparison to a "war zone"? Why, or why not?
2. Do you agree with Patterson that every human being has the right to the "basic essentials" of education, livable wages, decent housing, and health care? Are you willing to commit your taxes to making such essentials available to all? Why, or why not?
3. Patterson argues that the ordinary people of the United States have the power, not the politicians. What evidence for this view does Patterson provide? Do you agree? Why, or why not?

WINONA LADUKE

1. Do you think Winona LaDuke adequately supports her statement that "major party" candidates and the media neglect the most important public-policy issues? Do you agree? Why, or why not?
2. Do you think LaDuke is correct when she claims that "there is no real quality of life in America until there is quality of life in the poorest regions of this America"? Why, or why not? How do the other voices in the book support her contention?
3. What does LaDuke mean when she says that American Indians are "the only humans in the Department of Interior treated as a natural resource"?

TWO OPEN LETTERS OF PROTEST

1. What are Alice Walker's criticisms of the embargo against Cuba? Why does she feel the embargo should be lifted?

2. How are Alice Walker's and Adrienne Rich's letters similar? What common theme do they address?
3. What did Rich mean when she wrote, "But I do know that art . . . means nothing if it simply decorates the dinner table of power which holds it hostage"?

RANIA MASRI

1. Do you think the political goals and actions of the embargo of Cuba had anything in common with the embargo of Iraq? Explain.
2. Masri quotes the former chief weapons inspector who wrote in 1998 that the weapons of mass destruction that were cited as the primary reason for the embargo were "destroyed or rendered harmless." How and why do you think this information was not widely known five years later when George W. Bush declared that the war in Iraq was being waged because of the threat from Iraq's weapons of mass destruction?
3. If the "unwritten goal" of the embargo was to remove Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq, how do you think the United States government justified the fact that ordinary Iraqis, not Saddam Hussein, were the victims of the embargo?

RONI KROUZMAN

1. How does your interpretation of Krouzman's experience compare with the decision of the Seattle city authorities to call the demonstration a "civil emergency"? Was the law-enforcement response justified?
2. Do you think the World Trade Organization (WTO) demonstrators were "making history"? How was this demonstration similar to or different from earlier protests described in *Voices*?
3. The Seattle authorities used tear gas and mass arrests to break up the WTO protests. Do you think this reaction was justified? Why, or why not?

ANITA CAMERON

1. Why did builders in Denver oppose the construction of accessible housing? Do you think the civil disobedience tactics used by ADAPT members were

an appropriate response to the builders' refusal to pay more attention to their demands?

2. Do you think ADAPT provides enough information to support the argument that homes should be built to provide access for people with disabilities? Why, or why not?
3. Why do you think the police arrested the ADAPT members? Do you agree or disagree with this action? Explain.

ELIZABETH ("BETITA") MARTINEZ

1. How did the goals and activities of the "blowouts" of 1968 compare and contrast with the student walkouts of the 1990s? What had changed in schools serving Latino populations? What remained the same?
2. Do you think the actions of the student demonstrators in the 1990s were justified? Why, or why not? If you had attended any of these schools, would you have been involved? Why, or why not?
3. How are these students "making history"? How do their efforts compare with those used at the WTO in Seattle and with the work of the ADAPT activists in Denver, who also claimed to be making history?

WALTER MOSLEY

1. Do you think that many people in the United States believe that survival is "reliant upon servitude"? Explain.
2. What does Walter Mosely mean when he says, "We live within the margin of profit. We are the margin of profit"? Do you agree or disagree? Explain.
3. Is Mosely arguing for revolutionary overthrow of capitalism? For the creation of a socialist system of government? Explain.

JULIA BUTTERFLY HILL

1. How is Julia Hill's act of civil disobedience similar to and different from the other acts of civil disobedience described in this chapter or in earlier chapters?
2. Agree or disagree with Hill's statement that "the best tools for dismantling

the machine are the ones the mechanics are using to keep it running.” What tools are the mechanics using to keep the machine running?

3. Do you think it is useful to keep “preaching to the choir,” or is it more effective to preach to an uncommitted audience? Are these necessarily competing goals? Explain.

Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 23, “Challenging Bill Clinton”

After reading Chapter 23 in *Voices*, students should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points therein. Following are five possible main points.

1. The Clinton administration failed to live up to its promise to support union activists and instead served the interests of United States corporations.
2. The battle for full civil rights is still being fought in the United States.
3. In the 1990s, many came to see globalization (or “neoliberalism”) as a threat to people in other countries as well as to many people in the United States.
4. As the United States population changes and becomes more diverse in its racial and ethnic composition, people of color and immigrants have been blamed—or scapegoated—for social problems that have other causes.

Main Points in *Voices*, Chapter 23, “Challenging Bill Clinton,” and in *A People’s History*, Chapter 23, “The Clinton Presidency”

If your students are also reading *A People’s History*, they should be encouraged to identify what they believe to be the main points in Chapter 23 in both books. Following are five additional points to be stressed when *Voices* and *A People’s History* are used together.

5. The Democratic Party moved closer to the right during the Clinton administration.
6. The political, economic, and social interests of the Democratic Party

increasingly have less in common with the political, economic, and social interests of United States working people.

7. The Clinton administration joined the Republicans in upholding the tradition of big government support of big business.
8. During the Clinton administration, United States foreign policy was guided more by corporate interests than by human rights.
9. During the 1990s, enough people were disillusioned with the Democratic and Republican Parties to create several independent political movements.

General-Discussion Questions for *Voices*

While the following questions are designed for classroom discussion about all the voices read in Chapter 23, they can also be rewritten and included as evaluation tools.

1. What is the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA)? The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)? Why did these programs seem so controversial to the people included in this chapter?
2. Do you think most United States taxpayers would be willing to commit their taxes to making the basic essentials Patterson discusses—education, decent housing, livable wages, health care—available to all Americans? Why, or why not? Would you be willing?
3. What is scapegoating? What role has it played in American society throughout our history? Do you think Americans will ever stop using each other as scapegoats? How and why?
4. Do you think the other voices in this chapter will agree with Patterson's assessment, "If you dare to struggle, you dare to win. If you dare not to struggle, you don't deserve to win"? Explain.
5. What is the seventh generation Winona LaDuke describes?
6. What are the goals of the Endangered Species Act? Why is it important to have such an act? How did Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush respond to the provisions of the act?
7. What are sanctions? What is an embargo? Why did the United States

initially impose an embargo on Cuba? On Iraq? Why did the Clinton administration continue both embargos? Do you think we should lift the embargo on Cuba?

8. In Alice Walker's letter to President Clinton, she refers to the Cuban struggle for freedom from both Spain and the United States. How, when, and why have the Cubans had to struggle for freedom from the United States?
9. What was the United Nations' "food for oil" program in Iraq?
10. What is corporate globalization?
11. Does your school have a history of any student walkouts, blowouts, or demonstrations? If not, why do you think such actions have been avoided? If so, did any manage to change school policy?

General-Discussion Questions for *Voices* and *A People's History*

These general-discussion questions are additional questions for students who have read Chapter 23 *Voices* and *A People's History* (or 24, depending on which edition you are using). For all questions, discussion must focus on ways the materials in both chapters help students formulate and articulate their answers.

12. Why do you think President Clinton was re-elected in 1996 "with a distinct lack of enthusiasm"? Do you think this lack of enthusiasm was similar to that which characterized the presidential campaign of John Kerry in 2004? How and why?
13. How did the Democratic Party move to the right under the Clinton presidency? Do you think this move was good for the party? For ordinary people? For Bill Clinton? Explain.
14. Do you agree with criminologist Todd Clear that being tougher on crime is "dumber"? What does Clear believe to be the real reasons for crime? Do you agree?
15. Why should Americans be concerned with the plight of immigrants who enter the United States illegally?
16. What proof does Howard Zinn provide that the Clinton administration

continued the “historic use of economic aid to gain political influence” (*People’s History*, p. 639)?

17. Why did labor unions oppose NAFTA? Have their criticisms been proven in the years since NAFTA passed?
18. What is the “wealth tax”? Would you support such a tax? Why, or why not?
19. How powerful do you think third parties will be in the American political system of the twenty-first century?

Evaluation Tools

SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENTS

These assignments can be adapted to meet any classroom need—homework, short- or long-term research projects, individual or group work. The end product should be flexible, depending on teacher interest and student abilities—papers, journals, oral reports, visual aides, and the like.

1. Learn more about the origins of NAFTA during the Clinton administration. What were its goals? Why did Clinton support the agreement? How did other Democrats stand on NAFTA? What was the Republican position? How did the positions of both parties compare and contrast? Who opposed its passage, and why? Why do you think the voices of opposition were not widely heard or understood? Who has most benefited from the passage of NAFTA?
2. Conduct some research on the rise of the Green Party in the 1990s. What are its origins and goals? What has it accomplished since its creation? How have the Greens influenced the last three presidential elections? What do you think is the future of the Green Party in the twenty-first century?
3. Using a search engine of choice, read other primary accounts about the ways United States sanctions affected the Iraqis after 1991. Then read several government documents from the Clinton administration that explain why the United States government continued the embargo. If you had been an adviser to the president in 1999, would you have advised him to continue or terminate the embargo? Explain.

4. Compare and contrast the Chicago demonstration of 1968 at the Democratic National Convention with the Seattle demonstration in 1999 at the WTO meeting. What were the goals, activities, and short- and long-term accomplishments of each? How did the media report on both demonstrations? How did the American public respond to the demonstrators? Which of the two do you feel were most successful? What criteria did you use to measure its success? Explain.
5. Examine the archives of your local newspaper(s) to determine whether or not there have been any local demonstrations in your community over the past year. If so, learn as much as possible about the origins, actions, and consequences of the demonstration. Then interview someone who participated in the demonstration. How have the issues raised by the demonstrators been addressed? What contemporary controversial issues that might lead to demonstrations exist in your community?
6. Learn more about the money allocated to education and to prisons in your state. What is the annual expenditure per pupil? Per inmate? Do you think the money is being allocated appropriately? Explain. Compare your state's allocations to those of two neighboring states. What do you think these figures tell us about the health of democracy in the twenty-first century?
7. Learn more about the "Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996." What were its primary provisions? How did the law reform the welfare system? How did the Clinton administration explain its backing of the law? Almost a decade after this law was passed, how has it affected the lives of poor Americans? Did it actually save the \$50 billion it promised? Did it balance the budget? Why do you think Clinton was more comfortable with passing such a welfare-reform law rather than establishing new government programs to create jobs?
8. Study the origins, goals, and accomplishments of the Million Man March and the Rainbow Coalition. How do they compare and contrast? Which do you feel were most effective and why?

SUGGESTED ESSAY QUESTIONS

- I. It has often been suggested that since the 1990s, there has been very little difference in Democratic and Republican policies in both Congress and

the White House. Both, critics say, support the ruling elite at the expense of ordinary Americans. Using the voices from your reading throughout the book(s), support or refute this sentiment.

2. Patterson claims the existence of “a worldwide war on workers” in the mid-1990s. To counter the war, she suggests that workers “need to stand up with one voice—people of all races.” Do you think this attitude is possible? Why, or why not? Do you think the WTO demonstration may have been a step in this direction? Do the voices in this chapter give you any indication of how such a unified voice of opposition could be lifted? Explain.
3. Using examples from your reading, explain how the recent opposition to corporate globalization compares with historical opposition to corporate control over domestic workers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. What has improved for those who work for United States corporations? What has remained the same? What has become worse?
4. Many argue that the battle for civil rights is still being waged. After reading this/these chapter(s), who do you think fought for civil rights during the Clinton administration? What battles remain to be fought after the Clinton presidency? What could Clinton have done to promote civil rights? As the twenty-first century unfolds, what do you feel are the major unresolved civil rights issues?
5. Several of the voices in this chapter claim that their actions of resistance were making history. How and why do you think the resistance movements of the 1990s were different from past movements? How were they similar? Do you think they were making history? Explain.
6. In his essay, Walter Mosely states that “if the system defines you, then it owes you something too.” How would the other voices in this chapter respond to this statement? Do you agree or disagree? Explain.
7. In your opinion, what are the most important messages shared by the voices in this chapter? Which were involved in the most successful effort to be heard? Which had the most impact on society? Which were least successful and had the least impact? Explain.
8. When Bill Clinton ran for a second term, he frequently invoked the name of Martin Luther King, Jr., in his campaign. When George W. Bush ran for his second term in 2004, he frequently compared his decision-making with

that of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Harry Truman. What is accurate and what is inaccurate about these comparisons? Does the United States public “buy” these comparisons? Support your answer with examples from the reading.

9. Howard Zinn claims that Clinton misread public opinion when he declared that the “era of big government is over.” What does he believe the public really wanted in the early 1990s? Do you agree? Explain. How does Clinton’s declaration compare and contrast with the same declaration repeatedly made by George W. Bush in his elections campaigns of 2000 and 2004?
10. Using plentiful examples from your reading of *A People’s History*, support Howard Zinn’s contention in Chapter 23 that “[b]ig government had, in fact, begun with the Founding Fathers, who deliberately set up a strong central government to protect the interests of the bondholders, the slave owners, the land speculators, the manufacturers” (*People’s History*, p. 637). Then demonstrate how the Clinton administration joined the Republicans in keeping this tradition alive.

SIMULATIONS AND OTHER CREATIVE APPROACHES

1. Write a play about activists involved in the WTO demonstration. Base your dialog on at least one interview with a person who participated in the demonstration, as well as other accounts obtained from both primary and secondary documents. Be sure to include dialog that explains why they were opposed to corporate globalization, how they shaped the demonstration to reflect their concerns, what they hoped to gain by their resistance, and what they experienced during and after the actual demonstration.
2. Make a list of what you think you will deserve after your own lifetime of labor and ask everyone in the class to make such a list. Share the lists with your fellow students. Then discuss these questions among yourselves: What is common on everyone’s list? Do most people currently have access to these things? Why, or why not? Do you think you will have access to these things within your lifetime? Why, or why not? For which of the items on your list would you be willing to fight? Would you be willing to fight for any item on the lists of your classmates? Explain.

3. Draw two maps of the United States, one that illustrates poverty across the nation during the Great Depression and one that illustrates poverty across the nation in the early twenty-first century. Where has poverty persisted? Where has it improved? Where has it increased? What progress have we made since the federal government declared a War on Poverty?
4. Stage a mock press conference of the prominent leaders of the 1990s that is attended by a diverse coalition of ordinary Americans. As the press conference progresses, have the ordinary Americans address their questions to specific leaders.