

The Parallel Lives of Bill Clinton

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Reflecting on the legacy of former President Bill Clinton in December 2000, Leon Panetta, who served as White House Chief of Staff and budget director from 1994 to 1997, noted: “In many ways, this is a tale of two presidencies. One, obviously brilliant and extremely capable, with the ability to help produce the greatest economy in the history of this country and to focus on major domestic priorities and, in effect, protect peace in the world. And the other is the darker side, the one that made a terrible human mistake that will forever shadow that other presidency” (qtd. in Purdum par. 22). Many critics have shared Panetta’s assessment that Clinton’s presidency, and even his very identity, is marked by a fundamental duality. A Rhodes scholar with a dazzling intellect made mistakes that can only be called stupid. Clinton’s longtime adviser and strategist, Dick Morris, speaks of “Saturday-night Bill” and “Sunday-morning President Clinton” (83). Our former president has been described as a man so profoundly at odds with himself, the polarities of his character so divergent, as to be nearly irreconcilable.

This striking contrast has led commentators to invoke repeatedly some fundamental dichotomy in Clinton, some irresolvable schism that we recognize but cannot quite comprehend. Bruce Miroff identifies Clinton as a “postmodern character,” “a political actor who lacks a stable identity” (106). Clinton’s continual reinventions, Miroff argues, point to a disturbing absence of self that thrives on performance rather than on substance. Others, like Matt Bai, conceive of Clinton as a composite of opposites, not an empty vessel to be filled with the latest results of polling data. Bai observes, “Two sides of Clinton’s persona have long warred with

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each other, sunny optimism versus angry grievance. Clinton succeeded in politics largely because he projected the former; his worst moments came when he gave into the latter. Both sides are genuine reflections of who he is” (par. 29). Genuine reflections, yes, but how are such contradictions resolved within the man? And what effect did this duality have on the way he governed the nation?

Clinton himself finally shed some light on this essential dichotomy in his long-anticipated autobiography, *My Life* (2004). The nearly 1,000-page tome was completed under pressure from editors at Knopf who had persuaded the notoriously loquacious former president not to write two separate books as he originally intended. The final product suffers from its excessive length, as early reviewers noted. Joe Klein commented in *Time* magazine, “*My Life* is two books, really: Arkansas and the presidency” (par. 9). Even in the book that should have brought some resolution to his warring selves, Clinton could not escape the duality that defines his legacy; he is ever the man who smoked but did not inhale, who cheated on his wife but did not have sex with Monica Lewinsky, and who re-enlivened the Democratic Party by announcing in his 1996 State of the Union address that “the era of big government is over.” Clinton is always twinned, inhabiting both sides at once, and as demonstrated by his autobiography, ever struggling to unite them even as that struggle contributes to his political success. His sheer volubility, however, cannot mask the essential division of his identity and only magnifies his inner irresolution.

My Life begins with a poignant description of Clinton’s father. The necessary brevity of this portrait poses a sharp contrast to the text’s later verbosity, acting as the seed of Clinton’s infamous compulsion to talk and somehow unify his opposing selves. After serving in a motor pool in Italy during World War II, William Jefferson Blythe, Jr., died at the age of 28 in a car accident while driving home to his pregnant wife on a Missouri highway. Blythe’s memory haunts the entirety of his son’s autobiography, as does Clinton’s sense that he must compensate for that original loss. Blythe’s specter foreshadows the man Clinton might have been, the charming capable president we might have had before a sexual scandal overwhelmed his ability to govern. Clinton begins *My Life* by establishing the familiar trope of duality to his identity, but by rooting it in the un-lived life of his father, he provides a new way of understanding his vexed presidency. William Blythe, Jr., is key to resolving what Todd Purdum calls “the paradox of Bill Clinton” (par. 7). Although this duality begins with an awareness of his father’s absence, it develops into

an abiding struggle to manage what Clinton himself calls his “parallel lives.” The opposition between two conflicting identities, one externally content and another secret self wrought with confusion, fear, and insecurity, structures Clinton’s book as well as his presidential legacy, most notably seen in his disappointing compromise on gays in the military.

1. William Jefferson Blythe, Jr.: The Ideal Father

Clinton first alludes to his warring selves in a personal essay he wrote in his high school English honors class and which he excerpts in *My Life*: “I am a living paradox—deeply religious yet not as convinced of my exact beliefs as I ought to be; wanting responsibility yet shirking it; loving the truth but often times giving way to falsity. . . . I detest selfishness, but see it in the mirror every day. . . . I, in my attempts to be honest, will not be the hypocrite I hate, and will own up to their ominous presence in this boy, endeavoring in such earnest to be a man” (58).

Here, as elsewhere in his autobiography, Clinton alludes to an idealized but unattainable self, the man that he “ought to be” as opposed to the actual person he confronts in the mirror. His ego ideal is derived from his father’s memory and the grating issue of what his father might have done when confronted with Clinton’s own life choices—in particular when deciding not to serve in Vietnam and in the aftermath of the Lewinsky scandal. In these and other moments in the text, Clinton judges himself against an impossible standard that he manufactures, an artificial ideal that results from his evasion of key details about his father’s personal history.

The first chapter of Clinton’s book is devoted to numerous anecdotes about the effortlessly charming man who married his mother, Virginia Dell Cassidy, two months after meeting her at a hospital where he had brought a soon-to-be ex-girlfriend in for treatment. Clinton describes himself as a boy anxious for any trace of his father, any further insight into the dashing and ultimately mysterious man who died in a tragic car accident three months before he was born. Yet the image that Clinton seeks of his father is one entirely bound to his own self-image and that seeks to preserve the infinite possibilities of his youth. Clinton writes that he “beamed for days” when a stranger approached him at the age of 12 to tell him, “You’re Bill Blythe’s son. You look just like him” (5). With his father neatly mapped upon his own face, Clinton relishes a sense of unity and satisfaction rarely repeated in his lengthy autobiography.

As a young politician, Clinton also finds that one of the benefits of public success is access to people who knew Bill Blythe. While running his first race for elective office in 1974, Clinton learns from the first person to find his father's dead body in a roadside ditch that he "had retained enough consciousness or survival instinct to try to claw himself up and out of the water before he died" (5). Clinton's early hunger to know about his father is at last sated early in his presidency. The new information he receives, however, undermines the simplistic image he has cherished of his father. In 1993, on the first Father's Day Clinton spent in the Oval Office, the *Washington Post* published a detailed investigative report on William Blythe, Jr., confirming that he had been married three times before he met Clinton's mother and had at least two other children. While Clinton admits that some of what the *Post* revealed was already known to his mother and him, other parts of this new narrative came as a shock. Casting aside his usual volubility, Clinton does not explain if his mother knew about Blythe's previous marriages or the children he abandoned so that he could be with her.

We might trace a direct line from Clinton's spectacular rise to the White House to the disclosure of his father's surprising romantic history. There is an obvious lesson to be learned in this short opening chapter—political achievements lead to the exposure of personal indiscretions—but, of course, Clinton did not heed this pointed warning. Instead, as with his father, his reputation collapsed in the wake of the Monica Lewinsky scandal: like father, like son. In both cases, political success demands the revelation of private truths that are impossible to hide or deny. Clinton even remarks on a comparison with his father, citing the publication of the *Post* article: "I wasn't quite sure what to make of it all, but given the life I've led, I could hardly be surprised that my father was more complicated than the idealized pictures I had lived with for nearly half a century" (6). Clinton's uncharacteristic sense of bewilderment, along with his worldly admission, reveals his reluctance to confront this new unsettling portrait of William Blythe, Jr. He does little to discover or to disclose a fuller understanding of who his father really was, avoiding any substantial engagement with this more "complicated" man.

Although *My Life* is filled with garrulous accounts of his numerous encounters with individuals who have transformed Clinton's worldview and sense of himself, from various working-class people he meets on the campaign trail to foreign political dignitaries like Nelson Mandela and Yitzhak Rabin, Clinton is notably terse on the meetings he has with his father's other children. Following the revelations of the *Post* article, Clinton gets in

touch with his father's other son, Leon Ritzenthaler, a retired owner of a janitorial service. Ritzenthaler wrote to Clinton during his 1992 presidential campaign, but Clinton claims that he does not recall hearing about this letter and suggests that, "considering all the other bullets we were dodging then, it's possible that my staff kept it from me" (5). Clinton does not expand upon how Ritzenthaler's letter might have been another "bullet," only implying that the indiscretions of his father might be damaging to his political career. After meeting Ritzenthaler, Clinton observes: "He and I look alike, his birth certificate says his father was mine, and I wish I'd known about him a long time ago" (5). Although Clinton cannot deny the record of their biological bond, he stops short of identifying Ritzenthaler as his brother and is reluctant to admit any substantial connection between them. His focus on the superficial aspects of their commonality—their shared physical features and the documentation of his birth certificate—implies that their relationship may be biological, but it is hardly familial. Moreover, he does not say that he wishes that he had known Ritzenthaler previously, but states that he wishes that he had "known about him," indicating that his brother's importance may only be found in what he adds to Clinton's appreciation of his father. Ritzenthaler himself has seemingly no value as a distinct individual to Clinton.

Despite his explicit desire to know more about his father—"All my life I have been hungry to fill in the blanks, clinging eagerly to every photo or story or scrap of paper that would tell me more of the man who gave me life"—Clinton seems more comfortable with the material artifacts of his father than with the flesh and blood Blythe left behind (5). Although, as president, he also learns about a woman named Sharon Pettijohn who was born Sharon Lee Blythe to a woman who was once married to his father, Clinton does not pursue the connection, noting "for whatever reason, I've never met her" (5). By contrast, he is delighted when he reads the condolence letter that one of his father's sisters received from her congressman following Blythe's death. Clinton describes it with exuberant delight: "It's just a short form letter and appears to have been signed with the autopen of the day, but I hugged that letter with all the glee of a six-year-old boy getting his first train set from Santa Claus" (6). Despite the revelations surrounding his father's previous relationships and progeny, Clinton moves to secure the original romantic image of Blythe as a man important enough to warrant a politician's recognition of him, a kind of hero who died too soon. He can thus remain a wide-eyed child, eager to learn about his larger-than-life father, a child who need not trouble himself with the complexities of adult

relationships and shifting forms of identity. Clinton's half-siblings are certainly part of his father's story, but they muddy a narrative which places Clinton at its center. Despite the new information Clinton gleans about his father, he clings to a childish hero worship that simplifies both who William Blythe, Jr., was and who Clinton has become. Unlike the presence of his half-siblings, the letters he cherishes do not hold disturbing surprises, but instead preserve the silence necessary to maintain Clinton's paternal fantasy.

Clinton expresses no anger at his father for hiding key aspects of his life from his mother. He notes that while she was shocked by the *Post* article, "What mattered was that my father was the love of her life and she had no doubt of his love for her. Whatever the facts, that's all she needed to know" (6). Clinton seems to accede to this conception, affirming that love is more important than truth and the stories we choose to remember are more important than the stories others have to tell. He ends the opening chapter of *My Life* by again focusing on a material artifact rather than upon the living descendents of his father. He describes receiving a letter written by his mother to one of her high school friends following the death of her husband. Virginia Cassidy writes: "It seemed almost unbelievable at the time but you see I am six months pregnant and the thought of the baby keeps me going and really gives me the whole world before me." In the absence of his father, Clinton becomes the sole object of love and meaning in his mother's life. Even in utero, he claims the position of his father, becoming the ultimate source of her support. Clinton acknowledges this troubling conflation, noting of the dual blessing and curse of his father's death: "I had to live for two people, and that if I did it well enough, somehow I could make up for the life he should have had" (7).

While he has clearly written a book long enough for such an outsized burden, Clinton fails to recognize how he reenacts much of his father's legacy. The split between his father and him is as much a fiction as the hero ideal he has invested in Blythe. However, the responsibility Clinton adopts to live for both himself and his father may also elucidate his characteristic surfeit of energy and ambition. Even as the premature death of his father haunts him throughout his life and inaugurates his split self, it served as a principal motivating force for his eventual triumphs. Once, in describing the accomplishments of previous politicians, Clinton suggested that struggle against personal demons was actually a prerequisite of greatness. While governor of Arkansas, Clinton told a group of college students that "the political giants were usually a combination of darkness (insecurity, battles with

depression, family disorder) and of light (sense of history, a desire to serve the public). In the great leaders the light overcame the darkness” (qtd. in Gartner 130). This conception of what constitutes the dueling forces of light and darkness exactly matches with aspects of his life history and even suggests his own predetermined greatness. The qualities of light that Clinton outlines are those most strongly associated with the father who died having served his country in war. Yet the “sense of history” linked to Blythe and also to the power of light ultimately remains the son’s necessary fantasy.

2. William Jefferson Clinton: The Conflicted Son

Clinton most clearly articulates the anxiety of his lifelong duality while contemplating how to manage the Vietnam draft during his stay at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. Although Clinton protested the war, he feels compelled to engage in some kind of military service:

My struggles with the draft rekindled my long-standing doubts about whether I was, or could become, a really good person. Apparently, a lot of people who grow up in difficult circumstances subconsciously blame themselves and feel unworthy of a better fate. I think this problem arises from leading parallel lives, an external life that takes its natural course and an internal life where the secrets are hidden. When I was a child, my outside life was filled with friends and fun, learning and doing. My internal life was full of uncertainty, anger, and a dread of ever-looming violence. No one can live parallel lives with complete success; the two have to intersect. . . . [T]he draft dilemma brought back my internal life with a vengeance. Beneath my new and exciting external life, the old demons of self-doubt and impending destruction reared their ugly heads again. (149)

When speaking of his parallel lives, Clinton repeatedly invokes the phrase “with a vengeance” as if the return of this fractured self is rooted in some originating sin for which he has insufficiently atoned. Clinton identifies that break as resulting from his childhood of “difficult circumstances” which included not only the early death of his father, but also the consequences of an emotionally and physically abusive stepfather. These early traumas threaten to undermine Clinton’s hope to become “a really good person” because they leave him a victim of hardship rather than an agent of

his own ambition. The really good person or the man he “ought to be” is continually imagined as a version of his father and helps explain Clinton’s resistance to delve into Blythe’s prior romantic relationships; presumably, the “really good person” Clinton hopes to become would not have abandoned his children. Instead, Clinton highlights aspects of Blythe’s life history that more comfortably conform to the man he aspires to be.

Weeks after his marriage to Virginia Dell Cassidy, Clinton’s father was sent to Italy, where he fixed jeeps and tanks during the invasion. Although Clinton does not refer to his father’s service while contemplating his decision not to fight in Vietnam, his return here to the notion of “parallel lives” suggests that his anxiety over the draft is rooted in his concern for how his principled opposition to one war can accommodate his respect for his father’s legacy from another war. The self-doubt that plagues him as he considers whether or not to enter the military is intimately linked to the responsibility he assumes to “live for two people.” Wouldn’t his father go to Vietnam, fulfilling his duty to the nation? While his father voluntarily enlisted and served his country, Clinton doubts not only if he should go to Vietnam, but if he is even a good person. Like a great many young men of his generation, Clinton had to balance his refusal to serve in Vietnam, or in his case the effort to avoid the draft, with what it means to be a good person.

Protected from the draft while at Oxford, Clinton returned to Arkansas in 1969 and ultimately engaged in a series of stall tactics to avoid being drafted. In a letter to Colonel Holmes dated December of that year, Clinton thanked him for “saving me from the draft” (qtd. in Maraniss *First* 199). In *My Life*, Clinton claims that though he has “never changed my feelings about Vietnam,” he also “felt bad about escaping the risks that had taken the lives of so many . . . [A]nd especially after I became President—the more I saw of America’s military, the more I wished I’d been a part of it when I was young” (161). Clinton’s regret at not serving in Vietnam amplifies the separation between his parallel lives. Although he claims that “the two have to intersect,” by failing to stand by his decision to avoid military service, Clinton projects an impossible fantasy of himself as a participant in the Armed Forces. The conflict he agonized over in Oxford ultimately remains unsettled, for he cannot be content with the man he is, the man who is not his father. Risky as it might have been during the election of 1992, Clinton could have expressed a principled stance against the war that reflected his legitimate objection to American intervention in Vietnam—a stance that has not changed since his Oxford days—but instead he focuses on the path he did not

choose. This incident also suggests Clinton's struggle to identify himself not simply as a good person, but as a good man. The masculine ideal he invests in his father exposes insecurities fundamentally linked to Clinton's problematic sexual identity. He only invokes the notion of "parallel lives" when faced with a conflict hinging upon conceptions of masculinity, revealing the duality as fundamentally gendered.

The next personal crisis described in *My Life* that specifically provokes Clinton's anxiety about his parallel lives involves the work of Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr. The 600 pages that pass between Clinton's anguish over the draft and the reemergence of his split subjectivity demonstrate that the problem of his parallel lives derives from moments that conjure the specter of his father's legacy. In early 1998, Starr announced that he was investigating Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky and the charge that the president had encouraged the former White House intern to lie under oath. Clinton is again overwhelmed by the dual nature of his identity: "I went on doing my job, and I stonewalled, denying what had happened to everyone: Hillary, Chelsea, my staff and cabinet, my friends in Congress, members of the press, and the American people. What I regret the most, other than my conduct, is having misled all of them. . . . I was misleading everyone about my personal failings. I was embarrassed and wanted to keep it from my wife and daughter. I didn't want to help Ken Starr criminalize my personal life, and I didn't want the American people to know I'd let them down. It was like living in a nightmare. I was back to my parallel lives with a vengeance" (775). While in the case of the draft Clinton was at odds with the life his father might have led, here he seems more aligned with his father's promiscuity. Here the "vengeance" of his parallel lives derives not so much from what his father would have done differently, but from Blythe's seemingly inescapable legacy. Clinton, however, takes Starr's investigation and his own subsequent impeachment as a moment of ultimate resolution. He concludes, "There was no excuse for what I did, but trying to come to grips with why I did it gave me at least a chance to finally unify my parallel lives" (811).

The process by which Clinton "come[s] to grips" with his mistakes is largely elided in his autobiography, much like the suggestion that Clinton came to have a more "complicated" understanding of his father. He mentions attending therapy sessions with his wife and recognizing that the "current controversy was the latest casualty of my lifelong effort to lead parallel lives, to wall off my anger and grief and get on with my outer life, which I loved and lived well." Readers are left to understand that the hardship of living parallel lives is the reason for Clinton's adultery

and deception. Clinton does not deny responsibility for what he did by invoking the duality of his identity, but he does suggest that only one part of himself could triumph: “During the government shutdowns I was engaged in two titanic struggles: a public one with Congress over the future of our country, and a private one to hold the old demons at bay. I had won the public fight and lost the private one” (811). Here Clinton describes himself as having succeeded politically, but at the cost of succumbing to his personal failings. Like his father who served his country but was less than forthcoming regarding his sexual affairs, Clinton seemingly sacrificed his personal integrity but stayed true to his presidential duty. The invocation of his parallel lives aims to mitigate his private failings, to remind readers that even as he betrayed his family and friends, he was faithful to the needs of the nation.

3. The Legacy of Clinton’s Parallel Lives

Clinton’s brief description of his reconciliation with Hillary implies that his public disgrace has caused him to lead a more unified life, to reconcile the father who was with the man he has become. Moreover, he concludes *My Life* by suggesting that his lifelong struggle to unite his “parallel lives” is what allowed him to act as an effective president. Like the “political giants” of the past, he has battled the darker aspects of himself to triumph for the nation. He explains: “When I became President, America was sailing into uncharted waters, into a world full of apparently disconnected positive and negative forces. Because I had spent a lifetime trying to bring together my own parallel lives and had been raised to value all people, and, as governor, had seen both the bright and dark sides of globalization, I felt I understood where my country was and how we needed to move into the new century. I knew how to put things together, and how hard it would be to do” (955). By stressing the challenge of merging his parallel lives, Clinton presents himself as uniquely able to reconcile the myriad divisions affecting the country. His struggle becomes the struggle of the nation, and thus he positions the country as bearing the same duality that has structured his life. The nation is also cleft in two, alienated from its better self, represented in the hero ideal of his father. But just as this conception of his father is no more than an illusion, Clinton’s characterization of the nation as split by its “bright and dark sides” is a conceit manufactured to justify his own personal struggles as vital to the success of his presidency. As he concludes, “Life got better for all Americans” under his leadership (955). And yet Clinton traces the unification of his

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parallel lives not to the moment in which he became president, but at its very end, when, with two years left to serve, he was impeached. We elected not a man of clarity and resolution, but one torn by contradictions. If we follow Clinton's own chronology, the merger of his parallel lives was a struggle that defined his entire life, extending through his years in office. The man who both truly knows "how to put things together" and has actually done so has never been president.

Instead, the man who struggled with his warring selves utilized the duality at the core of his identity as a transformative political asset. Even if he could not "put things together" as easily as he suggests in his autobiography, Clinton successfully put forth a powerful political legacy, although one built less on unity than on the manipulation of identity. One of Clinton's biographers, David Maraniss of the *Washington Post*, observed this aspect of his character well before the publication of *My Life*, and cites "this duality as the reason he could perform so well on occasions when most people would crumble; for example, how he could deliver a State of the Union address unflappably only a few days after the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal broke" ("The Places" par. 11). Maraniss understands Clinton's "parallel lives as a means of helping him keep going during difficult times." This duality helped him endure an ever-volatile political climate and win his battle with Congress even as he lost the battle at home.

Since his departure from the Oval Office, Clinton has insisted that he be judged not on how he conducted his personal life but on how he governed the country. Still, his parallel lives are critical to understanding his approach to politics and the often contradictory stances that defined his presidency. Maureen Dowd once called him the "man of a thousand faces" (par. 9), a politician who, according to Marshall Blonsky and Edmundo Desnoes "became a Republican without ceasing to be a Democrat" (par. 3). Among his most noted achievements, he reformed welfare according to staunchly conservative principles that limited benefits to the poor, required recipients to work, and allowed states to mandate "family caps" to deny additional benefits to mothers for children born under public assistance. He adopted crime and taxes as signature issues, co-opting Republican concerns and showcasing his strict approach to budgetary expenditures and criminals.

The notion of parallel lives is not simply a structural literary trope for Clinton; it underscores a governing philosophy based on malleable definitions of partisan identity. Clinton's troubling duality ultimately defined one of his most important presidential decisions, his adoption of the "don't ask, don't tell" policy concerning gays in the military. Among his campaign promises in

1992 was the pledge to open the armed services to homosexuals, yet Clinton concedes in *My Life* that he “lost the gays-in-the-military fight” (514). The policy, which he summarizes as “if you say you’re gay, it’s presumed that you intend to violate the uniform Code of military Justice and you can be removed” (485), has received so much criticism that it is impossible for Clinton to call any aspect of the compromise a success. In tracing the development of “don’t ask, don’t tell,” Clinton emphasizes his support to have gays openly serve in the military, but explains that there was too much resistance in the Congress for him to pursue such a policy. He even cites polling data “showing that by 48–45 percent the public disagreed with my position” to justify his decision. Deflecting responsibility for “don’t ask, don’t tell,” Clinton notes that it was Secretary of Defense Les Aspin, General Colin Powell, and the Joint Chiefs who produced the compromise while his job was only “to announce it” (485). However, Clinton fully admits that the policy was a failure, writing, “I got the worst of both worlds—I lost the fight, and the gay community was highly critical of me for the compromise” (486)—as if he were the victim of a misguided policy.

“Don’t ask, don’t tell” essentially mandates that an entire population of Americans live “parallel lives.” It institutionalizes the very duality that has haunted Clinton throughout his life. Gay soldiers are required to dissemble their personal lives in all professional settings lest they be discharged from the military. Clinton excoriates Kenneth Starr for trying to “criminalize my personal life,” but he too effectively criminalized the personal lives of others—the homosexuals serving in the military. Despite the obvious problems with “don’t ask, don’t tell,” in *My Life* Clinton attempts to minimize its consequences by explaining all the freedoms that are protected for gay and straight soldiers alike: “But if you don’t say you’re gay, the following things will not lead to your removal: marching in a gay-rights parade in civilian clothes; hanging out in gay bars or with known homosexuals; being on homosexual mailing lists; and living with a person of the same sex who is the beneficiary of your life insurance policy” (485). Theoretically “don’t ask, don’t tell” preserves the possibility of successfully living “parallel lives.” Its adoption, however, ultimately increased surveillance of homosexual activity, leading to the discharge of over 13,000 service members since its implementation.¹ The policy’s assumption that parallel lives are viable has proved false, or as Clinton himself noted, when it comes to parallel lives “the two have to intersect.” The president who enacted “don’t ask, don’t tell” was hardly a man who “knew how to put things together.”

“Don’t ask, don’t tell” only works as the solution to Clinton’s own national disgrace. Had he never been asked if he had sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky, he would never have had to confess his sexual transgressions, never have had to quibble over the definition of “is” or to face the humiliation of Congressional impeachment. However, only military personnel were barred from asking about the sexual practices of soldiers; presidents have no such exemption in the public sphere. “Don’t ask, don’t tell” was neither a realistic approach to the demands for personal accountability from political figures in our celebrity-fixated culture, nor was it a way to resolve the issues of gays in the military. As the expulsion of thousands of gay soldiers and Clinton’s own life story indicate, there is no simplistic division between the personal and the political. The only unity enacted by “don’t ask, don’t tell” was to bring together Clinton’s vexed relationship with his father’s military service and his own fear of exposure concerning his failure to restrain his sexual appetites. Clinton’s response to the challenge of keeping his promise to gays and the hostile resistance of Congress to that pledge was to seek resolution through silence and to uphold the assumption that one’s personal life has no bearing on professional performance. Although homosexuality is not to be equated with adultery, in both Clinton’s personal life and the mandate of “don’t ask, don’t tell,” we see a similar anxiety concerning how to reconcile sexuality with national service. For Clinton, sexual behavior necessarily carries secrets that tarnish the loyalty expected of good men and good citizens. William Jefferson Blythe, Jr., was both a soldier and a charmer. There is no indication that he understood these parts of himself as warring dualities. That angst was his son’s alone, but its legacy belongs to the entire nation.

Note

1. Elisabeth Bumiller of the *New York Times* reported this statistic in early 2010. See “Top Defense Officials Seek to End ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,’” *The New York Times* (2 Feb. 2010), 18 Apr. 2012 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/03/us/politics/03military.html>>. More recent estimates put the number of discharged homosexuals at over 13,500. On 22 December 2010, President Obama repealed “don’t ask, don’t tell,” setting its end date for 20 September 2011.

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