



**Daryl A. Carter.** *Brother Bill: President Clinton and the Politics of Race and Class.* Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2016. 300 pp. \$26.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-55728-699-4.

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In September 2002, Bill Clinton became the first white man to be inducted into the Arkansas Black Hall of Fame. According to the hall, the former president earned the honor because he had created opportunities for African Americans to reach new heights in both government service and the private sector. In his acceptance speech, Clinton paraphrased Martin Luther King Jr. when he thanked the predominately black crowd's willingness to embrace him not for his skin color but rather for what was in his heart. This uplifting moment suggested that Americans had taken another step toward becoming a truly colorblind society that lived up to its beliefs in meritocracy and equal opportunity regardless of one's race or origins.

In *Brother Bill*, historian Daryl A. Carter digs deep into the hot-button racial issues of the 1990s to interrogate popular conceptions of Bill Clinton as the first "black" president. Not surprisingly, Carter unearths a complicated relationship between African Americans and the Clinton agenda. Class, rather than race, motivated many of the president's actions. Eager to maintain support from white moderates, Clinton promoted policies that benefited the middle class—including the growing black middle class—while ignoring or even harming the African American underclass.

A driving force in Carter's argument is the New Democratic philosophy promulgated by the

Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) in the wake of Ronald Reagan's 1984 smashing reelection victory over Walter Mondale. New Democrats like Clinton favored compromise over stridency and market-based approaches over big-government liberalism. The DLC recognized that the white backlash against the 1960s rights revolutions had turned Great Society-style proposals targeted specifically at helping disadvantaged minorities into political poison. Conservatives painted civil rights advocates as special-interest groups who demanded special treatment for minorities at the expense of law-abiding whites. "Colorblindness" became an all-American way to ignore the lingering importance of race. Treat everyone the same, the theory went, and the cream would rise to the top. While an effective rhetorical device, calls for colorblindness shortchanged deep-seated structural inequalities that made truly equal treatment an impossibility.

Clinton's temperament, as well as his electoral coalition, demanded a centrist approach to race. He soothed jittery whites by describing a colorblind nation that promoted opportunity for all while appealing liberals and African Americans by advocating strategic investments in education, job-training courses, and other programs that disproportionately benefited the poor. The Republican takeover of Congress in 1994 made compro-

mise even more essential, as Clinton constantly maneuvered to find common ground between himself and center-right politicians.

Carter provides extensive background on such racially tinged subjects as affirmative action, crime, and welfare, as well as on specific moments, such as the doomed nomination of the controversial Lani Guinier as assistant attorney general and the promising but mismanaged President's Initiative on Race. Clinton's triangulation resulted in an inconsistent legacy on racial matters. His cloaking of affirmative action within the colorblind rhetoric of opportunity reinvigorated popular support for the philosophy, while his abandoning of Guinier revealed the limits of his willingness to appoint African Americans who conflicted with white, mainstream ideologies. The much-vaunted crime bill made middle-class Americans feel secure while paving the way for more poor African Americans to get sucked into the prison-industrial complex.

Clinton sensed that middle-class audiences of all races would respond to a centrist message that emphasized personal responsibility, minimized "handouts" and race-based rhetoric, and stressed the importance of moving beyond the divisive debates of the civil rights era. Key to Carter's analysis is his recognition that class was a more important factor in Clinton's political calculus than race. Middle-class African Americans often held very different priorities from economically disadvantaged blacks, in part because racial integration increased the distance between themselves and the larger black community, in essence assimilating them into the broader American middle class. From an electoral perspective, this development freed Clinton to pursue a New Democratic agenda that disproportionately benefited the economically secure while relying on history and the relative unpalatability of Republican candidates to keep poor blacks voting for his party.

Carter demonstrates a solid grasp of his subject matter and has made good use of an array of

primary and secondary sources ranging from government reports to contemporary news articles to recent historical and sociological writings. A handful of oral histories lend his discussion a personal flair. His insistence that historians of recent America must do a better job of untangling the complex interplay between class and race is a highlight of *Brother Bill*. One wishes that Carter had maintained a sharper focus on this relationship and on the Clinton administration's attempts to navigate its perils. At times his deep dives into the backstories of issues cause him to lose focus on his main argument even as they lend historical depth to the subjects at hand. Moreover, Clinton himself remains a bit of an enigma here, too often shuffled to the literary margins while his administration plays out in other arenas. Carter's conclusion, which posits continuities between the Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama administrations on class and race issues, could move beyond its general assertion that all three presidents sought to assemble cross-class coalitions. These quibbles aside, Carter has produced a thought-provoking inquiry into the meaning of race and class at the cusp of the twenty-first century.

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