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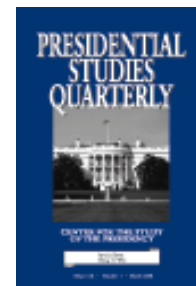
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### Presidential Studies Quarterly

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## Constructing Clinton: Hyperreality and Presidential Image-Making in Postmodern Politics

—John M. Jones

. By Shawn J. Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles. : Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2002. 245 pp.

Shawn Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles believe that, in the postmodern world of hyperreality, trying to discover the "real" Bill Clinton is an exercise in futility. Accordingly, they have made it their objective to answer the questions, "how did the constructed images of Bill Clinton reflect upon and express the character of U.S. politics?" and "what are the consequences of such images for U.S. political culture?" (p. 2). To answer these questions, the authors analyze how Bill Clinton was constructed in a variety of texts.

The first such text is the video *The Man from Hope*, which was shown prior to the candidate's acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention in 1992. Especially noteworthy is their analysis of the film's use of gender. *The Man from Hope*, though highly feminine discourse, used "familiar masculine institutions to establish Clinton's credentials for the presidency" (p. 36). They contend that the feminine style of this text served to mask its masculine themes, placing women in the role of supporting the candidate and testifying to his character and credentials (p. 39). The film "constructed a presidentiality that offered an intimate and highly feminine portrait of the candidate firmly grounded in a masculinist ideology" (p. 43).

Next, the authors discuss the concept of meta-imaging in the documentary *The War Room*. They contend that, although the film gave the impression of being centered on real issues of the campaign, it was in actuality "centered on image, and served as a representation of a representational campaign in an era of representational politics" (p. 55). It was an "ostensibly descriptive" documentary. Additionally, the authors identify four militaristic motifs that appear in the film and discuss the implications for our modern political culture.

Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles then analyze the 1996 campaign film *Between Hope and History*, in which Clinton used a "hyperreal, nostalgic version of history to justify his successes and his proposals" (p. 89). The film emphasized the community values of the 1950s and included, almost as an afterthought, the discrimination and oppression of that era. Furthermore, the film used the discrimination of the past primarily to congratulate the administration for its accomplishments in these areas. The authors also note that the film's nostalgic nature invoked the Progressive era and the Founding Fathers, ignoring the oppressive qualities of both, while using the past to underscore Clintonian themes of opportunity, responsibility, and community. Furthermore, the film "annulled" recent memory of the Clinton sexual scandals with a nostalgic love story view of his marriage.

In their analysis of the Joe Klein book and subsequent movie *Primary Colors*, the authors discuss its attempt to authenticate Bill Clinton. Finally, Parry-Giles and

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Parry-Giles examine an episode of the MTV series *BIOrhythm* and the PBS documentary *The American President* and their role in the redemption of the president in the wake of the Clinton-Monica Lewinsky scandal.

By examining these important texts, the rhetoricians have provided a thoughtful analysis of not only the constructed images of one of our most popular presidents, but also the growing importance of and dependence upon such images in the American political process. As the United States has moved from a modern to a postmodern paradigm, the rhetorical means of constructing the president have become more visual in nature. These highly mediated images may lead the viewer to conclude that he or she is receiving a more authentic representation of the president when the very opposite may be true. A prime example is the misleading nature of *The War Room*, which masqueraded as an inside-the-campaign reality film. The authors make this point very clearly. They also accurately discuss the necessity of greater intimacy with the audience and a more "feminized persona" for the candidate (p. 193). They alert us to the power of the constructed image of the president both to manifest fragmentation in our society and to unify the public. They explore the erosion of the connection between the individual president and the larger institution known as the presidency and offer explanations for it. Lastly, they predict that "rhetorical and image demands will intensify" in this postmodern era (p. 200).

I highly recommend this book as an excellent analysis of some of the most significant constructions of the Clinton image. The authors have rendered a valuable commentary on the role of constructed images and the direction that postmodern politics is headed. One can hope that an increased hyperreality will result in the "healthy skepticism" from the public that the authors predict and that the citizenry will indeed assume "a greater responsibility for the success of the U.S. democratic experiment" (p. 202).

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