

OP-ED

What would Bill do?

Michael Kinsley

IT IS EASY TO IMAGINE President Obama's delight on hearing that former President Clinton was writing a book of analysis and solutions for all of our current problems.

Since leaving office, Clinton has been surprisingly good in following the maxim about what you should do if you can't say something nice. (He was even pretty good about it during the George W. Bush era.) Clinton does take a bit too much pleasure in reminding us that "in my administration we had four surplus budgets," but who can blame him for that?

About Obama, Clinton is tact itself, saying only that he disagrees with the incumbent's policy on nuclear power. (Obama is for. Clinton is agin.) Oh, and he thinks the administration's mortgage refinancing policy could be simpler.

Clinton's book is called "Back to Work: Why We Need Smart Government for a Strong Economy." In it, he settles once and for all the question of which of our most recent Ivy-educated presidents is the biggest policy wonk. It's George W. Only kidding. The prize clearly goes to Clinton, whose riveting discussion of the various options for repatriation of income earned by American companies in foreign countries could drive millions to say: "Where's the remote? I wonder if President Obama is on Anderson Cooper?"

So if you're looking for gossip, stick to the recent GOP offerings (Rumsfeld, Rice, Cheney). Here there is only policy. The one shiv I detected is inserted into the tender flesh of Vice President Joe Biden. It's short and easy to miss. "Vice President Biden — whose speeches provided much of the same information and made many of the same arguments mine did." This totally superfluous aside, in a chapter on the 2010 elections, can only be a veiled reference to Biden's withdrawal from the 1988 presidential race after Maureen Dowd of the New York Times noted the similarity between his stump speech and a speech given by British Labor Party head Neil Kinnock.

This episode is largely forgotten. Or it was until Clinton reminded us of it. Maybe it's true that the Clintons are angling for a job switch between Biden and Hillary, although Bill specifically denies it in the book, and I don't see how this helps in any event. "I'm always glad to be in Joe Biden's company," Clinton writes. Maybe not this week.

Actually, if you're looking for a tour of the economic landscape — debt, trade, mortgages, taxes, banks, bailouts, Social Security, Medicare and (have I mentioned?) four years of government surpluses under Clinton — you could do a lot worse than read this book. Clinton is a good teacher, an excellent explainer of complex subjects. And he tells it pretty straight.

His solutions, though, are something else. They tend to be small-bore and suspiciously win-win. We can reform health-care in ways that improve care and save money too. We can increase foreign aid in a way that will please liberals and "well-intentioned" conservatives. And so on. For example, what should we do about the Tricare health insurance program for veterans? Easy: "We could switch to a sliding scale based on income ... as long as we do it without putting more burdens on veterans returning from combat with bleak job prospects or disability conditions ... sustained in service to our nation." Next problem? Social Security. "Is it broke? Technically, no, but there is a cash flow problem."

Even the best-intentioned conservatives may smirk at Clinton's weakness for a tax credit. Has he ever seen one he doesn't like? Immediately after a high-minded discussion of how "Democrats and Republicans should work together to amend the corporate tax laws ... by broadening the tax base through the elimination and tightening of credits and deductions," Clinton writes, "I think we should keep the research and development incentive and increase it." Needless to say, "It will more than pay for itself." I incent. You deduct. He has loopholes.

Post-presidency, Clinton may be spending too much time hanging with CEOs. That may explain his apparent fascination with the repatriation of foreign profits. He would permit U.S. corporations to bring profits earned overseas back to the U.S. with no tax at all, provided they spend the money on creating "new jobs" in the U.S. (To be fair, Obama also proposes trading favors for new jobs. Defining a "new job" and enforcing the distinction will itself create many new jobs.)

In a chapter titled "Why We Need Government," Clinton has an excellent list of what he believes are the purposes of government, starting with national security and ending (fearlessly) with tax collection. No. 2 and No. 3 are helping the poor (or those who would be poor if we didn't help) and guaranteeing opportunity for all. Then No. 4 is "economic development," which includes tax breaks and subsidies to certain people and institutions, and incentives for certain kinds of behavior that Clinton is so fond of. It seems to me that government is very good at No. 2 and No. 3, and lousy at No. 4. It should stick to what it's good at.

But never mind all that. Did you know that the Clinton administration ran four years of budget surpluses?

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INSPIRATIONAL: The iconic image of Rosie the Riveter from the 1940s.

Saluting the Rosies

Therese Ambrosi Smith

I CAN'T REMEMBER when I first learned about Rosie the Riveter. She's always been there, like the national anthem and baseball. So I was surprised, two years ago, when my 13-year-old friend Lara said that she thought the iconic image from the 1940s was an old ad for power tools.

It was a Saturday morning, and Lara had come by as I was pulling a piece of spongy wood trim off the back window of my beach shack. "Just trying to stay ahead of decay," I said, and asked if she wanted to help.

She picked up my cordless drill and posed with flexed bicep. "We can do it," she said.

"You're a Rosie fan," I said. "Who?"

"Rosie the Riveter — you know, 'We can do it!'"

Lara shrugged. "I saw it on your dish towels," she said.

My dish towels. She liked the graphics, the tough chick. Lara can relate because, like Rosie, she's strong and confident and sees no limits to what she can accomplish.

The women who built the steady stream of replacement warships and aircraft deployed in World War II are elderly now. The youngest of them is more than 80 years old. While we are often reminded that we're losing our veterans at a rapid rate, less is said of the mothers, sisters and lovers who equipped the troops and made essential contributions on the home front. They are the great- and great-great-grandmothers of the young women I see on the bus, texting friends. I've often wondered if today's daughters know the stories. According to Lara, "Not really." Nearly 70 years have passed since Pearl Harbor was attacked.

American women were President Franklin Roosevelt's secret army, and Hitler gravely underestimated them. Like their soldier brothers, they too left ordinary lives to do extraordinary things. They worked in difficult and dangerous conditions, often at the limits of their physical ability. They accomplished tasks they had never imagined having the training or strength to do. They were the home half of the Greatest Generation. They helped save the world.

Many of these women suddenly found themselves single, working parents at a time when stay-at-home moms were the norm. For some the change in marital status was permanent — part of the war's terrible toll. It was a time of change for minority women too. They often traveled far for an opportunity to earn more than the daily wage of the domestic. They joined an integrated workforce, bound together by common cause. They excelled.

Significant and lasting social change came in other ways. The industrialist Henry Kaiser (with some encouragement from Eleanor Roosevelt) broke new ground sup-

porting working mothers, providing day-care, healthcare, even a war rations office on site, to help employees manage the demands of job and family. The healthcare plan that Kaiser first offered his workers for 50 cents a week was made available to the public in 1945 and survives today as Kaiser Permanente, with more than 8 million members.

Although housewives and mothers were new to the wartime workforce, the majority of women drawn to industry needed the income and had been working before the war, but in unskilled, low-paying positions. As they gained skill and confidence, they believed they'd be similarly employed postwar, but then they found themselves denied good-paying jobs simply because they were women.

When the soldiers came home and women surrendered their places in industry, not all were happy to return to their old work, even though they had been told from the start that the veterans would need their jobs. But traditional roles and segregated society had become unfamiliar.

I've written about some of these women, following their lives through arrival in the shipyards, through industrial accidents and through the loss of their soldier relatives. Their influence and changed worldview are reflected in their daughters' commitment to gender and racial equality, and in the activism of youth in the 1960s and '70s. The Rosies taught their kids that they too could change the world.

On Oct. 25, 2000, President Clinton signed a bill establishing the Rosie the Riveter / WWII Home Front National Historical Park — at the site of the former Kaiser shipyards and near other wartime industrial sites — in Richmond, Calif. Completing the 15-year implementation plan for the park will require public and private investment. The Rosie the Riveter Trust assists the National Park Service with fundraising and manages an online store with gifts that include a Rosie action figure.

We owe a debt of gratitude to the Rosies, especially those of us who found more open doors in life than our mothers had. Rosie was with me when I worked my way through college. She was with me when I learned to adjust the valves in my Volkswagen's engine, climbed Mt. Kenya and built the beach shack I now call home.

Recently, Lara, now 16, told me about a visit she made to relatives in Canada, and how she helped them lay a new hardwood floor. She spoke enthusiastically about learning to measure and cut wood, to nail on an angle. I imagine her building her own beach shack someday, and when we all come by to warm it, I will bring her new dish towels, silk-screened with the image of Rosie the Riveter.

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Ohio sends a message

RONALD BROWNSTEIN

THIS WEEK'S resounding vote in Ohio repudiating a Republican anti-union law should provide a clear warning to the congressional deficit-reduction "super committee," especially its GOP members.

The 61%-39% tally repealing Gov. John Kasich's prized SB 5 legislation restricting collective bargaining rights for public employees reaffirms a lesson from the last three decades of budget wars in Washington: It is virtually impossible to sell voters on a significant retrenchment of public benefits without bipartisan support and a compelling case that the changes are linked to broadly shared sacrifice.

That message is especially important for Republicans because one of the biggest hurdles to a comprehensive deficit agreement is the expectation among many in the GOP that, after the 2012 election, they will hold unified control of Congress and the White House and can simply impose their preferred solutions without compromise or political cost. History, underlined by this week's Ohio result, suggests that expectation represents a huge gamble.

In many ways, the Ohio law that voters overturned followed the model that many Republicans envision for 2013 in Washington. With unified control of the governorship and both chambers of the Legislature, state Republicans passed sweeping legislation limiting the collective bargaining rights of public employees, including police and firefighters. The bill, which also rolled back pension and health benefits and banned strikes, passed the state Senate narrowly and the state House comfortably, without support from a single Democrat. When Kasich signed the bill, in March, he portrayed it as the sort of economizing that would be required to cut taxes.

But unions quickly obtained enough signatures to place a repeal initiative on the ballot. They then effectively inverted Kasich's argument: An early ad charged that politicians were "blaming public employees" for the state's budget woes even as they were "funneling over \$100 million in tax breaks to their corporate campaign contributors."

Kasich's experience should be a red flag for congressional Republicans because it so closely approximates the strategy many of them envision. Most Republicans understandably like their odds of winning the White House, and majorities in the Senate and House, next year. They believe they can then in 2013 pass a deficit-slashing budget on a party-line basis that would dramatically shrink entitlement programs — by converting Medicaid into a block grant and Medicare into a voucher system — without including any tax increases (and maybe cutting taxes further). That possibility is one reason so many in the GOP are reluctant to strike a deal now in which Democrats would accept entitlement cuts in return for Republican acquiescence to tax increases.

But the Ohio vote shows how difficult in practice it would be for Republicans, even if they have unified control in 2013, to hold public support while cutting entitlements and maintaining (or expanding) tax cuts for the wealthy without any bipartisan cover. Since 1980, Republicans have tried three times to retrench entitlements on a party-line basis: Social Security with Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, and Medicare with Newt Gingrich in 1995. Each effort failed — and helped precipitate GOP losses in the next election.

That consistent history — and this week's big uprising against Kasich — underscore the validity of the axiom that Gene B. Sperling, director of President Obama's National Economic Council, coined in a recent speech: "Nobody likes deficit-reduction plans. Successful deficit-reduction plans are agreements that everybody hates equally in an even and fair way." Balance and equitably shared sacrifice are precisely what Ohio voters believed SB 5 lacked.

The odd thing about the super committee's waiting game is that there's little mystery about what a balanced proposal should contain. The Simpson-Bowles and Domenici-Rivlin deficit-reduction commissions, and the bipartisan Gang of Six senators, all produced broadly overlapping blueprints. At a time when federal revenue, measured as a share of the economy, has fallen to its lowest point since 1950, and payments to individuals (mostly through entitlement programs) consume more than three-fifths of the federal budget, there's no secret to the formula for restoring fiscal sustainability.

The questions surrounding the committee — and the larger deficit debate — are entirely political. Neither party alone can pass a response of the magnitude this problem demands. Tax increases and entitlement cuts are each the key to the other. Democrats can't accept the latter without the former. For Republicans, it's the reverse. Probably the only way to pass either and live to tell about it is to pass both. This week's earthquake in Ohio shows what happens when politicians ignore that straightforward lesson.

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