United States, the only time in our history that a president has held the other highest office. Finally content, and in the job he had always wanted, Taft lost 100 pounds and his good nature returned. Once, when asked about his troubled presidency, he responded, "I don't remember that I ever was president."

In fact, he had made important contributions to the country during his presidency. In industrial regulation, in antitrust measures, in the creation of the Department of Labor, he had made his mark. And in the establishment of the first-ever executive budget, he had strengthened the position of the president vis-à-vis Congress.

Taft all along wanted a more powerful executive office; but he also wanted to head off the threat of one that was too powerful. And though his conception of the proper constitutional balance proved too precious for its time, it would echo through the twentieth century. In the era of Richard Nixon and the "imperial presidency," Taft's point of view would take on renewed significance and urgency, an urgency more profound than even Taft had imagined. "[Mine was] a very humdrum, uninteresting administration," he once declared, "but... I think that... I can look back [with] some pleasure in having done something for the benefit of the public weal."

WILLIAM JEFFERSON CLINTON
1993–2001
Second Chances

William Jefferson Clinton was born in 1946 as William Blythe III, the son of a salesman who died before his son was born and a professional nurse, Virginia Dell, who became the single greatest influence in her son’s life.

From an early age his instincts drew him to politics. “Civil rights was the defining political issue of my childhood,” he said, “starting when I was quite young, in the 1950s. The other thing was the fact that we got a television when I was nine years old, and I got to watch, in 1956, the Republican and Democratic Conventions. I watched the whole thing, and I was utterly fascinated by it.”

In 1963, he took the last name of his stepfather, Roger Clinton, an alcoholic whose rough behavior brought out in Clinton new powers of resilience and empathy. That same year he was chosen to be part of Boys Nation, a group of young people from around the country sent to experience Washington, D.C., firsthand. There, he got to shake hands with his political hero, John F. Kennedy. The encounter changed Bill Clinton’s life forever. “I was elated,” said Clinton. “When I went home I had the feeling that if I worked hard and prepared myself, I could have an impact.”

The following year Clinton entered Georgetown University, where he became known for his self-confidence, for his intelligence, and for being a man in a hurry. Twice elected class president, after his junior year he was hired as a part-time clerk on Capitol Hill by Arkansas Senator J. William Fulbright. And following Fulbright’s example, in his senior year he won a Rhodes Scholarship. At Oxford, he studied international politics, narrowly avoided the draft, opposed the
Vietnam War, and dreamt of one day entering public service.

"There is a sense of mission that most of us who grew up in the sixties feel as citizens," Clinton said. "That it is not enough for us just to pursue our own private lives; that we have a larger obligation to our community and to our country."

After his return from England, in 1970, Clinton's career advanced rapidly. At Yale Law School, he met fellow student Hillary Rodham, an active idealist whose no-nonsense working style was the perfect complement to his freewheeling charm. "Most everything we've done has been a partnership," Clinton later said of his wife. "She is profoundly important to what I've done."

In 1972, Clinton accepted a position on the faculty of the University of Arkansas Law School and used it as a springboard into Arkansas politics. "I ran for Congress in 1974 and was defeated," Clinton recalled. "And then in 1976 I was attorney general, and I loved that job. Then a vacancy occurred in the governor's race, and so I ran and I won, and it was exhilarating."

Elected governor in 1978, thirty-two-year-old Bill Clinton bristled with ideas and energy. But he also made a series of political miscalculations. By seeming not to listen to his constituents, by raising licensing fees, and by giving an impression of intellectual arrogance, in 1980 he lost his bid for reelection. "I think [the loss] was good for me," Clinton later said. "It's like every other adversity in life. If you survive it, you normally come out ahead. I was very fortunate to be from a small, rural state with a lot of small towns, where people were very forthright. Because a few months after the election, I went out across the state and I'd ask what I'd done wrong. And they would tell me—in great, stunning, brutal detail. They then gave me a second chance to serve."

After winning again in 1982 and then serving another ten years as governor, Clinton, at age forty-six, ran for president. And in 1992, when his national candidacy became threatened by rumors regarding his personal life, once again he reached out to the people. With his wife at his side, Clinton confessed on national television to having had rocky times in his marriage. But it was behind them, he said, and entirely a private matter. Forcefully, he urged that the people judge him by his performance and his political record, not by his private life. His words made sense to millions of Americans, and from a position low in the polls, he soared to second place in the New Hampshire primary, earning the nickname "The Comeback Kid." Going on to win the nomination of his party, Clinton faced President George Bush and third-party candidate H. Ross Perot in the general elections. By sticking to the issues and promising the kind of change that only a young man of a new generation could bring about, Clinton won an upset victory in November with forty-three percent of the popular vote. "I felt, at the one hand, elated," he recalled. "But there was a little bit of me that felt like the dog who was chasing the pickup and finally caught it. So now what do I do? I think any person who is not a little humbled by being given this responsibility doesn't understand what he or she has got ahold of."

Clinton's presidency began with a tremendous sense of potential. One of the brightest and most empathetic politicians of the twentieth century, he was highly literate and had an instinct for the direction of history. Determined to make his mark as a Democratic reformer, he set in motion an ambitious agenda to reshape numerous social programs, including a bold central initiative to create universal health care coverage. Republicans criticized it as an over-ambitious, liberal experiment, and health care became the rallying cry for a strong political opposition. Declaring their own more conservative "Contract with America," Republicans went on to sweeping victories in the 1994 Congressional elections. Gaining control over both houses of Congress for the first time in forty years,
Republicans repudiated the Clinton program and ushered in a new era of divided government, the partisanship of which had rarely been seen in modern times. The spirit of compromise—key to the workings of the Madisonian system—evaporated.

But Republicans underestimated Bill Clinton’s resolve, and the power he could still wield as president. Determined to regain equal standing with Congress, Clinton adapted to the political climate, preempting some popular Republican positions, such as welfare reform, and moving closer to the nation’s political center. When, twice in 1995, the government was forced to shut down, with the President and the Republican-controlled Congress at loggerheads over the budget, it was Clinton who convinced the country that the Republicans, not he, were the real radicals. And in 1996, despite negative publicity generated by an ongoing investigation into his past business dealings while governor of Arkansas, he staged one of the greatest comebacks in presidential history. In another three-way race, he won decisively in the November elections.

The Madisonian system was put to a further test at the start of Bill Clinton’s second term. When the Supreme Court ruled in Jones v. Clinton that a sitting president could be sued for actions taken prior to his term, thereby limiting the president’s traditional independence from the judiciary, Clinton was forced to testify at a civil court sexual harassment lawsuit against him. Confronted by an aggressive press corps, the President made what he later admitted were misleading statements, and insisted on keeping his entire focus on what he called “America’s business.” It was in this politically charged atmosphere that an independent counsel, with virtually unlimited investigative powers, intensified his scrutiny of Clinton. Intended to serve as an objective investigator, the Office of the Independent Counsel—now headed by Kenneth Starr—represented a new power that had been added to the Madisonian system of checks and balances, created in the wake of Richard Nixon’s Watergate scandal. But Starr was soon caught up in the partisan warfare of Clinton’s tenure, as the Madisonian system itself degenerated into one of mutual antagonism.

As Clinton’s second term unfolded, Starr’s inquiry broadened, turning into the most aggressive investigation ever leveled against a president. Failing to uncover incriminating evidence in what had become known as Whitewater, he shifted the focus toward Clinton’s personal life. In 1998, Starr exposed a secret affair between the President and a White House intern named Monica Lewinsky, claiming that Clinton perjured himself when he denied the affair under oath in his civil case. Despite strong Democratic showings in the November midterm elections and solid, popular support, on December 19, 1998, the Republican-controlled House of Representatives voted to impeach, initiating the only impeachment trial against a president since Andrew Johnson. The official charges were perjury and obstruction of justice, but throughout the trial the underlying dynamic was political: a struggle between the Republican revolution and Clinton’s Democratic revival. It was the President’s enemies who framed the debate in terms of the issue of character.

“I think a lot of the people who talk about [character] do so in ways that are quite self-serving,” Clinton reflected. “Most of the people I’ve known who have demonstrated great character didn’t go around talking about it. . . . It is important for us to remember that there is a difference between character and reputation, and that under the guise of elevating character, there are a large number of people in our country today who believe that the way they can get what they want in life is by destroying someone else’s reputation. None of us is ever a complete judge of another’s character; only God can fully judge that.

“Now, I made a personal mistake, which became a matter of public debate.
I've tried to acknowledge my wrongdoing and say that I was sorry about it. But I also have tried to demonstrate presidential character by standing up for the interests of the country and being very strong when the interests and values of the American people were at stake. I also tried to deal with this whole impeachment controversy in a way that showed genuine devotion to the Constitution and the history of the country. I will leave it to others to determine whether I did that.”

Throughout the Senate trial there loomed a more substantive issue—of exactly what constituted an “impeachable offense,” and whether the President’s actions in his misleading testimony during the private civil lawsuit rose to the level of “high crimes and misdemeanors.” Ultimately, the issue hinged on the Constitution itself, and the specter of James Madison was ever-present. If an elected president could be removed by his political enemies, scholars warned, on the basis of private misdoings and an effort to cover them up, the Madisonian system itself could be in danger of collapse.

Despite impassioned calls from many Republicans for the President's resignation, throughout the trial Clinton's job-approval ratings remained extremely high. And in the end, the Senate heeded the people. As a body it could not muster the required two-thirds vote, or even a simple majority of its members, to convict Bill Clinton of any charges.

"The American people were very good to me," Clinton said, "[and] I learned several things. I learned that there are certain rules of human conduct that apply to all of us, and when we make a mistake, whether you are president or anything else, you have to live with the consequences of your actions; nobody gets out for free. And the second thing I learned is that the Framers were smart: they designed the Constitution to prevent partisan passions from overriding common sense. The third thing was that the American people almost always get it right if they have enough time and enough information. They have this uncanny sixth sense about where things ought to be. [And] fourth, the American people were saying something besides 'We don't think the president should be impeached, and then if you do impeach him we certainly don't think he should be convicted.' What they were also really saying was, 'Okay, we know what happened—this guy made a mistake [and] he apologized to the American people—this is not what this whole impeachment thing is about. And, oh, by the way, you people are not working for us; we hired you to work for us, not to work on each other.' And I tried to remember that.

"I have made all kinds of mistakes in my life, but I try to keep going, and the people that I love and the people with whom I work, the people from whom I learn, they gave me a second chance. And I think if we think about life as getting second chances, as long as you learn from your mistakes and you don't make the same ones again, I think it's a helpful way to look at life.”

The only Democrat to be reelected president since FDR, Bill Clinton had a significant impact on American politics. He reoriented the Democratic party toward mainstream issues, including balancing the budget and reforming welfare. He genuinely cared about race relations, appointing minorities to high positions in his administration and initiating a national dialogue on race. And he appointed women to some of the highest positions in national government, including for the first time secretary of state and attorney general. He worked for peace in Ireland and the Middle East, and backed NATO's enlargement and its intervention in Kosovo. And, while highlighting the ongoing problem of America's poor, he presided over one of the strongest economic booms of the twentieth century. Bill Clinton both reflected and benefited from an increasingly tolerant America, and while most Americans deplored his personal acts in the Lewinsky case, they refused to judge his public role by his private behavior. In the end, they gave him
another chance.

“[The presidency] has taught me a great deal,” Clinton mused. “It’s taught me the importance of being humble. I’ve had to ask for forgiveness in a way that most people never do in public, although nearly everybody does in private at some point during a lifetime. But it has also taught me to be less aggravated at other people, less agitated, less upset about some criticism I get. . . . I’ve learned a lot about giving up the little things in life so you can focus on the big things.

“And I think I’ve learned it in a way I never would have if I hadn’t been president. If I had felt I was doing it only for myself, I’m not sure I would have had the strength to learn these things. But knowing that I was doing it for the American people helped me, and I’m very grateful for that. I think that it’s something that I can carry with me for the rest of my life.”