

AT NEARLY EVERY TURN THE spectre of 1996 is already haunting President William Jefferson Clinton.

Reagan never really faced this situation. Neither did Bush — for as remarkable as it may seem in retrospect throughout most of the Bush first term he and his people were very confident he would be reelected in 1992.

The last time Washington faced a situation where the incumbent president was widely perceived to be a lameduck early into his presidency was way back when the last Democrat inhabited 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Jimmy Carter had a hard time getting things done during his few months in Washington. First of all he and his entourage really were a bit too nice, not to mention too green. Remember, for instance Hamilton Jordan, a young strategist who just a few years before had been sleeping out in his car, yet whom Carter made his chief of staff at the White House. But even more importantly official Washington never really accepted Jimmy Carter — didn't think he really understood how Washington worked, didn't expect him to stay, didn't fear him as was the case during the previous Democratic presidency of Lyndon Johnson.

What Clinton faces is something similar.

If one is perceived to be limited in power and unlikely to be staying around in the job, then one's ability to get his own way in Washington is restricted.

Now who knows of course politics is not a science and nothing in this realm can be proved or disproved. Clinton may just surprise us all. He certainly does have indefatigable energy and he seems to love to campaign as much as he does to eat. But the betting here at the moment is that Clinton and his cronies will be departing in a few years. And furthermore, with 1996 ever approaching, Clinton is going to have to spend a lot of time watching his back, holding his fire, and keeping his friends happy — all far sooner than usual.

It used to be widely perceived that any American president who wanted to do something about the Israeli-Arab situation had to do so right in the beginning of his administration. That was the time of maximum leverage, that was the time when the president could afford to throw his weight around a bit, make a few enemies, try to get a few difficult things done.

There would then be plenty of time to get ready for the next election — so the conventional thinking went.

The same general way of thinking applies to other major issues in which there are significant interest groups and lobbies lined up to block any White House initiatives.

For Clinton, health care reform has fast become the paradigm issue. He campaigned hard on it; the American people want it, the current system is out of control, and a very bright and committed woman — who just happens to be the president's wife — is leading the charge.

Still, the Clinton plan has started coming apart in its early stages; with very powerful interest groups not hesitated it seems to take on the new president. Major industry groups have teamed up to

1996

Is it already beyond Clinton's reach?

twist the issues beyond recognition and a junior congressman from the president's own party is offering an alternative plan that goes against some of his president's main concerns. Similar political considerations of image and electoral posturing for 1996 are major elements in the foreign policy initiatives taken in recent days by the Clinton team.

With Clinton still widely perceived a neophyte when it comes to foreign affairs, with the situation in Russia very unstable to say the least, and with issues like North Korean nukes and potential new rounds of Mid-east terrorism always lurking, Clinton's political handlers are well aware they are already in a fight for their jobs.

Taking on the Japanese over trade and making threats against the Serbs have ample justification on their own merits, of course. Still, it's pretty evident that these policies, and the way they are presented at home, are also designed to buttress the president's political image.

With this backdrop, who's out there waiting in the wings to take Clinton on and recapture the White House for the Republicans?

The list is considerable at this point — and that's just the point. There are a lot of Republican hopefuls, along with one very major undeclared, that are already lining up at the political starting gate. This in itself is a sign of the major political weakness of the current administration.

First the most interested and quite possibly the most likely challenger of them all, the "undeclared" former chairman of the joint chiefs of staff General Colin Powell. At 56 Powell's image and stature are considerable. He could even cut into the Black vote while probably being the only likely Black candidate who wouldn't lose much of the White vote. At present Powell is busy with a multi-million dollar book deal and cashing in on the lecture circuit while playing his presidential aspirations very close to the vest. Meanwhile, according to a recent background report in *Parade* magazine, Powell "is the man many GOP insiders consider most likely to win against Clinton".

Among the others:

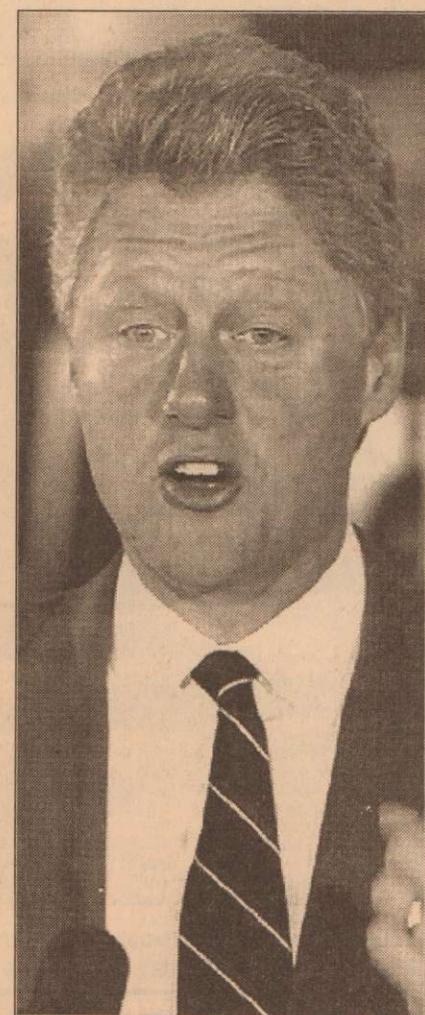
Former vice president Dan Quayle. At 47 he clearly wants the job. He's one of the darlings of the conservatives, but then he's also readymade for the liberal comedians. Quayle will try for it, but it's not likely he will get the nomination simply because his chances of beating Clinton are suspect and there are others of grander stature.

Among the others out their running hard are Senate minority leader Bob Dole, former cabinet secretary and football star Jack Kemp, and former secretary of defence Dick Cheney.

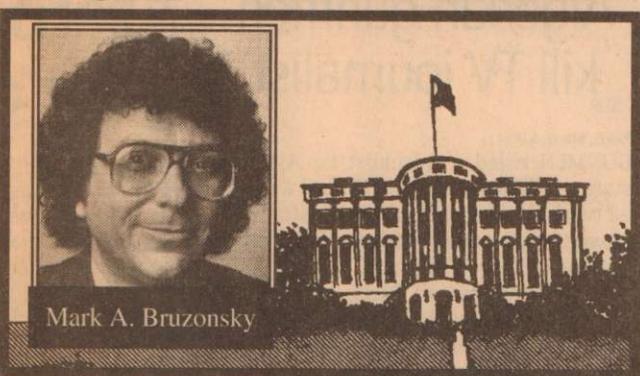
Senator Dole can be seen daily practically salivating for his chance at the Oval Office. At 70 it's now or never for the old crusty Washington infighter. And that's just his problem. Dole is not a very pleasant fellow, no matter how competent. He's been around Washington too long, knows the town too well, and in the process hasn't played the media game of smiles and laughs that Clinton has mastered. The public likes a president to smile a lot and reassure them. That was Ronald Reagan's secret, and in a sense Clinton took lessons watching Reagan throughout the 1980s. Dole needs an image-maker and a couple of new speech-writers fast!

Jack Kemp could well be a compromise candidate if the others beat each other up badly. He's bright, attractive, liked by women, and considered on the moderate side of the conservative spectrum. At 58 he's positioned right for the fight. Earlier this month he was the choice, once again, at the 21st annual Conservative Political Action Conference.

At 53 Dick Cheney is also perceived as



From



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Washington

a moderate. But he's got less appeal with the strong conservative wing of the Republican Party and coming from the small state of Wyoming he has a minor political base. Cheney's a long-shot, more likely someone who could be #2 on a Republican ticket headed by Powell, Dole or Kemp.

There are still others who just might come forward as well. Gramm of Texas and South Carolina Governor Carroll Campbell are both strong within the party and quite acceptable to the powerful conservative interests. Pat Buchanan makes no secret of wanting to live in the White House. And former drug czar William Bennett is also capable of rallying support and money.

Hard as it may be to believe, in just two years the candidates will be in New Hampshire for the first primary. Bill Clinton is already running hard. He has to.

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