

THIS transition period has seemed like it was a very long engagement of us to this new Commander-in-Chief.

Such a lengthy engagement, in fact, that the traditional presidential "honeymoon" pretty much ended even before Clinton got sworn in. "What happened to our honeymoon" screamed a headline in *The New York Times* in an article about the transition a few days before the inauguration.

It's not just the greater media attention that bombards us more constantly than ever before — though the new realities of hour-by-hour media saturation do play a significant part in how quickly things come and go. After all, it was less than two years ago that George Bush had unprecedented popularity and the conventional wisdom was that smart Democrats would wait for 1996!

Even more significant to the predicament the new president finds himself in is that the country he now leads is desperately hungry for all the promised "change" that got him elected in the first place.

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The Democratic campaign to unseat Bush was specifically designed to build-up expectations and create "hope".

But then the period of actually getting ready to assume power resulted in quite the opposite — ongoing attempts to deflate the previously built-up expectations and to mellow the previously hyped hope.

The new administration won't say anything like this in public, but it is already in a quite desperate race to create a more "realistic" attitude about what can be changed and over how long a time-period — a race against a ticking clock that each month is likely to bring

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CLINTON WATCH

CHANGING THE PROMISES ABOUT CHANGE

From



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The greatest threat to the Clinton presidency is that within months there will be another mood swing-back towards despair and cynicism if and when it becomes apparent that the new president, just like the old, was far better at verbal offerings than actual givings. The Democratic campaign to unseat George Bush was specifically designed to build-up expectations and create hope.... Thus, within a few months, the Clinton presidency will begin desperately looking for something to call a success, for something to divert attention from all the failed promises and renewed troubles; like trying to force the Arabs to make some kind of a deal with Israel

more and more negative assessments of the young president from Arkansas who promised so much but is delivering so little.

Furthermore, in the days of the transition and takeover, especially in terms of foreign policy, the Clinton team has been exceedingly busy reassuring everyone precisely that there isn't going to be much change — not about Haiti, not about Iraq, not about the Arab-Israeli "peace process", not even very much about the Pentagon's budget.

With the Clinton people running

scared, having so quickly and universally adopted the Reagan-Bush foreign policy agenda, whatever significant changes Bill Clinton continues to pursue are thus going to have to be pretty much on domestic matters.

Yet here too the new president has been spending much more time dissembling from campaign promises than putting forth anything significantly new and different.

Now in the Oval Office, Clinton is hinting that there isn't going to be a middle-class tax cut after all; that nearly all social programmes are hostage to the still mounting deficit; that comprehensive national healthcare reform remains a distant vision ... and so on and so forth.

What "change" there really is so far here in Washington is that of rhetoric and style.

In these areas Bill Clinton is definitely a very different kind of bird than George Bush.

From his jogging in the morning, to his delight at fast food, to his cherubic attempts to hug and kiss his way among the ordinary as well as the beautiful people,

Bill Clinton is not only a whole new generation, he's a whole new attitude.

George Bush was the epitome of elitism and the corporate old-boy network. Bill Clinton is a populist at heart, a people's president in spirit.

George Bush was the epitome of self-righteous American neo-colonialism, of a Pax Americana daring-do — a kind of refined, private-school version of Teddy Roosevelt and his rough riders.

Bill Clinton remains the anti-war moralist — even if he has learned to hide much of these sentiments — who desperately wants to rebuild his country and avoid the strong-arm of American military dominance; though he may simply not be able to.

George Bush relished his role on the world stage, one bankrolled by the military-industrial complex Dwight Eisenhower so presciently warned about, while giving every impression he wished someone else could handle matters at home.

Bill Clinton wants to "rebuild America", has had little experience with foreign affairs while

in Arkansas or before, and clearly wants to pursue the domestic agenda that he talked about throughout the campaign.

In short, when it comes to temperament, style, and vision, George Bush and Bill Clinton do indeed come from different parts of America.

But the American presidency is not really an institution dominated by the personality and views of the single man at the White House — contrary to how much of the press usually portrays things. The reality is that much continues from one administration to another regardless of who is at the top.

The United States is these days the imperial nation, the single current superpower, and its moves and policies on the world stage have a great deal of institutional longevity and policy continuance.

Furthermore, whatever the stylistic differences between Bush and Clinton, high-minded rhetoric, populist style and lofty attitudes are simply not going to solve America's neglected problems at home nor result in a more coherent, less neo-colonial, less hypocritical set of

foreign policies abroad.

In the immediate days before Clinton's swearing-in, the press was already having a bit of an initial frenzy reporting on Clinton's already broken promises, changed positions, excuses for inaction.

The very day before Clinton's bus rolled into Washington — a rather far-fetched attempt to recreate the horse and buggy journey of Thomas Jefferson of yesteryear — two of the three major networks devoted major segments on the evening news precisely to a focus on Clinton's "changes from the changes" he has been so loudly touting.

Okay. All this said many reading this may be understandably thinking that it's far too early to be jumping all over Bill Clinton and far too early as well to be judging his presidency. In many ways fair enough.

And yet the role of independent observers and analysts — of those who have watched these transitions of power and changes of the guard scenes before from front-row seats here in the American capital — is to offer what insights they can glean from their experiences as to what lies ahead.

In this case, the forecast from this analyst is for one problem after another for Bill Clinton — so much so that within a few months the Clinton presidency will begin desperately looking for something to call a success, for something to divert attention from all the failed promises and renewed troubles.

In that context, trying to push and cajole the Arabs to make some kind of a deal with the Israelis — Camp David II, if you will — is probably already looming large in the minds of some here, especially Israel's minions who permeate the Clinton administration through and through.