

NOT IN MODERN HISTORY has an American politician first defeated a sitting president yet then taken office only to find himself so quickly savaged by public opinion and the media as is the case with William Jefferson Clinton.

In the polls support for Clinton is at a record low for such an early point in office, well under 40 percent after just a few months on the job.

The figures are even more negative when people are asked about their confidence in the Clinton administration's economic plans. When it comes to foreign policy Clinton has quickly earned the reputation for indecision and waffling that can become debilitating in normal times or result in over-reaction in a crisis.

And then there's Ross Perot.

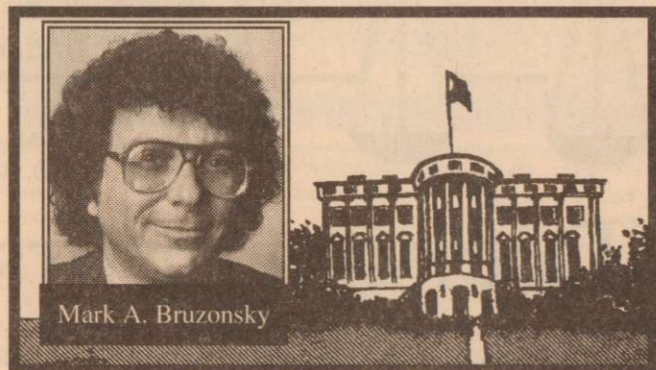
With the president still learning his way around the White House, Perot is out there shaping opinion by telling all who will listen — and that's a considerable segment of American society — that if Bill Clinton were interviewing for a position in big business he wouldn't be given a job above mid-management!

In a sign of what may be coming, in early June the party Clinton heads suffered a humiliating landslide defeat in Texas loosing what had been Secretary Lloyd Bentsen's Senate seat to an outspoken Republican woman dead set against Clinton's economic prescriptions.

And not just loosing — for it was an unprecedented landslide against the Democrats. A few days later the Clinton-endorsed Democratic candidate for mayor of Los Angeles also went

Clinton and Gergen

From



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Washington

down to defeat. "Has President Clinton become such a political pariah that he drove hordes of Texans to the polls to overwhelmingly elect a Republican, Kay Bailey Hutchinson, to the United States Senate?" *The New York Times* asked in a front page "political memo" a few days ago.

Then of course there was also the Guinier fiasco. Columnist Anthony Lewis, one you would normally expect to be backing Clinton, summed up the overall situation by concluding: "The Lani Guinier episode represented failure both political and moral.... There is something profoundly wrong with Bill Clinton's presidency. No one knows that more than those of us who thought the country needed real change".

With so much going wrong,

it's no wonder the young president who previously spent most of his life before coming to Washington in Arkansas is trying just about every possible move to regain his balance.

That, of course, is what the appointment of David Gergen is all about.

Gergen is one of those Washington types who survive and succeed so well in this town through what the locals know to be a kind of respectable political whoring.

Admittedly its a classy act Dave Gergen performs. And with so many in the press his friends or cronies, coupled with those wanting future access to one of Washington's insiders, Gergen gets away with what he does without much negative commentary.

Long-time success of this

kind in Washington can only be achieved by those, like Gergen, who stand for very little, have thus made few enemies, and who pride themselves for the technical capabilities in dealing with any and all Washington problems, thus making them capable of serving many masters. These are the Washington "insiders" who can always be found lurking around the corridors of power waiting for another chance at "governing".

Make no mistake about it. Appointment Gergen was a panic move by a president who perceives his ship to be taking on lots of water far too fast.

Make no mistake about it. Gergen comes into office in a way and manner that will give him considerable policy as well as tactical influence. Not quite a bipartisan "co-presidency", but definitely an attempt to present himself as no longer just a Democrat.

Bill Clinton's attempt to portray his abandonment of Lani Guinier as having nothing to do with politics — but rather the result of his finally reading a couple of law review articles — smacked of Gergen's approach to political finesse all the way.

Gergen is certainly not the only one of his kind; Washington is really quite full of Gergen-types. It's just that he is one of the best at what he does. A political spinster for hire, if you will, though Gergen himself prefers to use such rhe-

torical dissembling as "when a president asks for help the only thing you can say is how soon do you need me".

Of course what Gergen conveniently forgets to add is any discussion just what it is the president wants help with and whether or not he serves any and all twisting and turning as the political winds dictate. One go around its Richard Nixon, the next Ronald Reagan and the next Bill Clinton. The Washington merry-go-round this time is in full public glare.

This all goes to further underscore, of course, those political theorists, Noam Chomsky foremost among them, who have long said America is really a one-party state with liberal and conservatives wings and political funding from the same basic corporate and military-industrial interests.

For people like Gergen the Washington game that he plays so well is always portrayed as a badge of honour. A man who really knows his way around Washington; a man who understands the media; a man who can always give sound political advice and beautifully manipulate the media with his soothing rhetorical approach that passes for political charm in a culture where all that seems to matter is who's on top and who can twist reality through media imagery.

Then there is Bosnian policy that has put Bill Clinton's lack of depth in full few.

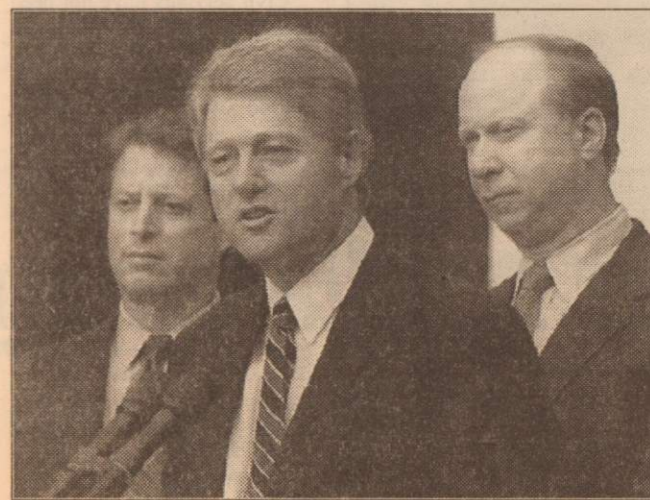
First he campaigned against the Bush administration's lack of action in the Balkans. Then he encouraged the portrayal of the Serbs as Nazi-like war criminals and practically promised the Muslims at least intervention from the air. Then the whole matter was pushed aside, thrown back to the UN, and pretty much swept under the political rug allowing pretty much to continue what was going on before.

Not exactly a course of action that earns Clinton either accolades for standing up straight or for understanding the political damage likely to flow from the way he approached the whole matter.

Make no mistake about it.

The appointment of David Gergen to guide Bill Clinton in the ways of Washington was one made in utter desperation by a president who already smells both defeat and discrediting in the air. In itself it was a panic move carried out with relative tactfulness — all the more so coming as it did just as the long Memorial Day Holiday weekend got underway.

With his economic agenda already under considerable unravelling, with his competence in foreign policy tremendously compromised by his mishandling of Bosnian policy, with one nominee after another finding that the president doesn't have the backbone to support them after a few whiffs



President Bill Clinton announcing to the press the appointment of David Gergen, extreme right, with Vice President Al Gore standing beside him on the left.

of opposition, with all this already on the record the Clinton presidency is in a political freefall.

All this in addition to the stupidities involved in two hundred dollar haircuts with Air Force One's engine humming and a tendency to cronyism and political payoffs that makes hypocrisy of so much that Bill Clinton says rhetorically.

Indeed, the image of this administration may never fully recover from the perceptions that have grown during the initial months — irresolution, incompetence, uncertainty.

ABC News outspoken gadfly, Sam Donaldson, noted a few days ago that there used to be a TV programme known as Ted Mack's *Amateur Hour* and that if it were still on the air Bill Clinton would win every week!

Overall the Clinton administration so far has created a basic perception of weakness and insecurity. And once the political sharks smell blood in this town there's no stopping them. It could be a long four years for the Clintons.

And so enter David Gergen. Perceived as a long-time Washington insider who has the right insights and credibility to prevent the president from future goofs or to help him talk his way out of touchy situations when they arise.

Next week a little reflection about the time I talked with Gergen a few years ago — back when he was covering for the *US News and World Report* publisher, real estate tycoon, and Israeli apologist, Mortimer Zuckerman, on matters dealing with the Mossad.