

'We've made real progress'

Bill Clinton mulls the meaning of his work and his predecessors' fates

With his first year in office drawing to a close, President Clinton met in the Oval Office last week with U.S. News White House correspondents Kenneth T. Walsh and Matthew Cooper. Excerpts:

■ **The first year.** I got elected on a commitment to try to change the way government works, to try to restore the economy and bring the American people together more and move us together towards the 21st century. And I believe we've made real progress there. On the other hand, I think I underestimated the importance of the president's voice—just being able to speak about these issues in a coherent, clear, forceful way. Whereas along toward the end of this year with the speech kicking off the [North American Free Trade Agreement] campaign or with the speech in Memphis [on violence and families], in a number of other settings the opportunity to speak turned out to be action in itself because it seems to galvanize the energy and concentration of a nation.

■ **A "Clinton coalition" in Congress?** It will depend in part on what the party leadership decides to do on the Republican side and on the extent to which we can get a majority of our folks to keep voting for change. For example, there are some things that didn't acquire a lot of notice that I think are really worth looking at. There were some nice stories today in the press on the national service program, how it's really getting off to a good start and the interest in it. They had a pretty fair number of Republican votes for that and a big majority of the Democrats. The more we can adopt the change measures with a bipartisan coalition, the better off it is. I think the people out here in America like it better. If you look ahead to the health care issue, we ought to be able to get a bipartisan majority.

■ **Should laws extend to Congress?** One of the interesting things for you to watch will be the political reform questions.



Reaching out. He says bipartisan coalitions are the best.

There is a whole package of legislation that will start in the House. The most important bill—I think, for the average American—is that the Congress will, if this bill passes, commit itself as an employer to living under the same laws it imposes on the private sector, which I think definitely ought to get passed.

■ **The Washington nominations game.** There are two big problems with it. Unconventional people are too big targets and the process is entirely too long and bureaucratic. We've had some conversations with some of the people who worked on personnel with President Bush, for example, to discuss it. I just now talked to some people in town here about whether there is some way next year maybe I could ask a group of people, equally divided between Republicans and Democrats, to take a look at just what has become of the

whole nominating process. If you take the [Supreme Court Nominee Robert] Bork case where I filed testimony against him, I worked for 60 hours myself personally on that. However, I liked him personally and I was outraged that they looked into the movies he checked out and things like that. I mean, he's an interesting, unconventional man. There ought to be some interesting people in public life in America.

I have no reason to believe at this point that I shouldn't go forward with the nomination [of Assistant Defense Secretary Morton Halperin]. Yes, he may have done or said some controversial things in his life, but on balance he's a good person for this job.

■ **President Kennedy's assassination.** There's just been another book written, right? Called *Case Closed* or something like that. I read a little bit of that book. I thought it was pretty persuasive.

■ **Newly released tapes on Lyndon Johnson.** You think we ought to start taping our conversations? [Laughter.] We are not doing any of that. You know I feel bad-

ly about Johnson, I admire him so much and in so many ways, and I think that if he could have been president at a slightly different time, he might have done so well. When you read the biographies of these guys—I'm almost done with August Heckscher's biography of Woodrow Wilson, which is an interesting book that a friend of mine sent me—you realize that the success of a president, in part, is going to depend on the time that they're in. And some of our failed presidents, had they been president at a different time, might have actually been quite good. And some of our greatest presidents were great just for the moment at which they lived. Had they served at a different time, they might have fallen in another category. Johnson was remarkable, though. He had a way of talking and dealing with people that was just fascinating. He got a lot done.