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Inside The Presidents Club

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When Barack Obama was hatching his most elaborate campaign video, he recruited two Oscar winners--one to direct and another, Tom Hanks, to narrate. But the real star of the film was not the man looking to win a second term. It was someone who had already accomplished that.

Bill Clinton appears four times in 17 minutes. Narrowing his eyes, pointing his finger, Clinton croaks out his favorite closing arguments for Obama on the economy, the auto bailout, health care reform and foreign policy. And then he confers upon Obama the Oval Office seal of approval for sending in the Navy SEALs after Osama bin Laden. "When I saw what happened," says Clinton of the raid in Pakistan, "I thought to myself, I hope that's the call I would've made."

For anyone who has studied the winding relationship between the 42nd President and the 44th, this is a ritually satisfying plot twist: Obama and Clinton, the only two Democratic Presidents in the past 31 years, are rivals as much as allies. They fought like ferrets in 2008: Clinton suggested Obama's record was a fairy tale; Obama suggested Clinton's presidency was paltry, a missed opportunity. Inside the Obama White House, Clintonian became a dirty word, a blackball top aides deployed to kill any idea that wasn't big enough or bold enough, or had too many angles or was just too political. At the heart of the Clinton-Obama grudge match was a prize for the ages: Which Democrat--the hot-blooded baby boomer or the cold-blooded law professor--would be remembered for saving liberalism when the nation was in a distinctly conservative mood? The two men spent most of 2009 and 2010 trying to piece together a partnership from the debris of the campaign. Even today, one party insider who knows them both describes the relationship in three words: "No love lost."

Now as Clinton gives full-throated testimony to Obama's many virtues, the reinvented relationship gives new meaning to the title of the campaign video: The Road We've Traveled. Against the backdrop of presidential history, however, reconciliation was practically inevitable. No matter what may separate American Presidents when it comes to politics, personalities or petty grievances, they are members of a unique and exclusive fraternity, and they are bound together by experiences that no one else can understand. "There is no conversation so sweet as that of former political enemies," Harry Truman once observed, and the modern Presidents are living proof. By the time Clinton made peace with Obama, he was also so close to the entire Bush family--vacationing with the father, raising money with the son, even escorting Barbara at Betty Ford's funeral--that the Texas clan had bestowed a nickname: Brother from Another Mother.

The Presidents club may not be in the Constitution or any book or bylaw, but neither is it a metaphor or figure of speech. It was created in 1953 at Dwight Eisenhower's Inauguration, when Herbert Hoover proposed the alliance to Truman. The two men, political and personal opposites, agreed that in the postwar age, a strong presidency was essential to U.S. security, and they worked together to enhance the powers of the office.

Up to that moment, the club had been more an idea than an institution. Some sitting Presidents consulted with their predecessors, yet beyond sharing war stories, there were limits to what a former President could do. Now in an age of global celebrity, when Presidents live longer and larger than ever, they retain unmatched influence long after they leave office. Plus they're the only ones who know what the job does to a person.

It was Eisenhower whom John Kennedy called on the morning he was about to announce a quarantine of Cuba that could trigger a nuclear war. It was Richard Nixon whom Clinton called late at night to discuss Russia, China and just how to best allocate a President's precious time. On the night that the SEALs killed bin Laden, Obama placed his first two calls--before informing allies, partisans or backers--to George W. Bush and Clinton.

There is no fraternity like it, and not just because of the barriers to entry or the privileges of membership. It has rules--stay in touch, don't discuss club business with the press--along with rituals, feast days and a private clubhouse across from the White House reserved solely for the use of former Presidents. It even has souvenirs. Lyndon Johnson gave Ike a pair of gold cuff links bearing the Presidential Seal: "You are the only one, along with Harry Truman, who can legitimately wear these," Johnson observed, "but if you look closely, it doesn't say 'Democrat' or 'Republican' on them."

At a time when a Democratic President and a Republican House Speaker can barely carry on a civil conversation, Presidents talk to, and about, one another in a dialect foreign to the current partisan vernacular. "You will be our President when you read this note," George H.W. Bush wrote to Clinton, the man who had just defeated him, echoing the message of transitions past, even between bitter political foes: "I am rooting hard for you." When it was George W. Bush's turn, his commitment to the club's code of conduct was unreserved. "We want you to succeed," he told Obama before the Inauguration, speaking for the entire club membership. "Whether we're Democrat or Republican, we care deeply about this country ... All of us who have served in this office understand that the office transcends the individual."

Today's club is remarkable for how much its members do together, both onstage and out of sight. The former Presidents spend a lot of time saying no: to requests to appear, causes to sponsor, business schemes to endorse. But they all keep close track of what their fellow members are up to, even monitoring one another's health. Recently, they privately circulated prints of a rare photograph in which they all appear, each one signing a copy for the others. Their top aides communicate by phone or e-mail, sometimes every day. As it has throughout history, the club has its share of feuds and

tensions, and while none of the members exactly love the President, each has helped Obama in his own way.

1. George W. Bush: Silence Is Golden

It's a benefit of membership in the Presidents club that each man passes on secrets to those who follow. Eisenhower showed Kennedy how to instantly summon the evacuation helicopter to the White House lawn. LBJ showed Nixon where he kept the tape recorders. Ronald Reagan taught Clinton how to salute properly; the two men practiced during a meeting at Reagan's Los Angeles office during the transition in 1992. Even though he already knew his way around the White House, George W. Bush wanted something more personal when he met Clinton in December 2000. He asked Clinton how to give better speeches.

When the time approached in 2009 for Obama to take over, Bush promised to do everything in his power to smooth the transition. The economy was still on life support, and Bush took White House rituals seriously. Besides, he had seen this moment coming. Back in 2005, when Obama visited the White House the afternoon before his swearing-in as a Senator, Bush offered Obama some advice. "You've got a bright future, very bright," the President said. "But I've been in this town a while, and let me tell you, it can be tough." When your star rises fast, people will come after you from all sides, he warned. "So watch yourself."

Obama would need all the protection he could get. He arrived in the Oval Office younger than any President since JFK and with less political experience than any since Eisenhower. Obama was many things, but he had never been a national leader--with the ability to create his own reality and invite the government and the country to embrace it. He was, however, a professor, which made him inclined to do what all Presidents do: study the men who came before and draw lessons from their gifts and flaws.

They called him after he won. "They were all incredibly gracious," Obama said. "But I think all of them recognized that there's a certain loneliness to the job ... Ultimately, you're the person who's going to be making decisions ... You can already feel that fact." He wanted his club initiation to include the entire membership, so he asked Bush to host a luncheon for all four living Presidents in early January. This request caused the Bush White House to gulp hard: Even Carter? aides asked. He has criticized everything we have done for nearly eight years. Yes, Obama said, Carter too.

Bush agreed, the invitations went out, and the luncheon came together. Sandwiches and not much else were served in the private office next door to the Oval Office. Everyone came: Bush, Obama, Carter, Clinton, Bush the elder (who swore in advance that he was going to say nothing). It was the first time five men who were, are or would be President had been together at the White House in close to 30 years. "We spent an hour talking about how we dealt with the White House staff and what living accommodations were and what to do about putting our kids in school in Washington ...

and how much of an intrusion it was on our private affairs to have security," Carter said when we interviewed him. "We were trying to educate President-elect Obama in a nice way without preaching to him."

The day he left office, Bush went off the grid, vanishing from the political conversation faster than any former President since Reagan. It wasn't that he stopped paying attention or that he approved of Obama's policies; he just knew from experience, and club tradition, that it didn't help to have former Presidents carping from the sidelines, particularly at the start. "He deserves my silence," Bush said of Obama. "I'm not going to spend my time criticizing him. I think it's time for the ex-President to tap-dance off the stage and let the current President have a go at solving the world's problems."

The club still keeps its own counsel: all the Presidents, including Bush, balked at a White House feeler last May to join Obama in lower Manhattan to mark the death of bin Laden. That invitation fell outside club protocol: way too political. Bush finally stepped out a bit in March, saying he favored construction of the Keystone pipeline and, in April, supporting the extension of his tax cuts--which, he added almost plaintively, he wished bore someone else's name because they'd stand a better chance of surviving. But, he also affirmed, "I don't think it's good, frankly, for our country to undermine our President. I don't intend to do so." On the whole, the Bushes have been the least critical Republicans in America when it comes to Obama.

2. George H.W. Bush: The Father Figure

If Obama had little contact with Bush the son, the father was a different story. Obama went out of his way to praise the elder Bush during the 2008 campaign and then courted 41 once he was sworn in. Early in 2009, White House aides let Bush know Obama wanted to pay a courtesy call sometime that fall, preferably in Texas. Bush, who had to contend with four former Presidents during his time in office, consented to meet. And so in October, Obama flew to Texas A&M in College Station, home of Bush's presidential library, to toast Bush in a speech about public service. Bush was so concerned that Obama's visit to the conservative Texas campus might be marred by protests that he took the unusual step of sending an open letter to the student body of 50,000, pleading for a welcome reception. When Obama arrived, he paid his host right back. "George Bush isn't just a President who promoted the ethic of service long before it was fashionable," Obama said. "He's a citizen whose life has embodied that ethic ... He could easily have chosen a life of comfort and privilege, and instead, time and again, when offered a chance to serve, he seized it."

For Obama, this was obviously good politics: the new President could only gain ground by courting one of the few widely admired figures on the American political landscape, particularly one whose moderate policies seemed almost liberal compared with those of the modern GOP. Still, members of the Bush family appreciated the way the club's youngest member treated its oldest, and they admitted as much to friends.

One of the minor perks of being a former President is the use of an unmarked townhouse on Lafayette Square, opposite the White House. The house has been there for more than a century, but it was converted into a presidential clubhouse by Nixon, mainly to keep LBJ happy when he was in town. The four-story townhouse, recently redone in tasteful earth tones, features a main parlor, an office equipped with bound volumes of all their papers, two dining rooms and a kitchen. A bold blue rug embroidered with the Presidential Seal sits in the foyer; the seal is also embossed on the white cotton bedspreads in both upstairs bedrooms. For reservations, you need to call the White House, and only four men are eligible to check in. Which is what Bush did early in 2010, when he and his son Jeb quietly slipped into town for the annual Alfalfa Club dinner, a Washington social ritual. When Obama heard Bush was seeking overnight accommodations at 716 Jackson Place, the clubhouse's official address, he invited father and son over for coffee the next morning. The snow was blowing sideways when Bush's limousine pulled up to the West Wing and the two men climbed out. Within minutes, Obama and Bush were together in the Oval Office, telling stories. A few days later, Obama sent Bush a picture of the two men together. In it, Obama looks amused as Bush, an accomplished raconteur, gets to the punch line. Sometimes, a President needs nothing so much as someone who can tell him a good joke.

3. Jimmy Carter: "We Always Have Sorrows"

The week Obama accepts his party's nomination, presidential historians--and at least one former President--will mark a minor milestone. That's when Carter will become the longest-serving ex-President in U.S. history: 31 years, seven months, 19 days--surpassing Hoover, who died in late 1964, a generation after he'd left the White House. By that time, Hoover had attained the stature of an elder statesman. How had he managed to deal with the critics who blamed him for the Great Depression? "I outlived the bastards," he said.

The Carter benchmark is key to understanding the 39th President in retirement. He lost to Reagan at the age of 56 and, after a couple of years of soul searching, invented a second career as a global problem solver--overseeing elections, fighting river blindness, malaria and other diseases, working on literacy programs and negotiating between warlords. His work helped earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002; Carter even admits he is a better former President than he was a President.

Carter's relationships with outlaw regimes around the world have made him an indispensable agent for nearly every President who followed him. Bush I, Clinton and Bush II dispatched Carter on sensitive foreign missions. Energetic, precise and self-righteous, Carter is a complicated ally, even for Democratic Presidents. He has a tendency to speak to reporters before his missions are complete; on more than one occasion, he has worked against a President's express desires. So when the time came for Obama to send Carter overseas, he wasn't taking any chances. In August 2010, Carter traveled to North Korea to free a U.S. citizen who had been held by Pyongyang for seven months. Whereas a similar trip by Clinton a year earlier had been high profile and covered on television, Carter's was on the down low until it was over. That was

partly by design: such rescue attempts are rarely helped by advance publicity. But Obama aides had also insisted that before leaving, Carter sign a 12-point agreement, including a promise not to speak to the press about his mission.

Carter arrived in North Korea, took Aijalon Mahli Gomes home and kept the episode largely to himself. "I had to swear to it before they let me go," he says. "I had to sign an oath ... Not that I'm complaining."

Even Carter points to what he calls "a quiet, fraternal feeling" that exists among the men who have sat at the big desk. "Something about having experienced the same issues with China, with the Middle East, with the Congress, with inflation," Carter says, "does kind of bind us together in a nice way." Asked if the fraternity has the power to redeem men who bear deep scars, Carter confesses with a chuckle, "There's no doubt about that. We always have sorrows."

4. Bill Clinton: Emeritus Coach

Carter wasn't the only President who had to take a loyalty test before Obama would accept his help. Hillary Clinton had become Secretary of State--which meant Bill Clinton was forced by Obama's aides to disclose the identities of all the donors to his foundation, clear his speeches in advance with various officials and refrain from asking foreign governments to contribute to his charities. The whole thing was a bit of a perp walk, designed to remind everyone who had won and who had lost in 2008, but Clinton went along. "I'll do whatever they want," he said. It was Hillary's turn now. Which was all a bit ironic, since the Obama White House was stuffed with old Clinton hands, many of them people who had returned to perform jobs they had held 12 years earlier.

Yet it was practically received wisdom in the Obama White House that the Clinton era had been a missed opportunity, a failure of nerve. Obama said as much in one of his books: Clinton's goals had been essentially "modest" and "hardly radical." At a moment when the end of the Cold War and the arrival of the information age allowed for a great leap forward, Clinton had settled for small steps and superficial accomplishments. In his sales catalog for hope and change, Obama promised he had grander things in mind.

This was a conveniently selective reading of the Clinton presidency, which had passed the first crime bill in a decade, reformed welfare and balanced the budget for the first time in 30 years. None of those measures had been easy to win; all were deeply unpopular on the left. So if Obama and his aides had a gripe about Clinton, it was that he had failed to do enough big liberal things, which was a little like accusing him of failing to do the impossible.

Yet for a moment, Obama seemed poised for vindication: winning a landslide Electoral College victory, passing a huge stimulus, moving health care through Congress. But after three years of proposing big things then trimming them down to manageable size, getting his hands dirty cutting deals and searching for compromise and being stymied by the same Republicans he once imagined might come his way in a postideological

age, Obama confronted the gap between promise and practice. He may not have cared for Clinton and Clintonism when he ran for President, but after three years of being President, it was hard to see what exactly set them apart from Obama and Obamaism.

Lately, Clinton has been something of a campaign coach emeritus, writing a book last fall that anticipated the Obama-Romney race, starring in the video and revealing his plans to attend at least three fundraisers with Obama this year. But when the two men are alone, Clinton insists, they talk of other things. "President Obama and I didn't talk much about politics when we played golf the other day," he explained in a conversation last fall. "He and I were both exhausted." But, Clinton added, "When my President summons me, then I come, and I would play golf in a driving snowstorm."

Which is just another duty that comes with membership in the Presidents club.