

AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONALISM
VOLUME II: RIGHTS AND LIBERTIES
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Supplementary Material

Chapter 11: The Contemporary Era – Foundations/Principles

William J. Clinton, Fourth Annual Message (1996)

Despite running a fairly conservative campaign for a Democrat to gain the White House, President Clinton's early acts were ideologically mixed. He completed the ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and passed a deficit reduction package, but Clinton move more leftward during failed efforts to permit gays and lesbians to serve in the military and pass health care reform. After the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994, Clinton returned to the more moderate themes of his first campaign. He claimed welfare reform, originally part of the Republican "Contract with America," as a success. Clinton's willingness to compromise shifted more authority to the states and reduced the sense that income support was an "entitlement" – or even a "right." That led a number of administration officials to resign in protest but helped secure his reelection as a "New Democrat."

The excerpt below is from President Clinton's 1996 State of the Union Address. To what extent did this address borrow New Deal/Great Society Era themes? To what extent did this address borrow important Reagan Era themes? Do you detect new, important Contemporary Era themes?

...

We must answer here three fundamental questions: First, how do we make the American dream of opportunity for all a reality for all Americans who are willing to work for it? Second, how do we preserve our old and enduring values as we move into the future? And third, how do we meet these challenges together, as one America?

We know big Government does not have all the answers. We know there's not a program for every problem. We know, and we have worked to give the American people a smaller, less bureaucratic Government in Washington. And we have to give the American people one that lives within its means. The era of big Government is over. But we cannot go back to the time when our citizens were left to fend for themselves.

Instead, we must go forward as one America, one nation working together to meet the challenges we face together. Self-reliance and teamwork are not opposing virtues; we must have both. I believe our new, smaller Government must work in an old-fashioned American way, together with all of our citizens through State and local governments, in the workplace, in religious, charitable, and civic associations. Our goal must be to enable all our people to make the most of their own lives, with stronger families, more educational opportunity, economic security, safer streets, a cleaner environment in a safer world.

...

I say to those who are on welfare, and especially to those who have been trapped on welfare for a long time: For too long our welfare system has undermined the values of family and work, instead of supporting them. The Congress and I are near agreement on sweeping welfare reform. We agree on time limits, tough work requirements, and the toughest possible child support enforcement. But I believe we must also provide child care so that mothers who are required to go to work can do so without worrying about what is happening to their children.

I challenge this Congress to send me a bipartisan welfare reform bill that will really move people from welfare to work and do the right thing by our children. I will sign it immediately.