WILLIAM J. CLINTON PRESIDENTIAL HISTORY PROJECT

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH ANTHONY BLAIR

June 16, 2010
New York, New York

Interviewers

University of Virginia
Russell Riley

Washington and Lee University
Robert Strong

Audiotape: Miller Center
Transcription: Martha W. Healy
Transcript copy edited by: Ann Donaldson, Jane Rafal Wilson
Final edit by: Gail Hyder Wiley

© 2018 The Miller Center Foundation and The Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History

Publicly released transcripts of the William J. Clinton Presidential History Project are freely available for noncommercial use according to the Fair Use provisions of the United States Copyright Code and International Copyright Law. Advance written permission is required for reproduction, redistribution, and extensive quotation or excerpting. Permission requests should be made to the Miller Center, P.O. Box 400406, Charlottesville, VA 22904-4406.

To cite an interview, please use the following general format: [name of interviewee] Interview, [date of interview], William J. Clinton Presidential History Project, Miller Center, University of Virginia

UNIVERSITY *of* VIRGINIA

WILLIAM J. CLINTON PRESIDENTIAL HISTORY PROJECT

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEW WITH ANTHONY BLAIR

June 16, 2010

Blair: I've just been on the morning TV shows. I think I've still got the makeup on. It's not my normal way.

Riley: You look great. Thanks for agreeing to do this. Do you have any questions for us before we begin, about the purpose of the interview and what we're doing?

Blair: No, I think I've got all that.

Riley: Wonderful.

Blair: Fire away.

Riley: Very good. One further question. You've seen the slate of questions that we submitted, and rather than my starting at the beginning, I thought I would see whether there were any in particular that you warmed to or felt would be particularly important for us to get to since we're limited in time.

Blair: I think the two key things, really, apart from all the personal stuff, are Kosovo and the third-way stuff. Those are the two bits of political interaction that were most important for me.

Riley: OK. Let me begin, then, with the opening question on the list, which was about the extent to which you were following events in the United States in the 1990s. There's a lot written about your attention. I wonder, from your own perspective, was there a lot of self-conscious effort on your part in the U.K. to follow what was going on in the U.S., or were you independently developing your own ideas apart from what was happening in the U.S.?

Blair: I think the interesting thing is that I was certainly following very closely what President Clinton was doing and the whole concept of the New Democrats. But I guess it was also chiming with what I personally thought. So there was a rather good confluence in the imitation and also our own belief in the right way for progressives to approach modern policy. I thought his huge insight—which I think is still the single most important insight for progressive politicians—was the clear distinction between the values that don't change and the policies that should adapt with changing times.

The whole concept of the New Democrats was that it was about a political idea that was to be in the center ground and to be able to build out from your base and not be constrained by your base. But it was an intellectual concept as well, which was in a new world, close of the twentieth century, where we'd kind of gone over the major ideological battles of the twentieth century. It was time to find a third way, if you like, between laissez-faire markets and an overbearing state. That's why President Clinton's concept of empowering state, or a hand up not a handout, reforming government, reinventing government, as well as simply governing—these were really the critical things for me.

Strong: In line with that, when is the first time you have a serious conversation with Clinton? When is the first time you meet him? I know there's the dinner at Downing Street that you're invited to.

Blair: Yes, but this started before then. I met him, obviously, when I was leader of the opposition. I think that was actually the first time I met him. I don't think I met him between '92 and '94, but I met him when I became leader of the opposition. I remember seeing him at the White House. But there was an immediate intellectual, political bonding. Obviously, he'd read about what we'd done and so on, and the changes I was making in the Labour Party.

Then when I became Prime Minister, shortly after being elected, he and Hillary [Clinton] came to London. We had dinner. He actually came into the Cabinet and addressed our Cabinet, and did it absolutely brilliantly. He had internalized some of the campaign slogans and bits of the manifesto and things. The Cabinet was absolutely in awe of it. It was a brilliant, very Clintonian performance. But it was both a personal and political, pretty much instant, bonding, I would say.

Riley: Can you tell us a bit about to what you attribute the personal bonding?

Blair: I think the most interesting, but less known, facet of Bill Clinton is his extraordinary intellectual scope and ability. So many people will say he's a great campaigner, he's a great politician, which they can mean as a compliment or not. But what a lot of people don't understand, but I did, both from reading what he was saying but then obviously when I got to know him, is that he has a near genius, actually, for conceptual, philosophical frameworks within which politics is located. This is a hugely underestimated asset in politics because it means it comes with a consistency of view. The policy may be just stated boldly and bluntly, but it fits within a conceptual, philosophical, political framework, intellectual framework, if you will, that then means that there is far more likely to be a consistency between what you think of the role of government, what's welfare, why is education important, and so on. So that, and coherence, was something that attracted me enormously.

Riley: It strikes me, though, that that could also be the root of a problem for a politician, because if he has a certain genius for synthesizing these things, unless you're able to communicate that genius outwardly, there can appear to be inconsistencies in the policies, right?

Blair: In fact, even if you can communicate it clearly, and he did communicate it brilliantly, the danger is for a political beltway, which is still very much in many respects trapped in quite partisan politics; it can appear almost an absence of principle. The criticism is made of me, and is often made of him, that we ditched our principles in order to win power. I always used to argue and said, as he did, that the whole purpose of it was to make your principles relevant for today's world. But that world had to be one in which you recognized that times have changed. This sort of "state-ism," if you like, of the 1930s and the 1940s, the New Deal concept, was really not a concept fitted for the late twentieth century in the ordinary business of government. It might be in a crisis, but not in the day-to-day business of government. That was not an unprincipled approach; on the contrary, it was based very much on the principle that the purpose of government is to empower people, not to empower government.

Riley: You mentioned that you had a meeting with him in '96 as the opposition leader, which was an unusual meeting, historically. Do you have any specific recollections about the conversation that you had with President Clinton? I guess this was in the Oval Office?

Blair: Yes, it was in the Oval Office. Actually I do have a very specific recollection because it was a classic instance of Bill Clinton's quick thinking, which is why I always think of—You

wouldn't say this about every American President, but he is someone who can handle a Prime Minister's questions perfectly easily.

I remember we were sitting as you sit in the Oval Office; you sit in the chair next to the President. They have these things where a stream of press come in and they shout a few questions and so on. Here I was, leader of the opposition. We were coming up to an election. One of the British journalists said to him, "Do you think you're sitting next to the next Prime Minister of the U.K.?" It was a trick question, because he obviously can't say yes, because that is to interfere with our politics. He can't say no, because that looks a bit rude to the guy who is sitting alongside him. So he just, quick as a flash—This was before his own reelection—said, "I hope he's sitting next to the next President of the United States." It was just a brilliant, absolutely classic Bill Clinton to be able to think of that reply as quick as that and deflect that thing.

So I remember it for that, and obviously for having a very good conversation. Then after I became Prime Minister, of course it was a lot easier to deal with issues together. A big part of our relationship and conversation was about third-way politics.

Riley: You had a series of organized meetings on third-way politics, conferences. How did those come about, and do you have any specific recollections of some of the highlights or lowlights of some of the third-way conferences?

Blair: Yes, we were organized—Both of us were very taken with the fact that—Obviously we thought we had a certain formula for success in progressive politics and we wanted to take that out to a broader group. Of course, there was enormous interest in my election in the U.K. after 18 years of opposition and his election in the U.S. and reelection in the U.S. So there was an appetite in the outside world to hear what we were about and what was motivating us. I think the interesting thing is that at that time we were able to give a lot of direction to the centrist and to progressive politics in Europe and in different parts of the world.

Indeed, in my Premiership in the second half, I became mostly known on some foreign policy questions. Actually, a lot of people in different parts of the world who maybe weren't so involved in those foreign policy issues, whether it is in China or Latin America, actually they're far more interested in that initial phase than throughout the government in that type of third-way politics.

I recall we had a meeting once in Florence. I chiefly remember because the President is a late-night guy, so it wasn't so bad for him, but he only got on to speak at about one o'clock in the morning and did absolutely brilliantly at it. Then I remember too there was another conference we had that was right in his most difficult period, in the impeachment stuff and everything, with Romano Prodi, I think, the President of Bulgaria, bizarrely. But he was extraordinarily—even in a difficult set of circumstances—incredibly articulate, on the ball, and it gave a lot of hope and direction to people. There was the inspiration of a whole younger generation of people around that politics and he was very much the author of it.

Strong: A lot has been made about the connections you've been talking about. How did you and others in Great Britain respond to 1994 and the shift in Congress and what looked like a reaction against Clinton?

Blair: I think we understood that he was determined then to make sure he got that center ground back and kept it. So the lesson we took out of that was get there as soon as possible, because that's where it's smart to be. So, really, I think politically, that was that. I also think that in a way it chimed with his own intellectual desire to be in that center ground position. The other thing is his speech, what was it, to that huge convention, was it black activists, which was the speech made before he got elected President? The speech where he basically told them what they didn't want to hear?

Riley: This was the Sister Souljah speech?

Blair: Yes. That would have made a huge impact politically on us, because it was very clear. Obviously, it was important in itself, but it was important because it symbolized this notion that to be a political leader capable of galvanizing support in the country, you had to be very clearly prepared to rise above your activist base.

Riley: Did you subconsciously seek out a Sister Souljah moment in your campaigns or in your own development?

Blair: With the British Labour Party I didn't have to, they came at me thick and fast. It was a question of which ones didn't you touch. No, we had—For us, there were all the issues to do with trade unions and people wanting me to rule this out and rule that out. We had many Sister Souljah moments. But the fact that it was such a visible big thing to do, and it was one of the first

times I remember thinking how important it was for people to hear a political leader say no as well as yes.

I always recall there was a moment, I think when Ronald Reagan, his final—or maybe it would be Walter Mondale—

Riley: In ’84.

Blair: In ’84. I always remember a speech at the Republican Convention, maybe that year, maybe earlier, but when a Republican speaker got up and said, “When did you ever hear a Democrat say no?” I just remember that. I don’t know who it was who said it, but I always remembered it. I remembered it at the time.

Riley: It may have been Jeane Kirkpatrick. I’m not sure.

Blair: But I thought, *I can understand that. Let’s lock that one away for future reference.* Therefore, when he had his Sister Souljah moment, that was important because it was a leader getting up and saying, “Look, I know you want me to say yes, but actually I’m going to say no. So there you are. Now you like it, you don’t like it, but I’m leading.”

Riley: In ’96, Clinton, after the ’94 midterms, is tracking in a more conservative direction domestically, particularly with something like welfare reform. You’re following that as well as you’re preparing for your own races?

Blair: Yes, and that was hugely important because welfare reform was, again, right in principle and it was clever politics. Believe it or not, the two usually go together.

Riley: Your own relationship with the President was enhanced because of the First Ladies getting along very nicely as well?

Blair: Yes. For Hillary and Cherie [Blair]—Obviously, Cherie was a career woman, very independent, although she didn't actually have a desire to go into politics herself. Nonetheless, they obviously had a very good, very close relationship straight off. They both understood it.

Riley: And they were both also involved in these third-way conferences, as I recall?

Blair: Yes. Cherie probably—That is to say, I don't think my wife ever really wanted to go back into active politics. She's very successful as a lawyer, but she was very politically switched on. She certainly wasn't going to be a meek little wife standing by the side of a ga-ga thing; that was not her scene, either.

Strong: When you're Prime Minister, how often and what kinds of communications are you having directly with the President of the United States?

Blair: When I become Prime Minister and he's President, then the relationship changes in the sense that you're having practical issues. So we dealt with the global economic crisis, which, if you remember, started I think in Thailand and then went to Brazil. Actually, we worked together very closely to put out a rescue package which stabilized that. It wasn't nearly as bad as the economic crisis we just had, of course, but nonetheless, it was a contagion that was starting to knock countries over, He was fabulous in dealing with that.

We worked together on trade issues, occasionally difficult ones that came up between our two countries. I have a bizarre recollection of cashmere sweaters and bananas and things that were issues. But the personal relationship obviously helped in dealing with all that. We did a great thing together on the Human Genome Project, which we were both very interested in. He was far more intellectually capable of understanding what it was all about than I, I may say. But that was an important thing; our scientists were working together on that.

Then Kosovo was obviously of phenomenal importance, and of course Northern Ireland.

Strong: Lots of phone calls on Northern Ireland.

Blair: Lots of phone calls on Northern Ireland. During the course of the Northern Ireland negotiation, he really was a quite important part of it, because during the critical negotiations, the Good Friday Agreement, he basically stayed out all day and night, really, to help us, to be at the end of the phone for counsel and to be on the phone for prodding and pushing the parties to get an agreement. At certain critical points he was very helpful indeed in getting the thing sorted, very helpful.

Strong: Why was he so interested in that issue?

Blair: That's a good question actually.

Strong: There are risks if it goes badly. I'm not sure there are huge payoffs if it goes well.

Blair: No, I think that's true for him, and in a sense for me too. I think he was fascinated by it in the same way he was and is by the Middle East issue. He could see this was essentially, in some ways, an old-fashioned dispute. He was, in his soul, a kind of modernizer in his outlook and was thinking, *Let's sort this out and move forward*. So he had that about him in a way. I think partly for the reasons to do with the Democrats and the Irish community in the U.S., but I don't actually—I think it was more to do with the former, really. He didn't regard it as a political imperative for him, but it was something he was fascinated by and interested in.

You see, this is what is great about President Clinton. I said to someone yesterday, funny enough, one of the really interesting things about Bill Clinton is that in some ways during his Presidency he didn't have enough crises to deal with. In other words, his was a period of calm and growth and sorting out and doing well and so on. If you really think about it, in the last few years, post-September 11 with security, post-September 2008 with the economic crisis, he never actually had something of that size to deal with, in a funny way. If he had—I think he was a great President, but—I think he would have showcased his talents to an even greater extent.

I mean, on Northern Ireland, it was remarkable how he got the issue. Got it, understood it. When I was talking to him during those three or four days, you really didn't have to explain it to him very fast. He just got it instinctively and immediately.

Riley: It was his intellectual acuity, or was there something about his background that helped him to understand the conflict?

Blair: Intellect and politics, I think he had the two going together. And I think this is where his own background and his upbringing and everything merged. He had this stellar brain combined with a very ordinary-person outlook, and that's the greatest combination you can ever have in politics, because it means you're grounded yet you're still conceptualizing it and thinking. So he was immensely helpful on that. Then, of course, in Kosovo, I think it was in many ways one of the greatest moments of his Presidency. I think it was incredibly hard for him to do what he did.

Riley: You had to pull him along on that one, though, didn't you?

Blair: It wasn't like that at all, actually. I know this is what people say, but it didn't really happen like that. He was completely focused on this from the beginning. But he had a tremendous challenge with his own American public opinion at the time. This wasn't like after September 11, when everyone said, "Well, the President has to act." For President [George W.] Bush to say, "Look, this will require the engagement of our military," was not surprising; it would have been surprising if he'd said something different.

In Kosovo, I think American opinion, Congressional opinion, was yes, it's a big problem for these Europeans, but why don't they go sort it out? It's on their doorstep. The fact is, we weren't in a position to be able to do that. I mean, 85 percent of the assets we used for Kosovo were American. One of the reasons why I was so clear, actually, about our position after September 11, standing shoulder to shoulder and so on, was because Americans stood by us in Kosovo. Let's be absolutely clear, if that situation had not been sorted out, the Balkans would have been where the Balkans had been many times before over the previous hundred years, which is the origin of real destabilization across Europe.

We agreed on the line, and then it was difficult because there were Europeans saying, On no account will we ever use ground troops, that's ruled out. The problem, obviously, as the President immediately spotted, was if you said that, then [Slobodan] Milošević was hearing that and he was going to say, "I'm just going to hang on in there because in the end these people, their will is not greater than mine." When the President finally signaled—and he did it subtly but clearly—that America was contemplating that, that's when the breakthrough happened, and it wouldn't have happened without that. I mean, we would not have gotten the resolution we got in Kosovo without that signal from the President. I didn't have to drag him to that; that was his decision to do it.

Riley: Were there places where you did have to pull him along on issues that maybe we haven't touched on? We have the popular portrait that shows the two of you being very close, but even within families there are disputes over particular things. I'm wondering if you have any recollections of places where you didn't see eye to eye or where you had to bring him along or he had to bring you along on something?

Blair: No, I don't think it was ever that. I mean, we had these trade issues, which got quite big at one point. I can't exactly remember now what they were about, but they were quite spiky and it was quite difficult, but that is where the relationship came into its own because it means we didn't dial up the rhetoric, we dialed it down and were reasonably relaxed about trying to deal with it. But no, we didn't—Kosovo was the toughest thing we did, because that was the engagement of our military. It was an engagement that was unpredictable; you didn't know how it was going to turn out. It turned out in the end well, but it could have turned out in the end badly. That is why he showed immense courage and leadership in doing that. It would have been very easy, and there were a lot of people urging him to tell the Europeans to go sort this out themselves.

Strong: Is it fair to say that it is the kind of issue where leaders aren't doing favors for each other; they're making their own independent judgments about what needs to be done?

Blair: Yes. His view in the end was, rightly, that this was an American strategic interest, that this wasn't about doing a favor to the Europeans. This was a situation where if it did get out of control, and it could easily have done that, then it was absurd to think America was going to stand by and see the Balkans go completely awry. That wasn't going to happen. So his decision was based very much on America's strategic interest. It's just that, on that issue, I don't think it was abundantly clear to a majority of American people that he should be doing this.

Strong: Was he more confident that air power was going to succeed or was he uncertain?

Blair: We were uncertain. It's just that committing ground troops would have been ghastly as well. The trouble with when you commit troops in that situation is that, as obviously I got to know in later times, you just can't tell what is going to happen. That's a whole different thing. When you're fighting an air war, there are all sorts of problems and difficulties and it's immensely challenging, don't misunderstand me. I don't actually think we lost any forces in Kosovo.

Strong: I think that’s correct.

Blair: But the ground forces thing—Of course, the trouble was that there were countries in Europe saying, Well, we won’t use ground forces. So for the Americans it was, OK, the British might be there, but where are the rest going to be? So that’s why it was so difficult. It was difficult because it wasn’t that the Europeans were begging the Americans to do this and saying we’ll be there with you. There was actually a division in the European opinion. My point was very simple: Is our bottom line we’re not going to use ground troops or is our bottom line we’re not going to lose?

The generals were advising pretty clearly what we had to do, or at least had to threaten. In the end, what President Clinton did was, really—As I said, all he did was indicate it, but that indication was enough to make Milošević back off. Then that really saved the situation.

Strong: What did you say in opposition during the early 1990s Bosnia, issues where Clinton was trying to lead the Europeans and Strobe [Talbott] doesn’t succeed in getting them early on to take his position?

Blair: Well, that early time, I wasn’t really focused on the foreign policy government. I know it sounds bizarre, but really you focus on foreign policy once you get into the job. In later time, because after Kosovo I made the speech in Chicago about intervention, I came to have a very strong view of it, but at the time no, it wasn’t featured on my radar particularly. I mean, of course it was, but it wasn’t what I was responsible for as just a member of the Shadow Cabinet in opposition.

Riley: That Chicago speech was something that you had planned for a long time? You were looking for a venue for making an address, or was it driven by the particular needs of the moment?

Blair: A bit of both, really. We were in the situation in Kosovo, but it was also a feeling I had because I also bet, in a sense, my own premiership on Kosovo. It was the first time I was actually prepared to go and just stake it all on a position, but I couldn’t see another way, really. My speech was an attempt to give an intellectual framework for that intervention.

Riley: Do you feel like your relationship with President Clinton ended up strengthening NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] or was there a greater sense of bilateral—?

Blair: We were both very keen to strengthen NATO through this. We had a lot of NATO meetings, and in the end it was a NATO operation. So no, we were both very determined to try and put the NATO badge on it.

Riley: Were there instances where you suffered domestically because of your relationship with President Clinton? Can you think back to either specific instances, or was there any general sense that you were getting too close to those of us over here on this side of the pond?

Blair: A little bit, I mean, not nearly as much as happened later. A little bit from time to time. But by then I had come to the conclusion that the single most important thing was that you represent the proper interests of your country. I was quite convinced that it was, and indeed is, in the interests of the U.K. to have a strong relationship with America, and that means with its President. So for me, the criticism of it was not something I was going to listen to.

The important thing is, when you have that, I think the closeness of the relationship mattered in respect to Kosovo. Friendship at an international, political level matters. It matters more than people think, actually. In fact, I think they might, in a way, be quite surprised at how much it matters. Because if you have a relationship that is one of trust and you're in a crisis, that's a different conversation from a conversation with a leader that you can't be quite sure that if you get into difficulties they're going to walk away.

Riley: That works even if they are—[interruption] I understand. Bob, do you have a follow-up on that?

Strong: No, I was going to go back a little bit and ask a slightly awkward question. I think you're right about Clinton's ability to handle crises and that it would have been interesting to imagine him after 9/11 or in that connection. The biggest crisis he faced was, in some sense, of his own making, and we know a little bit about how he responded to that. Does that run counter to the observation you were making earlier?

Blair: No, because my theory of this is that the public is always more sensible than we give them credit for, and that in the end they were prepared and are prepared to regard his Presidency as his Presidency. So whatever the issues to do with the impeachment and so on, I think they have a—

Strong: A different category.

Blair: They do, they put it in—That's what I think. I may be wrong, but that's what I think. I think people very much look upon him on the merits of his Presidency.

Strong: Our last question, because we are running out of time: Our audience is really future historians, future scholars. Nothing that is said here comes out for a long time. What we hope to gain in these interviews is hints to those people about things they should be paying attention to that in your judgment aren't receiving sufficient attention in the current commentary. What is it about those Clinton years that those future scholars should really look at carefully? You said something about Kosovo and I think that is an issue that people need to go back and pay more attention to. Are there others?

Blair: There are two things about the Clinton Presidency that stand out in my view. First of all, he was the first twenty-first-century political leader in the sense that he got the fact that post the Berlin wall, after the great ideological struggles of the twentieth century, people wanted a different type of politics. I think he got that completely. I think in terms of progressive politics, his intellectual reasoning and framework still require a lot of study. I think there are many people around the world still looking at that, still learning from it. So practical politicians, that is a big part of the Clinton years.

The second thing is that he was the first leader to articulate the concept of interdependence in a meaningful political way—not just a clichéd way, but a way that then understood what that meant for America, for the West, for the shifting in power from West to East and so on. I think the interdependence concept is very much Bill Clinton. I think in respect to both of those things, he was the politician who most got what the twenty-first century will be about, even though his Presidency was in the late twentieth century.

Riley: Very good.

Strong: People compare him to Teddy Roosevelt along the same lines—the first President who really understood what the New Age is about—and they compare him also in terms of some of the awkwardness of being that first President.

Blair: I think that is a good comparison. That is his league, really. I don't know a single active progressive leader in politics around the world today that doesn't still look at Bill Clinton as a role model, certainly the successful ones.

Strong: After he left office, did you stay in communication with him?

Blair: Yes, absolutely. In fact, if he were here this week, we'd be having lunch together.

Riley: Tell him we're hard at work on his behalf.

Blair: I will tell him that.

Riley: We appreciate this very much. I should also mention that we're in the very early stages at the Miller Center of our project on the forty-third Presidency. We're trying to learn a bit more as we go along before we approach you, but I would think in another year or so we'd like to come back and talk about George W. Bush.

Blair: Oh, I've got lots to say on that.

Riley: We look forward to that very much.