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Still the Idea Man

By David S. Broder

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When I finally got around to reading the policy speech that former president Bill Clinton gave in New York this month, it came as something of a surprise. The news coverage focused on his statement that Democrats were "missing in action on national security" issues during the midterm election and must fight to reclaim that territory from President Bush and the Republicans to have any chance to win in 2004.

The irresistible Clinton sound bite was this: "We [Democrats] have got to be strong. When we look weak in a time where people feel insecure, we lose. When people feel uncertain, they'd rather have somebody who's strong and wrong than somebody who's weak and right."

While savoring that little aphorism, reporters passed over big parts of Clinton's characteristically sprawling address to the Democratic Leadership Council, one he said he was reading from "handwritten notes . . . I wrote out this morning after coming back late from Mexico last night."

But it's worth wading through. What made Clinton's reputation as the most successful Democratic politician of his generation -- the only Democrat to win two terms as president since FDR -- was mainly his record in domestic policy. And for this reader, at least, it is the economic and social policy sections of the speech that compel attention from his party. Whether offering original ideas or repackaging others' proposals, Clinton continues to challenge conventional wisdom.

For example: In the last campaign, Democrats saw their share of the senior citizen vote continue to decline, despite all their scare talk that Republican plans to "privatize" Social Security would destroy the most important part of that safety net.

Clinton bluntly says Democrats should stop defending the status quo and instead consider changes that would "increase the rate of return" on Social Security. They could follow the model of the government employees' retirement system (as long-championed by some conservative think tanks) and give people the option, "with 1 or 2 percent of the payroll tax," to invest in one of three mutual funds "that almost always perform as well or better than the market," while at the same time permitting cautious investors the option of buying government bonds, so they could "get the guaranteed Social Security return and 100 percent safety."

That was one of the possible changes recommended last year by a presidential commission co-chaired by former Democratic senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan of New York. But few Democrats have embraced the idea or buckled down to the task of figuring out how to finance the transition to that new system without reducing benefits to those either on Social Security or soon to join its ranks. So they have left the door open for Republicans to champion a reform that is attractive to many younger workers.

More congressional Democrats agree with Clinton's idea that tax cuts should be designed to "juice the economy" now without "creating long-term fiscal irresponsibility." The way to do that, he says, is to freeze the scheduled reductions in the Bush tax plan at least for the top rate of income taxes -- affecting the half-percent of Americans with annual incomes over \$400,000, saving \$1.4 trillion over the next 20 years. Instead, Clinton urges the passage of short-term tax breaks for consumers and businesses that would feed straight into the economy.

On the corporate accountability front, Clinton suggests that Democrats support a requirement that stock options be exercised "over a long period of time to build employee loyalty and the strength of the company," rather than insiders' "just taking the money and running . . . leaving everybody else high and dry."

On welfare reform, one of the great policy changes of the Clinton years, the former president now says, "We need an honest analysis [of] what's happened to people in this downturn. Do we need to provide more incentives than we are presently providing to help poor people who fall into the cracks?" A good -- and timely -- question as Congress faces renewal of the 1996 welfare law.

And speaking of families, Clinton says Democrats ought to be trying to expand on the unpaid family and medical leaves that were mandated for the first time during his presidency. California has instituted paid leave for workers with family duties. Why should it be alone?

There is more in Clinton's speech -- on health care, community service and other topics. All a reminder that as long as this fellow is around, the Democrats will not suffer a shortage of ideas.

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