On Questioning the President

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On May 7, 2016, former President Bill Clinton delivered the commencement address at Loyola Marymount University. Clinton, a graduate of Georgetown University, another Jesuit University, received an honorary degree and also celebrated his nephew's graduation from LMU.

As part of the activities surrounding the former president's visit, I was asked to conduct a 30-minute interview with the president that would become a part of a story in the university magazine, and would also be uploaded onto the website of the World Policy Institute at Loyola Marymount University, for which I serve as president. It was a great opportunity, spoiled by the fact that on Friday morning, just one day before the interview was to take place, the Clinton "people" let me know that due to a change in logistics (part of the reason was that Hillary Clinton too would be attending the ceremony), the interview was cancelled. Disappointed, yet armed with my already prepared interview questions, I wondered just how good (or bad) my questions were.

How many times have we (presidency scholars) turned to the television and said (or screamed) at the debate moderator or interviewer, "That is the dumbest question I've ever heard," or "What a softball," or "This guy (woman) is a total idiot. I'd ask better questions than that!"? Well, now I had my chance. It was a wonderful opportunity, but also a bit nerve-racking.

I sent an email to my departmental colleagues asking for help. What questions might they ask Clinton? I sent a similar request to a few of my friends in the PEP (Presidents & Executive Politics) Section of APSA. My departmental colleagues were of little help. The questions they submitted were almost all of the snarky variety. "How could you have been so hostile to the LGBT community?" (that was a real question) or "Your crime bill…" or "NAFTA killed more American jobs than…" Somehow I did not think snarkiness was the way to go. My colleagues in PEP, however, were much more helpful and I included two of their questions in my final list.

Mid-way through the question development process (less than one week) I was told I had to limit my questions to eight or nine (I added my own follow-up questions to push that limit up a bit). Below are the final questions on my list:

Q: Yours was an activist presidency, yet your two successors pushed the boundaries of the office much further, articulating claims of unilateral presidential powers that are constitutionally mind-boggling. How can succeeding presidents find the right balance between the exercise of legitimate power and the rule of law on the one hand, and the demands of governing in an age of terrorism on the other?

Follow-up: How tempted were you to use more executive orders in an effort to circumvent Congress and achieve policy goals?

Q: Are presidents the victims of history or are they the architects of history? Can presidents dominate their eras or must they adjust to the winds already blowing?

Follow-up: What are the conditions necessary for presidents to actually "lead"?

Q: Today we have an eighteenth century Constitution guiding a twenty-first century superpower. Have we outgrown our original Constitution in an age of terrorism and rapid change, and how, if at all, would you change the Constitution?

Follow-up: I often refer to modern presidential power as a "Goldilocks Dilemma": Presidential power is either "too hot" (war) or "too cold" (domestic and economic policy), we can't seem to get it "just right." Clearly, Congress has demonstrated that it cannot lead. Does that mean we are to alternate between deadlock on the one hand, and presidential domination on the other?

Q: We live in an age of hyper-partisanship and political rancor. You faced that when you were president. President Obama came into office hoping to change that. He has not succeeded. Is there a way to make our politics reflect the best in us rather than the worst?

Follow-up: Why is it easier to build fear instead of trust? Why do we have such a hard time pulling our oars in the same direction? And as president, how did you confront the high level of individualism in our society at the times we most needed to work together?

Q: Are we entering a new Cold War with Russia? And how best can we deal with Mr. Putin?

Q: When you were president, the media was pretty rough on you, but the Republicans were even rougher. How do you compare your treatment with the treatment of President Obama, and in what way do you think *race* might have played a role in the criticism of President Obama?

Q: In what way do you think Pope Francis has changed the global conversation and influenced policy?

Q: Your Foundation created the "20/30 Program" which focuses on young professionals in their 20s and 30s who will be entering the leadership stream in business, government, and civil society. What piece of advice would you give young women and men as they step into public leadership positions for the first time?

Q: Many political leaders as well as educators and businesspeople are promoting a greater educational focus on STEM courses in college. As important as such programs are, what do you see as the value of a *liberal arts* education, in general, and a *Jesuit* education—and you

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are the first president to have graduated from a Jesuit university—in particular, in a world of rapid change?

Just in case President Clinton's responses were brief and we had more time (unlikely as that prospect was) I also had some backup questions I was prepared to ask:

Q: We are in the middle of a hotly contested presidential nomination battle for the presidency, and I wanted to ask you a question about *process*: What changes would you make in the way we select presidents, especially concerning the role of money in the process, the length of time the race takes, and the current rules of engagement?

Q: Has American global leadership been good for America? And has it been good for the world?

Q: What is the endgame in our global struggle with terrorism?

Q: Should we close Guantanamo?

Q: You have said that one of your biggest regrets as president was not ordering humanitarian intervention in Rwanda. What is the standard or test for when to and when not to intervene in humanitarian crises?

This was a very useful intellectual exercise for me. So what would *you* ask the president? If the opportunity presented itself, what would you want to know? Go ahead, play the game, and I do hope you come up with great questions. And by all means, send them to me at: mgenovese@lmu.edu. ■

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