

Rock-and-Roll Politics

By Dr. Greg Bahnsen

Newly installed President Bill Clinton "came of age" and was shaped by the cultural influences of the 1960s. So was I.

We were both keenly aware of the sounds and rhythms -- the musical trends -- of that momentous period. He knew, and me too, that "rock and roll was here to stay"! (to quote Danny & the Juniors)

Rock music matured or grew up in the 60s, both musically and ideologically. In 1960 Elvis hit #1 with a soupy love song "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" By mid-decade, in 1965, Barry McGuire topped the charts with his rough-edged, politically apocalyptic hit "The Eve of Destruction." 1968 saw Mick Jagger sing of "Sympathy for the Devil" (who was clearly active two years later at the Altamont Rock Festival, where the Hell's Angels killed a fan while guarding the Rolling Stones on stage.) The cultural stretch from one end of the decade to the other was phenomenal.

Bob Dylan captured the quintessential character of the age which saw Kennedy assassinated, Beatle-mania, racial integration, Viet Nam, the sexual revolution, riots, hippies and psychedelic drugs: he sang "The Times They Are A-Changin'." They really were.

In those days I sometimes lectured on the worldview implications of rock music for Christian young people. (These days I am still invited to speak on the subject occasionally, but now the title is the "History of Rock"! Alas, too many birthdays.) But while I was analyzing the culture of rock music in the late 60s, eventual-president Bill Clinton was living it out.

Flash back to October, 1969. Creedence Clearwater Revival released their fourth gold single, "Fortunate Son." The refrain was clear:

"It ain't me; it ain't me.

I'm no fortunate son, no."

The bitter third verse protested the draft, by which so many American sons died for nothing in a foreign war they would not have chosen: "Some folks inherit star-spangled eyes;

ooh, they send you down to war.

And when you ask 'em

'How much should we give?'

They only answer 'More, more, more, more.'

It ain't me; it ain't me.

I ain't no military son, no.

I'm no fortunate son, no."

Bill Clinton imbibed the same message. He would surely be no "military son." No.

But history has moved ahead. Now Bill Clinton is president -- the one with "star-spangled eyes." Now he is the one who is asking you and me to give "more, more, more, more" -- from our pocketbooks. Ironic, no?

Well, anyway, we now have a president who boogies and grooves to rock and roll music. He openly idolizes fellow southerner, Elvis. He even plays the sax for oh-so-hip late-night entertainers! (Hey, don't criticize. I'd be elated if he would turn to playing sax instead of playing President. A lot less dangerous....)

On the evening of his first State of the Union address, the rock-and-roll president was relaxed. His staff debated whether or not to leave in his prepared speech the expression "precious moment of promise." The President replied light-heartedly that he was just afraid that if it were left in the speech, he might burst into the song: "When will I see you again/ when will we share precious moments?" The man veritably oozes pop music.

None of us who were paying (painful) attention to the Clinton campaign will forget how he commandeered a well-known rock song, by the popular group Fleetwood Mac, for the musical theme of his presidential run. Indeed, in January Fleetwood Mac came back together (minus Stevie Nicks) to headline Clinton's inaugural celebration and party. The strains of his campaign theme song were heard repeatedly through the night:

"Don't stop thinking about tomorrow.

Don't stop; it'll soon be here. It'll be here, better than before.

Yesterday's gone; yesterday's gone."

Everybody was rocking and rolling with high hopes that a wonderfully new political regime had come to Washington. Surely, tomorrow would be "better than before." Just listen to the music and be a true believer.

I don't mind Bill Clinton's positive interest in pop music, especially his attachment to the music and groups of the 1960s. And I hate to rain on his musical parade. But I think he is listening to the

wrong songs. Proof positive of that fact was given when he announced his bold new plan for the budget, entitled "A Vision of Change in America."

Ex-President Bush saw the economy go into virtual stagnation and free-fall when he broke his famous promise of "No new taxes." (He also lost the presidency.) Now President Clinton reveals what he means by "change" -- even more new taxes to oppress the citizens of our land and stifle economic exchange. Clinton dreams of restoring the economy with the triple-play strategy of tax, spend, and regulate.

The voodoo magic of reducing the deficit by expanding the government is accompanied with some linguistic magic as well. A freeze on federal salaries gets sold to the populace as a pay "cut"! Originally, campaigning Bill Clinton assured the "middle class" of tax breaks; only "the rich" (households with an annual income of \$200,000) would face higher taxes. Now Presidential Bill Clinton says those earning \$30,000 must bear a heavier tax load, in the name of fairness. Government spending becomes an "investment" in tomorrow. Our taxes are a "donation" to recovery. Increased fees and taxes on us are dubbed "spending cuts" for the government. A surcharge on some incomes, not all, is proposed in the name of "equity"! (So fairness comes to be identified with unfairness.)

Clinton's attraction to bigger government and higher taxes convinces me that this son of the 60s has been listening to the wrong music of our era. It seems to me that our rock-and-roll president should be heeding the words of that infamous and rowdy British group, The Who. Their song, "Won't Get Fooled Again," projects a sentiment which near-perfectly suits, I believe, what we see happening in the presidency of Bill Clinton. The song envisions the arrival of a new radical political regime, and ends with these lyrics:

"And the parting on the left

is now parting on the right;

the beards have all grown longer over night.

I tip my hat to the new constitution,

take a vow for the new revolution;

Smile and grin at the change all around,

pick up my guitar and play, just like yesterday.

Then I'll get on my knees and pray

we don't get fooled again!

Meet the new boss.

Same as the old boss."

The key realization here is that politicians talk a great line, but don't really change anything. It's the same'ol same'ol. One party replaces another one in power -- but the new boss is no different from the old one. That's why we should pray that we don't get fooled again! I wish the rebuke implicit in this rocker tune would echo continually in our new president's ears (and those of the nation).

Another recommendation if Bill Clinton wants to pursue rock-and-roll politics would be to listen daily to a 1966 song by the Beatles, recorded after they learned through painful experience what it meant to become rich in the social welfare state of England -- a song entitled "Taxman":

"Let me tell you how it will be:

There's one for you, nineteen for me

'cause I'm the taxman; yeah, I'm the taxman.

Should five percent appear too small,

be thankful I don't take it all

'cause I'm the taxman; yeah, I'm the taxman."

We see here that rock and roll can be converted from a tame campaign accompanist to a trenchant political critic. It all depends on what our new President chooses to listen to.

My proposal is that President Clinton pay attention to a different kind of "Rock" and learn to sing a new song -- the final song of King David, the sweeter singer of Israel (2 Sam. 23:3-4):

"The Rock of Israel said to me:

When one rules over men in righteousness,

he rules in the fear of God;

he will be like the morning light at sunrise"

Real political change and economic relief will not come until this becomes music in our ears.