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Bubba Black Sheep: Ex-President Moves to the 'Hood

: Former President Bill Clinton greets well-wishers after looking at office space he may rent in the Harlem neighborhood of New York Tuesday, Feb. 13, 2001. The office Clinton looked at is three miles north of the midtown office space he passed up because of a controversy over its cost. (AP Photo/Suzanne Plunkett)

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Much humor has been found in President Clinton's plans to lease office space in Harlem: observers joke that he's moving uptown because there are few Republicans there, but that if he was really "down" with black folks, he wouldn't stop at just an office, he'd sell his estate in Chappaqua and get a studio on 1-2-5. Comedian Chris Rock quipped that Clinton might get into even more trouble in Harlem, finding it hard to resist the "big-butt black women." In an uglier vein, the shock-jock radio show "Imus in the Morning" jibed that Clinton's move to Harlem would allow him to buy "Malcolm Triple X condoms," that will help him "get booty by any means necessary."

But jokes and barbs aside, Clinton's decision to settle in Harlem has many pondering the legacy of "our first black president" (in Toni Morrison's memorable phrase) and his relationship to the African American community. Is Clinton's setting up shop in Uptown USA a public relations ploy, an example of his deep commitment to the African-American community, or an example of the embattled former president's taking refuge among the one constituency that has never let him down?

"No president has come to a community like Harlem to set up office. Clinton can affect the community and the way people view the community," said Jim Capel, spokesperson for Charles Rangel, the New York Congressman who is believed to have persuaded the former President to look at office space in Harlem.

"Clinton's move could bring tremendous benefits — an improvement in municipal and social services," Capel continued. "It will stimulate investment and help the whole city, not just Harlem. President Clinton has a genuine relationship with the African American community, and he identified with African Americans in his policies and programs. We hope the President's interests can be accommodated by the city."

The former president's earlier plan, to lease space in a midtown high-rise, was scuttled after Republican Representative Ernest R. Istook, chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, expressed outrage over the reported three-quarters of a million dollar annual price tag, pointing out that the amount exceeded the rent of all former presidents combined. Taxpayers pay for presidential offices for living former presidents.

Early last week President Clinton expressed his interest in moving to Harlem. After seeing the 14th floor penthouse of 55 West 125th Street, with its panoramic views of the George Washington Bridge and Central Park (and rents of about one quarter what midtown would have cost), he proclaimed it "perfect." Built in 1973, the gleaming ebony high-rise sports a large FUBU mural on its side and is said to be the "largest office tower in the nation built and owned by blacks." Obstacles appeared almost immediately. New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani said the building had been leased to the city and that it would be "unethical" for the owner to rent the space to the President.

But the problem was swiftly resolved, with Giuliani announcing at a press conference Friday that the city had reached an "excellent agreement" with the building's owners. He characterized charges that Republican political pressure from Washington hastened the issue's resolution as "totally untrue," and said, "President Clinton's being in Harlem, and particularly in Harlem, is a very good thing.... I think it is something that will say something very significant about where Harlem is now, not only to the people of New York but to the rest of the country."

Clinton's moving to 55 West 125th Street, many say, could bring benefits to Harlem natives. "Just the additional security of having the President up there helps 125th street immeasurably," real estate broker Mark Weiss, who negotiated the deal between Cogswell Realty Group and the city, told the *Daily News*.

The recent opening of brand-name retail stores (Disney, HMV, Starbucks) has sparked talk of an economic revival in Harlem, but businesses are still not rushing to set up shop here. And many wonder if the economic turnaround is lifting the living standards of Harlem's largely impoverished residents. According to a recent *New York Times* report, in 1999, the median household income in Central Harlem was \$20,625 (scarcely up from \$19,169 in 1990), while the median income for the rest of the city was \$41,415.

As president, Clinton launched government programs that aimed to revitalize the economies of Harlem and other poor, often minority, communities, notably the Community Reinvestment Act and the Empowerment Zone Program. Efforts like this have helped cement the

support Clinton enjoyed from the African American community.

It was a loyalty Clinton professed to return. In his final address before them as president, Clinton told the Congressional Black Caucus, "Toni Morrison said I was the first black president this country ever had. I would rather have that than a Nobel Prize." The 42nd President went on to promise that "for the rest of my days, no matter what, I will always be there for you."

But was Clinton's tenure in office really that good for African Americans? "The Clinton Legacy and Black America," a recent article in the new magazine *Savoy*, pictured the former president sporting an Afro, but concluded that, honorary brother or not, Clinton's record vis-à-vis African Americans was decidedly mixed.

Supporters argue that Clinton's sound economic policies produced the largest black middle class in history, that he appointed seven African Americans to his cabinet, and nominated three times more black federal judges than Ronald Reagan and George Bush combined, and that he consistently defended affirmative action and denounced racial profiling. The Urban League's 2000 report found that unemployment among African Americans is at a record low of 7.7 percent (down from 14 percent in 1992, the year Clinton was elected) and the number of black students continuing their education after graduating from high school rose to 59 percent from 48 percent in 1992.

On the other hand, says Ronald Walters of the African American Leadership Institute at the University of Maryland, "Clinton took political advantage of the underclass in a way conservatives probably could not have. His focus on crime fed the worst fears of whites and their feelings that blacks were to blame for all that went wrong in America."

In addition, Clinton's critics point to the growing disparity between rich and poor, the crime bill that targeted first-time offenders, and welfare reform. "The biggest thing that welfare reform has done is to have expanded the ranks of the working poor," said Walters. "Welfare reform has done something which I consider deeply immoral. The richest nation in the world has taken away the right of its poorest citizens to be taken care of by their government."

Author Michael Eric Dyson agrees, saying "It is just that facility with black America that Bill Clinton has evinced over the years that has made black people love him, that allows him to be so mean-spirited and manipulative. When he signed that Crime Bill, when he signed that Welfare Reform Bill, that was more than an implicit attack on black America. That was an explicit attack on very vulnerable regions of black America, the working poor and the poor."

But none of these objections were evident when Clinton strolled the streets of Harlem last week, where he was mobbed by supporters crying "We love you! We love you!" "I feel at home," Clinton told onlookers, "because of the empowerment zone, because of what the people are doing here, because they've made me feel so welcome here today, and because this is what my presidency was about."

Locals shopping on Harlem's bustling thoroughfare seemed cheerful about Clinton's impending tenancy.

"I'm almost 100 years old. I've lived in Harlem since 1941," said Alvin

Powers, a frail old man browsing in a local drugstore. "I'm glad Clinton is coming. We're giving him a chance to prove himself."

"I'm elated that he's moving to Harlem," said Eleanor, a homemaker who has lived in Harlem for 65 years. "He's the best president we ever had. He's done more for us than any other. I'd vote for him again if he ran — I saw him at the state office building some years ago, and it was my first chance to be in the presence of a president. I was elated then — and now he's moving here? I hope I get to meet him. He's family. I hope he comes to my church — the Greater Refuge Church."

Clinton "snubbed the Republicans by coming up here. Giuliani couldn't stop him — he would'a looked stupid," said Curtis, a Harlem resident who works for the City's Pest Control Department, while waiting for the train on the Lenox subway station. "Clinton's basically a nigga in whiteface — grew up poor, with no daddy.... He's black in many ways. I was born in South Carolina so I know. He's got charisma — which white people seldom have. Black people got it, but not whites. Reagan had it, as dumb as he was, but then again he was an actor. Clinton walks into a room and lights it up.... Clinton also likes to eat — he's not into salad and all that."

"Clinton is Clinton," said Mel Foote of The Constituency for Africa. "He has strong convictions about racism. Each former president has established himself in some way. Carter as a do-gooder. Clinton is a diversity president."

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