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A smoke-free institution.***By Neil Feldman**  
Staff Reporter

During the height of the 1992 presidential campaign, David Gergen criticized then-Gov. Bill Clinton almost as much as traditional right-wing commentators like George Will.

Once Clinton took office, Gergen, as editor-at-large of U.S. News and World Report, wrote column after column about what he thought were poor policies across the board.

"Clinton brought many of his troubles on himself," Gergen wrote in the weekly news magazine last May.

He repeated his criticisms as a weekly commentator on the MacNeil-Lehrer Newshour.

Gergen had little trouble diagnosing the president's troubles — he even offered some solutions.

He was particularly harsh on Clinton's deficit reduction trust fund, calling it a gimmick and supporting Oklahoma Democratic Sen. David Boren's opposition to the plan.

Furthermore, Gergen has been critical of several administration members, most notably Chief of Staff Thomas "Mack" McLarty. That choice, as Clinton observed a month after the appointment, "could not have

been a more serious mistake."

**Critic to Comrade**

Why then did President Clinton ask Gergen last spring to come into the administration as a high-ranking adviser?

That question, which has been the subject of debate since the appointment was made last June, seems to be wholly a political matter.

Upon entering the Clinton White House, Gergen suppressed his usual right-wing image by carefully conforming to the image most desired by the president.

"David Gergen brings a lot of experience ... in the White House," Senate Minority Leader Robert Dole of Kansas told Sam Donaldson on "This Week with David Brinkley."

Lloyd Grove, a political reporter at The Washington Post, wrote on July 26 that the "press corps is apparently charmed by this avowed space alien."

Veteran United Press International reporter Helen Thomas was quick to notice the lighter atmosphere at the White House with Gergen aboard.

"There's been a lot of give on both sides," she said, "and a lot of tension is gone."

That type of reaction was exactly the response Clinton desired.

**Image Change**

Gergen's image changed

overnight, and he progressively tied some loose administrative ends together.

"I feel much more socially committed," Gergen told the press in late July. "There was a period of time when the power, the prestige, meant a lot more to me than it does now."

By thrusting himself into Washington's main avenue, Gergen has taken some of the heat off Clinton and has dealt with the press corps as though he were actually one of them.

The lion's share of reporters, though skeptical as to how truthful Gergen has been with his own personal statements — such as claiming he voted for Clinton in the 1992 election, has welcomed Gergen as a communications asset.

Even Mark Shields has pointed most of his comments in a positive direction, though he thinks a "fault line" will develop in the Clinton White House between Gergen and the "populist impulses of James Carville and Paul Begala." That, Shields adds, is not a philosophical or ideological impulse, but an institutional one.

The bottom line is although Gergen has not acted as a mainstream adviser as he did in the Reagan White House, he has effectively dispersed much of the heat President Clinton had been taking, which was not at all his priority in the beginning.

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