

'Political know-it-alls know little'

BY BRIAN CARLSON
Staff writer

Although the past few months have not been good for political pundits, CNN political analyst Bill Schneider said the punditry can learn from 1998 as it looks ahead to 2000.

"In the past year and a half, the talking heads — the pundits, the chattering classes — have managed to get absolutely everything wrong," said Schneider, speaking at a Gallup symposium on survey research Saturday in Lincoln.

The pundits' march of follies began in January 1998, Schneider said, when the Monica Lewinsky scandal broke.

Commentators rushed to predict Bill Clinton's presidency would not survive, perhaps that he would resign in a week. Democrats, shocked at the tawdriness of Clinton's alleged behavior, shied from defending their president.

Then came the polls. Three or four days after the story broke, Schneider went on the airwaves to discuss the public's initial reaction to the scandal. Polls showed that while the public believed Clinton was guilty of carrying on an affair with a White House intern, lying about it and possibly obstructing justice, it did not believe those offenses warranted his removal from office.

The public expressed similar views throughout 1998 and throughout the impeachment trial, Schneider said.

"The message was, 'Get a grip. Take a deep breath. This isn't over,'" he said.

It was this disconnect between Beltway conventional wisdom and public opinion that saved Clinton, Schneider said. Schneider said that shortly after the initial storm of the Lewinsky scandal had subsided, he saw Clinton at a White House reception and told the president, "I think I saved you."

Clinton thought for a moment, then responded, "I know what you mean."

In a second blunder, political analysts predicted right up until election night 1998 that Republicans would gain seats in both the Senate and the House of Representatives.

By the time the last vote was tallied, however, Democrats had gained five House seats and prevented the GOP from gaining any ground in

the Senate.

Schneider said political analysts paid too much attention to the fact that the president's party had gained congressional seats in a midterm election just once this century.

Pundits failed to identify the crucial issue of the election, Schneider said: the economy.

In exit polls, 82 percent of voters said they believed the economy was in good shape — the highest percentage ever.

"This suggested the American people were thinking about something that people in Washington — who set expectations — weren't thinking about," he said.

Who saved Clinton?, Schneider asked. The answer, he said, was the "new rich," or the "Starbucks voters" whose economic conditions had improved in the 1990s and who wanted to reward Clinton and the Democrats for the strong economy that produced their new wealth.

Fresh off their election debacle, pundits immediately fell on their faces again, proclaiming loudly, "Impeachment is dead."

What the pundits failed to appreciate, Schneider said, was the degree to which the so-called "culture wars" that began in the 1960s would drive the impeachment battle.

At a time when Americans are enjoying a strong economy, cultural issues evoke the strongest passions in American politics, Schneider said.

On the one hand, liberals gave Clinton their overwhelming support during the impeachment trial — but not because they supported all of Clinton's policies, Schneider said. In fact, he said, the president has sold out liberals on a number of issues, including free trade, welfare reform and a balanced budget.

Liberals supported Clinton because of his tolerance of alternative lifestyles and his "I feel your pain" empathy for the concerns of everyday Americans, Schneider said.

Conservatives resent Clinton because he has successfully outmaneuvered them on several issues, pushing the GOP to the right and claiming several conservative issues as his own, Schneider said.

But he said the strongest conservative hatred toward Clinton results from what he represents to many: the excesses of the 1960s.

One conservative told Schneider, "I hate Clinton because he is a draft-dodging, not-

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The message of the whole impeachment episode is that Americans are not all that demanding when it comes to character. They want to know, can you do the job and not create a constitutional crisis?"

BILL SCHNEIDER
CNN political analyst

inhaling, abortion-protecting, gay-loving, Elvis-loving, sexually promiscuous, pot-smoking baby boomer."

Thus, despite polls showing two-thirds of Americans did not support impeachment, the House of Representatives impeached Clinton along partisan lines.

Finally, pundits have once again misread the public mood, this time over the Kosovo crisis, Schneider said.

Many pundits insisted the public would never support a war in Kosovo — a little-known country in which the United States did not appear to have a national interest.

But a month after the bombing began, with Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic refusing to back down in the face of the NATO air strikes, public support for the war is strong. And amazingly, Schneider said, the public even seems increasingly supportive of the introduction of U.S. ground forces to end ethnic cleansing and violence in Kosovo.

"The conclusion is very simple: We're doing the right thing, but we're not doing it right," Schneider said.

More and more, the public believes the "immaculate coercion" of air strikes will not work and that ground troops will be necessary, he said.

So, looking forward to the 2000 presidential election, what will be the winning formula? Will the public insist on a morally pure candidate?, Schneider asked.

"I don't think that's the case at all," he said. "The message of the whole impeachment episode is that Americans are not all that demanding when it comes to character. They want to know, can you do the job and not create

a constitutional crisis?"

The two candidates likely to square off in the general election, Schneider said, are Democratic Vice President Al Gore and Republican Texas Gov. George W. Bush.

Although the public does not perceive Gore as a strong, decisive leader, Schneider said, he enjoys a reputation for integrity and a connection to the strong economy of the Clinton years.

Oddly enough, however, Gore could pay for Clinton's sins, he said. Polls show that while the public would like to see Clinton's policies continued, they would not support Clinton if he were eligible for a third term.

The public seems to indicate in opinion polls that either Gore or Bush could be a solid president who would preside over continued economic good times, Schneider said.

"Maybe the perception is growing that it doesn't make any difference who the president is," he said. And the pact Clinton has essentially made with the public — "You don't bother us; we won't bother you" — may continue, Schneider said.

In that case, Americans may be inclined to support a candidate like Bush who has been removed from the scandal and partisan rancor of Washington, he said.

But Bush may face questions about his own past, with stories circulating about possible drinking problems, sexual impropriety and other potentially damaging allegations, he said.

Other candidates in both parties are vying for president, and Schneider said his greatest hope is that the 2000 election will be more interesting than 1996, when Republican Bob Dole never seemed within striking distance of Clinton.

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