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POLITICO

Mitt's new hero: Bill Clinton

By: Reid J. Epstein

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LANSING, Mich. — Mitt Romney has a new hero on the stump and it's Bill Clinton.

In seeking to drive a wedge between centrist and liberal Democrats, Romney spoke here on Tuesday in glowing terms of the Clinton era's balanced budgets and rosy economy.

"President Obama chose to apply liberal ideas of the past to a 21st century America," Romney said. "Liberal policies didn't work back then, they haven't worked during these last four years, and they will not work in the future. New Democrats had abandoned those policies, but President Obama resurrected them with the predictable results."

Romney continued: "President Clinton, remember, he said the era of big government was over. President Obama brought it back with a vengeance. Government at all levels now consumes about 38 percent of the economy, and if Obamacare is installed, that will rise to about half of the economy."

Furthermore, Romney sought to paint Obama as a welfare president. It was not a far cry from ex-presidential rival Newt Gingrich dubbing Obama a "food stamp president," and the former House speaker's work with Clinton to balance the budget in the '90s also resonated during Romney's speech.

"President Clinton made efforts to reform welfare as we know it," Romney said. "But President Obama is trying tirelessly to expand the welfare state, with more promises of more programs, more benefits, more spending."

In Romney's prepared text, he was to say that Obama is seeking to "expand the welfare state to all Americans," though he dropped that particular line when delivering the speech.

A senior Romney aide told reporters before the speech at a community college here that that invoking Clintonism was devised as a trick to drive a wedge between centrist and liberal Democrats, though with Clinton appearing front-and-center in Obama's campaign advertisements — not to mention his wife, Hillary, serving as Obama's secretary of state — the results of such a strategy remain to be seen.

Like Romney, the aide spoke glowingly of President Clinton.

"President Clinton in 1992 ran as a New Democrat," the aide said. "President Obama has really turned his back on all that. He's not run as a New Democrat, he's run as an old Democrat with old-school liberal solutions."

Though he spoke blocks from Michigan's state capitol, Romney didn't address his Monday claim that he will "take a lot of credit" for the auto industry recovery, despite first opposing the Obama administration's bailout of the industry.

Before the speech, Romney spokeswoman Andrea Saul said that the Republican would not be speaking about the bailout or his Tuesday remarks. But Romney did making a passing nostalgic comment about Oldsmobile, the former General Motors imprint that had factories in Lansing.

In speaking about the state capital where his father sat as governor, Romney said: "A good deal has changed, most noticeably, the demise of Oldsmobile. It was a fine car and a source of pride for the city. It was also a source of a lot of good paying jobs."

There was no other reference to the auto industry in the 19-minute speech.

Instead, Romney gave himself yet another introduction to a general-election audience. He recognized an Italian man who lived in his father's home as a foreign-exchange student decades ago and introduced new details from his business career, including anecdotes like his ability to predict the growth of the online advertising market.

"I spent my business career at the leading edge of change and dynamism," he said. "We saw, for instance, the immense opportunity for advertising on the Internet very early on. We saw the opportunity for superstores in sporting goods and superstores for office supplies. We saw the opportunity for building a new steel mill, in this country, even as old steel mills across the country were shutting down."

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