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Bill Clinton: What to Call Him if He Becomes the “First Husband”

(Washington, DC)— When Bill Clinton first won the presidency, the form of address used for him and the first lady, Hillary, was as follows:

The President and Mrs. Clinton

This form of address fits into the traditional formula in writing: *The President and Mrs. (Surname)* and in conversation: *Mr./Madam President* and *Mr./Mrs. (Surname)*.

If Hillary Clinton wins the current presidential election, Bill Clinton will be a first: the first First Husband, Spouse, Partner, or Significant Other.

So, how will the White House staff address Bill Clinton? How will his name appear with the President's on invitations? How will his place card read at a state dinner? How should the media address him or refer to him? Perhaps *First Gentleman Bill Clinton*, awkward as that might seem? According to Robert Hickey, author of The Protocol School of Washington's ***Honor and Respect: The Official Guide to Names, Titles and Forms of Address***, the formula for the husband of President of the United States (POTUS) has been around for a long time. It just hasn't been used thus far:

In writing: *The President and Mr. (Full Name)*

As a former elected official, Bill Clinton does have a special title. He is “the Honorable.” Using this courtesy title fits right in without a hitch.

In writing: *The President and the Honorable (Full Name)*

However, which version of Bill Clinton's full name would be correct? That is a matter of how formal a reporter or social secretary chooses to be for any given occasion. Bill Clinton, William J. Clinton, or William Jefferson Clinton might be frequent choices.

Still, two questions linger:

1. How should he be addressed in direct conversation or as a salutation?

Mr. Clinton
President Clinton

2. How should reporters refer to him in order to not mislead or confuse their audience on who is the current president and who is not?

Mr. Clinton
President Clinton
Former President Clinton

According to Hickey, the right option for both questions would be *Mr. Clinton*.

"While it is common practice in the media and elsewhere to address and identify former presidents as "President (Name)," this is a mistake," said Hickey. "Serving as President of the United States does not grant one the personal rank of "President" for life. The office of President is a one-person-at-a-time role for a specific individual and hands off for any other person."

"Courtesies, honors, and special forms of address are symbols of the power of the office. They belong to the office and to the citizens, not former office holders."

Hickey goes on to say the media and the public should be wary of identifying or addressing previous holders of the presidency and other unique offices by referring to them as "former (title)." This qualifier diminishes the singular prestige of both the office and its current occupant.

"There is an accepted term of respect used for previous presidents and other elected U.S. officials to recognize their service. This title is one of high distinction that they keep for life: she or he is addressed as "the Honorable (Full Name)."

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