

Clinton strikes a chord with project managers

PMI's Global Congress in the US regularly attracts thousands of members and non-members to hear from industry experts and keynotes on a wealth of subjects. Our US correspondent, Carl Pritchard, joined fellow members in Washington at the launch of this year's Congress with the keynote address from ex-President Bill Clinton.

by **Carl Pritchard**, *Project Manager Today's* US correspondent



The Project Management Institute's (PMI) annual North American Congress kicked off with a crowd as Bill Clinton drew thousands to wait in line for over an hour for the opportunity to hear the former President's take on project management at the end of last month.

The project managers filled the vast hall, where virtually every seat was taken by those anxious to see the link between their profession and Clinton's experiences.

Clinton opened by stressing that he was 'fascinated by project management', as he churned through a litany of his achievements both while in the White House and thereafter. He consistently nodded to the need to establish and execute projects in order to achieve success in meeting his professional goals.

He stressed that the big projects of the 21st

Century will be different from those of the previous one, saying that for his Foundation and for project management as a whole, it is important to convert 'good intentions into positive change.' He rolled through the efforts of his foundation worldwide, as well as those of others, like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. He stressed that there is not an emphasis on just what they do, but 'we're in the how business.' He went on to say 'that's what project managers do.'

He pointed to the dramatic changes that have occurred in the world since he took office. In 1993, for example, he pointed out that there was no e-mail and there were a total of 50 websites worldwide. 'More than that have come on-line since I started talking,' he joked, 'for many of you in this audience, that seems like the Dark Ages. For some of us, it's the day before yesterday.'

Clinton tried to hold out hope and promise 'in an unstable world,' talking about the recent discovery of a possibly earth-like planet in the constellation Libra, and the recent discoveries by the superconducting supercollider. His favorite was the recent acknowledgement that there may not be a perfect balance of positive and negative energy in the universe, thanks to atomic particles called muons. He said that the discovery showed that there may be an ever-so-slight edge in the volume of positive energy in the universe. 'It's a great metaphor for life if it's true.'

The former president went on to talk about the ongoing crisis in Haiti, the need for progress in economics, the environment, education, energy, and health care. 'If you're a project manager, there's always something to do for the next 50 years'



Over 100 exhibitors filled the aisles of the exhibit hall for the opening reception, as a thousand-plus attendees poured in following the Bill Clinton presentation. Shrimp, beer and Microsoft Project might seem an unusual combination in some settings, but at the Gaylord National Convention Center (in National Harbor, Maryland), it was the order of the evening. Duffers putted for prizes as vendors doled out tote bags, USBs of every description and paraphernalia of every description, as well as a forests' worth of handouts, brochures and catalogues extolling project management 'stuff' of every stripe. The heaviest emphasis in the exhibit hall seemed to be in education, with institutions from Academy Leadership to Villanova University represented in the mix.

As he answered a few questions from outgoing PMI Chief Executive President Greg Ballesteros, Clinton offered hope that we wouldn't collectively 'major in the minors' and instead will put our focus where it needs to be.

Clinton then shared his thoughts about the most remarkable people he has met in his career, counting among them Tony Blair. Clinton stressed the former prime minister's role in revolutionizing his party's politics in the UK in much the same way he had seen a similar revolution occurring in the US.

Clinton said his most revered character was

probably Yitzhak Rabin. His tone went somber as he reflected on Rabin's assassination almost exactly 15 years before (November 4, 1995). He pointed to Rabin's impressive ability to shirk off all of the violence that he had seen earlier in his life and 'give it up for peace. His death was one of the great tragedies of the past 25 years. Who knows,' said Clinton, '9/11 might not have happened had that event [the assassination] not occurred.'

The former president closed, stressing the need to work harder to build a common discourse, build up positive attitudes and reduce the negatives.



Bill Clinton talks with Greg Ballesteros

Bill Clinton on



Becoming President: 'We had to save \$250 billion in our first budget to reduce the deficit, and we had to do it fairly quickly. We eliminated over half of that in just unnecessary expenses. We never had to fire anybody. We just did it through attrition, early retirement, and the smart application of technology.'

Positive change: 'I tell all the hundreds of young people that work in our foundation and all over the world, if anybody asks you what we do, tell them we are in the 'how' business. We are trying to figure out how to turn good intentions into positive changes, and if you think about it, that's what project managers do.'

Foundation work: 'Today, I have a whole different life. I run a big foundation. We have contracts where we buy AIDS medicine in 70 countries. About half of all the people in poor countries in the world, more than 2.6 million who get AIDS medicine to stay alive, and 70% of all the children get it from these contracts. They are the lowest cost, high-quality medicines around. . . We work on economic projects in Latin America and in the United States. We have a campaign against child obesity and for childhood health in America, and we do a lot of other things.'

Sustainability: 'I have a climate change project, and I work in at least 25 countries, 40 cities, on six continents, proving that it is good business to change the way you produce and consume energy.'

Aiding development: '. . . in Haiti, our task is complicated by the fact that 17% of the national workforce was killed in the earthquake . . . so they don't have the government infrastructure . . . and then the government of Haiti asked me to co-chair their reconstruction commission, I knew it would be difficult, but I never imagined how difficult, because we were trying to simultaneously rebuild what was there and then to build things for the first time.'



Vivek Kundra

The Office of Management and Budget's Chief Information Officer offered his nickel's worth on the current state of project management in the US Federal sector. Emphasizing Federal information technologies' efforts to 'streamline what does work' within the government.

Kundra spoke extensively about the information gap and the need to close that gap in Federal IT, citing examples of wasteful effort and spending in the US military and at the Department of State.

He remained optimistic about the prospects for the future. He stressed that 'it is well-trained project managers, focused on execution, who will ultimately lead our projects to success.'

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of Kundra's vision for the future came in the revelation that his team is working on a 'project management laboratory'—a laboratory environment that will 'allow project managers to develop their skills by participating in a reality-based simulations of large complex projects.'

Comparing the experience to that of a pilot training simulator, Kundra stressed that it would enable project managers to 'hone their existing skills as well as develop new ones without putting real projects—and millions of taxpayer dollars—at risk.'

