

THE POLITICIAN

Bill Clinton's "My Life."

by Hendrik Hertzberg

One can make a plausible, if narrow, case that Bill Clinton was one of the most accomplished American politicians of the twentieth century. Among the century's seventeen Presidents, beginning with Theodore Roosevelt, Clinton went the farthest on his own steam, without any of the extrinsic advantages that gave all the others a leg up in one way or another. Unlike fully half of them, Clinton did not inherit the Presidency, either directly, as did T.R., Coolidge, Truman, Johnson, and Ford, or indirectly, as did Taft, Nixon, and George H.W. Bush. Unlike T.R., Harding, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Kennedy, Carter, and Bush, Clinton had no family money and no family connections. Unlike Wilson, Hoover, Eisenhower, and Reagan, he did not achieve national fame in some other field before turning to politics. He got the job by beating an incumbent and then went on to win a second term, a distinction he shares only with Wilson, F.D.R., and Reagan. The well-being of the nation palpably improved during his White House service: unprecedented budget deficits became surpluses; the economy enjoyed its longest boom ever, achieving something close to full employment without inflation; indices of social distress, such as the rates of poverty, crime, and teen pregnancy, dropped precipitously; peace reigned, mostly; and by the time he left both the number of federal employees and the tax burden on the middle class were lower than they had been when he arrived. In spite of (or maybe because of) his impeachment by a party-line vote in the House of Representatives, his end-of-second-term poll ratings were the highest ever measured. Finally, if the choice had been up to the voters, as opposed to the five rightmost Justices of the Supreme Court, Clinton would have become the century's third President, after T.R. and Reagan, to flex the ultimate political muscle: turning the Oval Office over to a handpicked (and less charismatic) successor.

The case is, I admit, a trifle, er, Clintonian. (It all depends on the meaning of "accomplished." And "politician.") The negative side of the ledger, God knows, is not exactly blank. Clinton never captured a majority of the popular vote; in 1992 his percentage was smaller than Michael Dukakis's four years earlier, and he might not have won at all if not for the gonzo candidacy of H. Ross Perot. Denied the traditional honeymoon, he allowed himself to be ambushed by the gays-in-the-military fiasco, which seized headlines for months, weakened him politically, and left its intended beneficiaries worse off than before. What, in "My Life" (Knopf; \$35), he calls "Whitewater World" was a fraud and a hoax—the true scandal was the right-wing conspiracy, which was real, vast, and breathtakingly mendacious—but it was Clinton's White House that both spurned the *Washington Post's* request for the (ultimately innocuous) Whitewater documents and formally asked for the appointment of an (ultimately partisan) "independent counsel." ("It was the worst presidential decision I ever made," he writes, "wrong on the facts, wrong on the law, wrong on the politics, wrong for the presidency and the Constitution.") His impeachment was a travesty, for which his political enemies should be spared no blame; but he was their enabler, to say the least. His efforts to combat terrorism exceeded those of his successor, pre-9/11, but they were manifestly not enough.

I don't know of any historical heavy thinkers who would place Clinton among the century's greatest Presidents, although some might argue that faced with Rooseveltian challenges, and gifted with a Rooseveltian Congress, he could have reached Rooseveltian heights (especially if he had benefitted from Rooseveltian levels of personal privacy). Strictly as a raw political talent, playing the hand that life and history dealt him, he has had few equals.

Clinton never wanted to star in a movie, command a submarine, or run a business. From the moment in adolescence when he realized that his saxophone playing was not about to make him the next John Coltrane or Stan Getz, all he wanted to do was run for office, which he started doing at sixteen, getting himself elected “senator” at Arkansas’s American Legion Boys State summer camp. (His reward was a week in Washington, where he famously received the laying on of hands from President Kennedy in the Rose Garden.) He chose to go to college at Georgetown University because Georgetown University is in Washington. He took a law degree because in the United States law is the default mode for professional seekers of elective office. He spent summers apprenticing in campaigns. He was elected attorney general of Arkansas at thirty, governor at thirty-two, and President of the United States at forty-six, the third-youngest man ever to win the White House. All in all, he ran for office nine times between the ages of twenty-seven and fifty, an average of one campaign every two and a half years. He’s still only fifty-seven—younger than George W. Bush, younger than John Kerry, younger than three-quarters of Bush’s Cabinet and three-fifths of Kerry’s senatorial colleagues. He is already a kind of folkloric character, the larger-than-life protagonist of a great American tall tale. Bill Clinton is to politics what Paul Bunyan was to lumberjacking, and “My Life” is his big blue ox—very big. And very bovine.

How big is “My Life”? It weighs in at three pounds, five ounces. According to Knopf, 2.6 million copies are in print, which puts the over-all tonnage, so far, at four thousand three hundred—the equivalent, in sheer mass, of a ten-mile-long motorcade of Lincoln Town Cars. “I was a fat band boy who didn’t wear cool jeans,” Clinton writes of his junior-high-school self. His jeans are cooler now, and at one of his White House going-away parties his staff gave him a modified Presidential seal emblazoned ROCK ‘N ROLL PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES. He’s been looking trim lately, but he still hasn’t licked that weight problem—he’s just put it between hard covers.

The text of “My Life” occupies nine hundred and fifty-seven pages. Acknowledgments and an index occupy another xlii, or forty-two, bringing the total to nine hundred and ninety-nine. Can this be an accident? I don’t think so. It is widely believed in the publishing industry that a book that goes over a thousand pages cuts its sales potential in half. One may speculate that Knopf deployed every tool in its kit—not just editing but also kerning and widow-pruning and messing about with margins and type sizes and optical squeezes—to bring this baby in under the magic number.

The thousand-page factor is one manifestation of the nonliterary considerations that have gone into the shaping of this book. These considerations are of two types: industrial and political. The financial stakes are high. Three years ago, when the Knopf-Clinton deal was first announced, Clinton’s advance was reported to have been around twelve million dollars; promotional, production, and other ancillary expenses will have added many millions more. These are Hollywood numbers, and they impose certain imperatives.

Clinton is said to have chosen Knopf and the editor Robert Gottlieb because he was so impressed with Katharine Graham’s “Personal History,” which was indeed a marvelous piece of work. But Mrs. Graham’s memoir, which not only won a Pulitzer Prize but deserved it, was not written for money. She did not require a large advance in order to buy a house and pay off big legal bills. She owned a Fortune 500 company. “Personal History” was six years in the making. Mrs. Graham took her own sweet time. Clinton couldn’t afford to take his. “My Life” had to arrive within certain temporal parameters. It couldn’t come out too soon, lest it interfere with the family’s other autobiographical enterprise, Hillary Rodham Clinton’s “Living History,” which appeared in June of 2003, sold 1.5 million copies in hardcover, and now rests comfortably on the paperback best-seller lists. It couldn’t come out too late, lest it forgo the octane of a political year; and within that political year it had to appear early enough so as not to step on, and

be stepped on by, the party Conventions and the general-election campaign. The ideal moment would have been just before Father's Day. Clinton, habitually late, finishing the manuscript in a rush of all-nighters, missed that particular selling opportunity. Nevertheless, the book landed in the stores more or less on schedule. In his acknowledgments, Clinton thanks Gottlieb, without whose ministrations, he writes, "this book might have been twice as long and half as good." (If that is true, then that pile of paper must have been a terrifying sight before Gottlieb got hold of it.) By the same token, though, the book might have been three times as good and a third as long if it had been written half as fast.

Political imperatives, and plain old political habits, have also done their share to make "My Life" heavy going. Much of the book is like an elephantine version of one of the interminable town meetings Clinton held in the days before the 1992 New Hampshire primary, when he was clawing his way back from the Jennifer Flowers and draft imbroglios. His strategy was to answer every question, explain every policy proposal, listen to every hard-luck story, shake every hand, and look deep into every pair of eyes in the room, quitting only when, whimpering piteously for surcease, "the last dog dies."

That is still his strategy. An enormous slice of "My Life" is given over to what stump speakers call shout-outs and what hostesses call bread-and-butter notes. There are more names here than in a cathedralful of church newsletters. The book teems with people who are brought briefly onstage, introduced, praised as being "smart and funny" or "brilliant" or "terrific" or "sharp as a tack," thanked, and ushered back into the wings, never to be encountered again. This is literature as retail politics. And there are Saharan stretches that read like a child's epic letter from camp: First I did this. Then I did that. Then I did something else.

In myriad other ways, the book is shaped by political pressures and obligations. Theoretically, when a President becomes an ex-President he is freed from many of the constraints that necessarily shackled him when he was seeking office or negotiating with Congress or conducting diplomacy. But Presidential memoirs seldom take full advantage of the freedom to be frank, and Clinton's is no exception. It is his unique and ironic fate to have a spouse who is a politician, too—one whose elective career lifted off with a roar just as his own was nearing splashdown. Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, Democrat of New York, represents a state bristling with political minefields, and she will almost certainly be on every list of Presidential possibilities for several cycles to come. Her husband must therefore consider the impact on her political fortunes of everything he says, does, or writes. He might like to fire off something beastly about Israel, for example, or the Cubans in Miami, or the teachers' unions. But he can't. He has to watch what he says. If this is Hillary's revenge, it is exquisite.

On the other hand, there's not much evidence that Clinton wants to say anything beastly about anybody. He likes people to like him. More to the point, perhaps, he likes to like people. His emotional voraciousness goes both ways; it isn't all take. In "My Life" he is forever mentioning how much he likes this county chairman or that Republican senator or whatever foreign leader he has just conferred with. His dislikes, if any, are harder to discern. He is angry at the press for its lazy exploitation of the series of fake scandals—from the haircut-on-the-tarmac to the Vincent Foster "murder"—that greased the skids for the Monica Lewinsky perjury trap, and he is supremely angry at Kenneth Starr, the Javert-as-Elmer Fudd prosecutor and Whitewater World wabbit wrangler. But these angers have a generic, impersonal feel. He writes of his legitimate political opponents—Bush senior, Newt Gingrich, Bob Dole—not only without rancor but with respect and something like affection.

Even a character like "Justice Jim" Johnson, who figured in the first grown-up political campaign that Clinton played a part in, gets his human due. In the summer of 1966, after his sophomore year at Georgetown, Clinton campaigned for one Frank

Holt, who was running for governor of Arkansas to succeed the notorious Orval Faibus. Holt, he writes, “had the support of most of the courthouse crowd and the big financial interests, but he was more progressive on race than Faibus, and completely honest and decent. Frank Holt was admired by just about everybody who knew him (except those who thought he was too easygoing to make any real change).” Holt’s main opponent was Justice Jim, a racist demagogue. Clinton’s take on Johnson’s appeal is worth lingering over, both as a glimpse of the political world the future President emerged from and as a sample of his own eyes and mind at work. Johnson, Clinton writes,

thought Faibus was too soft on civil rights; after all, he had appointed a few blacks to state boards and commissions. With Faibus, who had genuine populist impulses, racism was a political imperative. He preferred improving schools and nursing homes, building roads, and reforming the state mental hospital to race-baiting. It was just the price of staying in office. With Johnson, racism was theology. He thrived on hate. . . . And he was a savvy politician who knew where his voters were. Instead of going to the endless campaign rallies where the other candidates spoke, he traveled all over the state on his own, with a country-and-western band, which he used to pull in a crowd. Then he would whip them into a frenzy with tirades against blacks and their traitorous white sympathizers.

I didn’t see it at the time, but he was building strength among people the other candidates couldn’t reach: people upset with federal activism in civil rights, scared by the Watts riots and other racial disturbances, convinced the War on Poverty was socialist welfare for blacks, and frustrated with their own economic conditions. Psychologically, we’re all a complex mixture of hopes and fears. Each day we wake up with the scales tipping a bit one way or the other. If they go too far toward hopefulness, we can become naïve and unrealistic. If the scales tilt too far the other way, we can get consumed by paranoia and hatred. In the South, the dark side of the scales has always been the bigger problem. In 1966, Jim Johnson was just the man to tip them in that direction.

Johnson beat Clinton’s candidate in the primary and then, to Clinton’s relief, lost to Winthrop Rockefeller, a moderate Republican, in the general election. Twenty-five years later, Justice Jim turns up again as a peddler of anti-Clinton dirt. “When I ran for President,” Clinton writes, “he planted ingenious stories, directly and indirectly, with anyone gullible enough to believe them, and got some surprising takers among the so-called eastern liberal media he loved to revile, especially for Whitewater tales. He’s a canny old rascal. He must have had a great time conning them, and if the Republicans in Washington had succeeded in running me out of town, he’d have had a good claim to the last laugh.” Clinton sees Justice Jim quite clearly for the lowlife he is, but he brings a touch of sympathetic warmth to the picture (“He’s a canny old rascal”). Clinton is simply not a hater.

It’s an almost voluptuous pleasure to read Clinton when he’s recounting and analyzing a political race or a legislative battle, whether it’s one of his own or somebody else’s (and he’s as astute on why he got beat for president of the Georgetown student council as on how he turned the Gingrich Republicans’ post-1994 triumphalism against them). Passages like these, and there are plenty of them, are enriched by a characteristic mixture of shrewdness, empathy, earthiness, and a nuanced appreciation of context. The problem is that the book is not a sculpture garden. It’s a quarry. It’s a strip mine. There’s gold in that thar hill, but it’s veined among layers of rocky sediment, and you have to bring your own pickaxe.

A fine four-hundred-page book is buried somewhere under the avalanche that is “My Life.” Better still, perhaps someday someone will carve out of it a Little Clinton

Library of four or five concise volumes, suitable for carrying in the back pocket of a pair of cool jeans. The one that's closest to being ready to lift straight out of "My Life" is the story of his family and his childhood. It's a tale tinged with sepia, at once melancholy and idyllic. The family's closet was stacked with skeletons. Bill Clinton's father's name was William Blythe, as, technically, was his own till he had it legally changed, at sixteen. Blythe senior died at twenty-eight, in a car crash, three months before young Bill was born; not until he was forty-six and already President did Bill Clinton learn, via a *Washington Post* investigative story, that his father had "probably" been married three times before meeting his mother, and that he had a half brother and a half sister of whose existence he had no clue. At four, Bill acquired a "handsome, hell-raising, twice-divorced" stepfather, Roger Clinton, whose self-doubt and binge drinking "kept him from becoming the man he might have been." The incident when the teen-aged Bill angrily faced down his drunken stepfather and stopped him from beating his mother is well known; less so is a trauma years earlier, when little Bill, a kindergartner, saw Roger pull out a pistol and fire at his mother before being taken off to jail for the night. There is more along these lines. But his relationship with his salty, fun-loving mother, Virginia Kelley, was always close and tender, and his fractured family was the nucleus of a huge, overlapping set of variegated clans that, as he writes with clear-eyed practicality, "gave me kinfolk in fifteen of Arkansas' seventy-five counties, an enormous asset when I started my political career in a time when personal contacts counted more than credentials or positions on the issues."

Volume II of the Little Clinton Library might be a Dreiserian bildungsroman, the story of an eager provincial lad whose world opens out through college in Washington and a term-time job with his fellow-Arkansan J. William Fulbright, the distinguished and dissenting chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee; who discovers Europe, Western and Eastern, on a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford; and who struggles through to a kind of truce with his conscience in dealing with the great character test of his generation, the draft and the Vietnam War. A diary he kept during this period helps him trace the tumult of his feelings with unusual clarity and specificity. In that character test, Clinton neither excelled (as did, for example, John Kerry, who fought heroically in the war despite doubts about and finally full-throated opposition to it) nor flunked (as did, for example, Dick Cheney, who both supported the war and single-mindedly avoided getting anywhere near it). Clinton simply passed. You might say that he graduated, but *sine laude*. His angst-ridden thrashings are easily ridiculed, but he confronted his dilemma, obsessed over the moral implications of each of his fitful decisions, faced the personal and public issues before him with the utmost seriousness, and redeemed himself, in part, by participating in the responsible, moderate wing of the antiwar movement more actively than all but a few thousand of his contemporaries. The coda of this volume would take him through law school and his Tracy-and-Hepburn courtship of Hillary.

The Little Clinton Library volumes on Clinton's Arkansas ascent, which over eighteen years took him from a losing congressional race to five terms in statewide office to the Presidency, and on his eight years in the White House would have an overarching theme: the challenge of liberal governance in an era of harsh conservative mobilization and chronic legislative deadlock. The lessons that Clinton took from his reelection defeat after his first two-year term as governor of Arkansas were both personal and political. The former, he writes, was summed up by a friend who told him, "Bill, the people thought you were an asshole!"—an admonition that I suspect is a first for Presidential memoirs. The latter he sums up himself:

If I hadn't been defeated, I probably never would have become President. It was a near-death experience, but an invaluable one, forcing me to be more sensitive to the political problems inherent in progressive politics: the

system can absorb only so much change at once; no one can beat all the entrenched interests at the same time; and if people think you've stopped listening, you're sunk.

The right hated Clinton because it thought he was deceitfully disguising a high-tax, nanny-state, libertine liberal agenda in the language of mainstream moderation. On the left, which fully warmed to him only when he got caught with his pants down, the rap on him was that he didn't stand for anything—that he was a trimmer, a sellout artist, a slick self-seeker. One can find evidence for either proposition in “My Life,” if that's what one is looking for. The simpler explanation is that his purpose was roughly what he thought it was, to use himself as an instrument to effect change in a roughly consistent direction—toward a fairer, more egalitarian, more tolerant society, an economy in which the harsher effects of efficient markets are cushioned by social programs designed to equalize opportunity and encourage self-sufficiency, and a world in which peace is underwritten by political democracy and, especially, economic integration.

To be a political instrument—to be in politics—one has to politically survive. Clinton did what was necessary. Perhaps the most notorious of all Clinton quotes—after “Briefs,” “I didn't inhale,” “I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky,” and “It depends on what the meaning of ‘is’ is”—comes from his 1969 letter to a reserve colonel: “I decided to accept the draft in spite of my beliefs for one reason: to maintain my political viability within the system.” If one can see nothing but cynicism in this statement, one will be blind to the core of honor, a little tarnished but real, that I, for one, discern in Bill Clinton. Politics, democratic politics at any rate, is compromise, and sometimes the compromises are internal, and compromises of that kind can seem especially corrosive. Does Clinton, in his heart of hearts, truly favor capital punishment, which has always been his public position? I don't know. But I doubt it. In “My Life” he says almost nothing about the subject, even though he presided over Arkansas's first executions in a decade. The name of Ricky Ray appears in the book, in connection with the passage of an anti-AIDS measure called the Ricky Ray Hemophilia Fund, but the name of Ricky Ray Rector, the mentally damaged convict who was executed in Grady, Arkansas, three and a half weeks before the 1992 New Hampshire primary, does not. In Arkansas when Clinton was coming up, one could be against the death penalty or one could have a political career, but one could not do both. Clinton's silence on the matter is evidence either of shame or of a chilling ability to compartmentalize.

Clinton's Presidency divides into two periods—not pre- and post-Monica but pre- and post-health care. The left tends to forget that the emphasis of Clinton's first year and a half in office was on completing the unfinished work of the New Deal, the Fair Deal, and the Great Society by enacting universal health insurance. The enormous publicity, advertising, and lobbying campaign against the Administration's health plan succeeded in persuading much of the press and the public that the proposal's failure was all the fault of the Clintons: the plan was too complicated, it had been prepared in too much secrecy, it was too Hillaryish, and so on. None of this was true, any more than it was true that (as some critics charged) the plan would have taken away people's choice of a family doctor or put people in jail for buying supplementary insurance. The Clintons made their share of mistakes, but they didn't make more than their share. Clinton admits that he made an error in his 1994 State of the Union address when he promised to veto any health bill that did not cover all of the uninsured. But, he adds, “as it turned out, my error didn't matter, because Bob Dole would decide to kill any health-care reform.” Health care was doomed the moment that the Republicans—accepting the argument of William Kristol that the passage of any plan, however watered-down, would represent an unacceptable political victory for the Democrats—resolved to use the filibuster. The Clintons' mistakes were beside the point.

The health-care stonewall, however cruel as public policy, was a political masterstroke; it led directly to the Republicans' capture of the House of Representatives in the 1994 election. From then until the end of his second term Clinton was fighting a political guerrilla war. A working politician has to deal with the world as it is, not as he would like it to be. From start to finish, from the Arkansas of Orval Faubus and Justice Jim Johnson to the Washington of the conservative ascendancy, Clinton has had to operate in a hostile environment. His compromises, his maneuvers, his triangulations, his feints and parries were the tactics he used, in the waning years of his Presidency, to fight the Republicans to a standstill. Thanks to a private indiscipline that remains inexplicable to his admirers—and, judging from "My Life," to himself as well—he ended up fighting with one hand tied behind him. But fight he did.