

BookTalk

ALL TOO GEEKY

By Jonah Goldberg

All Too Human

By George Stephanopoulos

Little, Brown, 456 pages, \$27.95

When I started *All Too Human*, a certain angst came over me. It was similar to the mild intestinal panic you get when you realize the person sitting next to you on a long plane ride won't shut up. He's got a story to tell, damn it, and tell it he will. But then you realize that the longer it goes on the less you have to hold up your end of the conversation. Your obligation to ask questions, express judgment, even pay attention starts to evaporate like the last bit of scotch in your plastic cup. In fact, your narrator would probably just think any interruption at all is a failure to understand how interesting he is. So recline your chair, don't get too upset, and maybe you can follow along.

At first this is hard to accomplish with George Stephanopoulos's new book. He simply asserts as fact things that would turn heads anywhere, save perhaps at the Democratic National Committee lunch room. For instance, Michael Dukakis lost because he was a victim of low Lee Atwater smears, not, as most post-1988 autopsies revealed, because Dukakis was a liberal techno-nerd peacenik defrosted from an MIT lab where he'd been frozen since 1970.

This book is not about the "issues." It is being marketed as the real view from behind the throne. We do learn some disturbing things about the President, but nothing really new and certainly nothing particularly damaging after Clinton's impeachment examination. Surprise! The president listens to the polls! He is undis-

ciplined! Not only that, but get this: He has a dark side! Zowiee!

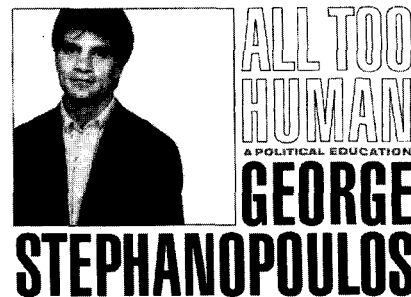
If only we'd known earlier.

That's not to say that Stephanopoulos doesn't have interesting stories to tell, or that he doesn't tell them well. When Clinton's "draft-dodging" letter, with its hateful statements about the military and its comparison of the war to racism, surfaced in 1992, Stephanopoulos tried to figure out how to hang this albatross on the Republicans. But Hillary's response after reading the letter was an exhilarated, "Bill, this is you! I can hear you saying this." Stephanopoulos was crestfallen: "So much for the dirty trick defense."

Occasionally Stephanopoulos lets snippets of Clinton's character shine through. He writes that "mansion fare" for 20 in Little Rock was "pimento cheese-spread sandwiches on white bread with corn chips on the side." While munching on one of these delicacies George tells the boss that he needs "tighter" answers about the Vietnam thing. The President and his wife erupt into a red-faced fury. "Bill's not going to apologize for being against the Vietnam War!" screams Hillary. Bill says he'd rather lose the race than say the war was right. This anecdote provides an enlightening contrast with Clinton's statements to the *Washington Post* about a year later that he "missed" the Cold War because back then we had "an intellectually coherent thing. The American people knew what the rules were."

But this book is not really about Bill Clinton. Stephanopoulos has written a tell-all about himself. Deep down, Clinton is still a mystery to the author. It is Stephanopoulos who is all too human.

If Clinton is the world in Stephanopoulos's cosmology, are we to be concerned

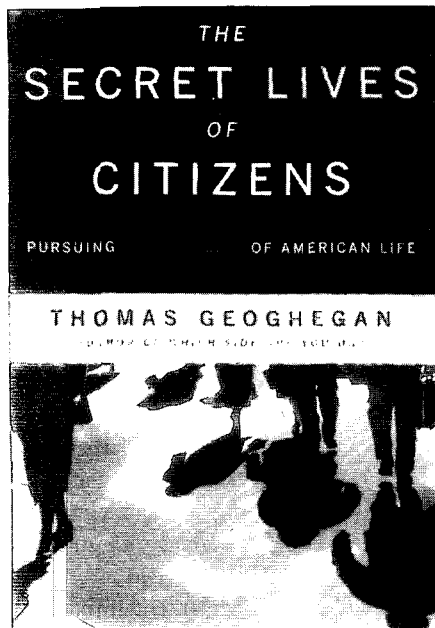


with the orbit of the moon? Is George up? Is he down? Is he in? Is he—don't even think it—out? If he goes back to Little Rock to run the campaign will he lose power? If he doesn't get the office off the Oval Office, will his job change be perceived as a demotion?

George got his first break when an acquaintance of his, an anti-nuclear nut, was shot after threatening to blow up the Washington Monument. George was invited to appear on "Nightline" to defend his friend. "It wasn't my fault Norman got shot," he writes, "but I couldn't escape the fact that his fate was my good fortune." Similar tensions play themselves out in every budget battle, military endeavor, bimbo eruption, and court intrigue described in this book.

Toward the end of *All Too Human*, Stephanopoulos becomes obsessed with the Darth Vader to his Luke Skywalker—the dreaded Dick Morris. To ensure that Clinton is the first Democratic President since Roosevelt to win re-election, Morris makes the President a Republican—betraying everything George stands for. Worse still, George isn't invited to the meetings! So George writes that he entered a pitched and complex battle with his new nemesis. Morris has written that the supposed duel between the two of them was non-existent—Morris' real enemy was Harold Ickes.

By the time Morris comes into the story, George has broken out of his close orbit of the President and seems to be spiraling out of control. He grabs onto Morris to anchor his trajectory and justifies it



by saying, once again, that he is embracing evil to do good. He starts to take anti-depression pills and goes to a therapist. He talks about himself in terms of the Dr. Jekyll vs. Mr. Hyde analogy to explain everything he does to stay close to the President and “do good.” But the good he wants to do is amorphous and seems to amount to little more than achieving presidential proximity.

Stephanopoulos’s choice of incidents from the Clinton presidency is highly selective and leaves out many of the more famous episodes. Every scandal of import is downplayed as a misunderstanding. Al Gore and Hillary Clinton are treated lightly enough to make sure no reporter in the campaigns of 2000 will begin his questions, “How do you respond to the allegation in George Stephanopoulos’s book that you...?”

Stephanopoulos told independent counsels and various congressional committees that he didn’t remember all sorts of things. He is far too smart to contradict any of that now. So instead he has written about the one thing he was sure to remember: his feelings. This book is full of cheap grace, self-doubt when it is helpful, and arrogant confidence in his own brilliance when he can get away with it. It reads like the world’s longest treatment for an “after-school special.” Boy wants to hang out with the cool kids. Hypocrisy and mistakes follow, but deep down we know he’s a good kid. And in the end he says goodbye to *all that*. He is his own man now.

It’s still an interesting book, but maybe you should just wait until it’s an in-flight movie.

Jonah Goldberg writes for National Review.

EVERYONE IN THE AGORA!

By Charles C. Euchner

The Secret Lives of Citizens
By Thomas Geoghegan
Pantheon Books, 241 pages, \$25

From the Christian Right to the marginalized Left, old activists are wondering how to make politics work again. In the aftermath of President Clinton’s impeachment trial, conservatives despair about their “loss” in the culture wars—and call for a retreat from the compromising world of politics. Leftist Thomas Geoghegan, meanwhile, despairs about the possibility of ever building New Deal-style coalitions to harness the energy of the federal government.

Geoghegan is a union lawyer, so much of his political activism has been in the courts. But he wants to be more than a man with a brief. When he was getting out of Jimmy Carter’s Washington, where he served as a bureaucrat in the Energy Department, Geoghegan decided to move to Chicago because he thought it still had the culture and institutions that support civic life. And he made a go of it—representing union members, working for Harold Washington’s campaign, even considering a run for the state legislature. But he found that the possibilities for political activism, even in Chicago, had hollowed out. The reasons are many. Manufacturing moved to the Sunbelt and then overseas. Whites fled to the suburbs. Crime scared the survivors indoors. Bad schools created a skills underclass. Suburbs were fragmented into hundreds of narrow jurisdictions. The feds cut back housing and social programs.

Meanwhile in Washington, minority factions blocked New Deal-style programs. To beat a Senate filibuster, Geoghegan complains, you need 60 votes—meaning that 41 Senators can stop any bill. “The 40 senators from the 20 smallest

states represent 10 percent of the population,” so “90 percent of the population base as represented in the Senate could vote yes, and the bill would still lose.”

Geoghegan wants to see a revival of the New Deal to reverse inequalities of wealth. He even wants to bring back the Humphrey-Hawkins Act, which “guarantees” full employment in government jobs. Geoghegan wants a strapping Madisonian republic, where the feds take charge over the states. He approvingly quotes Herbert Croly’s remark that when you let the states run things, only bad things can happen.

The problem with Geoghegan’s argument is that he doesn’t take care to sort out which policies are fundamentally national, state, and local. No one in American politics since Richard Nixon has seriously tried to allocate major areas of policy to the level of government that best fits the issue’s scale, resources, and politics. And except for a few symbolic victories on revenue sharing, Nixon lost his battle.

Geoghegan’s problem is that he thinks politics can’t be meaningful unless we all gather together in one place and debate things out. Everyone in the agora! Some of our most powerful political memories take place in such settings: The Kennedy-Nixon debates, King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, Reagan’s challenge to Gorbachev to take down the Berlin Wall.

But political thinkers as various as Thucydides, Cicero, Machiavelli, Rousseau, Madison, Tocqueville, Calhoun, Hayek, and Arendt teach us that political processes come in different sizes and shapes. The key to governing the polity is to have different arenas where people can act on common concerns and contribute to something bigger than themselves. Yes, we have to think about the nation-state. But we also need to be involved in parties, the Internet, city planning, corporate structures, nonprofits, associations, newspapers and radio, schools and universities, sports clubs, churches, and unions.

We have to sort out what issues should be deliberated in which of these arenas. We have to avoid getting sucked into the infinite regress of identity politics. We have to avoid amusing ourselves to death with trivial TV and silly entertainments. We have to make sure that serious contestants find a place in the debates. Then we might have a