

# A Thinking Man's President

**John Quincy Adams:  
A Public Life, A Private Life**

Paul C. Nagel

Knopf / 432 pages / \$30

REVIEWED BY  
**Florence King**

**O**ur sixth President has long been a favorite of quiz shows and Trivial Pursuit junkies: the only son to follow his father to the White House, the last President to be elected by the House of Representatives, the only candidate to win the Presidency while losing both the popular and the electoral vote, and the only President to serve as a member of Congress after leaving office.

All of these events could happen again, but it's doubtful if anyone will ever match John Quincy Adams's greatest "only." It happened after a boating accident on the Potomac where he took his morning swims. He always swam in his drawers and shirt but his aide stripped to the buff. They piled their clothes in the boat and set off, but midway across the river the boat sank, taking all the clothes with it. The pair then swam back to the bank, where Adams removed his remaining garments and gave them to the naked aide so he could return to the White House for help. After he left, the naked Adams sat down on a rock and waited—the only President to do an imitation of Rodin's "The Thinker" in public.

Another singularity has been unfairly attributed to John Quincy Adams: the only President to be called a "misanthrope." Described by most historians as an irritable, gloomy, solitary, rude, icy aristocrat, this complex man has found

the perceptive biographer he deserves in Paul C. Nagel, emeritus professor of history and contributing editor of *American Heritage*, whose splendidly researched and engagingly written *John Quincy Adams: A Public Life, A Private Life* gives us a President we didn't know we had.

JQA, as Nagel calls him, was born in 1767 and grew into a charming boy who found it easy to adore a father who was a hero of the Revolution. John Adams and his son shared a rare intellectual compatibility, reading Cicero together and parsing Latin sentences at breakfast. An amazingly gifted linguist from boyhood, JQA learned to read Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* in the original Greek, which the elder Adams considered "the most perfect of all human languages."

His relationship with his mother was something else. Abigail Adams, canonized by feminists who have spent three decades quoting her marching orders to her husband ("Remember the ladies") during the Constitutional Convention, was America's founding scold who "made no effort to hide her condescending attitude toward males."

Abigail merits her place in the American pantheon, says Nagel. "But while the American feminist movement does well to claim her as its archetype, history should be mindful that her strengths caused her downfall in one respect. As the life of John Quincy Adams discloses, Abigail Adams was a calamity as a mother."

**H**er specialty was long-distance nagging. In 1778 when John Adams was sent to Paris as a commissioner to promote the

American cause, he took 11-year-old JQA with him. The boy learned French in record time and soon was savoring the neo-classical dramas of Corneille and Racine at the Comédie Française. The two Adamse enjoyed "the sort of male rapport that comes when father and son must get on without a wife and mother," writes Nagel so of course Abigail had to spoil it with an endless stream of reproving letters about the dangers of a sophisticated life.

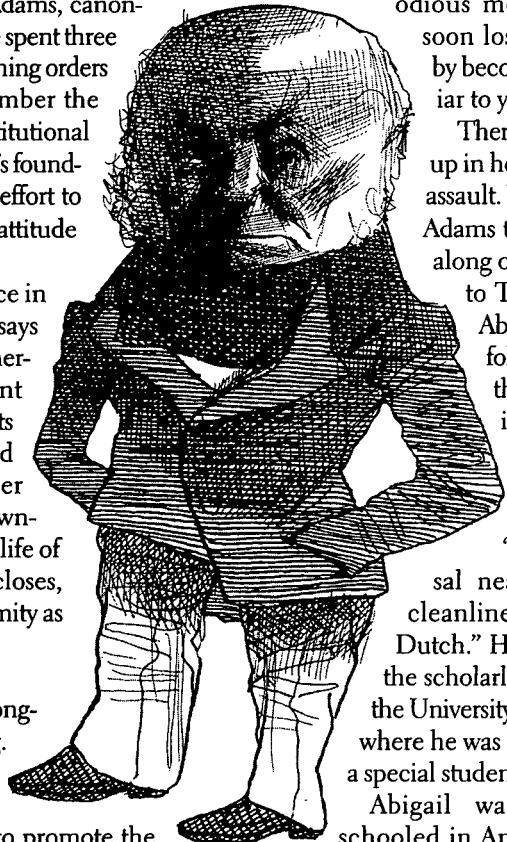
"For dear as you are to me," she wrote her son, "I had much rather you should have found your grave in the ocean you have crossed, or any untimely death crop you in your infant years, rather than see you an immoral profligate..." Vice—by which she meant Paris—was hideous and he must never forget it. "You must keep a strict guard upon yourself, or the odious monster will soon lose its terror by becoming familiar to you."

There was no let-up in her epistolary assault. When John Adams took his son along on a mission

to The Hague, Abigail's letters followed him, this time urging him to model his personal habits on

"the universal neatness and cleanliness of the Dutch." He preferred the scholarly models at the University of Leyden, where he was admitted as a special student at 13.

Abigail wanted him schooled in America and



FLORENCE KING's latest book is *The Florence King Reader* (St. Martin's). She writes "The Misanthrope's Corner" column for *National Review*.

aised under her watchful eye, but when John Adams was appointed Minister to France, she suddenly changed her mind. Worried now that her husband would be exposed to the seductive charms of the noble ladies of Versailles, she allowed the joy to stay in Paris with his father in the evident hope that having a son in tow would cramp John Adams's style.

Back in Paris, JQA concentrated on perfecting his French. In 1782 the boy of 15 accompanied Francis Dana on a diplomatic mission to Russia, serving as Dana's interpreter in Catherine the Great's French-speaking court. On the return trip they were stranded for five weeks in Stockholm while they waited for a sail wind. Nagel deduces that something significant happened during this delay that caused an uncharacteristic gap in the voluminous diary (340 reels of microfilm) that JQA kept up religiously from childhood until his death at 81. When the entries resume after the Stockholm interlude they reveal an indefinable but intriguing aspect of greater maturity. JQA never spoke of these five weeks, but once, many years later, he called Sweden "the land of lovely dames."

When Abigail joined her husband and son in Paris in 1784, she was taken aback by the discovery that 17-year-old JQA had become a European cosmopolite. Amid much carping about the perils of indolence and the "warm blood that riots in young men's veins," she packed him back to Quincy to live with his aunt and attend Harvard.

It was nothing less than culture shock. The budding young man of the world who had mingled easily with polished statesmen and bons vivants, the joyful scholar who had translated La Fontaine and longed to be "one who can invent, who can create," the lover of great cities who recoiled from the Jeffersonian doctrine of the good earth, was crammed suddenly into the narrow end of a New England funnel where pleasure and stimulation consisted of rustic dances, conversations about the weather, Aunt Elizabeth, and tutoring for Harvard with a country parson.

He sank into what today would be called a clinical depression that worsened when he began his study of law. Blessed—and cursed—with a mind that could not endure tedium, he loathed every aspect of

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the legal life and lost his first case. His only respite was writing political essays for a Boston newspaper. As it happened, it was his salvation. The essays were brought to the attention of President George Washington (probably by Vice President John Adams), who was so impressed by their astuteness that he appointed JQA Minister to the Netherlands in 1794.

The diplomatic post meant he could give up the law, but it also presaged a life of public service, and he wanted a lit-

erary career. Further complications arose when he stopped off in London and met Louisa Johnson. She was the daughter of the American consul, Joshua Johnson, a Maryland tobacco trader who was said to be very rich and to own vast acreage in Georgia. JQA set off for The Hague with fleeting visions of retiring to a Southern plantation to spend the rest of his life writing.

He was able to put Louisa out of his mind once he discovered that diplomacy left ample time for his literary pursuits. Savoring his bachelor freedom, he read and wrote and translated Tacitus, but Fate put Louisa in his path again when he was ordered to London to exchange formal ratifications of Jay's Treaty. The mission dragged on for months, leaving JQA ample time to fall in love.

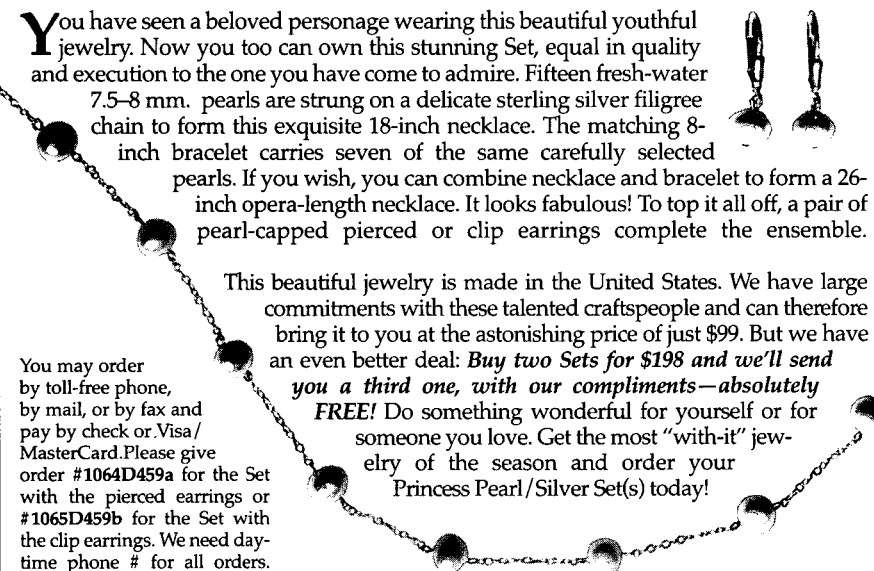
Abigail got wind of it and wrote carping letters, calling Louisa a "half-blood" (her mother was English) and warning him that a wife raised in Europe would take lovers. JQA replied testily that if he waited until she approved of a girl "I

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would certainly be doomed to celibacy.” Meanwhile, Joshua Johnson confessed that he was bankrupt. JQA’s vision of himself as a planter-*littérateur* turned into a vision of a lawyer supporting his in-laws.

Fortunately, he had pull. His perceptive reports on Jay’s Treaty had impressed outgoing President Washington and convinced the new President John Adams to name him Minister to Prussia. Better yet, Adams *père* appointed the ruined Joshua Johnson postmaster of the District of Columbia. Ambivalent about the nepotism but vastly relieved, JQA left for Berlin with his new bride.

**A**s his responsibilities increased, the duty of being his father’s son joined forces with a subconscious mind haunted by his mother’s criticism, turning him into an overanxious workhorse. It was as if he had to read every book, learn every language, to atone for the pleasurable round of balls and receptions that comprised the diplomatic life. Rapidly mastering German, he translated the long narrative poem *Oberon*. (Published in America in 1940, it was deemed “of unusual scholarly and literary merit, remarkable for its fidelity to the original and its genuine artistry.”)

Industry became his god and his goad, thoroughness his ruling passion, absorption its own reward. The voluminous letters he wrote his brother while in Germany were later published as a book, *Letters on Silesia*. JQA was, said Tom Adams, “the most exhaustless writer I ever knew.”

When John Adams lost his re-election bid in 1800 he recalled his son himself rather than let the victorious Jefferson do it. A devastated JQA returned to Massachusetts, wondering if the literary career he wanted would ever be his. Willing to do anything to avoid practicing law, he accepted the Federalist nomination for the U.S. Senate and was elected by the state legislature in 1802.

His Senate career is a clinical study of psychological conflict. His ulterior motive for taking the job was the Senate’s light schedule—noon to three—which would give him time for reading and writing. To prepare for the job, however, he felt it his duty to master American history, but soon tiring of it, he

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turned to translating his beloved Plautus and Juvenal, which made him feel guilty for shirking his duty.

The strange votes he cast in the Senate have been attributed to simple contrariness, but a closer look reveals a compulsive need to combat his mother’s contempt for Europe and her fear of cosmopolitan influences. To understand what drove him we must examine the conditions of life in Washington at this time. It was a mudhole; sans theater, sans opera, sans even a dignified home for the Supreme Court, which sat in Long’s Tavern on Capitol Hill. Homesick for the great capitals of Europe, JQA unconsciously tried to bring the mountain to Mohammed by making America a world power.

His pro-expansionist vote on the Louisiana Purchase stunned New England Federalists intent on clinging to their regional dominance. He defied them again when he voted to deny a seat to a senator who had supported Aaron Burr’s attempt to take lower Louisiana out of the Union; many New Englanders had supported Burr’s scheme as a way to reduce Southern and western influence.

The showdown came when JQA announced his support for the Embargo Act. Designed to stop British and French incursions on American shipping, it threatened to close down New England ports and leave the seagoing region to starve. Incensed, the Massachusetts legislature adopted a resolution ordering him to vote to repeal the embargo, but he refused and resigned his seat.

His voting record screams hatred of provincialism, but he loftily insisted that he simply followed his conscience and put country over region and party. Whether

he hoped that a grateful James Madison would reward him with a foreign posting is, writes Nagel, impossible to say. However, that’s exactly what happened: He was named Minister to Russia in 1809. His mother refused to bid him farewell, saying, “A man of his worth ought not be permitted to leave the country.”

He was an unqualified success in St. Petersburg. The diplomatic set considered him a brilliant conversationalist. President Madison found his reports on Napoleon invaluable, and he hit it off famously with Tsar Alexander I, who played piggyback with the three Adams sons. It was out of personal friendship that Alexander offered to mediate peace between the U.S. and England after the War of 1812, with JQA acting as chief negotiator of the Treaty of Ghent.

Now came the pinnacle of diplomacy: Minister to the Court of St. James’s. Never had he been so happy and relaxed as he was in London, but it did not last. When James Monroe named him Secretary of State in 1817, Louisa girded herself for a return of the grim intensity and melancholia that invariably emerged in the politician in his native land.

**B**ack in Mudtown, JQA fought with Speaker Henry Clay, who wanted to direct foreign policy, and became obsessed with the meter. *The Report of the Secretary of State Upon Weights and Measures* is “the finest scholarly evaluation of the subject ever written,” says Nagel, but it was supposed to be a pamphlet; JQA in overdrive produced a tome gravid with philosophical digressions, including a prediction that a universal metric system would bring world peace.

Abigail Adams died in 1818 but he did not attend her funeral. Never a neat man, he now became notorious for his unkempt appearance. It was, says Nagel, “an easy and lifelong form of rebellion against his otherwise compulsive reverence for duty.” It was also a slap at Abigail’s instructions to acquire the scrubbed Dutch look.

He was a superb Secretary of State, getting the Spanish out of Florida, the Russians out of the Pacific Northwest, settling the Canadian border dispute, and ghost-writing what became known as the Monroe Doctrine, but a cloud hung over his



entire eight-year tenure: the election of 1824. Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe had all been Secretary of State before becoming President, so JQA was the man to beat.

Andrew Jackson was the man who beat him, winning 152,901 popular votes and 99 electoral votes to JQA's 114,023 and 84. The four-way race also included William H. Crawford, who came in third with 46,979 and 41; and Henry Clay with 47,217 and 37. Since no one had a majority in the Electoral College, the House of Representatives chose the President from among the top three candidates, with each state delegation casting one vote. The result was Adams 13, Jackson 7, and Crawford 4.

His administration was a debacle, beginning with his first State of the Union address. His support for federal internal improvements—roads, canals, and bridges—was already well-known, but now he proclaimed government responsible for culture, science, and the promotion of knowledge, and called for a national university and a national observatory. This, after all, was how the great cities of Europe became the great cities of Europe, but several American senators introduced a resolution to indict him for usurpation of powers.

All his projects were blocked and he accomplished nothing, but duty demanded that he run for re-election in 1828. Not surprisingly, Andrew Jackson won by a landslide.

He returned to Massachusetts in defeat but his most successful public service was still to come, though it began as a trick. Fearing that his sense of duty would make him seek the presidency yet again, a pro-Henry Clay contingent in Boston proposed him for Congress to keep him out of Clay's way. Interpreting the ploy as "vindication," he ran for the seat in 1830 and won.

He spent the last eighteen years of his life in Congress, winning re-election eight times and furnishing the House with some of its most memorable moments. Drawing a bead on slavery, he called states' rights a "hallucination" and fought the "gag rule" devised by Southern members to set aside anti-slavery petitions. Declaring that it violated the constitutional guarantee of a citizen's right to petition the government, he brought stacks of petitions on various and sundry subjects to the

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## Judea/Samaria (the "West Bank") Can Israel survive without it?

There is incessant agitation for Israel to turn over most or perhaps even all of Judea/Samaria (the "West Bank") to the PLO. Such a move would inevitably lead to the creation of a Palestinian State—perhaps even with Jerusalem as its capital. Can Israel survive this dismemberment? Is it in the best interests of the United States?

### What are the facts?

**The Root of the conflict.** The conflict between Israel and the Arabs is not about borders and not about the Palestinians. It is about Israel's very existence. The PLO still adheres to its infamous "phased plan." It calls for first creating a Palestinian state on any territory vacated by Israel and then using that state to foment a final allied Arab assault against the truncated Jewish state.

**The Importance of territory.** Many believe that in this age of missiles, territory is of little importance. But this is not the case. The Arab states have acquired over \$50

billion of the most advanced armaments since the end of the Gulf War. And those are not just "conventional" weapons—enormous quantities of tanks,

aircraft and much more. The Arab state possess large arsenals of chemical and biological weapons, and all of them work feverishly on the development of their nuclear potential. All of those weapons have only one single target and one single purpose: the destruction of the state of Israel. And that goal is not being cancelled for any agreements between Israel and the Palestinians.

For both "conventional" war and for war of mass destruction, territory and topography are critical for self-defense and deterrence. The mountainous territory of Judea/Samaria (the "West Bank") is an indispensable line of defense. It totally controls access to Israel's

heartland from the east. Israel needs this high ground for defense and to be able to peer deeply into enemy territory. The high ground allows Israel to detect missiles while they are still in the launch stage and to destroy them.

**Would the "West Bank" be demilitarized?** Even those who want Israel to retreat to her pre-1967 borders are agreed that the evacuated areas must be demilitarized. But that would be useless. Because the Palestinians will have thousands of trained soldiers, camouflaged as their police force. In case of war against Israel, these troops could be helicoptered in minutes to their positions, with armored

forces reaching them within the same night. In any case, it is highly doubtful that the surrounding hostile Arab nations would allow such a military vacuum

"Without Judea/Samaria (the 'West Bank') Israel would be totally indefensible; therefore, neither the purposes of Israel nor those of the United States are served by Israel's relinquishing control of the 'West Bank'."

to exist. And finally, there is the matter of terrorism. There are over fifteen Palestinian terror organizations that neither Yassir Arafat nor any other Palestinian authority can control. There would be a constant rain of Katyusha rockets launched into the Tel Aviv area and into the entire coastal plain, which contains 80% of Israel's population and of its industrial and military potential. Ben Gurion airport, every incoming and outgoing flight, would be subject to mortar fire or shoulder-held Stinger attack. Does anybody doubt that the Arabs would not exploit that irresistible opportunity?

Without the "West Bank" Israel would be totally indefensible. That is the professional opinion of over 100 U.S. generals and admirals. Israel's strong defensive posture makes it most inadvisable for Israel's enemies to attack her. But once this defensive strength is removed, a coordinated war against Israel can only be a matter of time. The example and fate of Czechoslovakia, which preparatory to the Second World War was dismantled and shorn of its defensive capacity, insistently come to mind. What does all this mean to the United States? In a part of the world in which our country has the most far-reaching geopolitical stakes, Israel is the guarantor of American interests in the area. With Israel in a position of weakness, the role of the United States in the area would collapse and radical states such as Syria, Iraq and Iran would dominate. That is why, despite the heady prospect of "peace in our time," neither the purposes of Israel nor those of the United States would be served by Israel's relinquishing control over the "West Bank."

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chamber and read them out one after another—including one to gag *him*.

Was the Yankee congressman who once dreamed of being a literary gentleman of leisure on a Georgia plantation really so passionately opposed to slavery, or was the cultivated *dévo*té of European cities subconsciously doing battle with the rural parochialism that the South represented?

We'll never know, but at least he was consistent. He called the annexation of Texas as a slave state "apoplexy of the Constitution," said the Mexican War was nothing but an excuse to spread bondage, and literally used his last breath to vote against

commending its veterans. Half-rising from his seat, he whispered a hoarse "No," then collapsed of a stroke. They carried him to a couch in the Speaker's chamber where he died two days later on February 23, 1848.

Several reviewers of *John Quincy Adams: A Public Life, A Private Life* have faulted the author for emphasizing the private over the public, but that is exactly what Adams needed someone to do for him. By showing us the puritan who yearned to be a boulevardier and the lawyer who ached to be a writer, Paul C. Nagel succeeds in making John Quincy Adams, of all people, sympathetic and even lovable. ❁

## Ambrose Evans-Pritchard's Eye on America

### The Secret Life of Bill Clinton: The Unreported Stories

Ambrose Evans-Pritchard  
Regnery / 460 pages / \$24.95

REVIEWED BY  
Robert D. Novak

**B**ritish journalist Ambrose Evans-Pritchard is a Fleet Street wordsmith who can make the unseen stories of Washington read like Ian Fleming. But *The Secret Life of Bill Clinton* (a largely unscriptive and probably unfortunate title) is a deeply disturbing book for Americans.

The reader is left with two choices. Choice No. 1: Evans-Pritchard is a charlatan, who in quest of commercial gain has cobbled together rumors and lies that destroy reputations; or, at best, he is a fool. Choice No. 2: This country is in deeper trouble than anyone in mainstream politics or journalism dare imagine. "To put it with brutal honesty," Evans-Pritchard writes, "you can sniff the pungent odors of decay in the American body politic." There is no middle ground: the reality is one or the other.

Robert D. Novak is a nationally syndicated columnist and co-host of CNN's "Evans & Novak."

That's what makes this book so troubling for me. I know what kind of journalist Evans-Pritchard is. Wherever he is and whatever he is doing, he is a dogged, tireless, shoe-leather reporter. In Nicaragua, when the journalistic pack in Managua assumed a Sandinista victory in 1990, Evans-Pritchard roamed the rural areas and concluded, quite accurately, that the people would turn out the Ortegas. Assigned by the *Sunday Telegraph* of London to Washington, he dug into stories that the vast capital press corps would not touch. The allegations in those "untold stories" comprise part of this extraordinary book:

- The Oklahoma City bombing, America's worst terrorist tragedy, was not limited to Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols. At least two other men were involved in the plot, but the government did not investigate their activities because they were undercover informers in a neo-Nazi paramilitary organization. A warning by a covert agent of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) of the impending disaster was disregarded, and instead the agent was prosecuted by the government, unsuccessfully. Federal authorities have resisted efforts to find the truth.

- Authorities rearranged the "crime scene" at Fort Marcy Park to move White House aide Vincent Foster's body and place a gun in his hand. Evidence was

hidden and destroyed, and testimony by witnesses was altered by the FBI to fit the suicide theory. Witnesses, in fact, were harassed. Foster's "suicide" note appears to be a planted forgery. The career Justice Department prosecutor assigned to Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr found himself blocked as he probed for the truth, and he returned to his former duties with his mouth shut tight.

- The murder of Jerry Parks, who had performed security functions for Gov. Clinton in Little Rock, is linked to Foster's death. "I'm a dead man," Parks ("pale with shock") is quoted as saying when he heard of the alleged suicide. "I believe that Bill Clinton had my father killed to protect his political career," says Parks's son. According to his widow, Parks "had carried out sensitive assignments for the Clinton circle for almost a decade"—on instructions from Foster.

- As governor, Clinton was deep into the cocaine culture—both as a user and as an associate of drug peddlers. A former bartender, now in prison, says: "I thought it was the coolest thing in the world that we had a governor who got high." Billionaire food executive Don Tyson is known by law enforcement authorities to be intimately involved with illegal narcotics but is not prosecuted. Clinton intimate Dan Lasater got off with a slap on the wrist for his drug trafficking and has been free from further investigation.

- As governor Clinton was also involved in the clandestine operation of Mena Airport in Arkansas that illegally ran arms to the contras and drugs back from Central America. Arkansas State Trooper and erstwhile Clinton buddy L.D. Brown was encouraged by Clinton to work for the CIA and was sent to Puerto Vallarta to carry out an assassination.

This abbreviated list hardly does justice to Evans-Pritchard's Gothic world. *The Secret Life of Bill Clinton* is packed with accusations of lies, government corruption, murder threatened and murder accomplished, subornation and intimidation of witnesses, and the defeat of ordinary, honest citizens. Clinton is not directly concerned with much of this, and Evans-Pritchard's most startling allegation—about the Oklahoma City coverup—is really not linked to the president at all. What links these "unreported stories" is not an ethi-