

Usually First, Not Always Classy

The best of Clinton, the worst of Clinton: A new biography carefully traces both back to their roots

BY JONATHAN ALTER

First in His Class: A Biography of Bill Clinton
David Maraniss, *Simon and Schuster*, \$25

This is a first-rate political biography by *The Washington Post* reporter who won a well-deserved Pulitzer two years ago for his reporting on Bill Clinton's presidential campaign. While the book contains no shocking revelations, it is full of small truths about Clinton's background and character. The book may not change any minds about Clinton, but it should contribute to a more complex understanding of a complex man. "The contradictions co-exist in Clinton," Maraniss writes. "Considerate and calculating, easy-going and ambitious, mediator and predator."

Clinton's paradoxes stem from those of his life. Ultimately, he is the product of several distinct and contradictory worlds. There is the Clinton from Hope, Arkansas: religious and unceasingly loyal to his family; the Hot Springs Clinton: often vulgar, and given to infidelity; and the Yale Clinton: polished and feverishly ambitious, yet genuine.

What has remained consistent throughout his life, though, has been Clinton's enormous gift for politics. Indeed, what is most puzzling about Clinton is why such a naturally talented politician should have so many problems managing the political dimensions of the presidency. Maraniss's book is not particularly analytical

and it ends on the day Clinton announces his candidacy for president in 1991, so there are no direct answers. There are, however, little hints throughout.

Clinton's God-given political skills are clear almost from infancy. The key is in his ability to listen to other people, a surprisingly rare quality in politicians. Most politicians know that they must pretend to listen but are usually so interested in themselves that the pretense eventually shows through. Clinton is tremendously, even obsessively, interested in his own advancement, but his curiosity about other people's lives is evident throughout the book. Almost every one of Clinton's friends comments about it in some form. "Clinton was the master of the soft sell," Maraniss writes. "He remembered the smallest details of people's lives, and his deftness at personalizing the [thank-you] notes tended to overcome whatever unseemliness might otherwise have tainted a blatantly political contact."

At every school, he was the one white guy who was willing to sit occasionally at the black table. True, this was often an attempt to get votes in elections. When he was teaching at the University of Arkansas Law School and preparing for his race for Congress in 1974, it was said that he was an easy grader (especially for blacks struggling not to flunk out) because he didn't have a vote to spare in his race for

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Congress. But he befriended blacks and everyone else who crossed his path even when he wasn't running for anything (at Yale, for instance). The impulse was big-hearted and born of a real interest in how other people live.

An example of the overlapping Clintons: After riots devastated large sections of Washington, D.C., in the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968, Clinton's old Hot Springs girlfriend and next-door neighbor Carolyn Staley visited him at Georgetown. Clinton was in the process of breaking up with Staley—one of several girlfriends he had at the time—and he characteristically didn't have the "honesty," as Staley put it, to break up with her directly. But at the same time Clinton signed up with a relief agency to deliver supplies to dangerous sections of the city and took Staley on a mission the two of them would never forget.

This interest and energy is the essence of what makes Clinton likeable to most people he meets and loathsome to a minority who feel threatened by his personable nature. Throughout Clinton's life, a certain kind of person has simply detested him. There's even a scene where a dog can't stand to be near him. But no one can deny Clinton's thirst for life experience—his own, and that of others. It is his most appetizing appetite.

Bad Attitude

At first, this trait makes Clinton indiscriminate in his assessment of other people. At Georgetown, after winning a couple of elections, he loses the big one for student government president because his 19-point plan is too moderate and out of touch with the growing sense of ironic rebellion among students. (Sort of like 1994.) But the deeper reason is that Clinton lacked attitude. As one friend put it, "Bill never wanted to say, 'That guy [his opponent] is an asshole!' He would say, 'That's an interesting guy,' or whatever. We used to kid him about that—'Come on, Bill,' we'd say, 'Form the mouth, ass . . . hole'—but his basic instinct was to find, even with the most obvious asshole, something good. We wanted him to get angry in that campaign and he would not do it."

By the time he got to Yale Law School—after his Rhodes Scholarship—Clinton had acquired a savvy that grew out of intense study of older politicians. In a letter to Cliff Jackson—a friend at Oxford who 25 years later leaked the news about Clinton's draft status to the press (and who is himself revealed in the book to have been a draft dodger)—Clinton provides advice on how to win a White House Fellowship:

About the White House Fellowships: the best story I know on them is that virtually the only non-conservative who ever got one was a quasi-radical woman who wound up in the White House sleeping with LBJ, who made her wear a peace symbol around her waist whenever they made love. You may go far, Cliff; I doubt you will ever go that far!

Clinton is apparently picking up unsubstantiated scuttlebutt about Doris Kearns, who 25 years later is a frequent visitor to the White House. Of course, this is exactly the kind of sex rumor that is now directed at Clinton. The letter to Jackson continues:

There is no such thing as a non-partisan, objective selection process. Discretion and diplomacy aren't demanded so much by propriety as by the necessity not to get caught. I don't mind writing to Fulbright for you. . . . Wouldn't mind dropping David Pryor a line, either.

Here we see a touch of the cynicism Clinton would later decry, not to mention the kind of smug networking that drove Jackson and others crazy. By the time he was getting set to run for president and yakking on the phone to Gennifer Flowers (who was taping the calls) about his arch-rival in Arkansas politics, Sheffield Nelson, (who had claimed publicly that he had nothing to do with the infidelity allegations then being raised), Clinton was more than capable of getting the A-word to pass his lips:

"I stuck it up their ass. Nelson called afterwards, you know. I know he lied. I just wanted to see his asshole pucker."

This was the Hot Springs Clinton, the one with vulgarity and philandering in his blood. After all, his father had been married as many as five times in his short life; his mother and stepfather constantly argued about fidelity. The Hope Clinton was secure enough in his

own identity to tell his friends at Oxford that his mother was marrying a guy who ran a beauty parlor. (Though he didn't advertise that the man was an ex-con.) Clinton could have said his new stepfather was in business or used a hundred other euphemisms; instead, he chose family pride, and honorably so. The Yale Clinton skipped most of one semester campaigning for Joe Duffy in Connecticut and most of another running George McGovern's campaign in Texas, knowing all the while that the world of high status was something of a joke—a club where once you got in, you could slide through. (Yale was pass-fail.) Maraniss doesn't say it, but this idea of "getting over" at Yale and beyond was different in class but not in kind from the gambling ethic of Hot Springs.

Running Scared

The one time when the contradictions of his life came home clearly to Clinton was during the time he escaped the draft. Even though he eventually did expose himself briefly to the lottery—and probably would have gone into the service had he received a low number—this was not his finest hour, and he knew it. "I am running away from something for the first time in my life," he wrote his Rhodes friend Rick Stearns. The idiocy of the Bush campaign charges is clear. (Michael Boskin, Bush's chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers, was a much bigger anti-war activist in Britain than Clinton at the time.) But the politics of the draft issue overshadow the deep personal wound left in Clinton—a wound he has obviously never come to terms with.

The irony is that the wounded Clinton of the famous letter to Col. Holmes is more appealing and thoughtful than the man he later became. I once asked Clinton about this in an interview and he dodged the question. But he had to know it was true. The bargain he struck was that he would get ahead—partly for ambition's sake, partly to accomplish certain things—but would do so at least partly at the expense of the young man he once was. The Clinton of the years before he entered Arkansas politics comes across far better in Maraniss's account than Clinton as governor, Clinton's astounding

policy-wonk intelligence notwithstanding. (Maraniss points out that for all his love of Arkansas, Clinton was scheming to get back to Washington as a congressman only six months after his return home in 1974.)

Hillary's bargain was a little different. She had always been more practical and less ideological than advertised. A paper she wrote in college on Saul Alinsky disparaged community organizers who, she said later, didn't understand that "first, you have to win." She shocked British feminists who met her in the late seventies by explaining her strong religious faith. (Bill's faith seems genuine, too.) But this faith shaded over into righteousness. A minister once had to lecture her that God does not choose sides. Once, an adviser had to tell her it would look bad to have a swimming pool built at the governor's mansion that she truly believed she deserved. Hillary, one aide said, "was really mad. Very angry. She said, 'Why can't we lead the lives of normal people?'"

Most important, the belief in herself, her husband and their cause lent a sense of destiny to the way she viewed her union with Clinton. "I wonder how history is going to note our marriage," she told Carolyn Staley. When Hillary and Clinton discussed divorce—he had been cheating on her since before they were married—she told Betsey Wright that she had invested too much in Bill Clinton and was determined to see it through.

The common reaction to this statement is, "How cynical and sad." I disagree. As the Clintons themselves ask, why do they receive no credit for having held their marriage together, which—despite all the screaming matches—is clearly in the interest of their daughter? Whatever reason exists for staying together, Clinton has paid for the decision politically. Had they simply divorced, like many of today's political couples, Clinton's womanizing would never have been an issue. And however much people pretend not to care, womanizing is at the heart of character issues that threaten his presidency. Had Clinton amassed the same record—strong economy, lots of successful legislation—without the character baggage, he would not be seen as a great president, but at least as a decent one. To understand why the shorthand on this man is so insufficient, this book is essential. □

Burning Bush

A new book by the former Israeli foreign minister claims that Bush betrayed Israel. The real betrayal was right under his nose

BY GLENN FRANKEL

Broken Covenant

Moshe Arens, *Simon and Schuster, \$25*

The years between 1988 and 1992 marked a critical turning point in Israel's history. The country embarked on the hazardous transition from a small, ideologically oriented garrison-state to a more open, entrepreneurial, modern nation. It underwent the pain of suppressing and, ultimately, coming to terms with the Palestinian uprising; it braved the Gulf War; and it coped with the arrival of more than a half million Jews from the collapsing Soviet Union. Israel also endured what many then considered to be its greatest external threat: the Bush administration.

In his memoirs of this period, former Israeli Foreign Minister Moshe Arens recalls his early recognition that relations between Jerusalem and Washington had cooled. He warns his aides, "They are going to play hardball with us, and if they feel that they have the political backing for it, they will try to cut our balls off without mercy."

It's not a bad summary of what follows. The Bush administration was Israel's worst foreign policy nightmare come true—an unsentimental Republican administration with neither political nor nostalgic ties to the Jewish state. Even Jimmy Carter was better: He may have been a dewy-eyed dove in Israeli eyes, but he was a Democrat and ultimately had to bow before the kind of pressures big-time Democratic supporters of Israel could apply. George Bush had no such constituency. With few prominent Jews in the Republican camp, Bush had a free hand in his dealings with Israel.

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Rather than give a broad overview of this dynamic period, Arens has chosen to focus on the collapsing relationship between the Shamir government and the Bush administration. This gives Arens an opportunity to make a provocative point: The Bush administration arrogantly sought to "interfere" with Israel's internal affairs and dictate its foreign policy, ultimately causing the fall of Shamir and the Israeli right, and creating a peace process that Arens views as highly dangerous to Israel's fate. "Never before in its history had a government of the United States dealt in this manner with a sister democracy," he contends.

In so claiming, Arens says both too much and too little. Too much in that he mistakenly ascribes to a misconceived American intervention virtually all of Israel's difficulties during this crucial period; too little in that in doing so, he ignores many other critical factors. In the end Arens misses the most important point of all—that it was the vast political, social, and economic changes inside Israel itself, aided and abetted by the end of the Cold War, that ultimately caused the Likud's downfall and inexorably led Israel to its fateful deal with the Palestinians.

Even though he misses the main point, Arens offers us something useful: a behind-the-scenes look at how American officials throw their weight around when dealing with a recalcitrant ally. He recounts the diplomatic maneuvers of one of the great masters of the Washington game, the relentlessly ruthless James A. Baker III, who gave a reluctant, hapless, and often helpless Arens the full-body treatment of smash-mouth