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A Twisted Tale–Bill Clinton’s Autobiography

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As Mark Perry of the Washington Post noted, “The history of presidential memoir writing is, in sum, a history of failure. For the most part, presidential memoirs offer little in the way of insight into our understanding of the men who have held the nation’s highest office. They’re mostly written to celebrate a president’s triumphs while excusing his failures.”

Bill Clinton’s book, entitled *My Life*, is almost certain to be a publishing success. Alfred A. Knopf, Clinton’s publisher, has released 1.5 million copies of the book to the nation’s bookstores. With unprecedented media attention—including a full hour with Dan Rather on 60 Minutes—and given the nation’s tabloid-like interest in Clinton’s life, the book is expected to break the record for sales of presidential memoirs.

Why is this so? Christopher Caldwell of the Financial Times suggests that “the American public is reverting to its fascination, like an addict spiraling back into his vice.” In other words, the American people have a love/hate relationship with Bill Clinton, but seem altogether incapable of ignoring him. Clinton’s liberal supporters and conservative detractors find a common interest in explaining the man from Arkansas who left so many controversies behind as he left the nation’s highest office.

Though Dan Rather gushed over the book and its author, other reviewers have been less impressed. In *The New York Times*, chief reviewer Michiko Kakutani described the book as “sloppy, self-indulgent and often eye-crossingly dull.” She went on to characterize the book’s tone as “the sound of one man prattling away, not for the reader, but for himself and some distant recording angel of history.” Kakutani presents the book as “a mirror of Mr. Clinton’s presidency,” characterized by a lack of discipline, squandered opportunities, and “high expectations” that were “undermined by self-indulgence and scattered concentration.”

The first thing most people will note about the book is its size. According to the publisher, Clinton actually intended to write more than one volume of his story. Nevertheless, editors convinced the former president to restrain himself. Readers are likely to wonder where the restraint is to be found, since much of the book reads like a diary of Clinton’s activities and thoughts, right down to the smallest and most arcane details.

Of course, most readers will quickly look for the section of the book dealing with the Monica Lewinsky scandal and associated controversies. The first reference to Monica Lewinsky comes on page 773 when Clinton recounts: “During the government shutdown in late 1995, when very few people were allowed to come to work in the White House and those who were there were working late, I’d had an inappropriate encounter with Monica Lewinsky and would do so again on other occasions between November and April, when she left the White House for the Pentagon.”

As a major article in Tuesday’s edition of the Washington Post notes, this sentence is in direct conflict with Clinton’s

grand jury testimony of August 1998. In that sworn testimony, the former president said that his “inappropriate” sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky began in “early 1996.” As the Post notes, “Without explanation, in his memoir, Clinton departs from his grand jury testimony and corroborates [Monica Lewinsky’s] version.”

Those looking for contrition and moral change in Bill Clinton will be disappointed. The sections of the book dealing with the Lewinsky scandal read much like Clinton’s sworn testimony and the public defense he offered during the scandal itself. “What I had done with Monica Lewinsky was immoral and foolish,” Clinton acknowledges. He goes on to explain that he wanted to protect his family and himself “from my selfish stupidity” and thus relied upon a “contorted definition” of the phrase “sexual relations” to avoid acknowledging the affair.

The president who will go down in history for debating under oath the meaning of the word “is,” will now be remembered for blaming the controversy on Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr, rather than on himself. Clinton blames what his wife, Hillary Rodham Clinton, once described as “a vast right-wing conspiracy” for the scandal that led to his impeachment and nearly drove him from office.

Referring to his testimony before government lawyers, Clinton explains: “I did acknowledge that I had misled everyone who asked about the story after it broke. And I said over and over again that I never asked anyone to lie.” Clinton portrays Ken Starr and his associates as a crazed cadre of right-wing fanatics out to purge the nation of a president and his progressive agenda.

Thus, throughout the book, Clinton portrays himself as a knight on a crusade against right-wing forces of evil and regression. He points to his determined fight to remain in office as a matter of personal pride, claiming to have defended the constitutional order by so doing.

In an absolutely amazing passage, Clinton describes his version of the struggle: “Although I would always regret what I had done wrong, I will go to my grave being proud of what I had fought for in the impeachment battle, my last great showdown with the forces I had opposed all of my life—those who had defended the old order of racial discrimination and segregation in the South and played on the insecurities and fears of the white working class in which I grew up; who had opposed the women’s movement, the environmental movement, the gay-rights movement, and other efforts to expand our national community as assaults on the natural order; who believed government should be run for the benefit of powerful entrenched interests and favored tax cuts for the wealthy over health care and better education for children.” Just in case we missed the point, Clinton adds, “Ever since I was a boy I had been on the other side.”

This brazen effort to present himself as a brave defender of the Constitution is made all the more pathetic by his effort to portray critics of his character as defenders of segregation, racial discrimination, and other odious practices. Indeed, he expects the reader to believe that his fight to remain in office during the scandal was all about his commitment to liberal social causes. As he tells the story, those who called for his removal from office were really trying to block his brave crusade for equal rights. Sex, he explains, was but a pretext.

In numerous interviews, the former president has insisted that his book contains no excuses for his behavior in office. In reality, the book is one long excuse interrupted by occasional anecdotes and moments of self-pity. He begins the story with his rise from humble roots in Arkansas and then relates his version of the events of his political life, both great and small.

The reader will glean interesting information and insight about Clinton’s childhood, adolescence, and early political career. Lacking, however, is any deep reflection on the meaning of his life, the impact of his political philosophy, and the central issue of character in political leadership.

Throughout the book, Clinton explains that he has led “parallel lives” ever since he was a youth, forced to find a way to cope with economic deprivation and an abusive stepfather. In later chapters, he explains that this pattern of living “parallel lives” returned as he faced controversy and investigation during his presidency.

Joe Klein, author of *The Natural: The Misunderstood Presidency of Bill Clinton*, is perhaps the keenest observer of Clinton and his presidency. Klein acknowledges that the public’s conception of Bill Clinton is often reduced to “a surplus of libido and a deficit of integrity.” Klein—no conservative—presents an insightful review of Clinton’s character and governing philosophy, judging Clinton’s presidency to be a legacy of missed opportunity and a demonstration of the baby

boom generation come of age. Clinton's insistence that his sexual peccadilloes were of only private concern was, Klein explains, largely symptomatic of his generation. As Klein concludes, "In the end, Clinton's symbolic identification with the pathologies of his era may be destined to overwhelm the real accomplishments of his time in office."

Charles W. Dunn, Dean of the School of Arts and Letters and Professor of Political Science at Grove City College, offers a more pointed analysis. In *The Scarlet Thread of Scandal: Morality and the American Presidency*, Dunn presents a picture of Bill Clinton as pathologically unfit for the nation's highest office. "Though Clinton acts without moral consideration, his intentions are not all bad. In fact, this is the scariest thing of all. He simply lacks the moral education that was once fundamental to American life." Referring to the baby boom generation and the cultural revolution that has transformed America since the 1960s, Dunn notes: "His character is incomplete without an ethical code. He lacks the confidence, discipline, and compassion necessary to lead the nation out of its moral despair. Yet he lacks these things in part because society's moral pollution has deprived him of them."

In the end, the history of Bill Clinton's life and presidency remains unfinished. This much is clear—A man of unquestioned intelligence, political brilliance, and lofty ambitions undermined his ability to lead by involving himself in a tawdry sex scandal and associated lies that led to his impeachment and nearly drove him from the presidency. A man who speaks warmly of his boyhood experiences in a Southern Baptist church became an ardent defender of abortion rights and a proponent of the homosexual agenda. A man always ready to defend his policies in terms of high moral principle still refuses to come to terms with his own immoral behavior.

Bill Clinton still doesn't get it. More than anything else, *My Life* should be read as a classic political tragedy. A presidential memoir—no matter how large or how hyped—cannot change the stubborn facts of history.

