

My Life: Bill Clinton

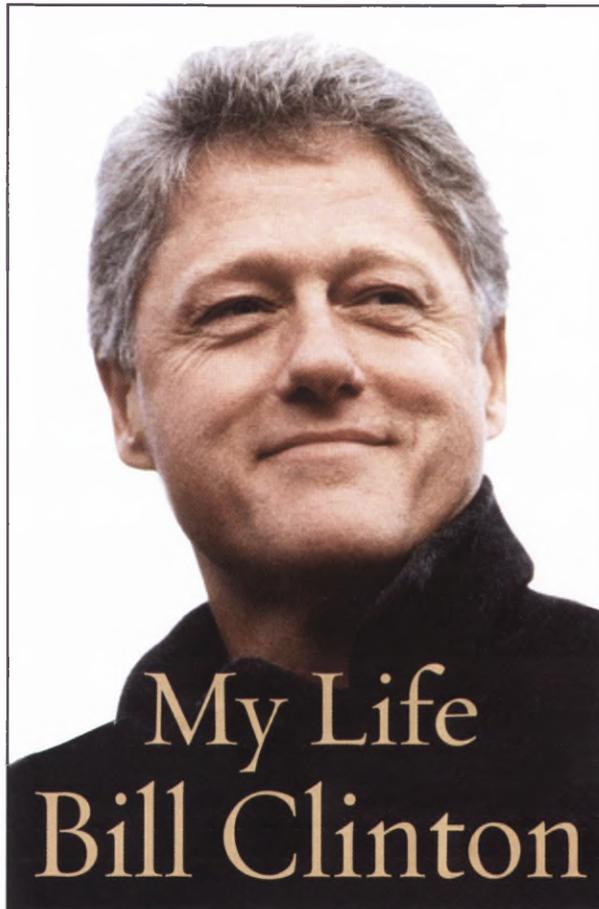
By Peter Carter

Bill Clinton's story is remarkable and, in his own words, 'improbable'.

Born in 1946 after his father was killed in a road accident, Clinton was a 'nerd' at his local schools in regional Arkansas, and was also often teased about his weight. He graduated to Georgetown University in Washington DC and studied international relations during the Johnson presidency. As an undergraduate, he also worked (at age 20) for Senator William Fulbright's anti-Vietnam committee. As in high school, he was involved in student politics and worked on election campaigns for state and national Democratic figures during his vacations.

He won a Rhodes scholarship and attended University College, Oxford. After two years, he entered Yale law school.

Clinton had been teaching at the University of Arkansas law school for only six months after graduation when he undertook his first political campaign at age 28 (1974). His congressional campaign for an Arkansas representative seat failed. Two years later he succeeded in a run for Arkansas state attorney-general and, two years after that (1978), he was elected state governor at the age of 32. He failed in his re-election attempt in 1980, but was successful again in 1982 and in three following elections for further terms expiring in 1994. He had



an impressive record as governor and was an early member of the New Democrats – the so-called 'centrist' or 'fiscally conservative' Democrats (also called the 'Third Way').

Before the end of his final term, Governor Clinton was elected President in 1992 and then re-elected in 1996. He inherited a battered economy and soaring unemployment caused by Reaganomics and the 'trickle-down theory' that delivered tax cuts to the wealthy and a budget deficit of \$4 trillion. However, by 1999 he succeeded in having Congress pass a balanced federal budget for the first time since 1969. Despite Republican majorities in the House for the whole

period, and in the Senate for most of it, he had many policy successes that accompanied his outstanding economic triumphs. His greatest policy defeat was Congress's refusal to pass universal healthcare.

The three main complaints by reviewers of Bill Clinton's memoir are its length and relevance, the vagueness of its explanations of critical personal issues and his description of his most vociferous foes as dangerous reactionaries.

Many commentators argue that the work is messy, that the author should have been more

selective and omitted dull accounts such as those describing the homes of his childhood friends. The work is long (nearly 1,000 pages). His presidential inauguration isn't reached until mid-way through the book. Hundreds of people are named and some of the details seem unnecessary. Nevertheless, the fascination is in the way he chooses to tell the story of his life – from a difficult childhood through to the office of leader of the greatest economic and political power on earth.

Clinton's accounts of his major personal controversies add little to what we already know. Some readers have said that it is necessary to read

between the lines to find the answers, if one can find them at all. This dissatisfaction probably has more to do with the expectation of the reader – to finally have answers on all those things – than any lack of candour on the part of the author. In any event, Clinton has admitted many times that he was far from a perfect person.

In some cases, Clinton simply collects the responses made at the time. In the first reference to the Jennifer Flowers issue, for example, he recalls his denial of Flowers' accusation of a 12-year affair in a *60 Minutes* interview. Nearly 100 pages later, he writes that in the Paula Jones deposition he answered 'yes' under oath to a question about having had a relationship with Flowers. The two statements are reconcilable on the basis that the affair was brief. It is a similar logic to the justification of the 'I did not have sexual relations' statement.

On some controversies, Clinton is more forthright. His explanation of the 'I did not inhale' statement is that he 'couldn't inhale' because he had never been a smoker of any type. He cites a fellow student eye-witness to an Oxford cannabis smoking attempt reporting the incident to a news service but the student's account received much less coverage than the original headline.

Clinton fully describes his final steps to be released from the Reserve Officer Training Corps and to be re-included in the draft while awaiting entry to Yale. He writes of the dilemma that he and other young men of draft age who were philosophically opposed to Vietnam faced, and the dreadful personal price paid by several close friends who either resisted or presented (some willingly and some unwillingly).

Most commentators also discount, as exaggeration and deflection, Clinton's charge that special prosecutor Kenneth Starr and the Republican far right were 'the forces of reaction and division' motivated by malice to 'get him'.

He contends that their actions were the revenge of bitter conservatives, dragged kicking and screaming into the latter half of the twentieth century, who profoundly resented:

- racism in the South;
- the US capitulation in Vietnam as a result of liberals at home rather than enemies abroad;
- decision after decision of the pro civil-rights Supreme Court;
- the empowerment of women and the change in their family roles; and
- the increasing acceptance of pro-choice and pro-gay views even among the moderate conservative electorate.

These conservatives, according to Clinton, saw him as the embodiment of everything they despised.

Clinton deeply admired the civil-rights records of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. He quotes Johnson as having said, after he enacted the *Civil Rights Act* and the *Voting Rights Act* in 1965, that he had 'killed the Democratic party in the South for a generation'. This was because most southern Democrats were still segregationists whose values were derived from their party's States' rights platform going back as far as the Civil War period. They resented court-ordered integration of schools and the removal of poll taxes that had previously denied most African-Americans the vote. These Democrats deserted to the Republican side in droves.

Clinton's progressivism and commitment to the civil-rights cause is undeniable. He quotes how inspirational various Supreme Court decisions were to him and how he celebrated the anniversary of some of them. (Can you imagine any current Australian politician applauding a decision of the High Court?)

In reflecting on the tumultuous events of 1968 (Robert Kennedy's and Martin Luther King's assassinations; Johnson declining nomination for a second term; race and peace riots across the country), Clinton describes it as '...the year that conservative populism replaced progressive populism as the dominant political force in our nation; the year that law and order and strength became the province of Republicans, and Democrats became associated with chaos, weakness, and the out-of-touch, self-indulgent elites; the year that led to

Nixon, then Reagan, then Gingrich, then George W Bush.'

He brands his impeachment fight as 'my last great showdown with the forces I had opposed all of my life' and expresses his gratitude for 'the good fortune to stand against this latest incarnation of the forces of reaction and division'.

This is the authentic message of his book. It is his most powerful and most convincing theme. Although in my opinion he is precisely on point, only history will be able to judge the accuracy this analysis.

My Life is many things. It is an instruction manual for all aspiring politicians and campaign managers; a gaze deep inside the machinations of the US political system and the concept of an elected executive with which we are not familiar in Australia; a fascinating account of US political events of the last half-century; and a guidebook on how to defeat the politics of division.

'Poor working people have no lobbyists in Washington', and neither do they in Canberra. Clinton's story reminds us of the responsibility that lawyers have for the economically weak and those who would otherwise remain voiceless, denied a say by governments beholden to special interests.

It is also an inspirational account of personal triumph over adversity. Hopefully it will inspire others to follow and to know that deeply held conviction, however unpopular, can have incalculable curative value. All young lawyers should read this book. ■

■ Published in June 2004 with over two million copies sold worldwide. For an index of the major US press reviews, see http://www.reviewsofbooks.com/my_life/

■ For an example of the many antagonistic rants against Clinton and the work see, <http://www.conservativetruth.org/article.php?id=2334>

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