



The Survivor: Bill Clinton in the White House

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***New York Times* Bestseller**

The definitive account of one of the most accomplished, controversial, and polarizing figures in American history.

Bill Clinton is the most arresting leader of his generation. He transformed American politics, and his eight years as president spawned arguments that continue to resonate. For all that has been written about this singular personality—including Clinton's own massive autobiography—there has been no comprehensive, nonpartisan overview of the Clinton presidency.

Few writers are as qualified and equipped to tackle this vast subject as the award-winning veteran Washington Post correspondent John F. Harris, who covered Clinton for six of his eight years in office—as long as any reporter for a major newspaper. In *The Survivor*, Harris frames the historical debate about President William Jefferson Clinton, by revealing the inner workings of the Clinton White House and providing the first objective analysis of Clinton's leadership and its consequences.

Harris shows Clinton entering the Oval Office in 1993 primed to make history. But with the Cold War recently concluded and the country coming off a nearly uninterrupted generation of Republican presidents, the new president's entry into this maelstrom of events was tumultuous. His troubles were exacerbated by the habits, personal contacts, and the management style, he had developed in his years as governor of Arkansas. Clinton's enthusiasm and temper were legendary, and he and Hillary Rodham Clinton—whose ambitions and ordeals also fill these pages—arrived filled with mistrust about many of the characters who greeted them in the “permanent Washington” that often holds the reins in the nation's capital.

Showing surprising doggedness and a deep-set desire to govern from the middle, Clinton repeatedly rose to the challenges; eventually winning over (or running over) political adversaries on both sides of the aisle—sometimes facing as much skepticism from fellow Democrats as from his Republican foes. But as Harris shows in his accounts of political debacles such as the attempted overhaul of health care, Clinton's frustrations in the war against terrorism, and the numerous personal controversies that time and again threatened to consume his presidency, Bill Clinton could never manage to outrun his tendency to favor conciliation over clarity, or his own destructive appetites. *The Survivor* is the best kind of history, a book filled with major revelations—the tense dynamic of the Clinton inner circle and Clinton's professional symbiosis with Al Gore to the imprint of Clinton's immense personality on domestic and foreign affairs—as well as the minor details that leaven all great political narratives. This long-awaited synthesis of the dominant themes, events, and personalities of the Clinton years will stand as the authoritative and lasting work on the Clinton Presidency.

The Survivor: Bill Clinton in the White House Details

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From Reader Review The Survivor: Bill Clinton in the White House for online ebook

Akash Gupta says

To his credit, author gave both sides of the facts. Felt like he was a bit biased whenever he added his interpretation of those facts (which to a large part always tended to be his confidence in what Clinton truly thought - which of course nobody can know for certain). However, he left enough room for reader to form their own opinions (on each controversy) based on the facts provided.

Gery says

John Harris' "The Survivor" is an aptly titled biography of the 42nd President of the United States of America: Bill Clinton. Without giving excessive context of Bill Clinton's early life and early political career, Harris jumps straight into and describes in satisfactory detail the main policy decisions and political incidences that happened between Clinton's inauguration and January 20th 2001.

The first few chapters were loaded with incredibly heavy and negatively connotated language and I was about to put the book down. I was getting a feeling the Harris had an ideological or personal vendetta against Clinton and was using each and every opportunity to stick a negative adjective before any verb or noun describing either Bill or Hillary Clinton's behaviour. Luckily I didn't, since his language seemed to be toned down 4-5 chapters into the book. This change in tone was however so striking to me, that I can't help but wonder whether two different people wrote the first few and the remaining chapters, or whether Harris was in some weird head space when revising some of the chapters.

This entirely negative bias seemed to come out of the blue to me, and so in order to compensate for it I noticed myself taking every negative statement with a grain of salt and trying to defend Clinton's actions to myself even though I had no other knowledge or perspective beforehand. Only about mid-way into the book did I however notice that the bias had been toned down and that I should try to continue reading the book open-mindedly. Looking back, this is one of my biggest issues with this book: I could not continue counting on the authors impartial reporting throughout the rest of the book anymore and remained skeptical of any value judgments made by him.

Nonetheless, I enjoyed the writing style of the majority of the book. While the Lewinsky affair was probably a huge issue during the time (I can't remember as I was still a child back then), I feel like the book could have devoted less space describing it and more on the Camp David talks and the Oslo accords (even if the author suggests that Clinton had fairly little to do with the latter, besides the signing ceremony).

Unfortunately about 10% of the pages in my physical copy seemed to be printed while the printer was low on toner. This did bother me throughout my reading experience. As this book was my first exposure to blatantly biased biographical writing, I feel like I learned a lesson as to when and how to anticipate bias in future books. I'm still quite puzzled as to the change in tone towards Hillary and Bill Clinton from the first few to the last few chapters.

Due to the bias and printing issues: 2.5 stars (rounded up).

Jay says

The Survivor is my sixth stop on my quest to read a biography of every American President (Washington, Adams, Johnson, and both Bushes already completed). Of all of the President's, reading a biography of Clinton was one I was really looking forward to. He was the first President I really remember. I still have a memory of watching his 1992 inauguration in the library at school. But while I remember most of his presidency, it ended before I really got into politics.

I am glad I chose this book to read. While it certainly is not without bias, I thought the book did a wonderful job covering Clinton as a man and as a president. Like many presidential biographies, The Survivor length (just over 500 pages) is a bit daunting at first. But around 70 pages are notes, and index, and acknowledgments. But the writing style makes this an easier read. Short chapters that each address a different story of Clinton's presidency allow you to just pick it up for ten or fifteen minutes here or there without issue. And while many biographies are written in a more academic fashion, The Survivor is much more of a story.

As far as content is concerned, John F. Harris covers the eight years of Clinton's presidency in great detail. All of the significant periods (both positive and negative). However, we are given great insight into the personality of Bill Clinton through his interactions with heads of state, advisers, adversaries, , and staff. This is truly a biography rather than a history of the '90s (which was my big issue with the George H.W. Bush biography I read).

My only real issues with content probably had more to do with the author's purpose. The first is that not much was written about Clinton's early years. He speaks briefly about his troubled childhood, college years, and life in Arkansas. But only in small blurbs. The second is the lack of Al Gore. He is mentioned sparingly for much of the book. At times, chapters upon chapters go by without even a mention. Not like I'm a big Al Gore fan. I just found his absence interesting.

As I said earlier, this book is not without bias. It is obvious that John Harris has a positive view of Clinton and his presidency. While overall, I believe the book if a pretty fair critique, there were a few issues. The scandals in the Clinton presidency were numerous. They were covered in the book but occasionally, Harris would slip from historian to pundit, subtly inserting his opinion about either the insignificance of the scandal or the actions of Republicans. My bigger issue was with the author's assignment of credit. Some of Clinton's failures were tip-toed over. Many of his accomplishments were greatly lauded even if pretty insignificant. Sometimes, Clinton was given credit for something he had no part of. On three occasions , Clinton was given credit for other people not acting on Clinton's behalf negotiating peace settlements. The worst was Harris calling the Kosovo peace settlement "Clinton's victory" despite being negotiated by Slobodan Milosevic.

But the slight bias did not take away from my enjoyment of the book. I learned a ton about a president I vividly remember but didn't closely follow. This book likely won't change minds. Supporters of Clinton will still regard him as one the great Presidents of the 20th century. Detractors will still view him as a shrewd politician who brought disgrace to the White House. But in my opinion, that is probably a good thing. The Survivor is meant to give a close look at Bill Clinton and a detailed history of his presidency, not an argument for or against Democratic policies. And I believe it did an excellent job. So if you are looking to learn more about Clinton, I highly suggest picking up the Survivor.

Mervyn S Whyte says

Second half dominated by the impeachment crisis, but overall an excellent one volume history of the Clinton presidency.

Robert Jones says

As hard as it must be to avoid injecting ones own political opinions on a biography of a recent president - especially one like Bill Clinton - but Harris manages the job quite admirably. It's obvious that he respects Clinton, and his tone can get a little apologetic at times, but it is an otherwise an unflinching and honest portray of Clinton's eight years in office - from Bosnia to Kosovo, from the Oklahoma City bombing to the Monica Lewinsky scandal. The book is at all times accessible, teaching the reader things that we really ought to know if we lived in America the past few decades, without getting confusing or condescending.

Tyler Bosma says

This isn't a full-life biography... It covers just Clinton's presidential years. But I really liked it a lot - it was the perfect mix of historical context, perspective from folks in his circle, details from historical records, limited minute-by-minute account of important events, and attempt at interpretation into his motives along with insight about how to really measure his administration. All of this in under 600 pages makes it a great option for somebody looking for one book to get a good hold on the place the administration holds in history.

Marc says

This is the third book I read about Clinton following "Clintons's wars" and "A vast conspiracy".

I was glad Harris' biography was less about the Lewinsky Scandal and more about everything else that happened at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

The author's style is very close to what Peter Baker wrote about Bush 43 in "Days of Fire".

The chapters on Bosnia, Russia and Kosovo were the most interesting for me as I learned quite a lot.

Harris is really good at introducing key players during the Clinton years with mini biographies and analyzing their relationship with the president.

Also the book doesn't follow a traditional timeline of the administration. Instead, the writing is more issue-oriented as many topics go back and forth which makes Clinton's policies and approach easier to understand.

Great book.

Nick Richards says

A very detailed and compelling account of one of the most polarising figures in global politics.

Zach Koenig says

On my trek through reading a book about each President, I turned to this text because "The American Presidents" series doesn't have a Clinton installment out quite yet. While I was impressed by the wealth of information that this book brings to the table, I must warn others that there is no "light reading" in sight from page one to close. It is a very deep, involved text that will take you a while to get through no matter what your reading sophistication level. If you are ready for that, you will likely enjoy the experience.

"The Survivor" begins with, simply enough, the election of Clinton over George Bush in 1992. Right away, the tone is set that this isn't a biography by any means. It is a look at the Clinton administration(s). All the major events of the "Clinton Years" (Whitewater, Lewinsky, Hillary, Kosovo, Camp David, etc.) are covered in a good amount of detail (chapters devoted to each). There does, however, remain a good balance between the "policy stuff" vs. the "personal stuff".

In essence, this book pretty much tries to be everything in regards to the Clinton terms. It is a personality examination, work style explanation, and political treatise. Those are lofty goals, but author John F. Harris manages to pretty much accomplish them. Of course, in order to do this the material is quite dense. This book is not for the casual reader of political materials. It takes a focused mind to get through it. I consider myself to be an adept, avid reader, and I had this one on the nightstand for close to four weeks.

Overall, I'm glad I chose "The Survivor" as my Clinton book. Harris impressed me with his ability to stay impartial, while I learned a ton about how the Clinton administration ran. Plus, and this is always the treat for me when reading about a President, I gained insights into the Clinton personality and why he made the decisions/actions he did.

Jessica says

I am certainly not the first one to pick up a biography of anyone, let alone a president, which is a bit ironic since my BA is in political science. This was written by John Harris, a journalist. The historian/political scientist in me cringes a bit to admit that but I was looking for a book I could read quickly and learn a little bit from. I was surprised how much I enjoyed this book and found myself throughout the book actually entertaining thoughts of reading another political biography.

The author seems to offer a pretty balanced look at Clinton's presidency, although it's clear that Harris admired Clinton so there are some inherent biases in the writing. The most intriguing items in the book were about the interactions within the President's circle and how that matured through his administration. Clinton's focus on foreign policy was interesting and certainly admirable. But more interesting (to me) was how Clinton was able to use his skills as a politician after the mid-term elections in his first 4-years to regain power in the face of a Republican legislative majority.

Overall an interesting and quick read, for a presidential biography.

Robert Sparrenberger says

When I read a presidential biography I want to feel as if I viewed the world through their eyes. I dislike when the book becomes a drool fest over the subject and I hate when they are overly critical on the opposite side. That being said, this book about Bill Clinton definitely achieved both results. The author did a nice job of pointing out what was happening with the president and the events surrounding him in what I felt was a fair and impartial manner. He pointed out his weaknesses and strengths without being preachy.

Recommend. One of the better presidential biographies.

Kevin says

Unfairly good. The politics in this are described with absurdly rich detail. The mini-biographies introduced as players enter the stage are timed incredibly well. Harris comes off impartial and a fly on the wall. For sure an important read. Important omissions include Clinton's reckless deregulation of the financial sector and creation of the prison state, but this was so well written...

Debbie Jacob says

Often brutally honest, John Harris's biography of Clinton, largely based on personal interviews and observations from covering the Clintons, presents the good, the bad and most of all the ugly. Most presidential biographies I have read seem to lean one way or the other: for or against, but this one swayed back and forth in such a way that made it difficult to pinpoint any bias. It provides great insight into Clinton's reactions behind the scenes. Didn't come away from this liking Clinton, but appreciated his gifts of speech and his uncanny ability to separate a sleazy personal life from a dedicated political life.

Mark Baier says

A definite read

Big, comprehensive, thorough. A look at the Clinton presidency warts and all. This is a detailed, careful examination of his eight years in office, including the role of Hillary Clinton and a very long cast of characters.

Jeffrey Keeten says

”There’s no reason to suppose that a man who caused so much debate in his own time will have a settled and stable reputation in posterity. ‘History,’ said the historian Pieter Geyl, ‘is an argument without end.’”

Just let me explain!

William Jefferson Clinton was breaking his first campaign promise just as he was beginning to warm his hard won seat in the Oval Office. He had said on the campaign trail that he was going to offer amnesty to Haitian refugees. On paper it seemed like an easy promise, a compassionate promise that would send the right message to his base and stick a thumb in the eye of his predecessor.

Until he watched the film.

The CIA brought him satellite footage of what was happening in Haiti as word of his election spread through the population. People were cutting down trees and tearing apart their homes to build rafts. The analysts were projecting that tens of thousands of Haitians would die trying to reach the shores of America. If your getting a sinking feeling in your gut about right now that would be very similar to the way Clinton felt. The best of intentions with the worst possible results.

John F. Harris doesn't pull any punches. He brings to light every misstep, every blunder, every indiscretion, and even takes the doors off the closets and lets the skeletons rattle around the room. From glancing at some other reviews I know that some Clinton supporters thought this was a biased book. I didn't feel that way at all. I felt that Harris related the facts without judgment, without political color, without rancor. Like most presidencies the early days of the Clinton administration are rocky, and a lot of that has to do with the fact that every president arriving in Washington, flushed with victory, thinks that the world is at his feet.

It doesn't take long for them to realize that it isn't just a matter of them snapping their fingers.

This book did make me think about our expectations for each new president. We are asking someone to run the largest company in the world. The thousands of people that have been running it suddenly find themselves out of a job, and now the new president has to replace those people. He has to reward his supporters, the people who sweated blood to get him elected, and he has to balance those reward appointments with people who hopefully know how to keep the Department of Labor or the State Department or the Department of the Interior running. If a major corporation was forced to do this every four to eight years it would severely cripple their ability to compete. It would be crazy.

In January of 1993 ex-governor of Arizona Bruce Babbitt walked into Bookman's Used Books in Flagstaff, Arizona wheeling a handcart stacked with boxes of books. Even before he dropped that stack on the floor in front of the book buying counter I knew I was going to buy every single book. He was in an ebullient mood. I knew he had been shortlisted for a cabinet position and one of the things people do when they get ready to move is sell books. "Going somewhere?" I asked caught up in the irrepressible energy coming from him. He laughed and said. "Bill called. I'm going to the interior." I offered him a high five which he returned with a smile and a laugh. I talked him into signing all the books because I could sell them for more with established providence, and could; therefore, give him more for each book. It was only later after his nervous energy had left that I realized that I had just had a brief brush with history.

Bruce Babbitt. He reads.

"The test of a first-rate intelligence," Scott Fitzgerald wrote, "is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function." Candidate Clinton had passed Fitzgerald's test with ease."

One of my all time favorite politicians is Lloyd Bentsen. He served as Secretary of Treasury under Clinton and was generally the old man in every meeting. He had his own take on Clinton.

"A year into the job, the Treasury secretary sat in his office one day reflecting on the eight presidents he had known, and concluded that Clinton was in some respects the smartest. 'I think this fellow is a step above in the way of being able to correlate and see how it all works together,' he mused. But Bentsen added that this talent for seeing multiple dimensions of a problem could be a curse.' He also has difficulty making decisions,' More seriously, he believed Clinton's incessantly political nature was self-defeating."

Once his staff did get a decision from Clinton they tried to keep him from talking to people who might change his perspective. He was always asking everyone for their opinion about anything from the economy to the latest polling data. He always wanted more information. I can appreciate a president who is willing to change his stances on issues after discovering new information. The presidents that scare me are the ones who even when faced with a mound of evidence to the contrary will not change their position.

Bill I can get you re-elected. I'm the KING maker.

Dick Morris is an interesting character who magically reappears in Clinton's life when he needs him the most. The Clinton staff loathed the man. He is the cockroach that loves the muck of political life and will do whatever it takes to insure that his candidate survives. *"He was Clinton's version of Colonel House to Woodrow Wilson or Harry Hopkins to FDR."* Or if you want the more modern version he is the Karl Rove of Clinton's election campaign. He is the only man that could force Clinton to just shut-up and listen to him without interruption for thirty minutes. He was a wizard. The man behind the curtain or maybe more appropriately the Man Behind the Darth Vader Mask. (Dick Cheney later stole it.)

"One reason that Clinton found it easy to speak in public was that he was essentially a transparent man. There was a narrow difference between the man at the podium and the man with his shoes off and feet up on Air Force One. Clinton in private was certainly more expressive, more profane, but the opinions and perspective he expressed were the same in both settings. Clinton was, by the standards of politicians, free of artifice."

Clinton is, without a doubt, the best speaker of his generation. In front of a crowd he is transformed, plugged in. He instinctively knows what they want, what they are dying to be told, and usually his best lines came from when he left the confines of his speech and let his natural oratory ability take over. I hadn't really thought about him as transparent or free of artifice. I've always thought of him as a man with a big heart, but maybe too political for me to ever be able to trust his frankness or his sincerity. (He wasn't called Slick Willie for nothing.) He could screw up and screw up again; and yet, people still loved him. We doubt him on a lot of things, but the one thing that he can't help even if he tried to hide it is how much he loves people. In the case of attractive, lush women he might just love them a tad bit too much.

"Mr. President," Newt Gingrich said, "we are going to run you out of town."

I think we all know how that worked out.

I just want to say one thing about the impeachment proceedings, which are covered in proper detail in the book, is that what politicians sometimes forget is that **WE** elect presidents and we don't want them impeached for reasons that defy reason. An impeachment is for incompetence in the job not for lying under oath about cheating on a wife. How a Whitewater investigation ever stretched into investigating his extramarital affairs is beyond me. Oh and Newt, the first to cast the first stone, what a hypocrite you turned out to be with your own extramarital affairs. Ok... so I'm still a bit bitter.

I do wish that Monica Lewinsky had not flashed her thong underwear at Bill. It was like a matador flicking a red cape in the face of a bull.

I bought this book when it was first published back in 2006. It has taken me until now to have the will power to read it. Clinton was the first politician I ever actively helped to get elected. I had come out of the closet as a Democrat (in my neck of the woods that is the same as saying you are a communist) to friends and family. I had a lot on the line or, seemingly so then, and with each disaster of his presidency I was losing my ability to defend him. He embarrassed me whenever he embarrassed himself. This book was painful, but only because Harris told it straight. I still cling to Clinton's balanced budget with cuts in spending and a tax increase on the top 1.2% creating a surplus (along with a robust economy), a sight that may never be seen again. He passed this budget bill without a single republican vote. The GOP predicted economic disaster, but then they underestimated not just Bill, but all of us.

History isn't finished with William Jefferson Clinton. The tabulations are still being counted. On a C-Span ranking presidents poll in 2009 he is tied for 14th with James Monroe up from 21st in 2000. History will never forget, but sometimes it does forgive.

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