

All Hail, the Demander-in-Chief

A Woman in Charge. The Life of Hillary Rodham Clinton

By Carl Bernstein Hutchinson (Random House Australia) 630 pp \$39.95

Hillary Clinton Her Way: The Biography

By Jeff Gerth & Don Van Natta Jr John Murray (Hachette Livre) 438 pp \$35.00

Reviewed by Anne Summers

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The transformation of Hillary Rodham Clinton from small town Arkansas corporate lawyer to America's First Lady to US Senator from New York to Democratic Party frontrunner with a real chance of becoming the 44th president of the United States is one of the most remarkable political narratives of the modern era.

Hillary – now a brand as much as her name – has always been an enigmatic and elusive figure, attracting in almost equal measure admiration and loyalty as well as derision and almost pathological hatred from colleagues, the press and the American public. Ever since her husband Bill introduced the notion of a co-Presidency by telling voters in the 1992 New Hampshire primary that if they elected him they could “buy one, get one free”, Hillary has been almost centre-stage in national politics. Although her efforts to design a health care reform package for the country were a policy and political disaster that forced her to step back somewhat, nevertheless for the eight years of the Clinton presidency she had a greater involvement in day to day policy and strategy at the White House than any First Lady before or since.

It was always going to be a controversial role. The US Constitution makes no provision for modern marriages where highly educated and politically astute partners aspire to work together to reform the country; nor were elected officials such as the Vice-president or high-level appointees to the White House especially receptive to having the wife of the President as an unanticipated part of the political equation.

But in the end Hillary's roles, and her reputation, were to be determined not by her political contribution but by how she responded to her husband's squalid philandering. She was never more powerful than when she weighed up whether to stand by him after the Monica Lewinsky scandal broke. “She knew she was once again the key to their potential survival,” writes Carl Bernstein in his rich and rivetting account of Hillary's journey. “Everything, including the presidency and their marriage, was at stake; she understood that immediately”.

Hillary was always aware of Bill's womanising; it was one reason she deliberated for two years as to whether she'd marry him. There had been numerous allegations while he was governor of Arkansas, several of them so potentially explosive that Bill was persuaded not to run for President in 1988. (The boundaries that had kept the press from revealing JFK's sexual crimes and misdemeanours had collapsed spectacularly in 1987 when presidential hopeful Gary Hart's infidelities were revealed and

politicians' sexual misconduct was now fair game; Bill was even more vulnerable on this score than Hart had been.)

Hillary had hoped Bill would atone and reform in readiness for a run in 1992; instead he fell deeply in love with Marilyn Jo Jenkins, an attractive and accomplished businesswoman, and wanted to leave his marriage. Hillary refused to divorce him, believing she had invested too much in their conjugal and political partnership to be able to walk away. Plus they had a nine-year old daughter, Chelsea, whom neither parent wanted to hurt. Bill stayed although he continued to have contact with Jenkins for almost four more years, and he did not clean up his act.

Early into his run for president the Jennifer Flowers tapes surfaced and Hillary found herself in the harsh national spotlight in a role that could not have been more humiliating or more repugnant to her: not the brilliant lawyer or the champion of policies to reform America but the wronged wife gamely standing by her man. She sat beside her wayward husband during an interview on *Sixty Minutes* while he admitted to causing "pain in my marriage" and told America: "I'm sitting here because I love him and I respect him and I honour what he's been through..."

Bernstein described her appearance as "a triumph", which "probably saved Bill's candidacy – because she had indeed stood by her man, as she would do again on the *Today* show when Monica Lewinsky became (like Jennifer Flowers) a household name."

But by September 11, 1998, Hillary had had enough. Three years later that very same date would bring havoc and devastation to the city she by then represented as a US Senator but this day destroyed what was left of her dignity and her trust in Bill as the entire world, including her daughter Chelsea, devoured on the internet the sordid details of her husband's dalliance with the young intern as laid out in the Starr Report. Over the next five months, while the US Congress got to work impeaching the President, Hillary fought harder than ever before to save the Clinton Presidency but this time, according to Bernstein, she extracted a price.

On February 12, 1999 while her husband sat in the Oval office waiting to see if the Senate would find him guilty, Hillary met with political advisor Harold Ickes to plot out a bold plan to run for the Senate in a state where she'd never lived and which had never sent a woman to Washington's upper house. In shooting for this political star, asserts Bernstein, "Hillary was seeking not just a seat in the Senate, but redemption: hers, her husband's and the Clinton presidency's".

By July she'd announced she was running for the seat of retiring Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan and in November 2000 she was elected, the first First Lady to run and to win elective office. She was still living in the White House. On January 20, 2001 while her husband was outside the Capitol handing over the reins of the presidency to the newly (and controversially) elected George W. Bush, Senator Clinton (who'd been sworn in on January 3 by Vice-President Al Gore) was inside enjoying lunch with her new colleagues.

Six years later on January 20, not by accident on the very date that US Presidents are inaugurated, Hillary (having just been re-elected to a second Senate term) announced

she was running for President. “I’m in to win,” she said. Bill was nowhere to be seen.

You don’t get much of this story from *Hillary Clinton Her Way*. Its authors, Jeff Gerth and Don Van Natta Jr both have *New York Times* and Pulitzer Prize pedigrees and were reported to have been paid a million dollars advance for this book. I suspect that even the most avid Hillary-hater will find it tedious. Gerth broke the Whitewater story for the *Times* – detailing Bill and Hillary’s money-losing investment in an Arkansas real estate venture - and still seems to be smarting that his prey got away. On their account, Hillary’s political trajectory was planned back in the 1970s when she and Bill decided on a “twenty year project” to seize the Presidency, first for him and then for her. This claim is thinly supported and had been widely disputed in the US press. These authors come across as grumpy old men who cannot find a single thing in Hillary’s entire 59 years to like let alone admire.

Carl Bernstein’s political reporting helped bring down the Nixon presidency and this one, which took eight years to research and write, is everything you want in a political biography. It is well written, meticulously researched and sourced and contains much we did not know before. Bernstein says that both Clintons “formally declined” to be interviewed but I suspect he had informal help from Hillary. He asserts a number of things authoritatively about her that uncharacteristically are not sourced including such intimate matters as her difficulty in conceiving Chelsea and her inability to have another child.

Hillary’s political ascendancy may have begun as revenge dressed up as redemption but it has now assumed its own perhaps unstoppable momentum. She has proved to be more popular than she could have ever dreamed back in those dark heartbroken days of the Starr inquisition. She is leading the polls, not just with Democrats but across the spectrum. Women, especially, want her to win.

Bill now traipses round the country raising millions and telling America what a great president she’d make. He is clearly her greatest asset but she is now the one in charge. Her vindication will come on January 20, 2009 if George W Bush hands over the reins to her. But she could be derailed by the charismatic and passionate Senator Barack Obama, a man who represents the future whereas her redemptive journey is about restoring the past – and by her own limitations. Even Bernstein, clearly a fan, says she “has always had a difficult relationship with the truth”. She “disappoints”, he says, because she misrepresents “not just facts but often her essential self”.

It’s not too late, he argues, for her to allow the essential good within her to emerge but that could prove to be the biggest challenge yet. After decades of denial and self-distortion (some of which is undeniably the result of the relentless persecution the Clintons endured during their eight years in the White House), Hillary perhaps no longer knows who she is. But she has shown herself capable of astonishing things and who knows what else she can accomplish on this unparalleled and unprecedented personal and political voyage.

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