

speech last year to denounce the President and his war in Iraq. His latest film, *Fahrenheit 9/11*, is polemic disguised as documentary. It is hilarious, sobering, sentimental, and chilling by turns. The film is also breaking box office records that had been set by his previous outing, *Bowling for Columbine*.

In the past two years, the tireless Moore has also produced two best-selling books on the same theme—*Stupid White Men*, and *Dude, Where's my Country?* The latter is the more readable and entertaining for Moore deploys humour in much the same way that Philips uses fact. But there's no doubting the passion in Moore's anti-Bush diatribes. It's a passion that originates, he reminds us in almost everything he does, be it film or print, in his resentment of corporate America's cavalier attitude towards society. For Moore that means the car giant General Motors and the devastation it's factory closures in the 1970s and '80s visited upon his home town of Flint, Michigan.

In *Dude, Where's my Country?*, Moore gets somewhat more practical. The book is more akin to a users' guide to dissent against the Bush administration and includes a chapter on how to convince Republicans to vote against the government in the next elections. The said chapter brims with advice on getting involved in the political system, and once there, how to use passion and commitment to destabilise things. His heart is on his sleeve, most definitely, but his mind is fully engaged in the project of defeating George W Bush at the polls in November.

Comedian Al Franken shifts his passion into overdrive for his contri-

**Essayist and academic Curtis White came up with the spectacular concept of "The Middle Mind" to explain this immense muddle in the middle of American life, this tolerance for Right-wing antics on a grand scale, corporate looting, cabalistic election rigging, huge military budgets, and relentless demonization of anything even remotely liberal or Left of Centre. To White, the agenda setters of America—the media, politicians and business leaders—actively conspire to keep public debate within narrow confines. Outside those boundaries exist vast no go areas where—as medieval European maps put it—monsters abide**

bution to the left-hand side of the book shelf, *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them: A Fair and Balanced History of the Right*. This is part media travelogue, part personal level polemic against the assembled ranks of American Right-wing political pundits. It's also very funny. Wittingly, Franken does self-deprecation very well. But in the end, non-American readers, or even Americans who don't spend all of their time watching political talk shows on television, will be baffled by the endless procession of names that Franken lists as he chronicles the "lies" of the political Right. That said, if even a portion of his assertions are true, then the American media is permeated by lies, and yes, the lying liars who tell them too.

So too, according to pollster and pundit Paul Waldman, is the White House. Pulling no punches, the young and telegenic Waldman calls his book, *Fraud: The Strategy Behind the Bush Lies,*

*and Why the Media doesn't Tell You*. His theory is that the perceived liberal media view of George W Bush as a verbally dyslexic, slightly dim, good humoured guy, is itself a lie—a deliberate attempt to portray the Ivy League-educated son of a hugely rich family as an ordinary American. Bush's inability to put two sensible words together may not be an act, but it's certainly an asset, Waldman writes, because the President's infamous inarticulation appeals to a public fed up with silver tongued, corrupt politicians.

The media, even the newspapers and networks criticised by the Right for their so called 'liberal' bias, accepts this view of the President with barely a murmur. Also they enhance Bush's brand value by treating him as incapable of complex thinking and by implication, of lying, corruption or bad behaviour. Waldman blames this attitude—in part—for the defeat of Al Gore in the

2000 presidential election. Journalists who were probably Democrats at heart, gave the Republican candidate an edge by not scrutinising his every word, as they did for Gore, finding several falsehoods along the way and making much of them in their reports. The media didn't like Gore, Waldman argues, and they bought the Bush image wholesale, actually liking him for what they believed was a slightly klutzy, but essentially friendly, personality.

My quest for modern American dissent by no means ends with these books. There are countless more of them, most with fiery titles that sum up the contents. There are also websites like [www.alternet.com](http://www.alternet.com), [www.moveon.org](http://www.moveon.org) and [www.theonion.com](http://www.theonion.com); magazines like *The Nation* and *In These Times*; and recently, the dissenters even inaugurated their own radio network called Air America to balance the almost complete dominance of the Right wing on radio talk shows. But alas, what this cornucopia of righteous wrath doesn't translate into is an informed electorate that keeps politicians on their toes by basing their loyalties on policy and handling of events. Instead, America is now officially a divided society of two hostile political solitudes. You either love President Bush, his government and his wars, or you despise him and reject all he stands for. Poll after poll shows the electorate deeply split into pro and anti-Bush factions of roughly equal size, with almost no crossover. Almost all of the dissenters, with the honourable exception of Kevin Phillips, line up on the anti-Bush side of the street. And they preach to the converted who are already there.

American dissent is alive. But it is not well. ■

It is a daunting task to pick up, much less read, former U.S. President Bill Clinton's memoir *My Life*. At 957 pages, excluding notes and acknowledgements, the book is a heavy, unwieldy object.

One's arms grow tired holding it open. It sits uneasily on the lap. The reader must patiently slog through pages and pages of electoral and legislative minutiae before Monica Lewinsky finally makes an appearance on page 773. Yet, after all those hours of patiently reading more than anyone would ever want to know about the state of Arkansas, about hands shaken and small-town fairs visited during campaign after campaign, health care and welfare reform, and about the ever more vicious battles with Republicans—nothing salacious is revealed at all. There is only breast-beating and the image of the President of the United States exiled like any other cheating husband to the sofa. (He couldn't go sleep in the Lincoln Bedroom?)

Bill Clinton sees himself as a conundrum of high tragedy and low comedy, of the noble and the vulgar, of spiritual yearning and corporal weakness. If there is a grand theme to Clinton's book, it is the quest to reconcile contradictory impulses and bridge different, parallel worlds. The small-town, fatherless boy from Arkansas becomes President of the United States. The born-again Christian champions women's rights, including the right to abortion. The White Southerner identifies with Africans and African-Americans, citing

# Bridging parallel worlds

My Life

By Bill Clinton

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MIRA KAMDAR

as his greatest heroes Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King. The Democrat tries to forge a new party identity that can steal some of the thunder away from the Republicans and their powerful conservative movement. The President hobnobs with great world leaders and makes decisions of historic import on Bosnia, AIDS, Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda, peace in the Middle East, and global trade. Meanwhile, "back in Whitewater World," he faces daily humiliations.

Clinton the author sees himself as a storyteller, spawned from a long line of storytellers; part of a grand old, very Southern oral history. Clinton views story-telling as the treasured past-time of "people of modest means". His book is peppered with Southern colloquial-

isms, from describing someone as being "three bricks shy of a full load," to praising a politician who could "talk an owl out of a tree," to the famous line from his debate with former President George H W Bush that "that dog won't hunt anymore".

Bill Clinton also sees his own story as part the grand narrative of the United States of America. He both says he wants to tell the story of his life, simply because "it's a good story," but also says he wrote the book to "tell the story of America in the last half of the twentieth century". Clinton's two-term presidency is part of American history, no doubt. How Clinton won the presidency and what he did during his tenure is chronicled in excruciating detail. Yet, Clinton believes that his life

is emblematic of the life of the nation during his lifetime, consciously drawing parallels between his own personal struggles and those of the nation. For example, he takes great pains to relate the conflicting emotions he felt as a student at Oxford in 1968 about the Vietnam War and his duty to serve or not to serve to the larger agony of a nation divided over a controversial war. Clinton also tries to explain every policy initiative he ever advocated with a lesson learned in childhood. Part of this is an attempt to relate Clinton the man to Clinton the president. Part of it serves to reinforce his image as a locus of unity in diversity. There is no American ethnic or religious minority, for example, that Bill Clinton did not meet up with as a child or young man, teaching him valuable lessons about tolerance and inclusiveness. Catholics, Native Americans, Pentacostals, African Americans, Jews, Hispanic Americans and more are specifically cited, both when they are first discovered by young Bill and later when he advocates policies specifically designed to respect and include all Americans in his "equal-opportunity" agenda. Clinton takes very seriously the American motto *e pluribus unum*: he views his life's mission as nothing less than to unify a country ripped apart by sectarian, regional, economic, racial and cultural divisions.

This is why Clinton is so hurt and outraged by the attacks of the Republican Right. His whole life, Clinton only wanted one thing: to enter politics as a way of helping others and

healing divisions. So, when Kenneth Starr goes after the Clintons in his Whitewater investigation, when Newt Gingrich leads the charge to seek impeachment, when Tom DeLay and Henry Hyde and billionaire Right-winger Richard Mellon Scaife go after the Clintons and their friends and supporters, they are not just part of a 'Right-wing conspiracy' to take down the president—they are taking down the country.

Clinton views the historical moment of his presidency as a moment of great reckoning for the United States. His vision of American history is of a long struggle between forces of union versus forces of division, from the Civil War to the struggle for civil rights. Because "I had spent a lifetime trying to bring together my own parallel lives and had been raised to value all people", Clinton pitches himself as a natural force for union over division. The radical Republican Right spawned at the end of the 20th century, on the other hand, wants nothing less than to divide and rule, and Clinton enraged them by combining in his very person aspects they view as fundamentally incompatible:

"The New Right Republicans wanted an America in which wealth and power were concentrated in the hands of the 'right' people, who maintained majority support by demonising a rolling succession of minorities whose demands for inclusion threatened their hold on power. They also hated me because I was an apostate, a white southern Protestant who could appeal to the very people they had always taken for granted."

The son of a young widow, Clinton never knew his real father. His stepfather, Roger Clinton, was an alcoholic who beat his mother, yet young Bill loved the man he called "Daddy" and took his name as his own. Clinton writes that it was during his childhood, when he intuited that what went on at home was not to be discussed outside, that he learned to keep secrets and to lead a double life—skills that would be both his greatest strength and weakness. Clinton's descriptions of his childhood and young adulthood are among the most satisfying parts of the book. The genuine affection he feels for his family and his home state comes shining through, as does his adoration for his adored, hard-working mother. Clinton was clearly a brilliant young man, excelling at studies that took him from Arkansas, to Georgetown University, to Oxford as a Rhodes scholar, to Yale Law School. He was also, from the age of nine, if we are to believe him, entranced by politics. From high school, when he ran for senator in Boys Nation and got to go to Washington, DC and shake President John F Kennedy's hand, to working for fellow Arkansan Senator J William Fulbright on the Foreign Relations Committee while a student at Georgetown, to running his own campaigns and becoming, successively and at tender ages, Attorney General then Governor of Arkansas and, finally, President of the United States, Clinton never lost his passion for politics.

Though Clinton does touch on his personal life after childhood, it is clear that *My Life* is really about "My Political Life," about the persona of Clinton the president rather than the person of



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Clinton the man. True, he briefly mentions early friendships, including some early girlfriends, his courtship with Hillary, their wedding, Chelsea's birth, high-school and college graduations. But though his love and admiration for his wife and daughter and his roles as husband and father are acknowledged, they are not the focus of the book. After all, this is not just an autobiography; it is part of a specific sub-genre: the presidential memoir. Clinton is writing as much for posterity as for current readers, self-consciously so, hence the conflation of Clinton's personal struggles with those of the country, of his story with history.

The suspension of disbelief that Clinton sometimes demands of the reader as he attempts to reconcile "down-home" average guy Bill with President Clinton jet-setting his way from palaces to parliaments around the world is sometimes hard to take. There is a considerable amount of name-dropping in the book. Naturally, one of

the perks of being president of the United States is that you get to fraternise with a very elite circle of the rich and the powerful. But Clinton's name-dropping is invariably accompanied by the absurd assertion that friendships bloomed between world leaders and Bill and Hillary on a "just folks" level. Of King Hussein and Queen Noor of Jordan, for example, Clinton writes:

"Hussein and Noor became real friends of ours. We laughed a lot together, forgetting our duties whenever we could in favor of stories about our lives, our kids, and our shared interests, including horses and motorcycles. In the years ahead, Noor would join us in vacation sing-alongs in Wyoming; I would go to their home in Maryland for one of Hussein's birthday parties; and Hillary and Noor would talk often. They were a blessing in our lives."

Here Clinton is caught in a double bind of his narrative: the reader is

treated to an intimate insight into the 'lifestyles of the rich and famous' where Clinton portrays himself and Hillary as people who allow kings and queens to forget their 'duties' and be just folks who talk about things people getting together for beers in a trailer park might discuss: kids, horses, and motorcycles. Of course, the heavy irony is that being able to relate as 'just people' to celebrities and world leaders is the best proof that one is a celebrity oneself. What Clinton writes about his and Hillary's friendship with King Hussein and Queen Noor (and Tony Blair, and King Carlos and Queen Sofia of Spain, and even Queen Elizabeth) may be perfectly true. However, one cannot help but wince at a narrative that reinforces Clinton's distance from his much embraced down-home roots, ironically vulgarising his private friendships with international royalty by publicising them in his book.

As the book reaches the second term of Clinton's presidency—and the 735th page—it is clear that there is no way that he can keep up the same level of detail and bring the book to a close under 1,000 pages. After slogging through Yeltsin and a new Russia, NATO expansion, Bosnia, Whitewater, the Oklahoma City bombing, the earned income tax credit, the V chip, a growing AIDS epidemic, NAFTA, the WTO, the GATT, the Mexican Peso crisis, WACO and more Whitewater, we sense that Clinton the author is getting tired or at least facing a looming deadline and a very long manuscript. The reader, at this point, has had about enough too.

The last part of the book makes the obligatory but brief mention of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, the Columbine massacre, and the tussle over returning little Elian Gonzalez to Cuba. But, at this point, Clinton is already considering his 'wrap' and concentrates on a few main messages: the many steps he took to counter Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda, the extraordinary efforts he made to get Ehud Barak and Yasser Arafat to come to a peace agreement (whose failure he blames on Arafat), the growing threat from what he calls "New Right Republicans" to the American union and his own redoubled efforts to save what he can of that union before he has to leave the presidency. The Florida vote count debacle and the Supreme Court decision to stop the recount that gave Bush the presidency come in for scathing criticism. The Yale Law graduate writes that "Bush v. Gore will go down in history as one of the worst decisions the Supreme Court ever made."

Despite it all, Clinton concludes with a statement that rings true: "I had loved being President, even on the bad days." That, after all, is what this book is about. Does he have regrets? Sure. He should have intervened to prevent the massacre in Rwanda. He should never have allowed the appointment of a special prosecutor to investigate Whitewater. But the confession of these regrets, only reinforces the paradox of a president whose main argument for greatness lies in his stated embrace of the everyday struggles of ordinary men and women. Some of this is hokum, of course. Still, read as the nation goes to hell in a hand basket under Clinton's dimmer successor, *My Life* makes me wish that Clinton was still my president.