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 perfect guide to dissent against the Bush administration and includes a chapter on how to construct a petition for a censure of the government in the next elections. The chapter brims with advice on getting involved in the political system, and on how to use persuasion and commitment to destabilise things.

It is heart 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 contribution 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 polemic against the accumulated ranks of American Right-wing political pundits. It’s also very funny. Winningly, Franken does self-deprecation very well. But in the end, non-Ameri-con readers are even more Ameri-cons who don’t spend all of their time watching political talk shows on television, will be charmed by process of names that Franken lists as he chronicles the “lies” of the political Right. That said, if even apportion 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 silver-haired Waldman challenges the Bush administration’s credibility 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 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 a good act, but it is 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. Aiso 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 probably didn’t do a lot for Gore, gave the Republican candidate an edge by not scrutinising his every word, as they did for Gore, finding several falsehoods and omissions of 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, personality.

The question is whether an American diʃeazy by no means ends with these books. There are countless more of them, most with witty titles that sum up the content. And there are websites like www.alternet.com, www.movien.org and www.thedonion.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 a popular movement that keeps politicians on their toes by basing their policies on policy and handling of events. Instead, Americans now only vote on the basis of hostile political similarities. You either love President Bush, his government and his war, or you simply can’t stand him. And for that, 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. A most of all the dissenters, with the honourable exception of Kevin Phillips, line up on the opposite side of the street. And they preach to the converted who are already American. There is no difference here. It is not one of issues, but of values.

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 presentations of historic import on Bosnia, AIDS, Oasma Bin Laden and Al Qaeda, peace in the Middle East, and global trade meanwhile. “Back in Watergate World,” he faces daily humiliations.

C-Clinton the author sees himself as a storyteller, spooked from a long line of storytellers; part of a grand old, very Southern oral history. Clinton views story-telling as the treasure of “people of modest means”. His book is peppered with Southern colloquialisms, from describing someone as being “three bricks shy of a full load” to praising apolitician who could “talk an owl out of a tree,” to the famous line from his debate with former President George W Bush that “that dog don’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 it all 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 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 country. For example, he does great pains to relate the conflicting emotions he felt as an student at Oxford in 1968 about the Vietnam War and his duty to serve or not to serve to the larger agenda of a nation divided over a controversial war. Clinton also tries to transform the 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 inclusion. And in this respect, the book of American, Pentacostals, African American, 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 accommodate American ethnic and religious differences. In fact the book of American, Pentacostals, African American, 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 accommodate American ethnic and religious differences.

This is why Clinton is so hurt and outraged by the attacks of the Republican Right. He is 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 M. Elson 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. It is vision of America's history is of a long struggle between majority and minority, of 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 denouncing 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 southerner. I was going to Oxford as a Rhodes scholar, to Yale Law School, when he ran for senator in Boys Town. of nine, if we are to believe him, "Clinton writes that it was during his childhood, when he intuited that what "kept secrets and to lead a double life—whatever way he was going to go, he 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 Town, to Washington, DC, and shake President John F. Kennedy's hand, to working for fellow Arkansas Senator William Fulbright on the Foreign Relations Committee, to being a student at Georgetown, to running his own campaigns and becoming, several years later, a tender, a Traffic 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 Clinton the man. True, he briefly mentions early friendships, including some early girl friends, 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 nation's history with history.

The suspension of disbelief that Clinton sometimes demands of the reader is a sign of a man who wants nothing less than to divide and rule. He wants to be a president who talks about things people get tired of at least facing a looming crisis, Waco and more Whitewater, he wants to be a president who 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 Saddam 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 reductionism in his attempts 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."

Then, capitulating, Clinton concludes with a statement that rings true: "I had loved being President, even on the bad days." That is, after all, this is a book about "Being President," even on the bad days. 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. But, at this point, Clinton has had about enough too.