

Hillary Rodham Clinton *Living History* Hodder Headline, 2003

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Hillary Rodham Clinton is her own woman and a smart and successful lawyer, a former young Republican who became America's First (Democrat) Lady not exactly when her husband became its President, but when the people and the Congress his (and her) Party rejected her role as his appointed but independently powerful policy-maker. JFK's appointment of his brother Robert as Attorney General could be borne, but not a later Democrat's sharing real power with his wife.

Most First Ladies are assumed to have at least some influence from their supposed intimate relationships with powerful men, and exercise it in their own ways - fashion icon (Jacqueline Kennedy), drugs campaigner (Nancy 'Just Say No' Reagan) or grandmother to the nation (Mrs Bush, no-nonsense wife to George the First). Eleanor Roosevelt exercised her real power after FDR succumbed, in the arms of his mistress, in the United Nations. But when first-term President Clinton appointed his wife to do the serious job, in his own administration, of reforming health policy neither the powerbrokers in Congress nor the public nor the self-appointed guardians of public policy, the columnists and pundits and reporters and talk-show hosts were immediately unwilling to make the best—or any—use of what Clinton jokingly offered as 'two for the price of one'. The joke was sour. By the end of 1994, Hillary Clinton was still her husband's policy confidante and a power in Washington, but had been sidelined from direct power when what she called her 'missteps' or misjudgements sank her health care reform project that year. She writes, 'I underestimated the resistance I would meet as a First Lady with a policy mission'. That's putting it mildly.

Even strong, self-confident women have a tenuous hold on power. Hillary Rodham, feminist and partner in a prestigious law firm, felt obliged to add 'Clinton' to her name, long after her marriage, because the Arkansas electors, whose Governor her husband was then, drew unsatisfactory conclusions from her keeping her 'maiden' (and professional) name. How much did she identify with her husband, then? 'I'm not some little woman like Tammy Wynette, standing by her man', she told a TV interviewer, doing exactly that when Jennifer Flowers revealed her long affair with her husband.

An intelligent, educated and policy-driven woman, as Hillary Rodham Clinton has clearly always been, would expect a 'real job' when her partner attained the highest office in the land. Women like her then saw the real power of the forces against women in positions of political determinism. She had broken a great taboo, as the President's wife, in being politically active, not behind the scenes but in paid office. Her armies of enemies sprang from the furrows: some attacking her husband, through her; others revenging themselves on the emancipation of women, making the President's wife a 'lightning rod for political and ideological battles ...and a magnet for feelings . . .about women's choices and roles'. The cost was enormous: not only the failure of her health reform plans, but the rallying of the right behind the odious Newt Gingrich, a focus for opposition to "the Clinton agenda"; a hostile Congress and a spooked Democratic party. The witch-smelling started on Capital Hill.

Hillary Clinton was to be hounded by TV, talkback radio and newspaper columnists, congressmen, senators and that remarkably interested 'special investigator,' Kenneth Starr throughout her White House years. She endured intense speculation about her role in their financial affairs, her understanding of the other kind of affairs, a Grand Jury investigation into her finances, her father's death (just when the health package reached a crucial stage in its passage through Congress) and the death of her husband's mother. But most of all, she endured the loss of friends, one to suicide.

It is, however, the President's predilection for sex with much more ordinary women than his wife, that will drive most people to read Living History. They will find this its least satisfying aspect. I looked for the name, Monica Lewinski, in the index. There was no mention. There is no mention of the details, except for her husband's late confession. There is no real clarity about 'whether she knew', before that day, though plenty of hints that the man had demons, and warnings were sent.

Perhaps, because she is undoubtedly a feminist, Hillary Clinton could not attack her husband's nemesis. Perhaps, too, like most women she is fully aware of the possibility of losing whatever their ongoing relationship is, if she goes into too much detail. The marriage, I think, was so thought that it could withstand infidelities, but not disloyalty. So why did she stay? She explains, but who can explain a marriage? Perhaps a deal was done. When the last term ended, and her husband was not impeached, Hillary Rodham Clinton decided to run for the Senate.

The art of compromise obviously came somehow out of her solid, Republican upbringing and the sense of agency, values and confidence taught by a resilient mother (abandoned and abused in her own childhood) and one of those generous, judgmental, strong, supportive and loving fathers who so commonly figure in the lives of remarkable women.

Hillary Rodham was a Republican who changed sides in the 1960s, in part through feminism but also the stupidity of the establishment of the time. She became an advocate for children's rights and a Watergate investigation team member, a partner in a prestigious law firm who ran civil liberties litigation for the poor. She married a handsome young Rhodes scholar who shared her values, and had an unhappy childhood. She put her career in second place to his own.

It is a careful book – as you would expect, of a woman with an ongoing political career. She does not tear her breast over the loss of old friends from her community advocacy years who did not make the transition into political power, which requires unthinkable compromises. When the great children’s advocate, Marian Edelman, a close friend and colleague, disparaged her choices and departed it must have cut deeply, but she does not say so. Nor does she wallow in her humiliation over the president’s dirty little dalliances with a needy young intern.

There are only superficial insights into the machinations of international politics and what it is like to work under the most simian President in the history of the United States, the rapid loss of civil rights and the liberties fought for in the 60s and 70s, when she became the woman she is: a potential President of the United States.

As I finished this review, Arnold Schwarzenegger, serial sexual harasser and completely political naïf, was resoundingly elected to be Republican Governor of California. Hillary’s greatest challenge is the people’s desire to identify with their leaders – and they do not think they are intelligent. And yet they love Hillary Rodham Clinton, because she represents something else that they can identify with: the dignity of ‘failure’ and the strength in bearing betrayal.

This is an imperfect but significant book because it may say something important about what makes the people love some political women. Joan Kirner, first woman premier of Victoria, is loved by many because, not in spite of, her failure to return Labor to power in 1992, after a series of catastrophes under the Cain premiership since 1982. Living History is written by a woman favoured by 44 per cent of the national electorate to be the next Democrat president. I wouldn’t write her off.