

Rock and a Hard Place

*The “Hard Choices” Made by
the 67th U.S. Secretary of State*

Hard Choices

Written by Hillary Rodham Clinton

596 pages

\$35, Simon & Schuster, 2014

When Hillary Clinton was in Philadelphia recently at a book signing, my friend Katie, waiting to get her copy signed, texted me for a good line to use when she met her. I suggested that after she signed, say, “Thank you, Madame President.” And when she chuckled, Amy Poehler-like, say, “Just thought that sounded perfect.” Katie did. Hillary said, “Thank you for that!”

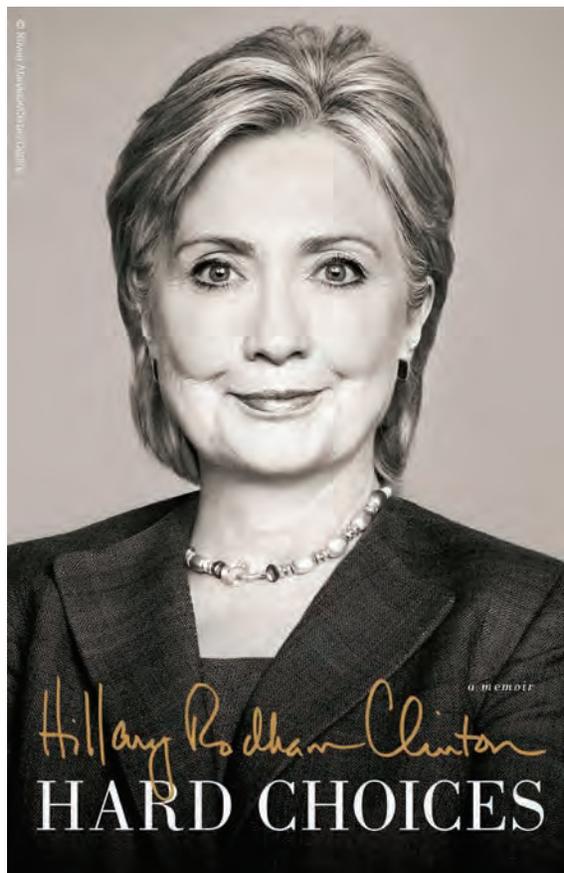
As a cultural icon on the order of Cher, Madonna and Beyoncé, she signs only “Hillary.”

Though it touches on prior and post aspects of her remarkable life, her 596-page volume covers only her time as this nation’s 67th Secretary of State from 2009-2013, during which she visited 112 other nations, logging more than 1 million miles. While it is dwarfed by Bill’s 957-page tome, “My Life” (Alfred A. Knopf 2004), to be fair, his covers almost 15 times as many years.

Although “Hard Choices” is also no “Present At The Creation” (W.W. Norton 1969, winner of 1970 Pulitzer Prize), coincidentally, Hillary was inspired by its author, the 51st Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, when they met the year of its publication, just before he spoke at her Wellesley College graduation.

Be forewarned. This is a memoir of a United States Secretary of State. While one reviewer called it “Fifty Shades of Boring,” it is only so if you have no or little interest in diplomacy and/or this nation’s role in an ever-shrinking, interdependent, volatile global community.

No reader should expect this work



to be revealing or controversial. An immediate past Secretary of State and presidential candidate could not possibly be so, consistent with law, logic and good taste. It is, however, a vastly more impressive work than any of the pre-campaign books of any successful, much less unsuccessful, presidential candidate in my adult life. Think George W. Bush, “A Charge To Keep;” Barack Obama, “Dreams Of My Father” or “The Audacity of Hope;” Jimmy Carter, “Why Not The Best?” or Richard Nixon, “Six Crises.”

Although it starts slowly and seems, at first, to be a travelogue or review of her Outlook calendar, it soon delves into the delicate intricacies of international

diplomacy. G.M. Young in “Early Victorian England,” 1830-1865 (1934) described diplomatic history as merely “what one clerk said to another.” Whether it ever was only that, Hillary’s adventures make clear that it is now so very much more – a veritable cauldron of characters resembling the bar scene in “Star Wars” with a wide variety of conflicting histories, values and interests.

She claims not to have decided to run for president, but we all know that to be a quaint fiction dictated by our fickle campaign laws. Although not a traditional campaign biography, it is clearly intended to evidence that she has the wisdom, experience, energy, respect and gravitas to be the next and first woman president of the United States. And it does so, quite nicely.

Her writing style is, however, rather pedestrian, sometimes wooden – “Hard men present hard choices – none more so than Vladimir Putin...” Somewhere in the San Fernando Valley right now,

you know some enterprising director is shooting a porn parody.

Hillary’s thoughtful and measured discussion of Benghazi should finally silence any rational, sincere critic.

Unsurprisingly, the largest portion, almost 30 percent, covers the Middle East, including the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Libya, Syria and Egypt, the eternal Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Iran and nukes.

Oddly, Iraq merits no separate chapter or section. Though she bravely admits her vote on Iraq was an error and that she “... came to deeply regret giving President Bush the benefit of the doubt...”

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dealt with together, though she fails to directly address the fact that the two are joined because both are unstable, have radical militants who live in the Middle Ages and hate the U.S. and, crucially, Pakistan has nukes.

Europe, Russia, Latin America and Africa are covered in somewhat cursory fashion, as are China and Asia, with an unexpected and fascinating detour into Burma (Mynamar). Her portrayal of China's less-than-stellar record on human rights has already earned a ban in the Middle Kingdom.

To maintain political balance, of

course, Hillary ends with serious, though not Biden-like stridence, discussion of climate change, humanitarian aid, the role of technology, trade and energy and human rights.

Lest you make the mistake of thinking Hillary an intellectual lightweight, read the "New York Times Book Review" column "By The Book" Q and A with her regarding the depth and breadth of her reading. (nytimes.com/books/6/15/14). I have read "Going Rogue" (Harper Collins, 2009) and Hillary is no Sarah Palin.

Anyone interested in the future of

this nation, including those of "the vast right-wing conspiracy" would do well to pick up this book.

Absent some new, real scandal of Nixonian proportions and/or further Supreme Court-approved voter suppression, Hillary Rodham Clinton may just be the 45th president of the United States. ■

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