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Book Reviews

Covering Clinton: The President and the Press in the 1990s by Joseph Hayden. Westport, CT, Greenwood Publishing Group. 168 pp. \$55.00.

If you find it fascinating to learn how Houdini managed to get himself into impossible situations and then magically managed to extract himself and escape to his next entanglement, this is your book. Joseph Hayden, a freelance writer and former journalist, tells the William Jefferson Clinton sequel. He starts with Clinton's 1992 run for the presidency and ends with the rainbow of speculations about the expresident's place in history.

The most astounding Houdini-like trick happened in 1992, when a badly flawed, obscure governor from a smallish southern state, who lacked support from his party's power structure, managed to propel himself into the presidency. How did he do it? How could he overcome the blemishes of rumors of corrupt real-estate dealings, evidence that he weaseled out of serving in Vietnam, and proof that he lied about engaging in repeated extramarital escapades and about using marijuana? Novel uses of peripheral media were at the heart of the trick. Hayden chronicles how a young team of inexperienced yet savvy advisers steered Clinton into new media venues like MTV, *Phil Donahue*, *Arsenio Hall*, and *Larry King Live*, as well as multiple town hall meetings. In these settings, his personal charm and uncanny ability to connect with people allowed him to win a large, loyal following.

By using these new media, Clinton traded the prosecutorial interrogations of traditional reporters for mostly respectful questions by young, star-struck audiences. What is more, these audiences gave him a chance to air his ideas about politics and policies in his own words, showing his impressive mastery of the field, rather than having his proposals paraphrased and often interpreted and even distorted by hostile, suspicious, cynical reporters.

Many mainstream commentators sneered at this soft, Oprah-style news that pulled at people's heartstrings and forged personal ties between the speaker and the audience, rather than inviting listeners to find faults with his policy proposals. Yet it gave Clinton the core of unwavering supporters that the would-be president so badly needed in 1992 and on many later occasions. The likes of James Carville, George Stephanopoulos, and Mandy Grunwald had invented an effective new style of political campaigning that would last beyond the 1990s.

While the title of the book suggests that media coverage of Clinton is the main focus, this is not the case. Rather, this is a smoothly-written general account, laced with quotes from journalists and pundits, that targets the largely self-inflicted political troubles plaguing the Clinton presidency. Hayden records the boyish charm and political deftness with which Clinton extricated himself again and again from near-fatal political disasters. He also notes the president's good fortune of often benefiting from inept opponents. In the latter category, the 1996 election was a cakewalk, because Clinton faced a lackluster Republican opponent and because he was blessed with a robust economy, thanks largely to forces beyond his control. Newt Gingrich, the Republican Senate leader, who rode into power propelled by Clinton gaffes, in the end self-destructed thanks to Clintonesque flaws like political arrogance and politically damaging moves.

In most of these instances, the press, which Clinton feared and detested and often tried to manipulate, played a relatively minor role. This became especially clear during the 1996 election and during the Lewinsky scandal and subsequent impeachment procedures. A major reason for press impotence was Clinton's success in personalizing his relationship with the public and in persuading majorities to accept his framing of political events. Images based on strongly-felt personal reactions to a politician invariably override contrary images featured in news reports. Still, when Clinton and his publics pass on, the warmth of human relations will dissipate and the final verdict about the Clinton presidency will be rendered in the cold light of dispassionate scholarship. If that light focuses on Hayden's text, it will show a presidency marked by superb style and acrobatic political flexibility but short on principled actions and sorely lacking in lasting substantive political achievements.

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Al-Jazeera: How the Free Arab News Network Scooped the World and Changed the Middle East by Mohammed el-Nawawy and Adel Iskandar. Boulder, CO, Westview, 2002. 228 pp. \$24.00.

For decades, the Arab world was forced to rely on national presses that were often monitored or controlled by authoritarian regimes or Western media, BBC, CNN, etc. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of Arab newspapers and satellite television stations. None has been more successful nor more controversial than al Jazeera. As Americans post-September 11 struggled with the questions, "Why do they hate us?" and "Why is anti-Americanism so widespread?" few realized that a powerful source of al Jazeera's success was its graphic coverage of the second intifada or Palestinian uprising. Arabs and Muslims across the world could have their morning cup of coffee or evening dinner and see live reports from Israel-Palestine or other parts of the Muslim world, often conveying a news coverage absent in the American media.