Soon after he was elected president, Bill Clinton began taping conversations with his old friend, Taylor Branch, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of the trilogy "America in the King Years."

Designed to catch the president "framing issues, telling stories and thinking out loud," the secret project continued throughout Clinton's eight years in office.

For the book, Branch draws on the detailed notes he took after each session (the president retains exclusive access to the recordings, which he hid, at first, in his sock drawer) to provide a riveting and revealing portrait of one of the most charismatic, complex and controversial figures in American politics.

Because the president's comments were often self-serving, and his interlocutor anything but objective, "The Clinton Tapes" is best understood not as a balanced interpretation based on a wide array of sources, but as "raw material" for histories yet to be written.

The book doesn't shed much new light on Clinton's domestic and foreign policies. And, because White House lawyers forbade Branch to discuss "that woman, Ms. Lewinsky," with the president to prevent their conversations from being subpoenaed, it doesn't add much to our knowledge of the scandal.

It is, however, filled with pungent -- and partisan -- assessments of politics and politicians. The difference between the two parties, Clinton contends, is that the Democrats sell access while the Republicans sell control. Business people, he adds, are "willing to pay a premium" for the latter.

Convinced that his Republican rivals for the presidency in 1996 didn't have "any tall" (a Southernism for stature and command), Clinton has some surprising favorites among his fellow Democrats.

His top wild-card candidate for presidential candidate Al Gore's running-mate in 2000, for example, was Barbara Mikulski, the 5-foot-tall, feisty, frumpy U.S. senator from Maryland.

With a knack for dramatizing the everyday implications to legislation, she is the person with whom he'd want to share a foxhole.

At its best, Branch's book humanizes the president and the presidency. When Clinton did not attend the economic summit in Japan in 1995 because of the "shutdown" of the American government in a budget impasse, Branch reveals that Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama was furious.

Gore recommended a quick visit to make amends, warning that Murayama faced economic stagnation, corruption scandals and resentment toward America over the rape of a young girl by three G.I.s.

The president demurred. Hillary would have to join him, he explained, and the couple simply would not leave Chelsea during...
junior-year midterms, the most pressure packed events in high school.

Throughout the project, which included 79 sessions, Branch wonders whether he and Clinton had failed to draw a line "between necessary rapport, critical prodding and wasted time." Would future generations welcome their "informalities, wish for more specialized rigor on NAFTA or NATO, or not really care?"

Some, no doubt, will care. And they should. All too typically, Branch allows Clinton to prattle on in defense of his pardon of Marc Rich (indicted for tax fraud, the billionaire had lived in luxury for 20 years in Switzerland, evading extradition). He does not challenge Clinton's denial that Rich's ex-wife, a donor to his presidential library, influenced his decision or the president's preposterous analogies to Gerald Ford's preemptive pardon of Richard Nixon and George H. W. Bush's pardon of Caspar Weinberger, the secretary of defense under Ronald Reagan, indicted in the Iran-Contra affair.

In the end, though, it may not matter all that much. As Branch concludes, Bill Clinton "had lived the politics." How he wrestled with the history is "up to the rest of us."

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