Book review: Political journalist takes partisan look at Bill Clinton's second act

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By Glenn C. Altschuler

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, some commentators in the mass media contrasted the initial “deer in the headlights” response of George W. Bush with the instinctive leadership of Bill Clinton. Mr. Clinton’s detractors, however, vowed to find new opportunities to malign the former president. “If we members of The Vast Right Wing Conspiracy don’t get back to our daily routine of obsessive Clinton-bashing,” a writer in The National Review declared, half-seriously, “then the terrorists will have won.”

According to political journalist Joe Conason, he needn’t have worried. Mr. Clinton’s old enemies, he argues, have never “tired of knocking him around.” And in retirement, “they discovered, he was an easier, more vulnerable target.”

In “Man of the World,” Mr. Conason (the author of “Big Lies: The Right-Wing Propaganda Machine and How It Distorts the Truth” and with Gene Lyons “The Hunting of the President: The Ten-Year Campaign to Destroy Bill Clinton,” tries to set the record straight. The vast majority of the allegations against Bill (and Hillary) Clinton, he claims, are false.

“Most of the reporting” in his book, Mr. Conason indicates, is based on interviews with Mr. Clinton, his present and former colleagues, and Clinton Foundation documents. The result is a partisan defense of “The Man From Hope” that some will dismiss as spin but also a source of useful information about his post-presidential political and philanthropic activities.

Mr. Conason documents the remarkably successful fundraising campaign undertaken by Mr. Clinton and former President George H.W. Bush in the wake of the tsunami in Indonesia and the earthquake in Haiti. In 2002, Mr. Conason points out, about 70,000 people in less developed countries (outside of Brazil) were getting HIV/AIDS medications that kept them alive; by 2012, more than 6 million patients were being treated, about half of them through agreements negotiated by the Clinton HIV/AIDS Initiative. And the Clinton Foundation also launched a substantial effort to eliminate malaria, which kills...
nearly a half million people a year, many of them African children.

Equally important, Mr. Conason provides a detailed (and convincing) “there is no there there” response to critics of the effectiveness, budget, transparency and potential conflicts of interest of the foundation. Revelations about annual deficits or how little money was doled out in grants, he makes clear, are based on misunderstandings of how the nonprofit operates and cash flows are reported.

Surprisingly, because he acknowledges that the Clintons know “that even their smallest missteps would be magnified and distorted,” and indicates that Hillary “seemed unable to comprehend” how critics on the right and left would use her “buck-raking” speeches on Wall Street, Mr. Conason at times appears too quick to downplay concerns about multimillion dollar contributions from foreign governments to the foundation and the appearance of “pay to play access” while Mrs. Clinton was secretary of state.

And, at times, “Man of the World” seems a bit petty. When Jesse Dylan, the oldest of Bob Dylan’s children, put up his own money to produce the “Yes We Can” music video in 2008, Mr. Conason tells us, Barack Obama did not even thank him. A few years later, the Obama White House refused to permit photos of Mr. Clinton with the two Americans he had rescued from imprisonment in North Korea.

Mr. Conason would not deny, I suspect, that Bill Clinton is a deeply flawed person — and public figure. That said, “Man of the World” provides a compelling portrait of a “joyful, energetic, ambitious, compassionate” man, possessed by his philanthropic work, more politically active (for good and ill) than other former presidents, and, along with his wife, “held to harsher standards” by the media and subjected to distortion, innuendo and lies by their enemies.

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