

Hard Choices

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Hard Choices details Hillary Rodham Clinton's four years as Secretary of State, from 2009 to 2013. The bulk of the text covers the major foreign policy challenges or 'hard choices' she faced during her time in office, organised thematically, starting with the 'pivot' to Asia, the withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan, the 'reset' with Russia, the Arab Spring, and the 'wicked problem' of Syria, via China, Burma, Pakistan, Europe, Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Libya, Iran, and Gaza. These central chapters focus on the intricacies of diplomacy and are similar in structure: she opens with a vignette, explains the challenge she faced, how she dealt with it (usually successfully), ending by noting what she learned from her experience. Bookended between these main chapters, Clinton offers other insights into the difficulties she faced in the immediate aftermath of her unsuccessful 2008 presidential campaign, and at the end of the book, pre-emptively sets up her stances on key domestic issues for the 2016 presidential race, specifically climate change, jobs, energy policy, development, digital diplomacy, and human rights (at the time of publication, in 2015, Clinton had not officially declared her candidacy).

The main challenge of reading *Hard Choices* is that Clinton does not consistently utilise history to promote one singular viewpoint or position throughout its pages. Instead, she uses pertinent historical examples to bolster particular arguments. On the one hand then, Clinton explains that the United States had learned lessons from history 'the hard way in Iraq', that it is 'one thing to remove a dictator and another altogether to help a competent and credible government take his place' (p. 302). And yet on the other hand, Clinton also argues that:

When America is absent, extremism takes root, our interests suffer, and our security at home is threatened. ... Retreat is not the answer; it won't make the world a safer place, and it's just not in our country's DNA (p. 316).

Whereas in the first example, Clinton offers a fairly standard interpretation of lessons that the United States might draw from the Iraq War (entrenching democracy in a former dictatorship is very hard indeed, and by implication, the United States ought to at least have a solid exit strategy), in the second, Clinton appears to be arguing the reverse (that the history of the country, taken *in toto*, demonstrates that the reach of the United States ought to know no bounds). Whilst Clinton is hardly alone in her American exceptionalism,

such comments make *Hard Choices* a standard campaign biography, rather a historical work *per se*.

Contradictions also emerge where Clinton discusses specific examples from recent history, i.e. her own activities at the State Department. In one chapter, Clinton intimates her distaste for politicisation by recounting her resistance to the suggestions of 'officials' who sought to avoid timing efforts to capture Osama bin Laden in May 2011 with the annual White House Correspondents' Dinner, because it might look bad if the President was telling jokes at the time or had to leave post haste. Clinton felt that the mission ought to go ahead when circumstances dictated that the effort might be most successful, dinner or no. In the final event, weather interceded, and the event was not a major issue in deciding the timings of the operation, but Clinton tells us that she may have used a 'four-letter word' to register her disapproval that politics was even a consideration (p. 182). Meanwhile, in another chapter, she demonstrates her own solid abilities to utilise the symbolic resonances of history, as evidenced through her choice to give a speech on LGBT rights in Geneva in December 2011, on the anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, rather than in the United States during Pride Month, as this would not be 'newsworthy'. (Ever the pragmatist, Clinton also notes that she was going to be in Europe at that time anyway (p. 481).)

Whilst one might argue that the above examples demonstrates only a politician's adroit use of history to advance a particular set of values (the first case signified politicisation for reprehensible ends, i.e. putting politics before American lives, whilst the second was to achieve human rights for all), on other occasions, Clinton avoids offering her own point of view. *Hard Choices* might have provided the author with the opportunity to do exactly that, to probe those 'hard choices' that foreign policymakers must make, and to examine the boundaries of American power. But Clinton does not fully address this problem; when she is asked what might be termed 'hard questions' by a group of university students in Lahore, namely:

Why does America always support India instead of Pakistan? What can America do to help with energy shortages and poor education in Pakistan, and why, again, does the aid package come with so many strings attached? Why are Pakistani exchange students in America stereotyped as terrorists? How can we trust America when you've let us down so many times before?

Clinton's answer is to emphasise that it is important to look to the future, rather than to focus on 'the rear-view mirror'. She explains that she 'tried to provide full and respectful answers' to these questions, but we are not told what these answers were. Here, Clinton had the opportunity to address the historical record, to analyse the United States' historical relations with India and Pakistan, and to offer a focussed analysis of the dilemmas that American foreign policymakers face on a daily basis. The pointed questions posed by these students strike at the very heart of the problem of the legitimacy of American global power, and the 'hard choices' the next United States President will have to make, and yet Clinton does not provide any answers. One might also note her disavowal of history here: on this occasion, when faced with an antagonistic audience, it is better to let bygones be bygones, to 'go forward', rather than to turn to the past to learn lessons for the future (p. 173).

Similarly difficult are those other places where Clinton avoids historical analysis, such as in her conclusion to a chapter on the freedom of the internet, where she notes her desire to 'make sure that the United States was leading the way on the frontiers of human rights in the 21st century, just as we had in the 20th' (p. 464). Here, Clinton needed to take into consideration opposing viewpoints and provide historical evidence to prove her case. Whilst the United States may well be the world's leading promoter of human rights both now and in the previous century, she has not definitively proved this is the case. To be fair, on other occasions, Clinton *does* offer a more nuanced account, such as in her discussion of climate change, where she argues that the United States must do more and lead by example because 'we're ... the second-largest emitter of carbon dioxide' (p. 424).

Whilst *Hard Choices* may not offer solid historical analyses of highly controversial foreign and domestic policy issues, it does provide a good insight into Clinton's understanding of her place in history. On her desire to 'knit gender issues into every aspect of U.S. foreign policy', for instance, Clinton tactfully remarks

that ‘institutionalising reforms is difficult’ in any bureaucracy – a polite way of flagging up the difficulties she experienced when faced so often with being the only woman in a meeting of senior officials (p. 476). But whilst Clinton only mentions *en passant* the double standards to which women in public life are subjected – and, by implication, her belief that such problems will only be resolved gradually – her discussions of historical figures, especially Eleanor Roosevelt, demonstrate an awareness of the important role one individual might play in effecting positive change. For example, Clinton remarks that:

... if you choose to be in public life, remember Eleanor Roosevelt’s advice and grow skin as thick as a rhinoceros ... learn to take criticism seriously but not personally

the point being that Clinton has learned this lesson from history well; to ride out the political storms and to persevere in the face of adversity (p. 168). Meanwhile, on other occasions, Clinton skilfully utilises her femininity, such as when she writes joyously of the time she lost her shoe on the steps of the Élysée Palace in Paris and her ‘Prince Charming’ (French President Nicolas Sarkozy) helped her retrieve her balance and her dignity (p. 192). Such anecdotes rather successfully demonstrate Clinton’s warmth and likability; indeed, her humanity and humour are apparent throughout the book. Clearly, Clinton has given much thought to the shaping of her own public image as a female politician in a predominantly male foreign policy establishment.

Clinton’s comments on her role within the Obama White House are also of considerable interest, again, for what these sections tell us about how Clinton wishes to portray herself. Silences speak volumes here, for she generally avoids attacking any individual by name – it is instead ‘some in the White House’ who cause her problems – but by reading between the lines, it is possible to gauge her true feelings about, if not always the names of, the specific individuals involved (p. 286). On those occasions where names are disclosed – such as the time when the President called her to express ‘unhappiness’ about ‘mixed messages’ emanating from the administration on the subject of the Arab Spring – such disagreements are depicted as fleeting and transitory; they are briefly mentioned, then Clinton moves on (p. 289). In her recounting of events, the Obama White House exists as a distant presence, often at the end of a telephone line, and away from the space where the central business of foreign policymaking is done – under her direction at the State Department. If not quite hands off, Obama is depicted as a managerial President who gauges the views of administration officials by going ‘around the table asking each of us for our recommendations’, and carefully, cautiously probing every piece of evidence before coming to a final decision (p. 119). Clinton usually gets her own way, but when she does not, it is because ‘some of President Obama’s aides in the White House were swept up in the drama’, and ultimately won the President over by appealing to his ‘idealism’ (pp. 283, 287). By implication, Clinton would not act in this way; she would be quite hawkish, a strong woman who would stand up to leaders such as Russian President Vladimir Putin who in her view, only understands American ‘resolve’ (p. 215).

In many respects then, *Hard Choices* is a political memoir in the traditional vein of campaign literature, interspersed with historical examples, rather than a book with an explicitly historical bent. That said, in demonstrating Clinton’s mastery of situations, *Hard Choices* portrays Clinton as a politician who is fascinated by detail, and skilled in the process of utilising historical examples to support her case. The work will be of great interest to political historians, political scientists, and public policy specialists, particularly those interested in the political uses of history. For those looking to assess the applicability of foreign policy concepts to real world situations or the intricacies of the Obama administration’s decision-making processes, *Hard Choices* also offers insights.

Other reviews:

Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jun/12/hard-choices-hillary-clinton-review-buttoned-up-revealing>

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Telegraph

[http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/10911623/Hard-Choices-by-Hillary-Rodham-](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/10911623/Hard-Choices-by-Hillary-Rodham-Clinton-review-a-calculating-tome.html)

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New Republic

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New York Review of Books

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2014/09/25/hillary-clinton-hard-choices/> [5]

Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/hard-choices-by-hillary-clinton-book-review-not-racy-or-self-deprecating-but-blessed-with-an-instant-9529193.html> [6]

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