Five reasons Hillary Clinton’s new book is worth reading—and three reasons it’s worth critiquing

What Happened matters. Here’s why.

by Elizabeth Palmer

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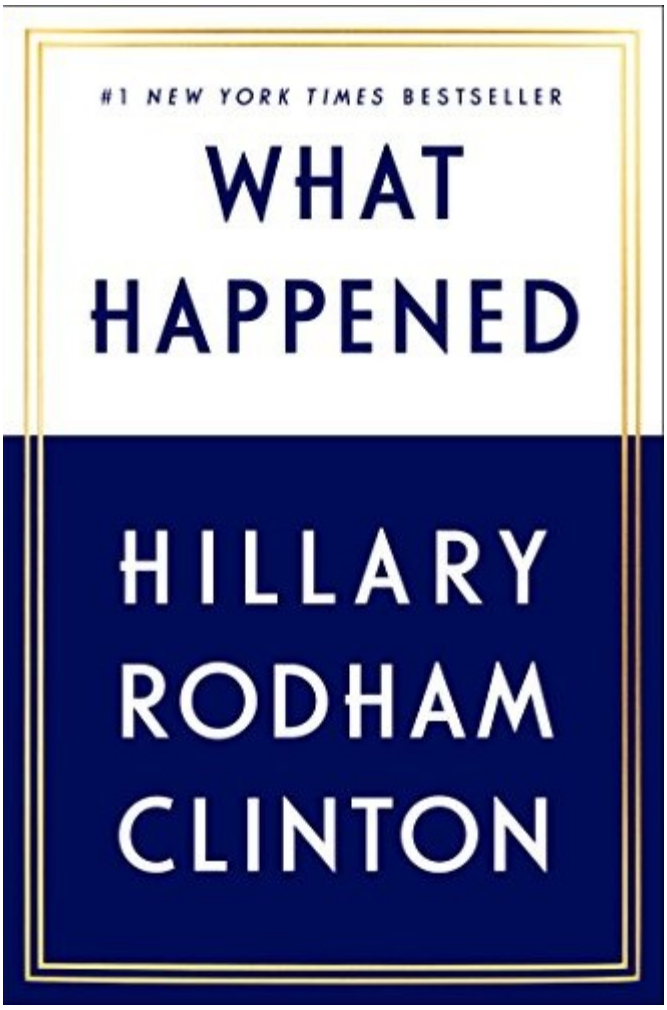
In Review



What Happened

by Hillary Rodham Clinton

Simon & Schuster

1. Vulnerability matters

Hillary Rodham Clinton admits that she's known for being careful with her words and guarded with her emotions, and there is a sense in this book that she's finally letting it all out. "In the past," she writes, "I've often felt I had to be careful in public, like I was up on a wire without a net. Now I'm letting down my guard." But Clinton *isn't* manifesting a sudden conversion to honesty in this book, as some reviewers have suggested. She's modeling vulnerability.

That's important for two reasons. First, when we see our most famous politicians as human—rather than as abstract power-filled entities who we either put on a pedestal or assign to the deliciously imagined hell we think they deserve—we're more likely to realize that *we too* have some agency in politics. Second, it's hard to work against a culture that idolizes bravado, domination, and ego without living into the theological truth that there's power in weakness.

2. Policy matters

When my five-year old daughter Anna learned that Donald Trump had won the election, she asked me: "will he kill people?" I thought she was too young to hear that every President makes decisions that kill people, so I responded that Trump wouldn't directly kill anyone but his policies would hurt a lot of people. I stressed that our family would be safe but a lot of people wouldn't, so we had a new job of helping to protect others.

I've thought a lot about this conversation in the months since then. Because every President makes decisions that will save some lives and end others, policy details are crucial. But how to weigh these details against each other isn't self-evident. Some Trump voters have talked about the tiny, vulnerable lives their vote will potentially save, as they helped get an anti-abortion justice on the Supreme Court. But they aren't talking about how their vote will potentially stamp out other people's lives by increasing white supremacist violence, mass incarceration, the profligacy of guns, serious poverty that often correlates to race, deportations of people who seek refuge, a culture in which sexual assault is tolerated, anti-Semitism, and climate change denial.

Clinton talks about these issues. I don’t agree with her on every policy point, but she’s articulate and she argues in a reasonable way. I’m no policy wonk, but my favorite chapters of the book are the wonkiest ones. They model what Clinton is so good at and what we all should be doing: working to come up with specific solutions to our political problems that minimize harm and maximize justice.

3. Pragmatism matters

Against populists—on the right and on the left—who accuse her of embodying the political establishment, Clinton makes a case for pragmatism. She tells stories of how she and Bill stayed awake all night deliberating about whether it was ethical to push forward a bill that had been compromised by the process of working across the partisan divide. From the crime bill to welfare reform, the concessions Bill made to win over the Republicans are easy to critique in hindsight, and Clinton acknowledges these critiques. At the time, she argues, she and Bill believed they were doing more good than harm by moving forward with the legislation.

Clinton is honest about the role her pragmatism played in the election: “When people are angry and looking for someone to blame, they don’t want to hear your ten-point plan.” There’s room in our political system both for strong emotions and for a ten-point plan. But emotions (or revolutions) without an achievable ten-point plan are unlikely to make much progress in untangling the complex roots of injustice in which we’re all complicit.

4. Service matters

Clinton has been a public servant for most of her adult life. Admittedly, she’s a very wealthy (by most Americans’ standards) public servant who has Secret Service agents following her everywhere, admits that she’s rarely driven a car in the past 25 years, and spent many mornings for several years ordering room service (scrambled egg whites with vegetables and fresh jalapeños, in case you were wondering). But her vocation has consisted almost entirely of serving the public, often in unglamorous ways.

Reading about Clinton’s student activism, her work with the Children’s Defense Fund (including one story about going undercover at a private school in Alabama to collect evidence on racist admission policies), her advocacy as a politician’s spouse, and her work as Secretary of State reminded me that service takes many forms. Clinton recalls learning when she was very young that God calls us to be “doers of the word,

not hearers only," which means "stepping outside the pews, rolling up our sleeves," and doing as much good as we can for as many people as possible. When the extent of suffering and injustice in the world feels paralyzing, it's important to be reminded of this calling.

5. Representation matters

In her chapter on being a woman in politics, Clinton cites the Pew study in which fewer than a fifth of Republicans said they'd hoped to see a female President in their lifetime, as well as a 2008 study in which more than a quarter of the population expressed anger or upset feelings at the mention of a female President. Men and women of both parties are implicitly biased against women in politics. Yet, as Clinton puts it,

> We need our politics to resemble our people. When the people who run our cities, states, and country overwhelmingly look a certain way (say, white and male) and overwhelmingly have a shared background (wealthy, privileged) we end up with laws and policies that don't come close to addressing the realities of Americans' lives.

In a memorable moment about a year ago, Anna asked me, "Mommy, who is Bill Clinton?" As I composed an answer in my head, I saw the light bulb turn on in hers. "Oh," she continued. "Is he Hillary's husband?" Anna won't be old enough to vote for 12 more years, but when she is, I have no doubt that voting for a woman as president won't feel strange to her. I know this not only because Clinton (Hillary, that is) was Anna's first role model who ran for President, but also because when she recently caught her mother sneakily reading a book underneath the dinner table during a long standoff over the eating of vegetables, Anna's first response wasn't "hey, why are you breaking the rule about no books at dinner?" It was "why is Hillary Clinton's picture on the back of that book you're reading?"

6. Black lives matter

Clinton spends much of the book unpacking the nuances of the political decisions made by white people—James Comey, Bernie Sanders, Jill Stein, the voting bloc that's come to be known as "the white working class," and Vladimir Putin, to name just a few. Race comes up on occasion: when she tells stories of meeting with the mothers of unarmed black boys killed by police, analyzes the crime bill, and ponders

whether economic anxiety or bigotry drove her defeat. (Spoiler: “ultimately this is a false choice that misses the complexity of the situation.”) But overall, the book feels very white—and not in an entirely self-conscious way.

To Clinton’s credit, she doesn’t try to speak for black voters—she lets their words stand for themselves. “If you look like me, your life doesn’t have worth,” says one young black activist. And Gwen Carr, the mother of Eric Garner, explains to Clinton:

> Some people say that we’re racist because we say ‘Black lives matter.’ We know that *all* lives matter, but we need people to understand that black lives matter *also*. So treat us as such. Don’t just treat us like common animals. We’re not. We’re American citizens, and we deserve fair treatment.

These are some of the most powerful statements in the book. If millions of white people read a bestseller by a white person, find in it a few amazing quotes by black women, and really take those words to heart, will some good have been done? Probably. But will white privilege be upended, white supremacy defeated, and reparations accomplished? Not even close.

7. Currency matters

I don’t mean money. I mean contemporaneity; being current. It’s not Clinton’s fault that it’s impossible to keep up-to-date with the (outrageously egotistical) twists and (abominably unethical) turns of our current President. And it’s not her fault that before the ink was dry, some of her statements were out-of-date. It doesn’t hinder readability, but it does mean that this is a book of its moment. If you’re going to read it, read it now. Some of the small details are already beginning to feel obsolete.

8. Discomfort matters

Surprisingly, Clinton’s book made me feel better about the election. She doesn’t wear rose-colored glasses. But her systematic exploration of all the factors that worked against her (including her own shortcomings as a candidate)—combined with her frequent reminders that she won the popular vote by nearly three million—made me feel less anxious about the fact that so many Americans voted for Trump. When she writes “it’s possible to appeal to all parts of our big, diverse nation,” I want to believe it. When she describes revisiting Henri Nouwen’s *The Return of the Prodigal*

Son in the days after the election and working toward gratitude for the humbling experience of her defeat, I feel comforted.

I'm not sure this is entirely a good thing. If reading a book helps me set aside my anxiety about the election and its aftermath, does that mean I might stop feeling driven toward advocacy for those who can't so easily set aside their anxieties—refugees, Dreamers, LGBTQ folks, black and brown people, people with pre-existing medical conditions, elderly people without secure housing? Comfort doesn't always turn into complacency, but the risk is always there. Describing how she got through the days after the election, Clinton uplifts resilience, the healing power of yoga and wine, and friendship. Not that I have anything against wine or resilience, but I found myself unsettled by how hopeful I felt toward the end of this book.

Then I realized that my hope was mostly grounded in Clinton's reading of Paul Tillich. After the election, she returned to one of her favorite sermons, "You Are Accepted," and realized that the alienation Tillich identifies, the meaninglessness and despair of the postwar years, "could just as easily be America in 2016." She continues, "How are we supposed to love our neighbors when we feel like this?" Later in the chapter, Clinton asks herself a question that's more to the point: "Do I feel empathy for Trump voters?" (Spoiler: "It's complicated.") She concludes:

> What we need more than anything at this moment in America is what you might call 'radical empathy' . . . [which] means more than trying to reach across divides of race, class, politics, and building bridges *between* communities. We have to fill the emotional and spiritual voids that have opened up *within* communities, within families, and within ourselves as individuals. That can be even more difficult, but it's essential. There's grace to be found in those relationships.

If I'm going to stubbornly hold on to my discomfort—which I believe God is, at least for now, calling me to do—maybe it's okay for me also to glimpse a vision of the vast, unending grace that we can experience even in this broken world. Maybe then I will have the fortitude to follow Clinton's counsel on the last page: "Keep going."