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BOOK REVIEW

High Hopes: The Clinton Presidency and the Politics of Ambition. By Stanley A. Renshon. New York: New York University Press, 1996. 402 pp. \$24.95 cloth.

In *High Hopes: The Clinton Presidency and the Politics of Ambition*, Stanley Renshon continues his influential work in political personality and character. Along with Renshon's concurrently published *The Psychological Assessment of Presidential Candidates* (New York University Press, 1996), *High Hopes* is an important addition to the growing body of literature in this area. These books showcase the merits of dual training in political science and psychological assessment; the author writes authoritatively as a political scientist with a thorough understanding of the presidency, and perceptively as a psychoanalyst with keen insight into the psychological dynamics that shape presidential performance. The present review focuses on *High Hopes*.

High Hopes has five parts. It starts with a general introduction outlining a rationale and context for a political-psychological study of President Clinton, followed, in the single-chapter "Part I: Presidents, Psychology, and the Public," by an examination of "the international, domestic, and psychological issues that faced Clinton upon taking office." "Part II: The Character of Bill Clinton" is a five-chapter analysis of the character of Bill Clinton based on "three primary elements" of presidential character, namely ambition, character integrity, and relatedness. "Part III: Growing Up, Coming of Age," also comprising five chapters, "explores experiences . . . critical to Bill Clinton's development." The two-chapter "Part IV: The Political Consequences of Character" deals with "the relationship between Clinton's psychology and his performance as president." Finally, "Part V: Conclusion" summarizes in a single chapter the major findings and examines their implications for a second term of the Clinton presidency.

The book also contains an appendix on conceptual and methodological issues in the study of presidential character, a useful addition for individuals contemplating scholarly work in this area.

The thesis of Renshon's book is that a president's character serves as the foundation for leadership effectiveness. The goal of the book is to examine the psychology of Bill Clinton and its development and influence, using "psychological

theories of character and personality, theories of presidential leadership and performance, and theories of public psychology” (pp. xii-xiii).

According to Renshon, the international context of the Clinton presidency is the challenge of defining America’s role in the post-Cold War world (p. 20). The domestic context, in turn, is one in which “the link between presidential candidates and their political personas, on the one hand, and party ideology and policy, on the other, has become attenuated” (p. 22). According to Renshon, a major consequence of this emerging trend in American politics is that political parties are losing much of their ability to serve as filters for evaluating presidential candidates (p. 21).

Concerning the immediate situation with reference to the Clinton presidency, Renshon identifies the “central issue . . . [as being] a decline in confidence and trust in public leadership and institutions” (p. 24). In Renshon’s view, the decline of public trust is the “basic public dilemma” for the Clinton presidency (pp. 30–31). To the extent that Renshon is correct in his analysis, the ease of Clinton’s 1996 re-election victory in the face of personal character and public trust issues raised by the Dole campaign stands as a monument to the political skills of Bill Clinton. In evaluating the Clinton presidency and explaining “the puzzling discrepancies between . . . [Clinton’s] talents and performance,” Renshon believes it is necessary to examine the character of the president and his ability to deal with the “basic public dilemma” (p. 33).

Following Allport (1937), Renshon draws a distinction between personality and character. Whereas personality denotes the surface qualities of observable behavior and mental processes, character refers to the more deeply embedded, consolidated, enduring “core of the person’s psychology” serving as “the basic foundation upon which personality structures develop and operate” (p. 38). Renshon conducts his psychological assessment primarily at the deeper characterological level of analysis.

The major theoretical influence in Renshon’s model of character is the psychoanalytic self-theory of Heinz Kohut (see, for example, Kohut, 1977, pp. 49, 172–173, 177–186). Renshon’s domain of ambition corresponds to the “nuclear ambitions” pole of the “nuclear self” posited by Kohut, and his domain of character integrity to the “nuclear ideals” pole (though the latter component is more broadly conceived than Kohutian self-theory to accommodate the ego psychology of, primarily, Erik Erikson). Renshon’s domain of relatedness is rooted in object-relations theory, including the Kohutian “self-object” construct, but extends to the social and interpersonal insights of Karen Horney, Harry Stack Sullivan, and others. Finally, Kohut’s notion of the integration of the constituents of the bipolar self to form an “energetic tension arc (from nuclear ambitions via nuclear *talents and skills* to nuclear idealized goals)” (Kohut, 1977, p. 178; italics added) is evident in Renshon’s conceptualization of character style as the “operational enactment of character.” Thus, in Renshon’s model, character style refers to “a set of stable psychological orientations” that

emerge from “the specific ways in which the three basic character elements come together and are linked with the individual’s personal *skills and resources*” (p. 47; italics added).

As conceived by Renshon, ambition “gives rise to a sense of self-confidence and personal effectiveness” (p. 39); character integrity denotes one’s “capacity for fidelity to one’s ideals . . . [in working] to fulfill one’s ambitions” (p. 41); and relatedness “concerns one’s stance toward relationships with others and the psychology that shapes it” (p. 45). Drawing upon an impressive array of sources, Renshon proceeds to assess, in terms of these three domains, the character of Bill Clinton, which he summarizes as:

- (1) his substantial level of ambition; (2) his immense self-confidence, coupled with a somewhat idealized view of his fidelity to the ideals he espouses; and (3) a distinct and powerful turn toward others in his interpersonal relationships, motivated by his strong need for validation of his somewhat idealized view of himself. (p. 50)

Renshon complements his characterological assessment with an analysis of Clinton’s “character-based personality traits” (p. 119), which may be summarized as follows: Clinton is persistent, impatient, highly achievement motivated, competitive, has a need to be viewed as special, wants to “have it both ways,” is willing to take substantial risks, and tends to avoid responsibility for his mistakes (pp. 120–141).

Renshon follows his assessment of Clinton’s character and central personality traits with a detailed analysis of Clinton’s developmental history, with chapters on the character of Virginia Kelley and of Hillary Rodham Clinton.

The author suggests that political leaders should not be evaluated purely on the basis of their “concrete accomplishments” (p. 245), which, in the case of Clinton, are substantial. To Renshon, the core of presidential performance is “personal, policy, and political *judgment*. . . . [and] quality of . . . *political leadership*” (p. 248). He gives Clinton low marks on both counts and points to character deficiencies that have prevented Clinton from measuring up to his potential.

Finally, with reference to a second term of office, Renshon concludes that the issue of loyalty to any convictions that do not serve his own interests “is perhaps the most basic question for the Clinton presidency” (p. 306).

With the publication of *High Hopes* Stanley Renshon has made a significant contribution to the literature in the field of political psychology. It is a thoroughly researched, well-documented record of Clinton’s psychosocial development, his character and personality, his 1992 presidential campaign, and the first three years of his first term as president. More important, it sets a standard for the qualitative assessment of political character and personality and reaffirms the value of this approach.

A particular strength of Renshon’s approach is the comprehensiveness of his model, which accounts not only for character and personality, but also for

presidential leadership and performance, and for “public psychology.” With reference to the latter, Renshon’s analysis focuses on aspects of political psychology that M. Brewster Smith (1968) conceptualized as the historical milieu, the social environment, and the immediate situation. A potential limitation of the characterological part of the model is its relatively narrow basis in psychoanalytic theory, most notably the self-psychological reformulation of Heinz Kohut. The triadic characterological scheme of ambition, character integrity, and relatedness, in particular, may be overparsimonious. In my opinion, however, this is offset by Renshon’s connection of these psychological building blocks to a variety of observable character-based traits. Furthermore, precisely because of its qualitative nature, there is much value in the theory-driven aspects of the model. Thus, rather than regarding its theoretical orientation as a limitation, I consider it a challenge to other scholars to formulate alternative theoretical frameworks for the characterological component of Renshon’s model, which I view as highly stimulating and of considerable heuristic value.

I should note, in closing, that readers unfamiliar with Kohutian psychology may find problematic the prominence of the narcissism construct evident in Renshon’s assessment of Bill Clinton, Virginia Kelley, and Hillary Rodham Clinton. Concerning Virginia Kelley, for instance, Renshon writes: “A central feature of her personality was her narcissism” (p. 162). The author, no doubt, is aware of this difficulty: “Though often overused as a label, ‘narcissistic’ nonetheless best describes Kelley” (p. 173). From a more broadly clinical psychodiagnostic perspective, however, I think the picture painted by Renshon is that of an outgoing, gregarious, even histrionic woman. As for Bill Clinton, my own reading of his personality is that he is highly confident and self-asserting, which is consistent with the narcissistic label. However, he also seems gregarious and other-directed, which — though compatible with Renshon’s analysis of his strong need for self-validation — is inconsistent with the nonchalant, haughty, disdainful qualities of narcissistic personality as depicted in the nonanalytic clinical literature (see, for example, Millon, 1996, pp. 396–408).

These observations aside, *High Hopes* is an essential addition to the library of any serious student of political personality or the modern presidency. It is unquestionably the most comprehensive, most coherent work currently available on the character of President Clinton.

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