The Academy of Political Science

475 Riverside Drive · Suite 1274 · New York, New York 10115-1274

(212) 870-2500 · FAX: (212) 870-2202 · aps@psqonline.org · http://www.psqonline.org

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All Too Human: A Political Education *by George Stephanopoulos. Boston, Little, Brown, and Co., 456 pp. $27.95.*

The English have a saying inspired by soccer: "Always play the ball and not the man." The meaning is obvious. People's works should be judged on their merits, not on the basis of the personal qualities of whomever produced them. Richard Wagner was undoubtedly a beast, but he wrote great music. The saying's application to book reviewing is equally obvious: always judge the book, never its author.

Most U.S. reviewers of *All Too Human* seem to have violated this norm. Stephanopoulos was variously excoriated for having become a television pundit so soon after leaving the White House, for having betrayed so many White House secrets, and for having bitten the hand—President Clinton's—that had so recently fed him. The book itself was largely forgotten.

But *All Too Human* is one of the finest volumes of political memoirs to appear on either side of the Atlantic during this century. It is subtle and acute, beautifully written and beautifully constructed. It will be read with pleasure in a hundred years' time. Not the least of its many virtues is that Stephanopoulos, unlike most memoir writers, eschews irrelevant detail. Facts are deployed instead of merely being accumulated. Often they are deployed to comic effect, as when the author describes how he tried in the lobby of a mock-Tudor hotel to suppress one of the many scandals that threatened to engulf Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign: "Under the gaze of the suits of armor posted by the registration desk, I tried to pick off the journalists one by one" (p. 58).

Most memoir writers are either openly vain or else attempt to conceal their vanity behind a mask of mock modesty. Stephanopoulos is the opposite. *All Too Human* is an essay in self-abnegation, almost self-flaggelation. Credit for success is given to others. Responsibility for failure the author clutches to his own bosom. His first White House press conference was a fiasco, and when it was over, "I hustled out of there," he writes, "with my head down like a rookie knocked from the mound in the first inning of his first game" (p. 113).

He was conscious from the beginning that there were two sides to his nature. One George Stephanopoulos was a traditional liberal Democrat, inspired by altruism, anxious to do the right thing, reluctant to compromise; the other was a hired gun, ruthless, focused, not altogether honest, capable of cutting corners. "I wanted," he says, with his usual candor, "to do good *and* do well"(p. 15). Elsewhere he describes "restrained idealism and raw ambition" as "the pistons" of his character (p. 24).

The trouble was that as time went on and the flaws in Clinton's own character began to emerge, the hired gun in Stephanopoulos began to take over—or, more precisely, the conflicts in him between restrained idealism and raw ambition became increasingly intense. The pressures of the job also got to him. The results were the loss of a girl friend ("exactly what I deserved" [p. 135]), anxiety, insomnia, hives, depression (for which he sought therapy), and what seem to have been growing feelings of self-disgust. Sensibly, he got out.

All Too Human is thus a human tale, wryly and often movingly told; but it is also, of course, a political tale—a tale of politics at the court of King Bill. And Stephanopoulos is far more open than most former courtiers about the anxieties and maneuverings that have attended court politics everywhere and always. He feared leaving the White House, even for a few hours: "What if the president needs me? What if he doesn't?" (p. 188). *All Too Human* is thus not merely a haunting political memoir. It is a vivid evocation of politics as it is lived at the very highest level.

ANTHONY KING
University of Essex, England