

# Books

## Reviews



### Hard Choices

by Hillary Rodham Clinton

Simon & Schuster, 635pp, £20.00



Superficially, *Hard Choices* is a memoir of Hillary Clinton's spell as President Obama's Secretary of State between 2009 and 2013. So it's big, serious and as dry as dust, even by the standards of such

tomes by retired politicians.

But of course Clinton isn't a retired politician – far from it. So *Hard Choices* is also a 596-page job application. Ambition and determination ooze from every page. Its very nature says she will run in 2016.

The book is full of barely-coded messages about how being America's chief diplomat has prepared Candidate Clinton for the White House. They include: "I'm tough", "I can cut a deal", "I work hard" and "I'm

more right-wing than you think". Less convincing is "I have a sense of humour", although there are some amusing typos: the "cone of confidentiality" sounds intriguing – do you wear it or eat it?

Clinton devotes her longest chapter to a likely Achilles Heel for 2016 – the attack on the State Department compound in Benghazi, Libya, in which four diplomats, including US ambassador Chris Stevens, were killed. While taking "full responsibility", Clinton fiercely defends her department's handling of the incident. "I will not be part of a political slugfest on the backs of dead Americans," she writes. "Those who wish to politicise the tragedy will have to do so without me". It hints at a campaign strategy for 2016: don't apologise, stick to the facts, stay above the partisan fray.

One apology, though, was unavoidable. As long as Iraq is the wound that keeps on bleeding, Clinton will have to keep on apologising for "giving President Bush the benefit of the doubt" and voting for war in the Senate. "I should have stated my regret

sooner," she admits. "I wasn't alone in getting it wrong. But I still got it wrong. Plain and simple."

Her chapter on Russia looks to have been hastily rewritten as the Ukraine crisis broke. Clinton famously tried to thaw US-Russia relations by presenting Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov with a plastic 'Reset' button, but her attempts here to unravel the Russian enigma and read the complex mind of Vladimir Putin come to little. She tells us that Putin is "thin-skinned", "autocratic" and a poor listener, but she offers little insight into Russia's national interests or Putin's motives, beyond the rather crude observation that he is "fixated on reclaiming the Soviet Empire".

The portraits of other world leaders are mostly polite but not very illuminating. Nicholas Sarkozy could be "fun" and Angela Merkel possesses "steely determination", but ex-President Karzai of Afghanistan is "stubborn" and "thin-skinned". All Clinton offers about David Cameron is a slightly tart comment that Obama seemed to like him. Apparently, she much preferred William Hague.

**Ambition and determination ooze from every page**

What does emerge, strikingly but perhaps unwittingly, is the disconnect between Clinton's lavishly resourced department and the raw politics of the world's trouble spots. Shortly after US forces killed Osama Bin Laden inside his country, President Zardari of Pakistan phoned Clinton. "I am fighting for my life and for the future life of my children," Zardari pleaded. "I am fighting the people who killed the mother of my children." Clinton's "commiserations" and her promise that "a number of senior American officials were on their way to meet with him" can't have been much comfort, or much use.

Reviewed by Craig Ryan