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Bill Clinton's Book on Giving Misses the Key Issues

By Pablo Eisenberg

Bill Clinton, the former president, would like to change the world for the better by using his enormous talents and personality to persuade individuals, corporations, and governments to invest more money, skills, and time in projects that serve society. He has already made some notable strides in this direction through his William J. Clinton Foundation, his global efforts to ease the AIDS crisis in developing countries, and his advocacy on behalf of climate change.

Now he has written a book, *Giving*, which calls for all Americans, whether wealthy or of modest income, to join in his crusade to improve our environment and the condition of millions of people who are in desperate need. It is a noble effort and hopefully will inspire some people to give and volunteer more.

But it is not a particularly good or thoughtful book, reading more like the philanthropic equivalent of a political stump speech. Citing a number of social and economic problems, Mr. Clinton goes on to list what numerous individuals, mostly his rich pals and celebrities, have done to address these problems through major contributions and projects.

Bill and Melinda Gates, Warren Buffett, Oprah Winfrey, Lance Armstrong, Andre Agassi, Bono, and his business friends Ron Burkle and Rajat Gupta, all receive his praise as model givers. Many less-known individuals, such as Paul Farmer, founder of Partners in Health, and Bruce Charash, creator of Doc to Dock, a nonprofit group that provides medical supplies and equipment to health providers in Africa and the Middle East, also are mentioned in his long laundry list of noteworthy nonprofit groups and philanthropies. Fewer examples and a little more analysis might have made the book less boring, more alive.

It is not surprising that many of the examples he cites are connected with his personal efforts at the Clinton foundation and the two global-initiative sessions he sponsored for world leaders and businessmen, meetings which apparently drew major commitments of time and money from many givers, foundations, and governments. The book, after all, is a reflection of Mr. Clinton's experience, passions, and friendships. It is not a serious examination of philanthropy — its strengths and weaknesses — the relationship between government and philanthropy, or the danger of an increasing number of billionaires

controlling the expenditures of hundreds of billions of tax-deductible dollars a year without any public input or much, if any, accountability.

In stressing the importance of giving, Mr. Clinton does not limit his discussion to money contributions. He discusses the significance of volunteering, the contribution of ideas — organizations like Ashoka that are stimulating the development of social entrepreneurs throughout the world — the lending of skills to development efforts, and the need for corporations, governments, and nonprofit groups to reorganize markets in order to make changes that are both profitable and in the public interest. The latter is perhaps the most thought-provoking section of the book; it is a pity he didn't devote more space to this intriguing possibility.

Not only is the book celebrity-oriented, as we have come to expect from a former president who raised celebrity to a high art form, it is also political in the sense that controversial issues are avoided and the author aims to please everyone.

He heaps praise on Wal-Mart for its programs to save energy, eliminate waste, and sell sustainable products that are environmentally sound. He does not take the company to task for its lamentable labor practices, gender discrimination, and negative impact on many communities and small businesses. He mentions favorably corporations that are trying to promote energy efficiency, yet he does not discuss the corporate excesses — pollution-generating power plants, offshore tax evasions, and excessive compensation — that have weakened our economy and environment. What is his solution for making American businesses better corporate citizens and more accountable? Now that would be an enormous personal gift to the United States.

In listing an endless string of nonprofit groups that are doing good things, he might have done a little more research to justify his judgments. He points to the efforts of America's Promise, founded by Gen. Colin Powell, which, regrettably, has been one of the most ineffectual nonprofit organizations in the past decade. He also cites the Points of Light Foundation, established by President George H.W. Bush, another nonprofit group that has had little impact on our society. And to think that these two organizations, which were supposed to be supported with money from private sources, have received about \$15-million annually from federal funds through the Corporation for National and Community Service. Surely this was not Mr. Clinton's concept of AmeriCorps, his signature national-service program.

At a time when our political leadership has failed to demand sacrifices from Americans, except for those working-class men and women in our armed forces, it is heartening to hear Mr. Clinton's message: There is a moral obligation to give to the welfare of the entire community. But this should not be limited to our giving philanthropically.

It applies equally to our role as taxpayers. In his chapter on government, Mr. Clinton stresses the importance of government in supporting public service, but he remains silent on the question of taxation. He seems to neglect, or want to forget, the moral obligation of American taxpayers to sustain the vital services, civil rights, and opportunities that are

essential ingredients of democracy. He is quick to identify problems: lack of access to health care and low-cost housing, the failure to improve the schools, the nation's dependence on oil and gas for its energy needs and inadequate efforts to protect the environment, the paucity of decent-paying jobs for low-skilled workers and inequities in wealth, and the crumbling roads, bridges, and other infrastructure across the country. Yet he is reluctant to discuss how we are going to pay for policies that would deal with those problems.

In short, like the current Democrat candidates for the presidency, he seems not to want to deal with the challenge of raising taxes. He doesn't advocate raising taxes on the wealthy, eliminating corporate-tax loopholes, increasing the gasoline tax to conserve energy, maintaining a strong estate tax, or pushing any other measure that would ensure the revenue needed to ensure a strong nation and economy. Is this just an unintended omission or is it a political response?

Mr. Clinton says in the book that he has transitioned from "getting" to "giving." He does not mention that he has earned some \$46-million in speaking fees and many more millions from his two previous books and consultancies, according to *The Washington Post*. How much of that money has gone to philanthropy?

We know how much Bill Gates, Warren Buffett, George Soros, and other people of wealth have given to philanthropy. It would be interesting if Bill Clinton had talked in his book more specifically about his giving.

At the end of the book he urges all of us to give as much as we can. On the dust jacket of the book there is a notice that a portion of the author's proceeds from the book will be donated to charities and nonprofit groups that are helping to change the world. Surely, Mr. Clinton, you can do better than that by at least giving all the money earned from the book to charity.

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