ForeWord Reviews

The New Prince: Machiavelli for the 21st Century
Dick Morris
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Arthur M. Schlesinger taught past presidents an important lesson: If you want escapees from your administration to write glowing memoirs or how-to books for aspiring politicians about you, make sure to get assassinated. If you live to tell the tale yourself, expect a raft of gainsayers to yip at your heels, point their dirty fingers in your general direction and distort the public record for their own advantage.

This is precisely what we get from the self-styled John Haldeman of the Clinton Administra-tion, Mr. Richard Morris. Morris, it will be remembered, assumed the role of choreographer of White House politics after he shoved George Stephanopholous, another recent author-diarist of the nearly scuttled Clinton Administration, from center stage in 1996. His ship sank, though, when he was ingloriously exposed for amorously engaging the feet of a prostitute, and was shown the door by the tut-tutting Clinton. Morris recovered, and went on to ever more dizzying heights of public service including a stint as a shouting head on the Fox News Network. He also wrote this book, the true value of which gives us a glimpse into the scrupulously convoluted thinking of a highly paid political consultant in the dying days of the twentieth century. It is a book that is easy on the eyes and well worth reading.

To say the book is a well written, lovingly crafted book, though, is to miss the point. In the world of pollsters, focus groups and post-modernist political theorizing, words can stand on their heads. A lack of forthrightness can come across as lyrical truth telling. For example, he takes great pains to point out that President Clinton won his office in the second term by a policy he describes as “triangulation,” which, roughly translated, means “lying.” In the cluttered confines of Mr. Morris’s head, this was a strategy whereby Clinton positioned himself as a man both above the fray and yet somehow in the political center. What Mr. Morris fails to mention is that Clinton was elected twice by a mere plurality, and that more people voted against him in both elections than for him. The Perot factor, where individuals who don’t have any party affiliation were siphoned off by the Texan’s candidacy to the tune of nineteen percent of the electorate, is hardly a mention. Instead, Morris performs the mental gymnastics required to turn this resounding electoral yawn into a mandate for change: because he convinced Clinton to stay “on message” of championing the small, sound-bite sized issues such as parental leave and

school uniforms, his man carried the day. In the Dick Morris world, there should be many more elections with this sort of empty fluffery, where the true reasons for representational government are obscured by the ad copy.

Morris seems to be saying that the days of the Big Idea are gone, and that his work with Clinton proved the worth of Thinking Small. He advocates similar behavior to aspirants to public office in the future. Don't go for the big picture. Clinton proved one doesn't need a big picture; all one needs is a course du jour, a thousand tiny snapshots for each demographic group: Pose for pictures, feel their pain, send some relief aid. Whatever you do, don't talk about the big issues, because, well, we're too sophisticated for that kind of thing now. Above all else, don't have any conviction that someone can pin you down on after you've left office. Watch it: They may write a book.

John Arens