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## First Lady Knows Best

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### Book Review

*It Takes a Village*

And Other Lessons Children Teach Us

By Hillary Rodham Clinton

THIS IS a marvelously conceived book, seamlessly interweaving warmly revealing anecdotes about Hillary Rodham Clinton and her family, folksy advice to parents, the findings of dozens of research studies, and a seemingly endless enumeration of her priorities for children (and, one assumes, her husband's). Her basic argument is that we have learned a great deal about child development and that we need to do a much better job of applying that knowledge.

Mrs. Clinton intends nothing less than that we collectively improve the way the nation raises its children. People who know her only from the political coverage she receives will be surprised at the portrait of a busy professional woman struggling to be an involved mother -- she comes out for "quantity time," not just "quality time" -- and to preserve the essentials of family life. Even in the White House, she says, "Bill, Chelsea, and I try to sit down to at least one meal a day together, usually dinner."

And readers will be surprised at her strong -- and repeated -- emphasis on personal responsibility and the obligations of parents to take better care of their children. Perhaps it is her "devout" Methodist upbringing, which she describes in some detail, but whatever the origin, when it comes to personal behavior, her first instincts are quite conservative: no sex before age 21, tougher divorce laws, dress codes for public schools, quicker terminations of parental rights in child-abuse cases, and mandatory work for welfare recipients.

But the primary message of the book is found in its title, *It Takes a Village* [to raise a child], which Mrs. Clinton says she chose because "children will thrive only if their families thrive and if the whole of society cares enough to provide for them." In the last decade, this African proverb has become a cliché in child-development circles. Experts use it to mean that parents cannot do it all on their own, that they need support in raising children -- and that children benefit from many non-parental influences, including the extended family, other adults, and various community institutions.

Mrs. Clinton has something more expansive in mind. For her, the village includes the federal government and its social programs. And in this book she finds room to describe and endorse dozens of them.

This idea of a national village is quite a stretch (although it finds echoes as far back as Beatrice Webb's writings on Fabian socialism and as recently as Mario Cuomo's "We Are Family" speech to the 1984 Democratic Convention), and it will surely be the most controversial aspect of the book. Many people, after all, blame the federal government for the breakdown of both the neighborhood and the family.

Unfortunately, the book is unlikely to advance Mrs. Clinton's ambitious cause. The contemporaneous release of Whitewater and Travelgate documents has muffled the moral clarity of her message (just watch her interviews on TV). But even sympathetic readers will find this book crammed with too much information for easy reading.

Mrs. Clinton has advice for parents on everything from how to avoid permissive parenting (she comes out for "authoritative" rather than "authoritarian" styles) to bedtime stories for children (she cites "Goodnight Moon" and Bible stories), how to choose a child care center (avoid one that gives jigsaw puzzles and crayons to infants, but they are O.K. for toddlers) and the proper size of meat portions at dinner (no larger than a "deck of cards"). It's amazing how many pointers she squeezes in, although she gets a few wrong (many experts fear that getting a child to eat by pretending the spoon is an airplane can escalate into a greater power struggle). Most parents (and children) would benefit from her advice. The only question is whether there is too much of it.

In seeming to have an opinion on just about every element of childrearing, she runs the risk of being considered a national nanny -- especially when she seems to endorse having family and friends "consistently and firmly [remind] an expectant mother to forego an alcoholic drink or a cigarette." Her interminable lists of social programs that "work" may also turn off readers. The chapter on education, for example, spends nearly 15 pages reporting on one program after another. The White House has issued a statement saying that Mrs. Clinton doubled the length of the draft prepared by her ghost writer. Judging from stylistic differences among passages, she is probably responsible for these long excursions into policy-wonkdom.

A far greater weakness is her tendency to exaggerate the effectiveness of specific programs, which undercuts the force of her policy prescriptions. At the same time, her palpable impatience with those who disagree with her and her failure to address their objections with reasoned arguments will probably offend many readers.

In trying to show that a particular program "works," for example, she repeatedly commits the cardinal sin of advocates on the left and right: confusing correlation with cause. A program reduces the number of low-birth-weight babies among women who obtain coupons for discounted baby goods in return for having pre- and post-natal exams, with no recognition that the women who take the trouble to use the coupons are likely to be more concerned about their

health and that of their babies anyway; a program reduces child abuse by almost 80 percent among mothers who allow home visits, with no suggestion that the acceptance of help might set these parents apart from those who refused; children who watch Sesame Street do better on math and verbal tests than children who watch cartoons and adult programming, with no thought that parents who encourage their child to watch educational programs may also pay more attention to learning; and so forth.

Moreover, many of the programs she wholeheartedly endorses have documented shortcomings, well-known in the academic community. In one particularly egregious case, Mrs. Clinton describes how, by age 3, the Abecedarian preschool project in Chapel Hill, N.C., raised IQs by 17 points compared to the control group's. She goes on to say, "Even more significant than these impressive gains is their durability: the differences in IQ persisted a decade later." If only that were true. As the children got older, the gap between the experimental and control groups narrowed to 7.6 IQ points at age 5 and to a statistically insignificant 4.6 points at age 15.

According to the White House, Mrs. Clinton's manuscript was vetted by many people, including the president and senior members of her staff (on their own time). That such mistakes remained is a metaphor for why so many of the policies proposed by her in the administration's first two years fared so poorly. In the months to come, some reviewers (and not just her political enemies) will surely -- and justifiably -- focus on them as reasons for ignoring her policy prescriptions.

Nevertheless, I came away from this book liking Hillary Rodham Clinton. Even as I was frustrated by her failure to subject her policy beliefs to critical examination, I was taken by her earnestly expressed concern for children and commitment to her own family. How can one parent not like another who pens the following line? "As the mother of a teenager, I felt very lucky indeed that my fifteen-year-old was willing to spend ten days with me" -- even if it was on a trip through South Asia.

Maybe Mrs. Clinton is too much of a village nanny for her own good, and maybe the president and the Democratic Party would be better off if she took a tougher look at her favorite social programs. But there is no denying her basic point: Children need a good start in life, and too many aren't getting one.

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