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'Blood Sport' Goes For the Clintons' Jugulars

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**BLOOD SPORT:** The President and His Adversaries, by James B. Stewart. Simon & Schuster, 479 pp., \$ 25.

SUSAN MCDUGAL is a babe. Sorry, but that's the big news in journalist James B. Stewart's two-year probe of Bill and Hillary Rodham Clinton's financial misadventures in Arkansas and the ongoing investigations into them.

McDougal, along with her now ex-husband Jim, were the Clintons' fellow investors in the ill-fated Whitewater land development; both McDougals, along with Arkansas Gov. Jim Guy Tucker (their business partner in other dealings), are standing trial in Little Rock on criminal charges involving loan fraud. Susan McDougal's federally funded lender, David Hale, is the prosecution's star witness, and so far he's the sole participant to have accused President Bill Clinton of improper conduct in helping the McDougals obtain their loans. Clinton, who is expected to testify as a defense witness, has already rejected Hale's accusation.

Susan and Jim McDougal were two of Stewart's principal sources for "Blood Sport," and Stewart's depiction of them is perhaps understandably sympathetic. "Blood Sport" repeatedly tells the reader how physically attractive Susan is; only in a footnote on page 430 does Stewart report that Susan McDougal also faces California criminal charges of embezzling some \$ 200,000 from orchestra conductor Zubin Mehta in the years after she left Arkansas.

But not all of "Blood Sport" concerns long-ago Arkansas land deals and loans. When the Clintons moved from Little Rock to the White House, their Arkansas financial entanglements went with them and became the responsibility of Vincent W. Foster Jr.

Foster's mysterious 1993 suicide catapulted journalistic coverage of the Clintons' Arkansas past to the front page. But much of the reason that Foster's suicide inspired an avalanche of press coverage stemmed from the politically self-destructive manner in which Foster's boss, White House counsel Bernard Nussbaum, a Manhattan litigator and one-time mentor to Hillary Clinton, obstructed law enforcement efforts to make a credible search of Foster's office and files.

Like the McDougals, Nussbaum was one of Stewart's most helpful and forthcoming sources, and boy, does it show. When the controversy over the restricted search of Foster's office was followed by charges that Nussbaum had also erred concerning Treasury Department investigations into Whitewater, Clinton forced Nussbaum's resignation. Most coverage of the Clintons' Washington missteps has portrayed Nussbaum as an overly combative, politically

obtuse bumbler, but in Stewart's hands Nussbaum is transformed into a perceptive, courageous and self-sacrificially heroic figure. Stewart's Nussbaum sagely advises his client to think about the long-term judgment of history, not a one-day journalistic "spin." Indeed, "Blood Sport" ends with a firsthand account of an ostensibly private November, 1994, phone conversation in which a forlorn president calls Nussbaum to rue the flourishing investigations and praise the ex-counsel who had recommended against endorsing them. "You're a good guy, Bernie. Your advice was good advice."

"Blood Sport" inveighs against Washington's preoccupation with journalistic spin, but Stewart's book may well lead Clinton loyalists to conclude that Bernie Nussbaum has spun Jim Stewart like a top.

Rewarding one's sources is not a new phenomenon, yet on most counts "Blood Sport" is an impressive piece of research and reporting. Stewart makes the complicated details of those long-ago Arkansas land deals as comprehensible as anyone ever will, but the greatest value of "Blood Sport" lies not in how it makes sense of Whitewater but in Stewart's memorable portrayals of his main characters. No one who reads "Blood Sport," Democrat or Republican, is likely to quarrel with Stewart's overall verdict on "the pattern of evasions, half-truths and misstatements that has characterized the Clintons' handling of the story," but his portraits of Bill and Hillary Rodham Clinton are cumulatively devastating.

P ERHAPS surprisingly, Bill Clinton is the principal figure whose image "Blood Sport" alters least. Anyone already familiar with the Gennifer Flowers and Paula Corbin Jones stories won't blanch at Stewart's recounting of how Clinton's peregrinations around Little Rock left his security detail fumbling for cover stories and his household staff at the governor's mansion cleaning up the broken crockery left behind after apparent marital spats. But when Clinton as president is reduced to calling former aides to ask if they need federal jobs in a less-than-subtle effort to keep them from providing women's names to nosy reporters, "Blood Sport" makes clear why so few Washington insiders have much personal respect for the president of the United States.

In the long run, however, it's Stewart's portrait of Hillary Rodham Clinton, not her husband, that makes "Blood Sport" a book of enduring value. Fans and supporters of the first lady will be shaken by Stewart's reporting, and those who already dislike Mrs. Clinton will find evidence aplenty for believing that her pleasant and impressive public face is a false one. "Blood Sport" is not an uplifting book, but it's one that anyone with a serious interest in the Clinton presidency has to read.