

BOOKS

[*What Happened: Inside the Bush White House and Washington's Culture of Deception*, Scott McClellan, Public Affairs, 368 pages]

Present at the Destruction

By Leon Hadar

IN ROBERT PENN WARREN'S *All the King's Men*, Jack Burden, a young and idealistic political reporter who goes to work as a right-hand man to Gov. Willie Stark of Louisiana, discovers that the populist figure he at first romanticized is a corrupt politician surrounded by unscrupulous aides and shady operators. But Stark continues to serve the charismatic Southern governor. He applies a professional and somewhat detached approach to his work until Stark's behavior has tragic consequences on the young aide and his loved ones. Burden, the narrator, concludes, "the story of Willie Stark and the story of Jack Burden are, in one sense, one story" and he accepts responsibility for his association with "the Boss."

Burden describes his tale as "the story of a man who lived the world and to him the world looked one way for a long time and then it looked another and a very different way." He "did not know when he had any responsibility... and when he did not." But finally he realizes that "he had seen too many people live and die" and that his preoccupation with the "Great Twitch"—a metaphor for the cynical political world—prevented him from searching for the truth.

There was a time when Scott McClellan, once a young and idealistic political communicator who went to work as a press secretary for George W. Bush, the popular governor of Texas who ended up occupying the White House, ideal-

ized his folksy boss. He saw him as a "man of personal charm, wit and enormous political skill," someone who "had a rare understanding of what everyday citizens across America were looking for in a leader, and was committed to giving it to them." McClellan certainly believed that Bush "possessed enough of those qualities to be a very good, if not great, president" and decided to move to Washington, D.C. to work for him at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

But McClellan discovered that his idol believed being president meant never having to say you're sorry. In addition to being insecure, President George W. Bush lacked curiosity and suffered from self-delusions. He was surrounded by a bunch of incompetent and nasty advisers like Dick Cheney (played a "sinister" role), Donald Rumsfeld ("controversial" and "disappointing"), Condoleezza Rice ("history will charge her harshly"), and Karl Rove (placed "political gain ahead of the national interest").

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"The first grave mistake of Bush's presidency was rushing toward military confrontation with Iraq," McClellan writes. "It took his presidency off course and greatly damaged his standing with the public." Bush's second serious error was "his virtual blindness about his first mistake, and his own unwillingness to sustain a bipartisan spirit during a time of war and change course when events demanded it." Indeed, McClellan writes, the "one reaction Bush would never allow himself was self-doubt." He clung to the belief that the war upon which he had wagered his presidency would turn out right. As "the trickle of bad news turned into a torrent, the president could only double down."

Some of Bush's current and former aides who continue to share his bunker mentality have ridiculed McClellan's critique of the Iraq War. In particular, they resent his insistence that what drove

Bush toward military confrontation wasn't the threat of nonexistent weapons of mass destruction but "an ambitious and idealistic vision of transforming the Middle East through the spread of freedom." This dream was grounded in a "philosophy of coercive diplomacy, a belief that Iraq was ripe for conversion from a dictatorship into a beacon of liberty through the use of force, and a conviction that this could be achieved at nominal costs."

McClellan's critics contend that the former press aide is not a deep thinker (like, say, Douglas Feith) or a renowned Middle East expert (Paul Wolfowitz comes to mind). But in a way, it's McClellan's unique perspective that makes his memoir a fascinating read. For he comes across as a non-intellectual, unsophisticated, and unpretentious Texan who, like pre-9/11 Bush, favored a "humble" foreign policy and, like many Americans, was willing to give the White House the benefit of the doubt on Iraq.

Rove and Ari Fleischer, McClellan's predecessor as press secretary, suggest that the author of *What Happened* is not "the Scott that we knew." They express shock that a conservative Republican, a patriot, a man of faith, and a Bush loyalist—the kind of guy who should support the ousting of Saddam Hussein and the struggle against Islamofascism—should publish the sort of views about the Iraq War that one can read in, say, *The American Conservative*. McClellan's narrative makes it clear that from his very authentic, small-town American perspective, "waging an unnecessary war is a grave mistake." There is a clear compatibility between his own political-ideological roots, which were the reason he decided to work for Bush in the first place, and his devastating assessment that "the decision to invade Iraq was a serious strategic blunder"

whose evolution he had an opportunity to observe as a White House insider.

Indeed, outsiders, like those of us who opposed the Iraq War and the entire Freedom Agenda—based on our understanding of history and a deconstruction of the public statements and news reports on the invasion—will be struck by this testimony. McClellan confirms that Bush and his aides hoped that the war on terrorism, and by extension the war in Iraq, would serve to advance the Republican agenda and cement Bush's place in history. Officials in the administration, he writes, "deliberately chose to ignore the facts when assembling the case for war" and even worse, "they knowingly dissembled in order to make the case appear stronger than it was." They used deception to cover up their efforts to mislead the American people. The American media, in turn, was "too deferential to the White House and the administration" over the decision to go to war and failed in its duty to make the public more aware before the invasion "of the uncertainties, doubts, and caveats that underlay the intelligence" about Iraq.

So why didn't you resign from your job, Scotty? Despite the disillusionments, McClellan, thanks to his own form of the "Great Twitch," was able to continue working for George W. Bush. He inserted himself into the "permanent campaign" of Washington—"a breeding ground for deception and a killing field for truth" dominated by the "philosophy of politics of war." Manipulating sources of public approval, politicizing the governing process, and tearing down opponents by employing distortion and misrepresentations are part of the job. And the job is a lot of fun. You get to work with the Leader of the Free World and other important people. You travel around the world on Air Force One and meet foreign leaders. You're an eyewitness to history. And you rationalize to yourself that perhaps you are "making a difference."

But at some point you discover that the costs outweigh the benefits. The story of George W. Bush and the story of

Scott McClellan are also, in one sense, one story. McClellan's epiphany happened in July 2005, when he discovered that what he had told the White House press corps two years earlier—that Rove, Cheney, and Scooter Libby, Cheney's chief of staff, were not involved in the leaking of classified information about Valerie Plame, the former CIA operative and wife of Joe Wilson—was untrue. McClellan was used by leading White House officials as part of a campaign to discredit Wilson, who had challenged the administration's reasons for going to war in Iraq.

It was the "defining moment in my time working for the president, and one of the most painful experiences of my life," McClellan writes. "I had unknowingly passed along false information. Five of the highest-ranking officials in the administration were involved in my doing so: Rove, Libby, Vice President Cheney, the president's chief of staff, Andrew Card, and the president himself." Upon learning this, he felt "constrained by my duties and loyalty to the president and unable to comment. But I promised reporters and the public that I would someday tell the whole story of what I knew."

In *All the King's Men*, the disillusioned young aide chose to admit responsibility for his association with his boss after seeing "many people live and die." McClellan considered telling the truth only after he became a victim of the administration's deception. In fact, he determined to expose the truth only after Bush and his aides decided that McClellan's role in their manipulation of the American media and public had damaged his credibility as a spokesman and fired him.

That McClellan is now able to get back at them and profit from doing so demonstrates that he has mastered the rules of the "permanent campaign." After all, he had great teachers. ■

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[*Rapture Ready!: Adventures in the Parallel Universe of Christian Pop Culture*, Daniel Radosh, Scribner, 320 pages]

On This Rock

By Peter Suderman

THE BACK FLAP of *Rapture Ready!: Adventures in the Parallel World of Christian Pop Culture* notes that author Daniel Radosh is a regular contributor to *The New Yorker*, a former writer at *Spy* magazine, and a resident of Brooklyn. Given this résumé, it's hardly surprising that, on the book's second page, he informs the reader that he is a New York liberal. Radosh spends much of his book's 300-odd pages reminding readers of this fact—snarking at opponents of gay marriage, expressing concern at the freedoms that might be lost in an anti-abortion regime, and worrying that a teenage rock fan's religious convictions might lay a "path to creationism and abstinence education." He even goes so far as to admit—without irony—to having "secular elitist" friends.

This makes the worldly and with-it Radosh quite the outsider as he dives into the decidedly un-hip universe of Evangelical pop culture—a world that is, above all, determined to be neither secular nor elite. That Radosh openly filters everything he sees through the lens of his own class means that his book is often as revealing about the mindset of the secular and urban elite as it is about Evangelical culture.

Nevertheless, *Rapture Ready* largely succeeds as a guide to the variegated world of spiritually inflected pop. Radosh goes in expecting uniformity, but quickly learns that there is no such thing as a singular Christian culture. The world he encounters is sprawling and self-contradictory, defined by no particular politics or ethos. Some of his subjects are simply in business; others are determined artists. Some view conversion as their primary goal; others downplay their commitment to proselytizing.