

Theodore White

Since The Making of the President, it's

by Walter Shapiro

Mad As Hell: Revolt at the Ball
Jack W. Germond and Jules Witcover,

As I think back on it now, reading Theodore White's *The Making of the President, 1960* at the impressionable age of 14 probably changed my life. Coming from a family of last-gasp Stevenson Democrats, I was transfixed not so much by the saga of Kennedy triumphant as by the small, lovingly etched portraits of thwarted dreams—a forlorn folk singer crooning a ballad for Hubert Humphrey on the eve of the West Virginia primary, the packed galleries at the Los Angeles convention in hopeless thrall with Adlai. Other young would-be writers fantasized about running off to Paris to emulate Hemingway and Fitzgerald, but romance for me could be found here at home, chronicling the pageantry of a presidential campaign.

How hollow that dream feels 30 years later. Political reporting, my chosen trade, has become a burnt-out genre, as derivative as medieval Scholastics trying to ape the rhetoric of Cicero. The literary flowering that followed White sadly lasted little more than a decade; the 1968 and 1972 elections alone produced *The Selling of the President*, *The Boys on the Bus*, and the gonzo posturing of Hunter Thompson. But since then, the void. Only Richard Ben Cramer's *What It Takes*, his landmark character study of six 1988 presidential contenders, rises from the muck to redeem White's legacy. With the publishing industry now convinced that campaign narratives don't sell, the once-proud genre has been winnowed down to the quadrennial now-it-can-be-

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What Germond and Witcover offer instead is politics seen at a middle distance viewed exclusively through the prism of the strategists, the operatives, and the pollsters. A typical passage argues, "What Perot could not or would not grasp was that it was essential for his campaign to control the message that went out," but the authors fail to grasp that 20 years of this kind of political message control spawned the voter cynicism that made Ross Perot's candidacy possible.

Germond and Witcover's idea of an exclusive tidbit is Democratic National Chairman (and now Commerce Secretary) Ron Brown's riveting reconstruction of his phone conversation with Mario Cuomo that led to the New York governor placing Bill Clinton's name in nomination at the Democratic convention:

Cuomo: How long is that speech supposed to be?

Brown: As long as you want it to be, Mario.

Cuomo: You really want me to do this, don't you?

Brown: Yes, I really want you to do it.

Cuomo: Clinton really wants me?

Brown: Yeah, Clinton really wants you to do this.

Cuomo: I think I have been much more persuasive on this issue, but I'm going to defer to your judgment.

That's it. There is no punchline, no kicker, no hidden payoff—just standard, empty-your-notebooks-it's-deadline journalism.



Jay Lincoln

What comes across as particularly one-dimensional is their inside analysis of the Clinton campaign in *Mad As Hell*. Having covered Clinton myself for *Time* magazine, I will concede that my standards may be unduly demanding and perhaps a little self-serving. It's not that Germond and Witcover are unfair or inaccurate but that their narrative seems woefully incomplete. What's missing, for example, is the bitter battle within the campaign after the California primary that led to the elevation of James Carville and the fabled War Room, as well as the *de facto* demotion of campaign chairman, Germond and Witcover source, and now Trade Representative Mickey Kantor. The authors' disinterest in substance blinds them to the intense internal policy debate that led to the publication of the *Putting People First* economic plan in June. They also fail to grasp the significance of keeping the campaign headquartered in Little Rock and largely outside the sway of the Beltway political establishment. Most flagrantly, Germond and Witcover gloss over the strategic importance of Hillary Rodham Clinton as the disciplined insider who forced her ever-reluctant husband to make difficult, but necessary, decisions on the structure of the campaign.

This last point underlines where Germond and Witcover probably went astray: They were generationally ill-equipped to cover the Clinton campaign. Nothing in their life experience prepared them for the first campaign in American history in which women were as much the key players as men. Based on the list of sources in the "Acknowledgements" section, it seems clear that the only women in the Clinton campaign they ever interviewed were media consultant Mandy Grunwald and press secretary Dee Dee Myers. Without talking with scheduler Susan Thomases or research director Betsey Wright, let alone anyone close to Hillary, it was easy to get a distorted view of what actually was going on in Little Rock. Not traveling

much with the candidate after the early primaries for understandable financial and logistical reasons, Germond and Witcover also never managed to sit down with such key sources as Clinton confidant Bruce Lindsey and issues director Bruce Reed.

As for the poetry and drama of Clinton's last, sleep-defying 72-hour-campaign marathon, Germond and Witcover distill it down to this evocative sentence: "The final day was a blur, as both Bush and Clinton raced frenetically by jet around the country."

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To be fair, there are several strong chapters amid the dross in *Mad As Hell*. I was amused to discover, for example, that none of Bush's handlers grasped the divisive potential of Pat Buchanan's fire-and-brimstone "religious war"

speech on the opening night of the Republican National Convention. "I read the speech, and it had a great endorsement [of Bush]," recalled Bush adviser Jim Lake, who had previewed the text. "I really paid no attention to anything else."

Germond and Witcover also provide the fullest account that I have read anywhere of the days leading up to Perot's precipitous withdrawal from the race in July, perhaps the single event that vaulted Bill Clinton into the Oval Office. Most of the other versions tell the story from the self-serving perspective of turncoat Republican consultant Ed Rollins. Calling on ties that date back to the Carter White House, Germond and Witcover counterbalance the Rollins bias with a revealing interview with Hamilton Jordan, who also was advising Perot. According to Jordan, Perot told him this in early July: "It probably was a mistake to hire you guys. The difference between you and Rollins is, I like you. I don't like Rollins and don't trust him. He's got the Washington disease. He talks to the media too much. This is just another business deal for him." A few more lines like that, and I could almost muster a little sympathy for the Texas billionaire who spoke to some of the best and worst aspects of the American character.

In the end, *Mad As Hell* is one of those vaguely useful reference books that you can plop on the shelf in case you someday need to conjure up the Buchanan campaign in New Hampshire. What intrigues me far more is wondering what a reporter like Teddy White in his prime could have done with a presidential campaign as rich, complex, and mysterious (Perot again) as 1992. White, to be sure, could be seduced by top politicians ranging from Jack Kennedy to, sadly, the Richard Nixon of 1972. But all reporters (save, of course, the saintly Janet Malcolm) are to some extent prisoners of their sources, and this occupational hazard should not minimize White's lasting contribution to political literature. So it is alas easy to tick off the reasons why a true reprise of *The Making of the President* series seems impossible: the prohibitive travel costs; the difficulty of winning access; the omnipresence of self-serving "spin"; the self-consciousness and self-importance of the handlers; the bloodless, technocratic nature of modern politics; the competition from newspapers and news-magazines; the lowly status of print in a video

age; and the well-earned cynicism of voters and readers about the political process itself.

But all that aside, I still feel a yearning to strip off the veil of presidential politics, to use the campaign as a metaphor to get at something deeper and more evocative about America, about idealism, about ambition, about character, about the media, and about the meaning of democracy itself. Sure, there is something addictive about the mindless adrenaline rush of covering a campaign, the fraternity (and sorority) of the press bus, the late-night drinks in some hotel bar, the ability to step outside your life and sign on with the closest thing that America has to a traveling circus. I recall and appreciate Clinton strategist Paul Begala's election eve crack, "Politics is show business for ugly people." But if three years from now, fate finds me trudging off one more time to Iowa and New Hampshire, I hope that I will be impelled by reasons that transcend habit, boredom with civilian life, and a craving for the limelight. Instead, I hope that I will be motivated by the quest to rediscover what it felt like to read *The Making of the President, 1960* at age 14. □

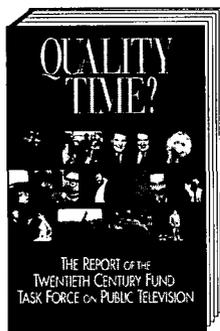


THE TWENTIETH CENTURY FUND

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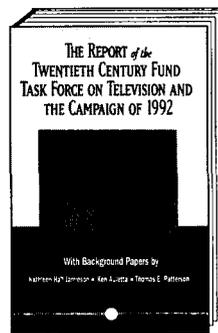


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POLITICAL BOOKNOTES

A City Year: On the Streets and in the Neighborhoods with Twelve Young Community Service Volunteers

Suzanne Goldsmith
The New Press, \$22.95

By Daniel H. Pink

National service, once a flaky idea peddled only by *The Washington Monthly* and a few cranky neoliberals, has hit the big time.

Bill Clinton says national service will be a defining idea of his presidency. He has promised to usher in a

“season of service,” and has created a White House Office of National Service to turn that promise into a reality.

Into this congenial climate comes Suzanne Goldsmith’s firsthand account of nine months with City Year, the highly regarded Boston-based project that’s a prototype for the national service programs Clinton envisions. The brainchild of Alan Khazei and Michael Brown, whose Harvard law degrees did not quash their entrepreneurial instincts, City Year is a privately funded service corps in which young people work in

small teams on projects like building playgrounds, restoring housing, tutoring children, or assisting the elderly. City Year participants earn \$100 per week, and if they stay an entire nine months, they receive \$5,000 for college or job training. To write her book, Goldsmith labored alongside a City Year team and talked at length with its members.

She began her City Year on a team that demonstrated one of the program’s greatest strengths: diversity. (At the risk of being labeled a bean counter, I note that her team had six women, six men, two Latinos, four African-Americans, two Asian-Americans, three middle-class whites, a few college students, and a man on probation.) The crew was officially known as the Reebok Team, after the Massachusetts footwear company which supplied part of the uniform all City Year corps members must wear.

The Reebok Team’s first projects were worthwhile. Team members excavated a weed-choked garden and playground complex in a beleaguered south Boston neighborhood, repainted a playground in Roxbury, and did chores for the elderly in a Charlestown public housing project. Then it was on to a state hospital to repair a greenhouse.

But difficulties quickly arise. Most tragically, one corps member is shot and killed one night as he walks home. And while some corps members hurl themselves into their work, others do little but complain loudly. Absenteeism and lateness are chronic. Several corps members often disappear for the afternoon or spend work days chatting on the phone.

What makes the shirking and skipping hard to understand is that the Reebok Team doesn’t work that much anyway.

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