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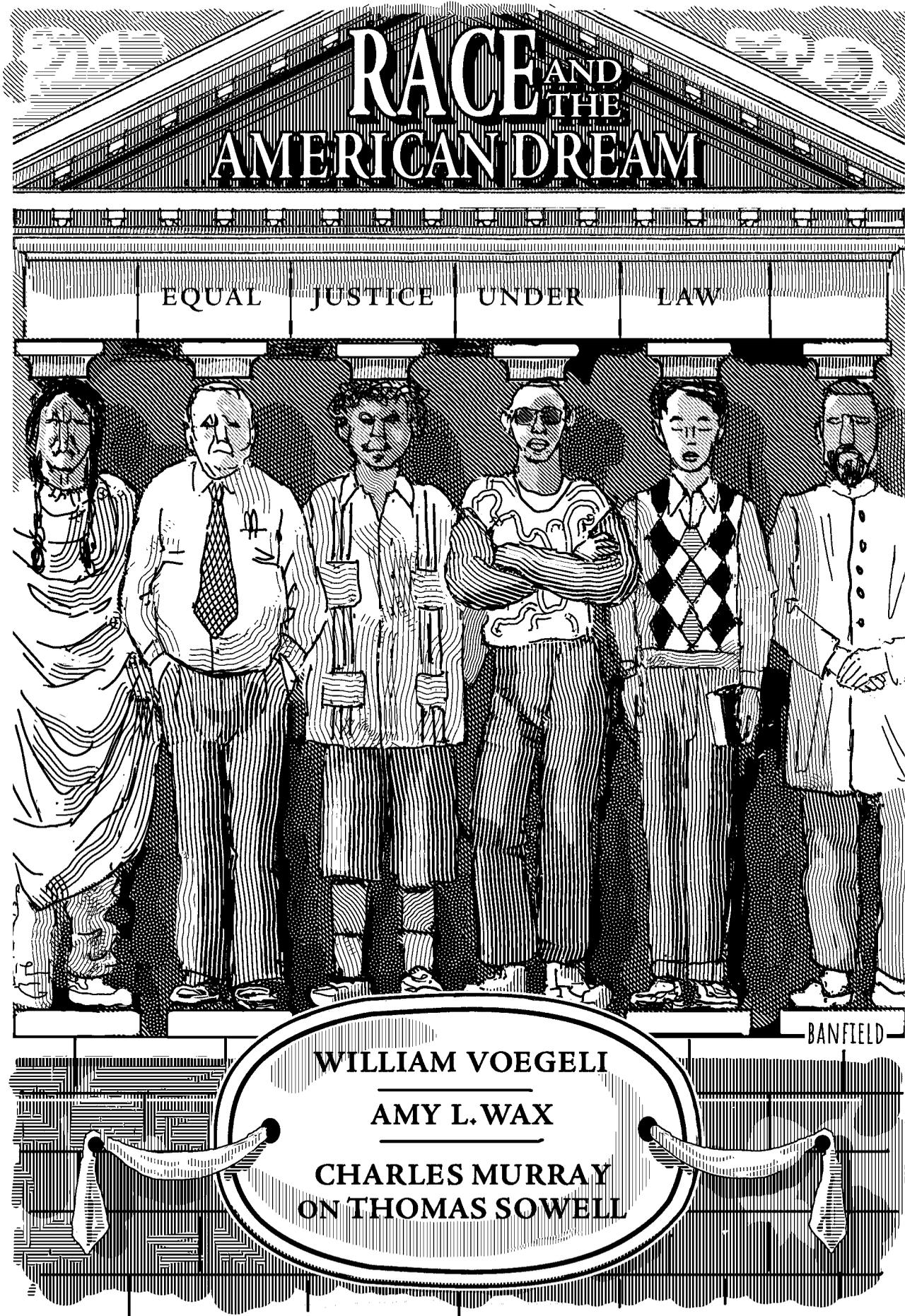
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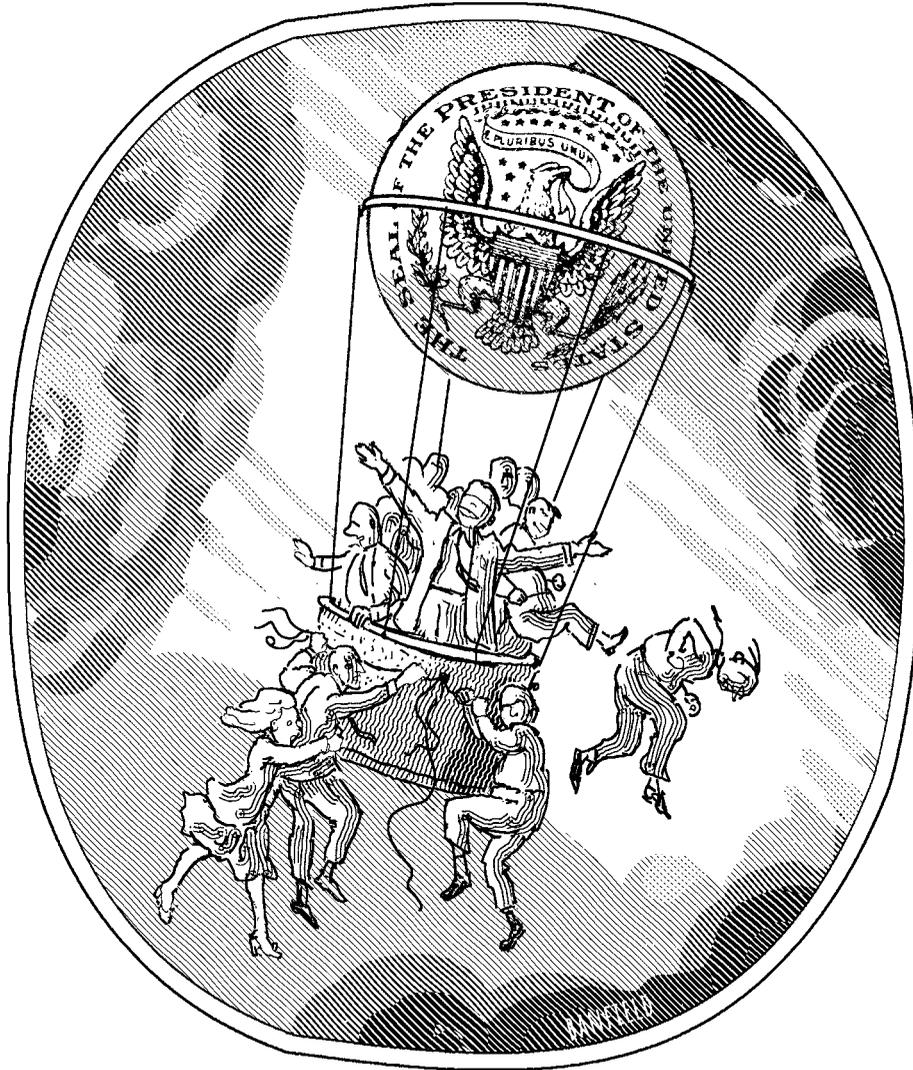


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Essay by Tevi Troy

ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

From Kennedy to Trump.



THE “FLY ON THE WALL” LOOK AT CAMPAIGNS has long been one of the most interesting and enthralling approaches to political reporting. Since the 1960s, books such as Theodore White’s *The Making of the President* series and Joe McGinniss’s *The Selling of the President 1968* have told engaging stories with insightful personal details and drama. In the decades following, other authors joined in, including Bob Woodward and the now defunct team of Mark Halperin and John Heilemann.

White was the pioneer. A former *Time* magazine reporter who had written a novel, *The Mountain Road* (1958), later made into a movie starring Jimmy Stewart, White had this idea of chronicling an entire campaign from a narrative perspective. He used the money from his novel to pay his expenses

and travel the country, observing the various presidential hopefuls. In his book, he gave readers something they had never experienced before: an insider’s view of what candidates and their aides said to one another behind closed doors. As David Shribman wrote about White in 2012, “He was both dramaturge and playwright, and he transformed the U.S. presidential election from news story into docudrama.”

White’s *The Making of the President 1960* was a cultural and political phenomenon, selling 4.2 million copies and winning a Pulitzer Prize. White reportedly earned \$500,000 off the book, the equivalent of \$4.5 million today. It didn’t hurt that the victor in the race, John F. Kennedy, was a handsome, popular candidate, but the real selling point was the insider’s perspective.

Unsurprisingly, the book spawned sequels. First came *The Making of the President 1964*, for which White snagged a \$100,000 advance. He continued the series, writing additional volumes about 1968 and 1972, and then one, *America in Search of Itself*, which included the 1980 campaign but also summaries of every campaign dating back to 1956.

White inspired imitators. In 1968, an unknown journalist named Joe McGinniss approached the campaign of Democratic hopeful Hubert Humphrey and requested inside access. His request was denied. So he went to the campaign of the Republican candidate, Richard Nixon, and made the same request, suggesting, according to some, that he was a graduate student who intended to write his thesis on the campaign. Inexplicably, and unwisely, the Nixon campaign said yes.



The 26-year-old first-time author was a man of the Left, but he cozied up to his subjects in order to get better material. Nixon aide Leonard Garment later wrote that McGinniss “laughed at our gibes, sympathized with our difficulties, offered judicious and helpful suggestions.” The Nixon aides fell for it. McGinniss’s book, *The Selling of the President 1968*—its title a clear allusion to White—caused a sensation. Its cover featured an image of Nixon’s face on a pack of cigarettes and made the case that slick ad men sold the American people candidates the way they did consumer goods. The book also introduced readers to the young TV guru Roger Ailes, who told McGinniss,

Let’s face it, a lot of people think Nixon is dull. Think he’s a bore, a pain in the ass. They look at him as the kind of kid who always carried a bookbag.... Now you put him on television, you’ve got a problem right away.

McGinniss’s book hit a cultural moment, when people were starting to realize the impact of television on our politics. He quoted Nixon aide Ray Price saying, “We can’t win the election of 1968 with the techniques of 1952. We’re not only in a television age, but in a television-conditioned age.” White had shocked the American people with a loving, behind-the-scenes look at political campaigns. McGinniss brought a far more critical perspective. As historian David Greenberg wrote, “If White was the voice of the liberal consensus, with its sonorous even-keeled wisdom, McGinniss was an emissary from the New Journalism, with his counter-cultural accents, youthful iconoclasm, and nonchalant willingness to bare his left-leaning political views.”

Woodward and His Sources

FOLLOWING WHITE AND MCGINNISS, NO one could ever be surprised by a campaign chronicle again. Aides became not only wary, but savvy, recognizing that they could work with the journalist to help shape how they and their candidate were covered. This symbiosis was at the heart of the books that began emerging from Watergate scribe Bob Woodward in the 1990s. Woodward not only chronicled campaigns, but administrations as well. Like his most famous source, Deep Throat, who had a grudge as a result of being passed over for a promotion, Woodward famously preyed on the egos and gripes of insiders, and implicitly threatened poor treatment to those who did not cooper-

ate. These anonymous sources provided the material for Woodward’s best stories, and he defended his approach, saying, “It’s the only method if you’re going to get an unlauded version of what occurred.” Woodward also inspired imitators, including Halperin and Heilemann, who got both an HBO movie and a \$5 million advance for *Double Down*, the sequel to *Game Change*, their bestseller on the 2008 Obama campaign.

With the 2020 campaign over, we are faced with a flood of such books, which raises the question for those interested in politics: what is to be done with them? No one, outside your intrepid reviewer, can fairly be expected to read them all. How can one discern among them, and can one be confident in the accuracy of what one learns—if that is the word—from them? Start with Woodward, as he is the best known, and his book *Peril*—his third on

that no attack from the United States was forthcoming and—bizarrely—that he would call China and give a warning if an attack were actually underway. It is pretty clear that Milley is a source for some of the other 2020 books, but he gave this choice detail to Woodward alone.

The book, as with all Woodward books, comes down to the question of whether you trust Woodward and his sources. If you do, you will enjoy some of his stories, particularly this exchange between President Donald Trump and House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy:

Trump: “You know, being off Twitter has kind of helped me.”

McCarthy: “Oh, really?”

Trump: “Yeah, a lot of people would say they liked my policy, didn’t like my tweets.”

McCarthy: “Yeah, like everybody.”

This story gets a chuckle when I tell it, and perhaps the reader has chuckled upon reading it as well, but one is left with questions. The way the story is told, Trump and McCarthy are speaking privately. No one else is mentioned. Perhaps someone else was in the room? Perhaps Trump or McCarthy themselves shared it, or retold it to an aide who then leaked it to the reporters? We don’t know and the nature of these books is that we can’t know. What we do know is that Woodward’s method is to go to participants and suggest that if they don’t speak to him, the book will not reflect their perspective, i.e., will turn out badly for them. One of the reasons that Colin Powell always shined in Woodward’s books while his antagonists like Don Rumsfeld did not is that Powell, a close friend of Woodward’s, was widely presumed to be a source, but Rumsfeld refused to speak to the reporter. This situation served Powell’s interests, but did it serve the historical record? Or make for a truthful account?

Another story, with a nastier edge, has an even more questionable provenance. Woodward and Costa write that “[o]ne night, Biden wandered into a room where a huge video screen covered the wall. To relax, Trump used to upload programs to virtually play the world’s most famous golf courses. ‘What a f***ing a**hole,’ Biden once said as he surveyed the former president’s golf toys.” To whom did Biden say this? Did Biden tell that person that his reaction was in response to the golf simulator? Was there some other impetus for Biden’s observation? The paragraph

Recent books discussed in this essay:

Peril, by Bob Woodward and Robert Costa. Simon & Schuster, 512 pages, \$30

Landslide: The Final Days of the Trump Presidency, by Michael Wolff. Macmillan, 336 pages, \$29.99

I Alone Can Fix It: Donald J. Trump’s Catastrophic Final Year, by Carol Leonnig and Philip Rucker. Penguin Press, 592 pages, \$30

Frankly, We Did Win This Election: The Inside Story of How Trump Lost, by Michael C. Bender. Twelve, 432 pages, \$30

Trump, this time co-authored with the *Washington Post*’s Robert Costa—has garnered the most attention. The very fact that Woodward is working with a collaborator again, decades after breaking up with Carl Bernstein, is noteworthy. Costa is a serious reporter who cut his teeth at *National Review* and cannot easily be dismissed as a product of the mainstream media. The team-up also raises the question whether Woodward, soon to turn 79, is planning on passing his baton to Costa.

Peril reads like the kind of Woodward book we have come to know, with short chapters ending on portentous notes. He is masterly at exploiting the most explosive and most exclusive nuggets from his book. In *Peril* it was the revelation that Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Mark Milley called his Chinese counterpart and told him



is written as if by an omniscient narrator in a novel, but the real world is not a novel, and so we are left with an amusing but unverifiable story.

More or Less Reliable

EVEN MORE QUESTIONABLE THAN Woodward and his intimidation methods is *USA Today* and *Hollywood Reporter* contributor and columnist Michael Wolff. When Wolff's books come out, they are often met with denials from participants, which can either be a sign that he is untrustworthy, or that he has a gift for uncovering damaging quotes. I will leave it to the reader to decide, but I will share this cautionary tale: when I texted a Wolff tidbit to a pundit friend of mine, he wrote back, "Yeah, that's been reported. Otherwise, I wouldn't take Wolff's word for it."

If one can get over this admittedly large hurdle, Wolff's *Landslide*—like Woodward, his third book on Trump—stands out in the details it has about the president's dysfunctional debate preparation process. Chris Christie apparently played the role of Joe Biden, and went after Trump hammer and tongs, even having "spittle come out of his mouth," making the notoriously germophobic Trump attempt "to duck from the drop-lets." According to Wolff, Christie-as-Biden said directly to Trump, "You have blood on your hands.... You're a complete failure. All these people have died from the virus. And it's your fault." In Wolff's telling, this assault had two dramatic impacts: it got Trump's blood up, leading to the unwisely hyperaggressive Trump we saw in the first presidential debate. Trump was not responding to Biden in that disastrous debate, he was responding to Christie playing Biden. Second, the Christie assault was too much in another way. Trump took it personally, damaging the longstanding friendship between the two men. Wolff's other good debate tidbit was

about Rudy Giuliani, who was apparently invited to debate prep once and then not invited back. Among his many sins were his obsessive focus on Hunter Biden, his inability to quiet his phone or work his iPad, and his excessive flatulence.

Sometimes it also seemed that Wolff had good access to marginal characters, such as campaign finance chief Sean Dollman. This can lead to comical stories, such as the time Trump told Dollman after a briefing, "Great job. Really impressive. Boy, we need someone like you on this. Any chance you could come in and work full time?" Dollman told him, "Well...I'm the CFO of the campaign, sir." Trump replied, "Really? How long have you been in that job?" When Dollman told him, "Since the beginning of the campaign," Trump asked, "And what did you do before that?" only to be told, "I was the CFO of the 2016 campaign." Entertaining, to be sure, but to what end? Trump did not know who Sean Dollman was, but neither will the reader.

More reliable, at least to this reader, was *I Alone Can Fix It*, by *Washington Post* reporters Carol Leonnig and Philip Rucker. They, like the other authors, present long verbatim conversations between senior officials, but there is no indication that they implicitly threaten their subjects, à la Woodward, or may be fabulists, à la Wolff. The conversations sound as if they could be actual conversations between senior officials, albeit in the pressure cooker of a political campaign, a deadly pandemic, and a famously fractious White House. Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar barks back at an angry Trump on the phone, only to have Azar's chief of staff Brian Harrison, who was listening in on the line, tell him, "You really shouldn't speak to the president of the United States like that." Giuliani is once again unhelpful at debate prep, but this time other aides give him the wrong time for the sessions to minimize their exposure to him. And Milley once again appears to be a source, this time fight-

ing with White House aide Stephen Miller in the Oval Office about whether to use the military in response to the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests.

Another book in a similar vein is Michael Bender's *Frankly, We Did Win This Election*. Bender, like Leonnig and Rucker, is a careful reporter with solid sources, but what sets him apart is his humor. Bender is a funny guy, and consequently his is the funniest of the books reviewed here. When he tells us that disgraced *Today* show host Matt Lauer criticized Trump for being a womanizer, a footnote reads, "Yes, that Matt Lauer." Bender's opening quote to the book has GOP strategist Mike Biundo tell pollster Tony Fabrizio the good news and bad news about the 2016 election: "The good news is we won. The bad news is these stupid f***ers are going to think this is the way you win a presidential election." Bender jokes around with Trump, who considered Bender's "wavy hair as being worthy of a job in his administration" but less so with Vice President Mike Pence, as Bender's "dry attempts at humor had fallen flat with him before." Even Bender's acknowledgments are funny, opening with, "The acknowledgments sections in books always struck me as a bit ridiculous. There's no other industry where you finish a job and immediately stand up and start thanking everyone you've ever met."

In the end, the discerning reader will have to decide what is of interest to him. The most notorious of the books is Woodward and Costa; the most detailed and credible is probably Leonnig and Rucker; Bender is the funniest; Wolff is the least credible. Thanks to Teddy White and the revelation revolution he began, there are unlikely to be shortages of these kinds of books for as long as the republic stands.

Tevi Troy is a senior fellow at the Bipartisan Policy Center and the author, most recently, of Fight House: Rivalries in the White House from Truman to Trump (Regnery Publishing).

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