

Drew's New Washington

Whatever It Takes: The Real Struggle for Political Power in America

Elizabeth Drew

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REVIEWED BY

John H. Fund

Every four years intrepid reporters follow the footsteps of Teddy White, that legendary chronicler of campaigns (*The Making of the President*), and turn out a ponderous tome on "what it all meant." But Elizabeth Drew, sensing that the race for the White House would turn out to be the vapid and bloodless slog it was, decided in early 1996 to write about the battle for control of the House of Representatives. *Whatever It Takes* not only manages to tell a good story but also illuminates the current realities of political power in Washington.

Drew, a veteran of campaign reporting, tells the story of the 1996 election through the activities of seven players: Grover Norquist, the energetic head of Americans for Tax Reform and a columnist for this magazine; Ralph Reed, executive director of the Christian Coalition; Marc Nuttle, a consultant to the National Federation of Independent Business; Tanya Metaksa of the National Rifle Association; David Rehr of the National Beer Wholesalers Association; Steve Rosenthal, the political director of the AFL-CIO; and Dick Morris, the architect of Clinton's stunningly successful election-year scramble to the center. Three vulnerable GOP congressmen who were targeted by the AFL-CIO are also featured: Rep. Randy Tate, a firebrand freshman from Seattle

JOHN H. FUND is a member of the Wall Street Journal editorial board and a contributor to MSNBC.

and the youngest House Member; Peter Torkildsen, a cautious Massachusetts moderate and the Republican incumbent who came closest to losing in 1994; and Greg Ganske, a plastic surgeon turned Iowa congressman who ran against a Democratic former TV anchorwoman.

With this cast of characters, Drew tells the story of the 1996 House races, which began early in the year with conservative activists increasingly anxious that the Republican primaries would produce a wounded, exhausted nominee. While Pat Buchanan appealed to many at a gut level, they recognized his nomination would be disastrous for races further down the ballot. When Bob Dole finally emerged with the nomination in hand he had little money, and his failure to seize the initiative allowed Clinton to define him as old and out of touch. Both parties held successful conventions over the summer with Republicans temporarily energized by the selection of Jack Kemp as Dole's running mate and Democrats pleased that they tamped down liberal criticism of President Clinton's signing of the welfare reform bill.

By mid-September, President Clinton felt confident enough about his own reelection that he became intent on helping Democrats regain control of one or both Houses. "The one word reason his advisers gave privately was 'Whitewater,'" writes Drew. "This was code for hearings not just on Whitewater but also the bevy of Clinton scandals, past and perhaps future. And if the independent counsel, Kenneth Starr, brought damaging charges, a Clinton adviser said, it would be more comfortable to have a Democratic Congress." In other words, at some point in the fall of 1996 Clinton shifted his emphasis from winning a second term to ensuring that term didn't end in a scandalous Nixon-like *Götterdämmerung*. On September 17 President Clinton met with Democratic leaders and agreed to transfer funds from

the DNC to the congressional campaign committees and hold three unity fundraisers for them. Drew reports that a grateful congressional Democrat "realized he might have Kenneth Starr to thank."

The next day, conservative activists gathered in a basement room in the Capitol to meet with Speaker Newt Gingrich. Before Gingrich's pep talk the group heard a downbeat report on the results of Washington State's "jungle" primary, in which candidates from both parties appear on a single ballot. In 1994 the results had forecast the defeat of then-Speaker Tom Foley and several other Democrats. But this time they showed Randy Tate trailing his Democratic opponent by two points, and four other GOP freshmen hovering just over 50 percent.

As it became clear that the sputtering Dole campaign was creating a drag on Republican congressional candidates, the GOP Congress began trying to pass legislation to burnish its image with swing voters. Dole campaign manager Scott Reed said he considered himself "at war" with the leadership over their efforts to stem illegal immigration. Senator Alan Simpson asked Reed for a meeting to protest Dole's efforts to kill the immigration bill. Simpson told Reed it was wrong for him to stop the bill and that as an American he should be for it. He then said: "This is the most incompetently run campaign in American history." Reed replied: "F--- off. I'm not a statesman. I'm not a legislator. I'm a campaign manager and it doesn't help Bob Dole if you continue to send Clinton bills to sign."

The tension between conservatives both in and out of Congress and the Dole campaign intensified. In the last two weeks of the campaign, they persuaded RNC Chairman Haley Barbour to focus party energies on keeping the House at the expense of Bob Dole.

Republicans had not won back-to-back House elections for 70 years, and it was feared that if they lost control in 1996 it might remain out of their grasp for years afterwards. Private polls for both parties in late October showed that the GOP could lose the House. The Republicans and Democrats alike realized that the battle for the House would have far more to do with the nation's long-term political alignment than the race for the White House.

So with eight days left in the campaign, Republicans brought out an ad warning voters not to give Clinton "a blank check." It showed a fortune-teller looking into a crystal ball—and an announcer asking "What would happen if the Democrats controlled Congress and the White House?"—while headlines on the Clinton health and tax plans were splashed across the screen. At the same time, the RNC made a large ad buy on Christian radio which warned that Hillary Clinton might take over implementation of the welfare plan and said that if Democrats won Congress, "Teddy Kennedy will be running the place." Soon word began filtering back to the RNC from field workers that the "blank check" campaign was working.

So too was the corrosive publicity about Democratic fundraising scandals that had begun to filter into public consciousness in October with the first revelations about John Huang. "In a historical irony, people took out their anger over the money scandal more on the Democrats running for Congress than on Clinton himself," concludes Drew. "It was as if the gods had stepped in to punish Clinton for his arrogance and insouciance when it came to fundraising. He had surrendered what moral authority he had left."

President Clinton himself apparently agrees in part with Drew. While in public he denies his fundraising scandals hurt Democrats, in private he has come to regret his strategy of ignoring the scandals in the campaign's last days. Drew cites an unnamed White House aide as saying that the president had concluded that the scandals had depressed Democratic turnout and that "a strong response would have helped more than it hurt." He has since lamented to Democratic audiences that "with only 9,759 votes spread across ten Congressional districts the Democrats

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would be in the majority today." In the end, Republicans won the most narrow House majority in 40 years. Reps. Tate and Torkildsen went down to narrow defeats, while Rep. Ganske survived.

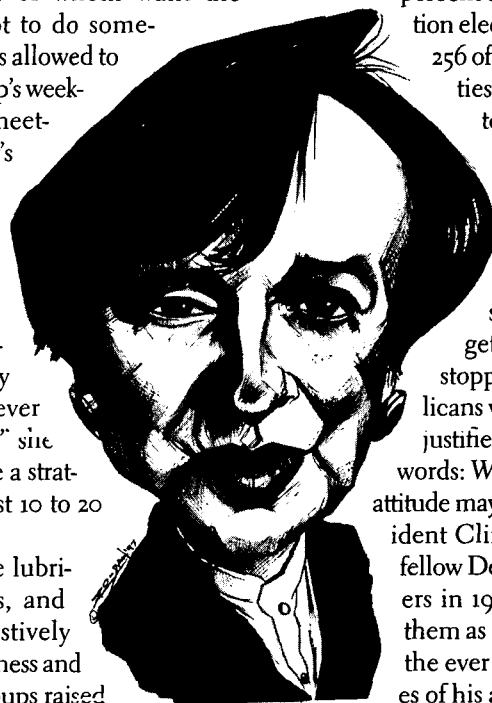
According to Drew, much of the credit for the narrow Republican victory is due to the work of Grover Norquist, Ralph Reed, and Tanya Metaksa. The efforts of Reed and the NRA to educate their members on issues and motivate them to go to the polls despite the dreary Dole campaign have been well reported. Less well known is the role of Norquist, an old friend of mine, whom Drew credits with assembling "an extraordinary coalition of about 70 groups called the Leave Us Alone coalition, each of whom want the government not to do something." Drew was allowed to sit in on the group's weekly Wednesday meetings at Norquist's office and came away with new respect for the conservative activists: "They think longer-term than any people I have ever seen in politics," she says. "They have a strategy that's at least 10 to 20 years out."

Money is the lubricant of politics, and Drew exhaustively details how business and conservative groups raised

"soft" money for the Republican National Committee which, in turn, sent funds to groups (such as Norquist's Americans for Tax Reform) for "issue advocacy" ads on issues such as Medicare. Democrats have attempted to equate those transfers with the fundraising scandals of the DNC, and this summer are hoping to use Sen. Fred Thompson's oversight hearings to highlight the role of ATR and other conservative groups in the 1996 election. In fact, both Thompson and Sen. John Glenn, the ranking Democrat on the hearings, are said to keep underlined copies of Drew's book on their desks. Republicans, in turn, will no doubt be interested in her description of how the AFL-CIO used "issue advocacy" ads to "wreak vengeance on the 104th Congress."

As preparations for the 1998 election get underway, many of the players in Drew's book are preparing to be back for return engagements. The AFL-CIO will likewise attempt to finish the job it started. Once again, they may be disappointed as the gathering cloud of scandals surrounding President Clinton threatens once again to undermine his party's chances of winning back Congress. While President Clinton has been an extraordinarily lucky politician, he seems to bring only ill fortune to his party, which is now a congressional minority but has seen states with 75 percent of the nation's population elect GOP governors and 256 of its officials switch parties—all since Bill Clinton's first election.

Despite this dismal record, Dick Morris recently justified the Clinton 1996 campaign tactics by saying: "The ends of getting him elected and stopping what the Republicans were doing damn well justified the means." In other words: *Whatever It Takes*. That attitude may have worked for President Clinton in 1996, but his fellow Democrats may find voters in 1998 once again using them as the whipping boys for the ever more creative excesses of his administration. ❧



ISRAEL ROLDAN

The John Elway of Criminal Prosecutors

Without a Doubt

Marcia Clark with Teresa Carpenter
Doubleday / 502 pages / \$25.95

REVIEWED BY
Joe Queenan

One of the great things about professional football is that no one ever asks the team that lost the Super Bowl to write a book about it. You do not see the shelves in your local bookstore filled to overflowing with volumes by Buffalo Bills quarterback Jim Kelly, Minnesota Vikings coach Bud Grant, Denver Broncos quarterback John Elway. No one is really interested in reading books by people who lost the biggest game of their lives. We already know why they lost. The other guys were better.

How very different things are in the publishing arena. In the world of letters, it doesn't matter whether you win or lose but only whether you have a large enough public profile to justify the publication of a few hundred thousand copies of your ghostwritten book. Never mind that your only claim to fame is having lost the most famous criminal trial in American history, in a case that was initially viewed as being completely unlosable. All that matters is the brand name. Jane Q. Public knows who you are, so she might buy a copy of your book. (For more information on the burgeoning genre of best-selling authors most famous for being losers, consult "Carter, James.")

Marcia Clark, the Los Angeles public prosecutor who made a mess of the O.J. Simpson double-homicide trial, has now co-penned a compendious apologia entitled *Without a Doubt*. Assisting her in this effort is Teresa Carpenter, a Pulitzer-Prize-winning journalist now reduced to doing

JOE QUEENAN is the author of *The Unkindest Cut: How a Hatchet-Man Critic Made His Own \$7,000 Movie and Put It All on His Credit Card* (Hyperion).

scut work. Nobody really expects ex-politicians to write their own books, but it is a sad commentary on our times that even lawyers need ghostwriters to put their thoughts into luminous prose. But then again, these are sad times.

Without a Doubt is not so much a bad book as an unnecessary one. It is a blow-by-blow recapitulation of everything that took place in the O.J. Simpson trial from the time the murders of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ron Goldman were discovered to the moment the murderer officially beat the rap. Clark seems to be laboring under the impression that most of us missed out on this event, that she is writing a book about esoteric twelfth-century Incan burial techniques of whose existence the general public is entirely ignorant.

Au contraire, Ms. Clark. The details of the Simpson case—the gloves, the white Bronco, the cut hand, the missing knife, the “n” word—are as widely known as the details of George Washington’s chopping down the cherry tree. By this point, the words “Bruno” and “Magli” are so much a part of our DNA coding that even our grandchildren will come into the world with an innate understanding that if your parents name you Kato it’s because they’ve already decided that you’re an idiot.

What then is the point of this book? Well, obviously to make a few bucks, both for Marcia Clark, and for her Pulitzer Prize-winning ghostwriter, who clearly needs the spare cash. Beyond that, the book would appear to be a sad attempt to portray Clark as a victim. A victim of an incompetent

judge. A victim of a racist police officer. A victim of a brain-dead jury. A victim of Simpson’s unethical lawyers.

Here we have two distinct problems. One, we already know all this stuff. We saw the trial on TV. We read about it in the papers. Don Imus and Dominick Dunne got the word out. So we’re not going to stop the presses just to print this recycled material. Even if Doubleday would.

But the second, bigger problem is that Clark *isn't* a victim. The trial made her a celebrity. She got a huge advance for the book. She can move to France. The rest of America can't. The society Marcia Clark was supposed to protect has to live with the fallout from this trial. Marcia Clark isn't the victim. The American people are. Consider a typical passage:

Almost every day, the defense made some attempt to inject race into the courtroom. It seemed to me the height of immorality cynically exploiting a serious social issue for the benefit of a murderer who'd never lifted a damned finger to advance the cause of civil rights. O.J. Simpson wasn't "rousted" by a band of racist cops; the evidence demanded that he be arrested and tried. You can call the cops sloppy, you can call me and my colleagues inept, but the facts showed that Simpson was guilty. The deliberate twisting of reality to distort this horrific murder was the biggest lie told in the entire case.

But the facts also show that the cops were sloppy and that Clark and her colleagues were inept. She should have vetted Mark Fuhrman more carefully before she put him on the stand. She should have made sure that Simpson tried on a pair of duplicate gloves without wearing a latex liner. She should have kept it simple, stupid, because she was dealing with a simple, stupid jury.

I am not suggesting that Clark

