

An essay review of "The Making of the President 1968,"
by Theodore H. White (Atheneum, 459 pp., \$10)

The Election in the Year of Decay

by BILL MOYERS

If Theodore White did not exist, the Ford Foundation would have to award Harvard University a grant to create him. How else would the Establishment tell its story?

The Making of the President 1968 is essentially that: the authorized version, the view through the official keyhole. For Teddy White, the most successful entrepreneur of political detail and perception in American journalism today, tells the story of 1968 as he did four and eight years ago, primarily through the momentum of a few stout and earnest persons. But things have changed. For the first time in my experience the lead actors in the theater of American politics were largely irrelevant, more acted upon than acting, scarcely permitted on center stage. The difference between what they believed to be happening and what in fact was happening is the real story of 1968.

In that sense it was not a reporter's year. Only a novelist, living the passions, could truly capture the phantasmagorical pageant of acrimony, pride, and violence that marched through our political world, leaving it upended. Character in decay, Mencken observed, is the theme of the great bulk of superior fiction. And 1968 was the Year of Decay. It was Norman Mailer's kind of year.

For one America, official America, *The Making of the President 1968* will nonetheless earn its place on the shelf next to Webster's and the Britannica. Unfortunately, we are no longer one America. We are two, three, many more. Richard Nixon has acknowledged that his most urgent task is to "bring us together again." Under such

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circumstances no single author, not even a Teddy White, could chart the shifting boundaries of our political terrain.

That he has tried, against impossible odds, is a tribute to the man's intrepid will. Certainly his is the most coherent and the most eloquent account we are likely to get from any reporter's notes. And for the majority of Americans his interpretation will be illuminating and persuasive. White, after all, is the quintessential liberal middling American—an admirer of Adlai Stevenson, an early Kennedyphile, a devotee of the Great Society; and increasingly Fed-Up-to-Here with the excesses of the young and the black. To him Vietnam is "a cause of which no American need ever have been ashamed," LBJ a tragically misunderstood commander-in-chief, Nixon a healer. Black rioters, on the other hand, are "barbarians" and the new morality of the young "aggressive infantilism."

Now Teddy White is usually the gentlest of men, the reach of his sensitivity putting most of us to shame. He has always—well, almost always—dipped his criticisms of the central figures of American political life in the milk of human kindness, and not only because he may need to return again to his sources. White is by nature a kind man, the sweetest of Boswells, with little taste for the commonplace meanness of the men he observes.

Yet he comes down hard on the outriders of society, indignant with hippies for fouling "the entryways of the beautiful old private homes that still line the northern rim of Beacon Street," and furious with student radicals, "led by a youth whose glands had outrun his learning." A sharp tongue from a gentle man! If he is only exercising the overdue obligation liberals have to restrain the excesses of their



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friends, fine. But there is a tone in it that we are not accustomed to hearing in Teddy White. If he is becoming preoccupied with the bad manners of this generation, if he hears only the obscenities and not the anger, what can we expect from lesser men?

In the light of that tone, it is not surprising to learn that he is hopeful for Richard Nixon in the White House. It is one of Teddy White's charms that he is forever beguiled by the good intentions of public men, and here he is assuring us that there is a New Nixon Mark III, that his subject has changed in eight years. "No more plastic President, none more open to suggestions and ideas, none more willing to admit mistakes or learn from error, has sat in the White House in recent times." Alas, I believe him. Richard Nixon is plastic and he is following a new script. What I wonder now is how much Theodore White may have changed.

As a reporter he remains the master. Illuminating details, such as the story of how Barry Goldwater's speechwriter became a welder because he could not get a political job after the debacle of 1964, are used to drive home a point (in this case, that the Republicans' plight was so miserable in 1964 as to make their comeback in 1966 and 1968 nothing less than miraculous.)

His descriptions of Nixon and Humphrey watching their own nominations, and receiving each others' congratulatory calls, do not surprise us; we have come to expect such color from White.

There are memorable sketches of Miami; of a harrassed and hounded Hubert Humphrey with no one to organize him (in that respect his campaign in 1968 resembled Nixon's in 1960); and of a meeting of the Student Mobilization Committee which White left in disgust.

His skill in drawing the line between the McCarthy-Lowenstein forces and the New Left militants illustrates a discerning talent rare among political commentators. There endures, too, his command of the apt quote: Pat Lucey saying McCarthy's people hated each other more than any campaigners he had known, Stephen Smith's chilling remarks about McCarthy, and William Connell's statement that "Nothing would bring the real peaceniks back to our side unless Hubert urinated on a portrait of Lyndon Johnson in Times Square before television—and then they'd say to him, why didn't you do it before?"

White is constantly adding to our knowledge. He does us all a singular favor by filling in the real George Romney around the hills and valleys created by sophisticated journalists who

never liked this square. In a revealing vignette he describes how Romney's "brainwashing" line was innocently dropped in the middle of a lengthy local television interview, where it remained until the opportunistic interviewer, seeking additional publicity, called it to the attention of *The New York Times* man in Detroit—three days after the interview.

The *Times*man reported the story to his desk, burying "brainwashing" down in his text. "The man on the desk caught the 'brainwashing' quote. On Tuesday, September 5th, the day after the telecast, on page 28 of *The New York Times*, a full five days after the blurt-out, the story came to national attention: "Romney Asserts He Underwent 'Brainwashing.'" If White is right, and we have reached the point where political campaigns resemble *Laugh-in* (didn't Billy Graham and Richard Nixon both appear?), we are in t-r-o-u-b-l-e.

These are the elements of superlative reporting which excite the admiration not only of intrigued readers but

of professional colleagues who know how difficult the reconstruction of such events can be.

Professional competence is obviously not the problem with this book. So many of the "facts" are there; lengthy and generally perceptive passages are devoted to race, crime, Asia, and the media; the writing, as usual, flows gracefully and easily.

What, then, is the problem? Why does *The Making of the President 1968* leave us with a feeling of incompleteness that we did not have after reading its two predecessors?

It is because, in Samuel Johnson's words, "Seldom any splendid story is wholly true." This book is no exception. Most of what White reports is interesting; much of what he does *not* report is significant.

Something is missing because interpreting politics at the top so completely and so officially for eight years has finally caught up with Theodore White. The converging of complex social con-

licts and new disparities of perceptions came upon our institutions with such force in 1968 as to render impossible any man's effort, no matter how gifted, to compile a political textbook widely credible within the country's factions. But White was already shut out of those factions as completely as he was included in official circles. He had become over the years so much a part of what the new furies were assailing (I know of no one who has stronger links to the major organs of mass communications or closer ties to more exalted politicians) that he could not, in honest loyalty as well as by instinct, completely separate himself from the besieged. He saw the struggle from across the moat, inside the battered fortress of the reigning powers, and while he was able to be fair toward those on the other side of the wall, he could never achieve total freedom from his prejudices.

Perhaps I can illustrate with his treatment of Vietnam. "The cause in Vietnam," he writes, "was the cause of America for half a century, a cause made clear to the world by the Democratic Party of the United States." Lyndon Johnson also believed that. But with all the influence of the Presidency behind him, he could not convince the country. Neither can White, nor does he try; but the point is that he believes in the war, and it colors his sympathies.

He called upon Vice President Humphrey after the violence in Chicago and found him "stunned." Said the Vice President to the reporter, "The interesting thing about all this is that if anybody could qualify for the title of hawk, it would be Nixon, but he's never been picketed, only me." It is not recorded what the reporter said to the Vice President, but he might have said, "Well, Hubert, I can understand how you feel. But I am afraid your comment completely misses the point of how so many Democrats feel. They feel betrayed. After all, it wasn't Nixon who had escalated the war or who felt compelled officially to defend it. It was your party, the Democratic, not the Republican, which was in power when the fateful decisions were made. Nixon may be a hawk, but he didn't say four years ago that he was not going to send American boys to Asia, and he didn't then order them over. You had better snap out of this persecution complex and realize just why they are picketing you. Then maybe you can do something about it."

White, as everyone knows, is an old Asia hand who understands the historic mission of Asians to expel Westerners. He knows and details the thoughtless way in which we stumbled

into the Vietnamese jungle. Like George Romney, Nelson Rockefeller, and Humphrey (like most of us, in fact, who have had to grapple with the strategic and moral contradictions of Vietnam), he battles within himself to reconcile the paradox of the war. His ties to power and the men who exercise it finally prevail.

When he writes that "In the highest possible sense, Vietnam was a matter of conscience for candidate Hubert Humphrey," there arises a serious problem of language. To millions of Americans who last year were concerned less with one man's moral agony than with the issue of war and death, this sentence must appear offensive, just as Hubert Humphrey appeared to his natural peace constituency. Again, White is right. Vietnam was a matter of conscience to the Vice President, and in the end his principles of loyalty, allegiance and propriety bound him to a war he detested and to a man who regarded him with humiliating derogation. Right through to the end of the campaign. Conscientious, yes, but to vast numbers of people it was a lower scale of conscience, a distortion of moral priorities, conventional morality at its worst. The failure to perceive that it would be so regarded proved costly.

Yet White remains sympathetic: "He [HHH] had reason to be unsmiling. Pinioned in his official role of Vice President, he must suffer the denunciation of all his old friends for the war, as if his old record of twenty years service to the liberal cause had been sponged away by the rewriting of history." Here is the hint of an implication that men should judge a public official for his past, not present, conduct, as if previous virtues canceled present errors. But even this argument is not the essential issue. What it reveals is that Hubert Humphrey's problem is Teddy White's problem: they underestimated how strongly people felt about the war, how pervasively it had contaminated the moral climate of America, and how exclusively it had become the one issue that truly mattered to the very people White and Humphrey care about.

And so Humphrey would grieve because Nixon was ignored by the protesters and White would pass judgment on men and events he might otherwise see differently.

Witness: "Never before had a party gathering [the Democratic National Convention] attempted so violently to intrude itself in state policy while its party leaders were fighting a war"—as if a party has no stake in the issues of war and peace and no claim over the
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An essay review of "The Annals of America,"
edited by Mortimer J. Adler, Charles Van Doren,
George Ducas, Wayne Moquin, Thomas Stauffer, *et al.*
(Encyclopaedia Britannica, 20 Vols., \$164.50)

Twenty-five Issues Programmed for Retrieval

by DANIEL J. BOORSTIN

This set consists of eighteen volumes of selected documents and two volumes of "Conspectus" (entitled "Great Issues in American Life"). Altogether *The Annals of America* has some 2,202 selections, averaging a little over four pages in length, interlarded in each volume by six to eight clusters of illustrations (about twelve pages each). The two-volume Conspectus, intended to be both an introduction and an index to the whole work, is quite explicit about the claims of the enterprise.

With a frankness not too common among scholars, the editors inform us that this work is in *every* respect "unique" and superlative. We are told, for example, that the *Annals* include "all" the documents "essential to a full understanding of the official history of the country." Here they give us "an approach to the writing, and more significantly the understanding, of history that is perhaps unique." "Every one of the selections has been edited with meticulous care. In this respect, indeed, the *Annals* probably has no peer." As for the chapter introductions, "In several ways, these essays represent a wholly new kind of writing." Concerning the general structure, we are told that the editorial staff had numerous conferences, out of which came twenty-five "major themes." "But, after the list of twenty-five was finally determined, the staff never again found it necessary either to expand or decrease it. These twenty-five subjects are the major concerns of Americans, both present and past. They have stood up to the most stringent examination that any such list has ever been subjected to." A student

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of American history can only remark, "Wow!" And all for \$164.50. (Retail.)

As Dr. Mortimer J. Adler, the editor-in-chief of the work, pointed out at a press conference marking publication, the *Annals* is the first reference work of such size and scope to be computer-set and programmed for retrieval. He explained that it was set at an average rate of one page every twenty-five seconds, by means of an RCA Videocomp 70/830 typesetter, and then stored in a computer with separate magnetic tapes for each volume. As a result any teacher can put together his own course, and have his selections printed in book form within three months. "Retrieved" materials, Dr. Adler indicated, are already being used by school systems in San Diego and Memphis. And he went on: "We think that our retrieval system may be the beginning of one of the greatest innovations in the history of educational publishing—a departure from textbooks thrust and imposed upon teachers, in the direction of books of texts created by them tailor made, as it were, for their own teaching purposes."

Barnumesque claims for multivolume works are not entirely unprecedented. The secondhand furniture stores are full of similar sets published in the early years of this century. They once made quite comparable claims. And they, like the present set, always had something to recommend them. They brought into many a living-room documents and fragments of documents of our past that might never have been there. From these volumes, too, a family without books and not accustomed to books will find a good deal of amusement and instruction. Plainly designed for the house-to-house commodity market, this set would not merit an extended review in a magazine for people who buy books if it did not somehow have a significance for students of American civilization. The special kind of