

# POLITICAL BOOKNOTES

**The Good Times.** Russell Baker. *William Morrow*, \$19.95. Russell Baker's latest memoir takes him from apprenticeship as police reporter at the *Baltimore Sun* to elevation, at age 37, to *New York Times* columnist. Considering Baker edged out future *Times* editor Abe Rosenthal (who wanted to write a column about Asia), Baker could be forgiven were he to display any retrospective smugness about his rapid rise. Instead, he writes about these years with utterly convincing self-effacement. Baker is deeply skeptical of the status obsessions of both small-time and big-time journalism. The result is a book that is even more likable than its predecessor, *Growing Up*.

Baker's true rival for success in journalism was not Rosenthal (whose name doesn't even come up in *The Good Times*), but his mother's first cousin, Edwin James, who was managing editor of the *Times*. "Edwin James was no smarter than anybody else," young Russell's mother would tell him again and again. Although Russell never had a chance to meet Cousin Edwin, his pompous figure loomed large in the family. Baker turns him into a marvelous caricature of all distant relatives whose undeserved good fortune brings endless grief.

Big-city newspaper reporters may be well-paid today, but when Baker signed up with the *Sun* in 1947, "newspaper work was for life's losers." Starting salary was a miserable \$30 a week. One *Sun* writer broke a belt and couldn't afford a new one, so he came to work with a necktie around his waist. Political reporters were routinely lured away from the newsroom by politicians offering better pay. The turnover compromised the *Sun's* objectivity, but allowed Baker to move quickly up the paper's ladder from police reporter to feature writer to chief of the London bureau.

Baker does a nice job lampooning the Anglophilia that was pervasive at

the *Sun* (and remains common in American news organizations today). One editor went so far as to always request House of Lords gin for his martinis; when he visited London, Baker made sure to pick him up in a Daimler, the type of car Queen Mary rode in. While his pals back home were earning starvation wages, Baker, like all foreign correspondents, was expected to travel first-class and run up enormous expense accounts to demonstrate his sophistication.

In the early fifties, London hadn't yet become the completely pointless finishing school for newspaper reporters it is today; in the aftermath of World War II, it was still producing some news of genuine significance. But Baker ended up making his biggest splash with a piece about Queen Elizabeth's 1953 coronation—"just another color story," Baker admits. The greatest benefit of Baker's London experience was not what he covered but what he read. Exposed to the nonhysterical prose style of the *Manchester Guardian* (with whom the *Sun* shared an office), Baker purged his copy of journalistic clichés like "tense world capital" and "behind closed doors" and developed the gently ironic, unaffected voice that graces his columns today.

Returning stateside, Baker won another plum assignment—the White House. Especially in this television age, covering the White House is often viewed as journalism's big brass ring. In fact, Baker shows, it's a largely stenographic job. Even when a reporter got the inside line from a powerful aide, the result would commonly be "anecdotes illustrating the president's firmness, decisiveness, energy, alertness, glowing good health, zest for living, and a thousand other gee-whiz qualities." (Sound familiar?) Later, when Baker covered the Senate for the *Times*, he wisely avoided getting too cozy with majority leader Lyndon Johnson. This cost him scoops but spared him the straitjacket of "access." Nor did Baker become

a "player," like his *Times* colleague, Bill Lawrence, who derailed a successful career as a political reporter by becoming too obviously close to John F. Kennedy—a cautionary tale Baker relates with clear-eyed compassion.

Baker stretched the boundaries of he-said-she-said daily journalism to accommodate his quirky sensibility, but in those days not much stretching was allowed—especially at the starchy *Times*. Finally wearying of "sitting on marble floors, waiting for somebody to come out and lie to me," Baker accepted an offer to write a column for the *Sun*; the *Times*, recognizing it was about to lose an enormous talent, called and raised the *Sun's* bid by offering Baker the "Observer" column, which he writes to this day. Although obviously a gain for Baker and for readers of the *Times's* editorial pages, Baker's departure was a loss to the world of fact journalism. Within a few years, the rise of the New Journalism created a niche for novelistic talents like Baker's, and in the years since, the possibilities for reporters to explore the significance of daily events have expanded further. Even the *Times* now finds room on page one for "off-the-news" pieces exploring issues and personalities, and, inside,

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its uneven "Washington Talk" page demonstrates at least some commitment to doing the kind of government anthropology of which Baker was a master. Given the narrative and reportorial powers on display in *Growing Up* and *The Good Times*, one can't help wondering what Baker might have accomplished had he remained in harness as journalism's rules were easing up.

—Timothy Noah

**The Price of Admiralty.** John Keegan. Viking, \$21.95. At 4:00 p.m. on May 31, 1916, during the Battle of Jutland, one of the main gun turrets of the British battlecruiser *Lion* was hit by a 12-inch German shell. For the unfortunates inside, it was as if their world had been fired by lightning.

The gun-house crew perished instantly; one, as he died, involuntarily switched on the loading hoist and sent burning cordite into the turret's depths. Fire raced down towards the magazines. Only an order from the dying turret officer that the doors be shut and the magazines flooded saved the ship. *Lion* was thus luckier than its sister, *Invincible*, which blew into halves when one of its gun turrets was hit shortly thereafter. Out of *Invincible*'s 1,000-man crew, only six survived.

As the British military author John Keegan points out in his well-reasoned new book, *The Price of Admiralty*, such damage and death didn't have to happen. At the time of the Battle of Jutland, all Britain's capital ships had the same flaw: insufficient "antiflash" doors for preventing fire from racing through turrets and magazines. Keegan points out that the previously installed protective devices had been removed by crews "to achieve the highest possible rates of fire in gunnery competitions."

German warships were better protected. Damage to the battlecruiser *Seydlitz* four months earlier had alerted German admirals to the danger of turret fire. Their capital ships had antiflash protection, and while Jutland was perhaps a strategic German defeat, the exchange of big ships was three to one in their favor.

The lesson that turrets are a battleship's most vulnerable points has been brought home again to the U.S.

Navy in recent months, by the gun explosion on the U.S.S. *Iowa* that killed 47 men. By peeling back layers of romanticism and dogma to expose what really happens in naval war, Keegan's book shows the roots of many of today's naval problems.

His lesson is that real military preparedness often revolves around mundane items and activities. Attention to turret safety is but one example. Another is the quality of torpedoes. Keegan points out that at the end of World War II even the best torpedoes were comparatively short-legged and inaccurate. Today some experts complain that U.S. torpedoes can't dive deep enough or move fast enough to catch many Soviet submarines. And as Keegan's chapter on the U-boat battles of the Atlantic amply demonstrates, submarine communication was a major problem in World War II; he says that it "remains an unsolved weakness."

Keegan's strength as an author has always been his grasp of what actually happens in war, as opposed to what movie convention and War Ministry propaganda imply. In his classic, *Face of Battle*, due for reissue soon in an illustrated edition, he took a series of land battles, beginning with Agincourt, and examined them to determine what men who experienced them must have gone through. The exercise leaves no illusion about the glories of combat, revealing it as a brutal and random business. Indeed, in his conclusion to *Face of Battle*, Keegan theorized that modern land combat would be so horrible that men would simply refuse to fight.

*The Price of Admiralty* takes the same approach. Four battles—Trafalgar, Jutland, Midway, and the Battle of the Atlantic—are examined in detail. The result is not so much a portrait of men at war as a study of change and counter-change. In Keegan's book, naval warfare seems a uniquely technology-dependent type of combat, with new generations of machines completely transforming the rules. Status quo means defeat.

At Trafalgar the innovation was tactical. According to Keegan, until this episode sea battles resembled World War I land battles, with opposing fleets prizing position and ignoring maneuver, content to slug it out line against line. Admiral Nelson suc-

cessfully flouted this conception by sending his ships plunging into holes in the French and Spanish lines.

At Jutland the innovation was battleships. The first and last great confrontation of dreadnoughts, Jutland brought home the fact that technology had accelerated, that navies were vulnerable to defeat "in an afternoon" if found deficient in armor, gunnery, or flash protection. Midway and the Battle of the Atlantic showed how quickly entirely new ways of waging naval war—aircraft carriers, submarines—could rise, threatening the supremacy of nations whose old salts cling to old ways.

And today the U.S. Navy may be clinging to old ways. In the aftermath of World War II, the aircraft carrier came to dominate the U.S. fleet. But Keegan sees subs as the capital ships of the future, for the simple reason that full freedom of the seas, both above and below, rests only with them. By contrast, he judges conventional surface ships as "marginalized" instruments of military force.

Yet the U.S. Navy still clings to the big deck carrier, while, compared to the Soviet Union, the U.S. sub fleet is small. The arguments against carriers are by now op-ed clichés—too much of their strength is spent defending themselves, they're vulnerable to cheap smart missiles, etc., etc. It's notable that *Price of Admiralty* recycles none of these points. Instead it shows by accretion of historical detail what happens to navies that, faced with a choice in technology, choose wrong.

Unworkable technology has long been the nemesis of efficiency in all military branches. The U.S. Navy might well have turned the tide against the Japanese in the Pacific much earlier if its submarines had not been stocked with torpedoes that misfired at catastrophic rates. Then there's the Army's famous reluctance at the start of the Vietnam war to abandon the heavy and hard-to-control M-14 rifle, and its subsequent perversion of a viable preexisting design of a light, reliable one. Or the Air Force and Navy decision in the sixties to commit to a missile-only fighter even as Vietnam and Middle East experience was showing the necessity of guns in air warfare.

The adaptation of technical ad-