

Just the Facts, Ma'am

Bob Woodward once again displays a knack for getting the telling detail—and omitting the necessary context

BY MATTHEW COOPER

The Choice

Bob Woodward, *Simon & Schuster*, \$26

Through the early months of this year's presidential primaries, the word spread through the small fraternity of political reporters: Did you hear? Woodward's doing a book on the Republicans. Occasionally we would catch glimpses of him in action. Late one night this past winter, I sat in bed watching a Bob Dole campaign event being broadcast on C-SPAN. The aging Kansan was working a New Hampshire breakfast spot and there, with him, was Bob Woodward. When Dole got up from the table and went outside, Woodward followed him while the rest of the press corps was hustled off to waiting vans by pasty-faced advance men. Damn, I thought—he's getting in the car with Dole. I was envious of that valuable time in cars when you have a candidate's attention.

As the campaign went on, though, the fears of Woodward's book and what revelations it might hold began to dissipate among us "pencils." We had heard that Woodward had spent huge amounts of time with Phil Gramm and Pete Wilson, doomed candidates whose stories would not a bestseller make. We had heard that Woodward's long hours in Sacramento and College Station meant that he had spent too little time with Steve Forbes and Pat Buchanan, although any reader of *The Final Days* would have to suspect that Buchanan had been a longtime source for the *Washington Post* reporter. Suddenly, we political reporters were a little less fearful that Woodward's book would be an embarrassment for his competitors.

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To be sure, *The Choice* has its scoops. The big one was supposed to be Hillary Rodham Clinton's conversations with the dead. I confess I wish I had gotten that bit of inside knowledge. But I don't think I would have, à la Bob, hyped it so hard. The conversations were not seances, but a reasonable, albeit somewhat silly, exercise in imagining what it would be like to talk with Eleanor Roosevelt or Mahatma Gandhi. In the end, it should not have been a big deal.

This is typical Woodward—great reporting, but too little context or coherence. Woodward prides himself on his just-the-facts-ma'am approach, and, indeed, when many reporters rely on attitude or verbal pyrotechnics rather than old-fashioned shoe leather, there's something to be said for keeping the analysis to a minimum. Still, Woodward takes it too far, and the reader suffers for it.

Anyone who has seen Woodward on TV has a pretty good sense of what his writing is like. He speaks slowly, in a flat Illinois accent with barely any affect. This is what his books are like, a style parodied brilliantly by Art Levine in the pages of *The Washington Monthly* some 20 years ago, when he speculated how Woodward would have covered Hitler in his bunker. ("Himmler was worried. It wasn't like the Reichfuhrer to sulk....") Woodward gathers fact upon fact, and the effort is impressive. But his unwillingness to offer any kind of context leaves his books fatally flawed.

Consider *The Agenda*, his last Clinton opus, which traced the battle between two Clinton camps: the deficit hawks like Leon Panetta and the

self-styled populists like Paul Begala. Woodward touted the book as a portrait of a White House in "chaos." He told the story of how Bill Clinton blew up at aides when it emerged that a trip to Chicago had been scheduled without a courtesy visit with Mayor Richard Daley. This was meant to show Clinton's out-of-control temper. In fact, Clinton's red-faced response to a staff screw-up seemed to me a proportionate reaction to offending the most powerful Democratic mayor in the country.

The greater sin of *The Agenda*, though, was in its failure to capture the big picture. The White House, painted by Woodward's brush, was hopelessly disorganized. There's certainly some truth to that sense of disorder. (I once waited three hours in a holding room in order to interview a senior official who came in breathlessly and said: "Forgive me. This place is completely screwed up. You want a cookie?") Still, what actually happened with Clinton's economic plan in the end seems to have been a very good thing.

The Choice is, in many ways, the opposite of *The Agenda*. The once incompetent Clinton is now portrayed as righting himself, moving toward the center, and becoming more focused—thanks to the savvy advice of the now legendary Dick Morris, the ambidextrous political consultant whom Clinton knew from his Arkansas days. It is true that Morris contributed mightily to the Clinton White House in some ways. His idea that the President should support a balanced budget was a wise move. And his interest in values issues—school uniforms, curfews—helped as well.

But the whole truth is somewhat more complicated. Clinton's recent success, it seems to me, owes to four big factors, only one of which is Morris. First, the Republicans wildly overreached after taking Congress in 1994. This would have buoyed Clinton whether he hired Morris or not; simply by being the anti-Gingrich, he was bound to rise. Second, Clinton no longer was proposing legislation. This is an enviable position to be in, since legislation—like the Clinton budget or health plans—is invariably controversial. Third, Clinton was helped by something that had little to do with Morris: the demagoguing of Medicare. Woodward gives it short shrift, but Morris favored cutting a deal with the GOP on Medicare. Whatever the merits of the deal, it surely would have been bad politics. George Stephanopoulos and Harold Ickes prevailed over Morris and convinced the President that he should

give little on Medicare. Eventually Morris came around to this position, too. But it's important to remember that Morris's political instincts were way off base on this issue.

Woodward also gets inside the Colin Powell camp. The Powell he presents is a likable fellow—calm, self-confident, as comfortable fixing cars in his McLean driveway as he is attending a Georgetown gala. But Woodward, again, offers no analysis. He gives us great inside dope about how Powell thought through his potential candidacy with advisers Ken Duberstein and Richard Armitage. But it never occurs to Woodward to put these advisers in context. What does it say about Powell that he chooses to surround himself with these particular men? Duberstein is a Washington staple, a former chief of staff and a powerful lobbyist, and the architect of Clarence Thomas's comeback on Capitol Hill during the Anita Hill affair. That Duberstein is Powell's best friend suggests that a President Powell would have been a thoroughly establishmentarian figure.

This tendency of Woodward's is most frustrating when it comes to his coverage of the Dole campaign. Here, Woodward faithfully reports the internecine battles within the Dole camp—the rivalry between Scott Reed, the campaign manager and Jack Kemp protege, and Sheila Burke, the moderate former Democrat who was Dole's Senate chief of staff. Woodward, to his eternal credit, gets great stuff. There's a hysterical shouting match between Reed and Al D'Amato over affirmative action. And there's the terrific anecdote about Elizabeth Dole needing to schedule an appointment with her husband in order to talk campaign strategy. But Woodward recoils from even obvious observations. For instance, he dutifully reports how Mari Will, Dole's communications czarina and the wife of columnist George Will, convinces the senator that he must campaign on family values. This is deliciously ironic, since George Will divorced his first wife, as did the candidate himself.

More importantly, Woodward's access to Reed stops him from offering the kind of critical reaction that kept popping into this reader's head: This guy's terrible. Reed pushes Dole to cut taxes, something that Dole, a deficit hawk, clearly doesn't want to do. He pushes Dole to renounce affirmative action, even though the senator repeatedly voted for affirmative action programs. He returns a campaign donation from a gay Republican organization with-

out telling Dole. And then he tries to convince Dole that it's the right thing to do, even though he knows that Dole has made it clear to the staff that he won't bash gays. In other words, Reed is forever trying to make Dole into someone that he isn't, which may explain why the candidate has begun reaching out to the likes of Donald Rumsfeld, the former White House chief of staff.

For Reed, 1996 is about trying to purge the ghost of 1988, the year in which Bob Dole ran as, well, Bob Dole, refusing to sign the ridiculous anti-tax pledge in New Hampshire or pander to the right. And yet Dole would clearly be better off by running as a more moderate candidate. Consider

his farewell speech on the floor of the Senate, when he praised Hubert Humphrey, Bob Byrd, and George McGovern, when he waxed eloquent about food stamps and the merits of compromise. This is the Dole that could win.

And so we're left with much more knowledge about these candidates, and yet relatively little to help us make the choice this fall. That doesn't diminish Woodward's achievement. By unearthing great anecdotes, he teaches all of us reporters. But he also shows that reporting is about more than stenography and detective work. It's about thinking, analyzing, and explaining. Woodward is capable of offering that. But will he? Well, that's his choice. □

Who Killed Liberalism?

Why, the liberals, of course

BY JIM SLEEPER

The Inheritance: How Three Families and America Moved From Roosevelt to Reagan and Beyond

Samuel G. Freedman, *Simon & Schuster*, \$27.50

How I wish *The Inheritance* had been read by the author of every new book that has predicted an implosion of conservatism and a rebirth of some kind of progressivism. In close-grained reportage that sometimes achieves a novel's intimacy with its subjects, former *New York Times* reporter Samuel Freedman has traced the political evolutions of three white-ethnic families through three generations, from immigrants' ardent support of the New Deal through their grandchildren's active politicking for conservatives such as Lew Lehrman and George Pataki.

Freedman shows that these apostasies had less to do with any conservative conspiracy than with liberalism's abandonment of a class-sensitive politics in favor of one that redefined "need" in terms of countercultural, racial, gender, and other grievances and rights. The second and third gener-

ations—a plumber, a custodian, a department store manager, a gravedigger, and a state university student—watch as such policies divert resources, moral legitimacy, and political energy from a Democratic Party that once would have been worthy of their support.

But Freedman's stories don't begin or end there, and little in them should hearten conservatives or even old-style liberals who think they can win by rolling the clock back to 1964 or 1935. His subjects aren't selfless civic saints, and this is no morality play for either party to take on the road. Yes, liberals have dug their own graves by casting as "privileged" and "bigoted" the working-class whites who, in Freedman's nuanced telling, still nurse lingering immigrant injuries, Vietnam War sacrifices, and the myriad insecurities of a hard-won and closely guarded upward mobility. But now these people find themselves swimming in Republican corruption, ham-handedness, and

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