

Political Booknotes

Master of the Obvious

by Walter Shapiro

SELF-AWARENESS IS OFTEN AN exaggerated virtue for successful authors. A few years ago when I was profiling Tom Clancy, I discovered that the bard of the techno-thriller seriously believed he was a far better writer than John le Carré. Clancy, whose uncritical self-confidence must help him churn out the bestsellers, couldn't understand how a reader might prefer le Carré's dense, atmospheric plots to his own gleefully uncomplicated us-vs.-them shoot-em-ups. That same myopia, that same uncomprehending failure to view her own work as others might, afflicts Elizabeth Drew in her inexhaustible zeal to keep chronicling modern politics with a tendentious literalness that she clearly views as high art.

I have been baffled by Drew's appeal to serious readers ever since the days when she was filling the pages of the old *New Yorker* with her oddly uninflected recounting of the news that we all had just read from Washington. Purged by Tina Brown (just thinking about it has me humming "Rule Britannia"), Drew rebounded by continuing her dispatches from the conventional-wisdom front in hard-cover form. *Whatever It Takes* (even the title is derivative of Richard Ben Cramer's epic character study of the 1988 presidential contenders, *What It Takes*) is Drew's third book about the Clinton-Gingrich years, and it crystallizes the stylistic and conceptual limitations of her approach.

As always, Drew's prose style makes *Congressional Quarterly* seem lively in comparison. Take this pivotal paragraph that sets up the thesis of *Whatever It Takes*:

By early 1996, Gingrich was the most unpopular national politician. (He had only a 30 percent approval rating.) He had helped Clinton restore his political fortunes. The showdown between Clinton and Gingrich was the predicate for the 1996 congressional as well as presidential elections.

Even a wire-service reporter, facing tight deadlines, would have found a few adjectives to garnish these insipid sentences. More unsettling is the banality of Drew's central conceit: that only a reporter of her vast experience could have gleaned the hidden truth that in 1996 *The Real Struggle for Political Power in America* (that's what it promises on the book's dust jacket) was between Clinton and Gingrich. No one writing about politics during the dispiriting 1996 campaign, myself included, ever figured that one out. Serves the rest of us right for deciding in late October that Bob Dole was certain to be the next president.

To her credit, Drew did make the astute decision that her mission in 1996 would be to cover the struggle for control of the House of Representatives. *Whatever It Takes* begins with sketches of a handful of the 70 right-wing activists who convene each Wednesday morning in the Dupont Circle offices of Gingrich acolyte and conservative impresario Grover Norquist, who heads Americans for Tax Reform. From the NRA to the beer wholesalers (they don't want Big Government levying sin taxes), Drew adroitly identifies the groups with the most to lose if the Democrats reclaimed the house.

But Drew suffers from the Faustian bargain implicit in access journalism: the inability to be skeptical about her sources. In a recent devastating profile of Norquist in *The New Republic*, Tucker Carlson portrays this purported ideological purist as behaving no differently than "any other cash-

addled, morally malleable lobbyist in Washington." Particularly unsavory is Norquist's current status as a paid lobbyist for his one-time foe, Albert Rene, the left-wing dictator of the Seychelles. Carlson calls Norquist's flackery "a remarkably cynical reversal, even by Washington standards." But Drew devotes only half a paragraph to Norquist's born-again career as a lobbyist, totally missing the ideological backflip inherent in his representation of the Seychelles. Small wonder that *The New Republic* profile ends with Norquist proudly hosting a book party for his devoted Boswell, Elizabeth Drew.

Having decided to spend the 1996 campaign as a House-keteer, Drew covered the 100 hotly contested House races like a Vietnam War correspondent who never strayed far from the comforts of Saigon. Aside from one trip to the Seattle area and visits to Massachusetts (always a hardship post) and Pennsylvania, Drew seemingly never ventured more than a cab ride away from the Washington TV studios during the entire 1996 campaign. (Okay, she also deigned to attend the conventions, which she obligingly recounts in two non-reflective, empty-your-notebooks chapters).

The inevitable result of Drew's outside-the-Beltway phobia is a narrative studded with Washington talking heads and little else. At times she veers dangerously close to a Bob Woodward parody as in this mock-dramatic passage: "In early September, Tom O'Donnell, Dick Gephardt's chief of staff, was optimistic, but cautiously so, about the Democrats' chances of retaking the House. 'If the thing were held today, I think we'd take it back,' he told me." Not only is Drew serving up the spin of the day as if it were an exclusive, but the tepid quote is also indicative of the way that nobody seems to use colorful metaphors or vivid language in her presence. As she declares elsewhere in the book in what may be an inadvertent self-portrait, "Washington is filled with driven, humorless people."

Drew's dogged earnestness does serve her well in striking the proper tone of moral outrage over the soft-money scandals that besmirched both

WHATEVER IT TAKES

By Elizabeth Drew
Viking, \$24.95

the 1996 presidential and congressional campaigns. She details how the AFL-CIO, for example, has the same person targeting both its PAC contributions and its supposedly (ha!) non-political "issue advocacy" ad budget. She hits the right note in identifying the central affront to democracy in the way Clinton funded his money-talks re-election campaign: "One of the most precious commodities in America, if not the world—the President's time—was parceled to the White House meetings with prospective or recent large donors, and the people they brought along."

But Drew's wanderings down the political money trail were episodic, and only marginally compensate for the haven't-I-read-this-before quality of the rest of her book. Even as a moralist, Drew is a disappointment because she insists on taking hustlers like Grover Norquist at face value. The fetid campaign scandals of 1996 were nothing short of an indictment of the entire Washington political culture. And Drew remains too entwined with that world to look beyond her note-book and the smiling faces of her carefully cultivated sources. The final verdict on *Whatever It Takes*: right topic, wrong author.

WALTER SHAPIRO, a contributing editor of *The Washington Monthly*, is a political columnist for *USA Today*.

The Next World War

by Mark Feldstein

FOR YEARS, JOHN KERRY HAS been known as the "other" senator, overshadowed by his more famous Massachusetts colleague Edward Kennedy, or confused with Nebraska's senatorial war hero Bob Kerrey. Even now, as he prepares for a possible presidential bid, John Kerry is perhaps less known for his genuine accomplishments than for his recent marriage to millionaire heiress Theresa Heinz, widow of the ketchup magnate.

That's a shame, for John Kerry has been one of the few truly original—even heroic—members of Congress, consistently ahead of his time.

Kerry investigated the secret world of Oliver North well before the Iran-Contra scandal went public, and took on Manuel Noriega's drug dealing when Panama's dictator was still a darling of the C.I.A. Kerry also led the charge against the corrupt B.C.C.I. bank, at a time when other Democrats deferred to its hired gun, Democrat Clark Clifford.

Now, Kerry has written a book connecting the dots of these and other seemingly unrelated international scandals, in a call-to-arms titled *The New War*. His thesis is simple: In the aftermath of the cold war, the new enemy has become global crime—from Colombia's Cali cartel to the Russian mafia, from Chinese triads to Japanese yakuza, from respectable banks that launder dirty money to the politicians on the take world-wide that make it all possible. For just as technology and the economy have gone global, so, too, has crime.

At first blush, Kerry's slender and dryly sober book seems little more than a compendium of ethnic crimes encircling the globe, a kind of international edition of *Reefer Madness*. After all, now that the cold war is over, a new enemy must be invented to replace the Soviets; America's security apparatus is in search of a new mission to justify its swollen budget.

But it would be as wrong to dismiss Kerry now as it was to challenge his warnings about Manuel Noriega before 1989. Kerry is onto something important and serious in his frightening tale about the growing sophistication and ruthlessness of international criminal cartels, which threaten our national security in ways previously never dreamed of. "Today's transnational criminal cartels use high-speed modems and encrypted faxes," Kerry points out:

They buy jet airplanes three or four at a time and even have stealth-like submersibles in their armadas. They hire the finest minds to devise encryption systems and provide the complex accounting procedures any multi-billion dollar empire requires. They engage the ablest

lawyers...the craftiest spin doctors...the most persistent—and generous—lobbyists.

Not only is much of the violence on America's streets a direct outgrowth of global gangsters, Kerry writes, crack-cocaine was itself created and disseminated as a deliberate market-making decision by the Colombian cartel seeking to penetrate a new, less affluent American market. Kerry is careful not to minimize U.S. culpability for creating the demand for drugs in the first place; but "crime today is not simply random or local; more often it is purposeful and global."

For example:

- In England, cyberterrorists extorted tens of millions of pounds from British banks and defense companies after gaining access to their computers and threatening havoc. Law enforcement officials believe it is only a matter of time before airlines, communication satellites, or even missile systems are similarly penetrated.

- The Russian mafia are not only vying for nuclear stockpiles, they are hiring unemployed Russian scientists to create new and deadly synthetic drugs to export.

- Colombia's drug cartel is now working hand-in-hand with criminal groups from four continents, costing the United States an estimated \$200 billion per year—roughly equal to our entire defense budget.

The metaphor of war permeates Kerry's writing. "Having exhausted our rhetoric on everything from wars on poverty to wars on drugs, *we* may not think it's an all-out war, but *they* do," he writes "They know exactly what it is: War of a new kind, the whole globe its theater of operations." Kerry's prescription: "America must lead an international crusade...just as we led the world in the fight against" communism and "rogue" states like Iraq.

Kerry offers a number of solutions: beefing up U.S. law enforcement abroad, expanding laws for extradition and asset forfeiture, cracking down on money laundering centers like the Cayman Islands, establishing transnational courts to try global gangsters,

THE NEW WAR

By Sen. John Kerry

Simon & Schuster, \$23