

The Running Men

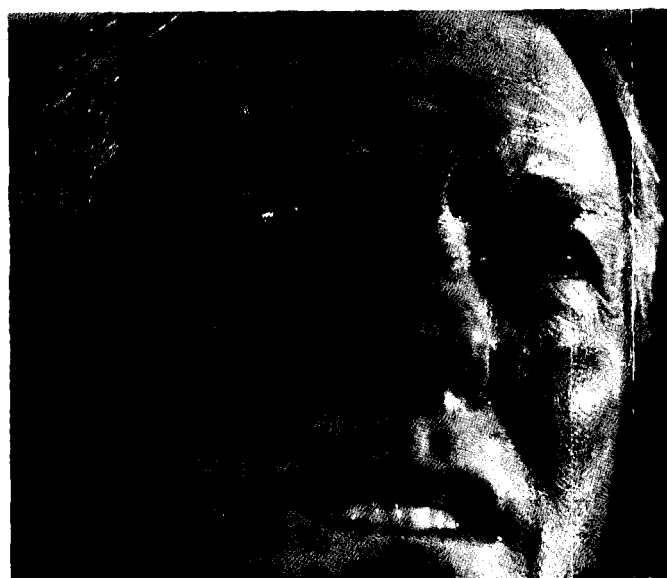
How candidates decide to run for president reveals how prepared they are to win.

By Walter Shapiro

Campaign chronicles, the spiritual descendants of Teddy White's trail-blazing *The Making of the President*, have sadly become a dying genre.

No matter how beautifully crafted and meticulously researched, these now-it-can-be-told political narratives, which traditionally come out after the campaign is long over, suffer from a built-in flaw—readers know the inevitable conclusion before they get to the first page. Even as a card-carrying political junkie, I would find it hard to curl up right now with a backward-looking recap of, say, the 2000 race filled with passages that begin, “Bill Bradley was nervous...” That’s why I thought that it would be glorious fun to publish my impressions of the early phase of the 2004 Democratic presidential race at the precise moment when Americans are becoming transfixed with the wide-open, anything-can-happen battle for the nomination.

Walter Shapiro is a contributing editor of *The Washington Monthly* and a columnist for *USA Today*. This article is adapted from his forthcoming book, *One-Car Caravan*. Copyright 2003. Reprinted by arrangement with Public Affairs, a member of the Perseus Books Group. All rights reserved.

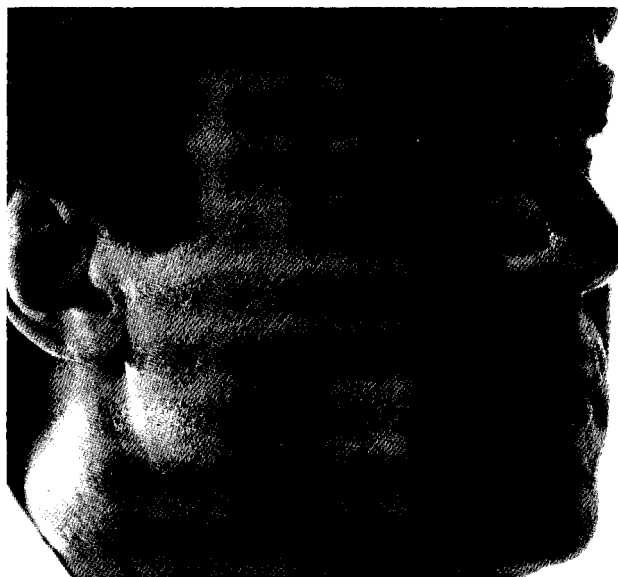


During my quarter century of covering presidential campaigns, I have found that the most telling glimpses of the candidates have come when they were just beginning to step into the cauldron of ambition. This is the time when their lines were still unscripted and their public veneers hung loosely like a suit that they had not yet grown into. Yet most political coverage during this early period is buried in the back pages of the newspapers. With a war in Iraq and other breaking news stories, who can blame editors for decreeing that full-tilt coverage of the presidential campaign could wait until the fall of this year? But what this means, in practice, is that most Americans tune into the campaign at the point when the Democratic contenders have thrown off the last vestiges of spontaneity, and virtually every syllable they utter is an echo of an earlier speech, question-and-answer session, or interview.

It is a Washington cliché that every senator peers into his shaving mirror and sees the next president. But few ever start that journey. Those that do must weigh the competing obligations to country and family, the challenges of fundraising, the evaporation of privacy, the odds of being elected, and ultimately the deep, dark-night-of-the-soul quandary, the question that should leave any self-aware politician in fear and trembling about the implications of his own ambitions: whether he is ready to assume the responsibilities of actually serving as president. For those who ultimately grab for the brass ring, the way they make the decision to run can be revealing.

For instance, retired Gen. Wesley Clark's year-long private agonies over whether to become a candidate are telling, reflecting either a preternatural self-confidence about his presidential prospects or a Bambi-like innocence about the political process. While his rivals were taking questions from real voters in Iowa and New Hampshire, Clark was charming elite audiences at forums like the Aspen Institute. On the other hand, Florida's star-crossed senator, Bob Graham, who decided in late 2002 to enter the race, chose—or rather stumbled into—a weird way of announcing his candidacy. Appearing on a call-in show on a Haitian-American radio station in Miami, a listener asked the senator whether he was considering the presidency, and Graham couldn't bring himself to obfuscate. By the end of the day, the rest of the media was onto the story. Graham's unwillingness to play the game and save his big news for, say, "Meet the Press" revealed an admirable decency and forthrightness. But his inability to master the news cycle also served as an early warning sign of his inability to master the rigors of a presidential campaign. In early October, with his fund-raising lagging and his poll ratings negligible, Graham became the first 2004 drop out.

But beyond the obvious extremes of the dilatory Clark and the impetuous Graham, I am convinced that something essential about the character and temperament of each of the 2004 candidates was revealed by the way that he made the decision to begin the long trek toward the White House.



All photos by Getty Images

The Rookie

In early December 2002, when a rumor buzzed around Washington that John Edwards was having second thoughts about running, I scheduled a lunch with the vacillating candidate's most trusted adviser, the one person sure to be privy to his inner deliberations: his wife, Elizabeth Edwards. Elizabeth—a bankruptcy attorney until their 16-year-old son, Wade, was killed in a freak automobile accident in 1996—normally projects an air of bemused confidence. But that afternoon, Elizabeth, dressed in jeans and a sweater, fluttered nervously in the kitchen of their sprawling rented house in the Spring Valley neighborhood of Washington over the simple act of toasting the white bread for our lunch of egg-salad sandwiches. With her husband arriving home that afternoon from a four-day, burnish-the-foreign-policy-credentials visit to NATO headquarters in Brussels, the uncertainty and waiting were taking their toll on the home front.

We sat down at a table in the large, comfortable library that serves as the casual center of family life. Nearby was the computer that Elizabeth uses to thread her way through strand after strand of the latest campaign stories, typing her husband's name and those of his putative rivals into the Google News search engine. Elizabeth immediately confirmed the rumors. Yes, they had intense discussions about the pros and cons of the race when their eldest daughter, Cate, was home from Princeton over Thanksgiving, and Edwards has been talking with his fellow senators. At my request, Elizabeth outlined the case for not running this time around: "That John's doing it too soon. Should he wait and do it, if he's going to do it, in 2008?" She pauses and then adds, "The first question that he has to ask doesn't have to do with the field, it has to do with himself. Am I up to this? Not only am I up to the job of the campaign, but am I up to the job of presidency?"

John Edwards has not had a moment's pause in his headlong rush to the top; he was in the Senate for little more than a year when, in a tribute to both his southern base and his courtroom-honed skills as an advocate, he popped up on Gore's short list of potential 2000 running mates. Politics as a second career has come easily to Edwards, perhaps too easily. But no would-be president is ever prepared for what awaits him the moment he steps into the Oval Office. The real question, although Elizabeth didn't use these precise words, was whether Edwards was ready to play at the top of his potential game. His years as a trial lawyer had given him a quick-study ability to master complex material, skills that might translate well to the White House. But is that enough? Had he come far enough along his personal learning curve to grapple with a fast-changing and threatening world?

For Elizabeth, a woman who listens to C-SPAN radio in her car, the other side of the equation was the risk of four more years of a Bush presidency. Her voice brimming with partisan zeal, she ran through the standard litany of issues from the red-ink tax cuts to the president's ill-advised

judicial appointments. "We have to win," she said. "The nation can't afford for us to lose." And she adds, "I just think that he's more likable, warmer, and more engaging than any of the other Democrats ... I also think he beats Bush on that score."

Her comments reflected a mixture of honesty, wifely pride, and a can-do optimism that is a hallmark of both her and her husband. Any obstacle (excluding the loss of Wade) can be overcome with hard work, a broad smile, and innate intelligence. But now she finds herself on the outside looking in, as this practiced attorney argues the case for and against running for president in his own mind. She thinks he's going to do it, she hopes he's going to do it, but she isn't confident that's what he'll decide. Finally, gesturing toward the front door, she said, "Maybe he'll come back from this trip and know the answer." I swiveled my head in the expectation of witnessing this dramatic homecoming scene. Of course, it didn't happen.

The Edwards loyalists were, for the most part, younger and hungrier than the campaigners for his likely opponents. Although his advisers claimed that methodically thinking through the rigors and rationale of a presidential campaign is a useful and even high-minded exercise, they had assumed that this was a slam-dunk leading to only one possible conclusion. After all, they were certain enough to dedicate the next 18 months of their lives to nominating John Edwards for president. Why then was the candidate of their dreams having these doubts?

A few days after Edwards returned from Europe, two of his advisers trekked to the senator's home to argue for the virtues of unveiling his candidacy the week before Christmas, a traditionally slow news period. A little skittish, the staffers organized their mission under the guise of showing the candidate the new campaign logo. When they casually inquired whether the senator had any firm plans for the week of Dec. 16, Edwards snapped, "I'm not going to rush this decision just to get a little more press."

It is impossible for an outsider to gauge what role the memory of his son Wade (whose Outward Bound pin Edwards wears in the lapel of his suit jacket) played in his inner struggle over seeking the presidency. Neither John nor Elizabeth ever mentioned Wade in any of the meetings at the house, but his presence, even six years after his death, hovered softly around both of them. As one Edwards adviser explained, "Someone like John Edwards is painfully aware that life moves quickly and things are precarious. We never talked about it, but it has to be part of his thinking." Others in the inner circle suggested that Wade's death made Edwards impervious to the fears that govern the lives of other politicians, fears like losing an election. As veteran pollster Harrison Hickman, who had advised Edwards since the 1998 Senate campaign, put it, "After you have to get up on a table in a medical-examiner's office and hug your son good-bye, there's nothing they can ever do to you."

Right after Christmas, Edwards escaped both the flurry of phone calls probing his intentions and the chaos of

a household revolving around two small children, by retreating (as he often did before major trials) to the family's North Carolina beach house on Figure Eight Island near Wilmington. There, over three days, he finally made his decision. There was never a Eureka moment, just the gradual arc of inevitability. Edwards deserves credit for recognizing the need for solitude and for refusing to be stampeded into seeking the presidency by the restlessness of his staff. In a follow-up conversation, Elizabeth recalled, "It was necessary for him to say, 'You have to do it on its own merits.' And not because people expected you to or even that they turned down another job to take this prospective job with you."

The Loyalist

Joe Lieberman was that rare senator born without a presidential gland. No stranger to ego, though he masks it well, Lieberman's lack of palpable interest in the big prize didn't stem from any concern over being too Jewish or too hawkish. Rather, before 2000, he always regarded himself as a man of the Senate. Even with his family, he never allowed himself to muse aloud, "Well, maybe, someday, if everything goes right..." Even when a conservative newspaper columnist would occasionally suggest that the Democrats should abandon their foolhardy leftist ways and look to someone like Lieberman, the Connecticut senator would wave it off with a bemused air. As Rebecca Lieberman, his 33-year-old daughter from his first marriage, recalled, "He never talked about running for president. He never talked about it with us."

Of course, everything changed as soon as Lieberman ended up a hanging chad short of having the heartbeat-away job of vice president. Small wonder. Every vice presidential nominee in the past 30 years, with the conspicuous exception of Geraldine Ferraro, has at one time run for president. Now that he was kosher-certified presidential timber, Lieberman was poised to be a candidate, except for his old-fashioned loyalty to Al Gore, the man who single-handedly raised the Connecticut senator's sights beyond someday being chairman of the Armed Services Committee. Throughout 2002, Lieberman was animated by the intuition—more a hunch than any solid nugget of information—that Gore wouldn't do it. But by late fall, as Gore roared back into the headlines with his book tour and a foreign-policy speech assailing Bush's Iraq policy, Lieberman began to develop a frisson of doubt. After all these careful if-I-run preparations, was his career again destined to be defined by a near miss? Lieberman, though, was absolutely certain about one thing: Gore had said he would announce his decision in early January. The senator expected to learn more when the two of them got together at Gore's Washington-area home on Monday morning, Dec. 16, for a long-scheduled chat.

But Lieberman didn't have to wait. Instead, the news broke mid-afternoon Sunday the 15th. Lieberman had just returned from Connecticut to his Georgetown home in one of Washington's rare gated communities. His wife,

Hadassah, was in New York City, and the senator was sharing the house with their 14-year old daughter, Hana. Suddenly he got a message from a Senate staffer on his BlackBerry wireless console: There's a rumor that Al isn't running. Lieberman and his daughter immediately switched on CNN to learn that Gore would indeed announce on "60 Minutes" that he had chosen not to be a candidate. A surge of adrenaline shot through Lieberman as he thought, "This is what I hoped for, this is what I dreamed about and, uh-oh, this is just the beginning of a long and grueling ordeal that can end who knows where." Hana, a deeply religious teenager, let loose with what even Orthodox rabbis would agree was the only appropriate response: "Holy shit!"

About an hour later, Lieberman received a text message on his BlackBerry from Gore formally confirming everything and asking to postpone their meeting so that the former vice president could work through his must-call list. When Matt Lieberman, a teacher in New Haven, called, he found his father's mood to be well-modulated enthusiasm (more "How about that?" than "Yippee!") mixed with an undertone of seriousness about the gravity of the undertaking. As Lieberman later told me, "That day I felt a combination of excitement and seriousness because this was it. I was now faced with this awesome responsibility. So I wasn't jumping up and down." At the time, the mostly vacationing Lieberman loyalists were a far-flung lot, since they had been operating under the assumption that the first hints of a Gore decision would not come until after Christmas. So the residents of Lieberworld—the loyalists and staffers plus the senator and his family—got together on a conference call that evening and merely decided that Lieberman would hold a Monday press conference to announce that he "probably is a candidate." But that was a mere fig leaf of plausible denial. For during the call, Rebecca Lieberman concluded, "It's definite all right. We're doing this." The yarmulke was in the ring.

The Idealist

If you believe the venomous critics of John Forbes Kerry, he's been running for president since his prep school days when he first realized the implications of the initials "JFK." Yet for all the sneering put-downs of his overweening ambition, after nearly two decades on Capitol Hill, he is only now embarking on his first race for the White House. On a Sunday in mid-August 2002, I accompanied Kerry on a trip to New Hampshire. The senator at times radiated eagerness about the coming Democratic contest, saying, "I feel that people are ready to get things going with the presidential race. It can't happen soon enough."

On that afternoon, Kerry was still months away from commissioning the stump speech and the scripted sound bites that would later define his campaign for the White House. Instead, like all the other Democratic hopefuls at this premature stage, his speeches were a personal "Great-

est Hits" album—applause lines from his Senate campaigns, tropes that he has been using for years, flights of rhetoric salvaged from his mental attic—fascinating in their own right as a Baedeker to his political persona. There was a time-warp quality to Kerry's words as the calendar kept drifting back to the 1960s, the decade that carried him from Yale to the Mekong Delta as a navy officer (where he received a Silver Star, a Bronze Star, and three Purple Hearts during two tours of combat) and eventually transformed him into a disillusioned crusader against the Vietnam War.

Late that afternoon at a party fundraiser in Londonderry, standing this time on a rock in a sprawling backyard, Kerry spoke with fervor about another 1968 campaign—the anti-war insurgency of Gene McCarthy. Fatigued after three lengthy speeches and brooding over his mother's health, Kerry offered raw emotion rather than polished diction as he conjured up the turbulent decade that molded him: "One thing that was authentic, honest, that came from the gut and the passion of people was the notion that as individuals we could make a difference in the life around us. And when people saw that the war was wrong, Gene McCarthy and a bunch of kids came up here, the peanut-butter-and-jelly brigade, and they went out there, living off those sandwiches and knocking on the doors. And he sent the president of the United States a message that he couldn't continue to be president of the United States and wage that war." I get the sense that Kerry is still trying to work through the '60s, still trying to capture something elusive from his youth, and yet the answer remains just beyond his mental grasp, like an emotion-laden dream that vanishes with the first rays of daylight.

Sitting in his Senate office on an early spring day in 2003, Kerry gestured toward a burnished leather sofa and said, "I didn't think about it for 10 seconds in '92 when Paul Tsongas sat on that red couch and asked if I was thinking about running for president. He told me that he was, and I said no I wasn't." But in 2000, Kerry, like Gephardt, made preliminary noises about challenging Gore. Yet for a range of factors (impeachment, Gore's prowess, Bill Bradley's



Photo by Mario Tama/Getty Images

Hearing Kerry on the early days of the campaign trail, I got the sense that he is still trying to work through the '60s, still trying to capture something elusive from his youth.

candidacy and, he insists, concerns about divisiveness in the party), Kerry never entered the fray. But this time there was no hesitancy, at least on his part. As Kerry explained, "I felt so frustrated and angry about the [2002] election, angry about what happened to Max Cleland, angry about the voicelessness of my party and determined to make a difference. That resolved it for me, fairly quickly and easily." Cleland, a Vietnam veteran confined to a wheelchair because of his war wounds, was defeated in

his Senate reelection bid in Georgia by a vicious GOP campaign that assailed his patriotism.

Kerry's second wife Teresa Heinz, widow of Pennsylvania Republican Sen. John Heinz and heiress to a half-billion-dollar-plus condiment fortune, is a longtime student of senators on both sides of the political and marital aisle, and she understands the presidential bug. A young-looking 64

(call me naive, but I thought her secret was great genes and not, as she later revealed to *Elle* magazine, Botox injections), she appreciates the time-is-fleeting pressures on her husband as he nears that day of reckoning with a 60-candle-power birthday cake. "This is his fourth term," she said, "and he, like a lot of us, maybe it's age-related, maybe it's the state of the world, feels a certain urgency to talk about certain things." As she explained, "I think he viewed this as an opportunity to finally get things off his chest and go for broke. Just go for broke."

"We talked about it a lot over the last year or so, off and on," she said in February 2003, in the Washington office of the Heinz Foundation. "Mostly, it was how do we cope with this? How do we live our lives? Is it really the right thing for us at this time?" Dressed in a black jacket and skirt highlighted by a white blouse and a large bejeweled cross encrusted with diamonds, she explained her initial reluctance: "I cherish privacy. I like to go to the supermarket. I like to talk to the shopkeeper. That's a big sacrifice for me, because I love doing those things." Here was how she framed what to her was the Big Question: "Do I, caring as much as I do about so many issues, have the right for selfish reasons, personal reasons, not to be part of his trip? And the more I thought about it—hiking by myself

and just thinking, just out there with nature and God—the more I thought that I have to help him because of what he had to say, the questions that he had to raise.”

The Maverick

Nothing in political reporting compares to the enforced intimacy of sitting with a candidate in the backseat on a long car ride, as I did with Howard Dean one Saturday in late summer 2002. There are no distractions, just two guys talking, as the one with the tape recorder tries to take the measure of the other who wants to be president while the topics range from Jean-Paul Sartre (Dean has an encyclopedic memory of his political philosophy courses at Yale) to the lineup of the 1961 Yankees. Up until now, Dean, the governor of a rustic bed-and-breakfast state, has been something of a stealth candidate—and this was only his third lengthy interview with a national reporter. In the campaign's early days, you could still pose an obvious question and receive a candid rather than canned response. So, I ask, how did you decide to run for president? “It’s a hard question to answer,” Dean began. “The answer should be that I deeply care about it, and I thought it all out. But the way it happens is that I’m very intuitive, so I was driven toward running before I knew why I was doing it. I know that doesn’t make any sense. It sounds like I’m just a very ambitious person who wants to be president.”

I resisted the temptation to mention that naked ambition has spawned countless other candidacies. But Dean does it for me: “There’s a big difference between me and some of the other Democrats. There are two Democrats running because they want to be president, that’s all they can tell you.” (An obvious, if slightly petulant, reference to probable rivals John Kerry and John Edwards.) “I want to be president because I want health insurance, I want to balance the budget, I want a decent foreign policy. I want to lead people, not follow. I don’t want to just do what it takes to be elected.” (Whoops, here comes the stump speech.)

Surprisingly, Dean opted for something suspiciously close to honesty: “I decided in August [2001],” —the month that his father, a retired stockbroker also named Howard, died at age 80—“that I wasn’t going to run again [for governor]. It then quickly came to me that I had a choice of joining boards and swearing at *The New York Times* every morning and saying how outrageous it was. Basically, I was in a position where I thought I could run for president, so I decided that I was going to.” That answer is about as unvarnished as an experienced politician ever gets. For all his sincere, if still vague, sentiments about health care, the economy, and foreign policy, Dean is not running as an embodiment of a political movement. There were no “Draft Dean” Web sites or trial balloons floated by his fellow governors. Rather, faced with a life change in his early 50s, Dean recoiled at the vision of the road ahead—a few corporate boards, a blue-ribbon commission or two, the semi-retired,

didn’t-you-used-to-be-somebody, bland life of a respected former governor. Having stared into the abyss of irrelevance, Dean preferred to roll the dice at a craps table soon to be filled with other candidates who would arrive with huge piles of chips and chits earned in Washington.

The Lifer

The day after the dispiriting 2002 elections, Dick Gephardt, who resembled Sisyphus in his efforts to win back the House, stepped down as minority leader. Two days later, on the Friday of election week, Gephardt was perched on a couch in his palatial, soon-to-be-relinquished leadership office in the Capitol. Over his head was a dramatic rendering of the romance of the Industrial Age—an oversize 1873 painting of the Eads Bridge, the first railroad crossing of the Mississippi River, which was slated to be returned to the St. Louis Art Museum. Gephardt had been conducting continuous interviews since the election. Although his words were practiced, the anguish over falling on his sword was still audible in his voice.

The renunciation of his leadership post was not exactly a surprise, since many had assumed that it would be the logical response to the expected Democratic defeat. But Gephardt insisted that he made the decision with his wife, Jane: “We came back here after the election and we sat most of the day at home. And we decided that I didn’t want to do this any more. I wanted out.” Gephardt, at this point, kept up the pretense of being elusive: “I want to do something different. What it is, I don’t know at this point; I haven’t figured it all out.”

Fast-forward to my next conversation with Gephardt—a fast figure-it-outer who was now an active presidential candidate—in late January 2003, the day of the State of the Union address. This time, because of a bomb scare, we took refuge in Gephardt’s former hideaway office off the House floor, to which his staff still held the key. The walls, once filled with cartoons and other memorabilia from his 1988 presidential race, had been stripped bare. When I asked about the decision to run, Gephardt made a surprising admission: “It’s always a hard decision. I guess the decision to step down as leader was harder.” Those words made me think of Bob Dole wandering forlornly across America in mid-1996, ruining the day that he let his handlers convince him that resigning the Senate seat he loved was the only way to demonstrate his determination to oust Clinton from the White House. But Dole was Senate majority leader, while Gephardt, if he had stayed on, would have been stuck with heading the toothless House Democratic opposition at a time when the Republicans had no interest in bipartisanship. Gephardt, in his early 60s, had come to a point in life when the House was not a home. His reasoning was understandable—having hungered after the White House for nearly two decades, he felt entitled to one final turn of the wheel. It was place your bets, up or out, and hopefully no lasting regrets if you lose. ♦

On Political Books

Franklin, my dear...

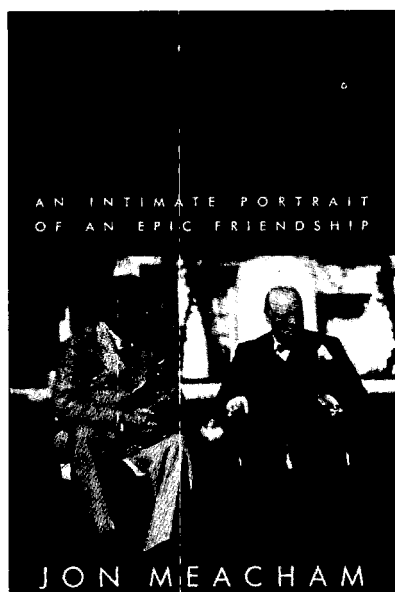
The limits of political friendship.

By Bruce Clark

Both were born in the most privileged circles of their respective countries, at a time when the British and American elites were more closely intertwined, and far more exclusively white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant than they are today. As children they read the same nonsense verses, and tales of heroism at sea; both were fascinated with military strategy, and by naval warfare in particular.

But as Jon Meacham points out in his highly intelligent and immensely readable account of one of the 113 days which Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt spent together during World War II, the two men's psycho-histories—and therefore the qualities they brought to the friendship—could hardly have been more different.

Even by the norms of the British upper class, Churchill's parents were neglectful. His politician father, Lord Randolph Churchill, treated Winston with cruelty and sarcasm when he noticed his son at all. His American mother Jennie was a glamorous society lady who shone—in Winston's own poignant words—"like the evening star," brightly but from a great distance. Like so many other young British patricians, he was saved from becoming a complete emotional cripple by a tender-hearted nanny.



Franklin & Winston: an Intimate Portrait of a Epic Friendship

By Jon Meacham

Random House, \$29.95

The net result could have been predicted by any dabbler in psycho-analysis: The wartime prime minister carried around with him a keenly-felt need to win the approval of those he admired, and he was underterred when the objects of his affection seemed cold or ungrateful. Churchill had several other childish qualities which on balance worked to his advantage. More than most products of the British private school system, he was in touch with his feelings: He was sentimental and easily

moved to tears, but he also had a child's ability to forgive and to seek forgiveness.

Roosevelt, by contrast, was showered with affection as a boy, as the adored only child of a 53-year-old father and a proud and ambitious 27-year-old mother. Secure, optimistic, and conscious of being more intelligent than average, he learned from an early age how to influence and, where necessary, to manipulate people. The president's manipulative and at times devious quality was brought to the fore when he was stricken with polio and confined to a wheelchair; meetings and ceremonies had to be stage-managed even more carefully than before to compensate for his disability.

The contrasting, but in some ways complementary, personalities of Churchill and Roosevelt set the stage for a fascinating study of the importance—and limits—of one-to-one diplomacy at great moments in world affairs. Through hundreds of hours of elaborate ceremony, intimate conversation, shared recreation, and scores of affectionate hand-written notes, the two wartime leaders self-consciously cultivated their relationship. As Churchill himself said, with disarming frankness, "no lover ever studied the whims of his mistress as I did those of President Roosevelt."

The mere fact that both men had a keener-than-average sense of the