



The Old Way of Doing Things Doesn't Work

By Jeff Greenfield

"THE MAKING OF THE PRESIDENT 1972," by Theodore H. White (*Athe-
neum*, 391 pp., \$10).

In 1960, Theodore H. White changed the face of American political reporting, taking us into the rooms where crucial political decisions were made, offering us a romantic pageant of America's political nobility struggling in bloodless, passionate battle for the right to lead the greatest nation in the world. "The Making of the President 1960" helped to shape the heroic image of John F. Kennedy and his "best and brightest" aides; it was of a piece with the sensibility of the times, in which politics was the place to be for a bright young man.

Each four years since then, the cruel tyranny of facts has marched over Theodore White's tableau; each presidential race has been marked by a grimmer atmosphere. In 1964, the shadow of John Kennedy's assassination; in 1968, riots, burning cities, the murder of Martin Luther King and then Robert Kennedy, and the national division over Vietnam; in 1972, the pervasive assault on our institutions we call Watergate. And each

quadrennium Theodore White tells us that we have been through bad times, that the old ways of doing things won't work, that we need new ideas and solutions—and promptly trots out the same old tableau, with a new set of faces over the togas and parchments.

White himself is now an institution. If he shows up at the speech of a senator the year before a presidential election, that senator is rated a Contender. He has access that would make governors, much less journalists, swoon: private meetings with the President; interviews with the highest White House officials; entry to the "situation room" at the Committee to Reelect the President. In 1972, the McGovern campaign, demonstrating its openness (or its hunger for staff publicity), practically made White a mascot. He was permitted to sit in on the key strategy session at the Miami convention, where the McGovern forces calculated how to lose a minor vote for tactical purposes; he was in the command trailer outside convention hall watching the McGovern people win the vote to seat California. If the Nixon campaign had given White as much access as the McGovern camp, he would have been holding a flashlight at the Watergate.

This access, combined with the enormous goodwill and affability of White, gives him the kind of entry that could produce outstanding journalism. It did in 1960. But in "1972"

as in the volume before it, White has given us a disappointing, wearisome book, flawed by his most enduring limitation: his lack of hard, independent judgment. The reportorial trait most demonstrated in "The Making of the President 1972" is gullibility.

The most obvious illustration is Watergate; White has admitted that he opened his book up for last-minute insertions after the Watergate scandal blew open in late March of this year. It shows. Chapter after chapter is filled with what read like last-minute additions to earlier conclusions ("only later would it appear . . .," "but it was not to be"), and at one point, White conjures up "an imaginary White House hate list" on which he lists The New York Times and The Washington Post. With commendable honesty, White tells us he had a two-and-a-half hour discussion with President Nixon on March 17, 1973, and did not ask him a single question about the scandal because "it did not, at that moment, seem relevant." A month earlier the Senate had voted to establish the Ervin committee; two young Washington Post reporters, risking their jobs and their boss' fortune, had spent months tracing the funding and the cover-up to Nixon's most trusted aides; four days later conspirator James McCord would tell Judge Sirica that perjury had been committed and that others were involved; the Post had alleged that Watergate was part of a massive

campaign of political espionage and sabotage—and White did not think it was relevant. When you have that kind of journalistic instinct, it's not hard to see why doors open for you.

The more serious gullibility, however, is intellectual; Theodore White is absolutely enthralled with any political participant who can talk about ideas. If you can sit down and point out there on the horizon, and say very earnestly, "Teddy, the real issues aren't these grubby political scrambles; it's housing; it's the human organism; it's how we're going to cope with increasing leisure and abundance in a time when our people are rootless . . ." Well, you get the idea. If you can do it, you have won White's heart. From John Kennedy's team in 1960 ("as visionary a group of thinkers as have ever held the ear of any chief in modern times"), to Robert McNamara's men ("the ablest civilian team to direct the department of Defense since its founding"), to John Lindsay's white-paper authors in 1965, to McGeorge Bundy and Walt Rostow in 1967 ("the action intellectuals," White enthused, in what he now calls "a season of disordered admiration"), to Henry Kissinger, we have in White's view been ceaselessly led by men of awesome intellect, wisdom and compassion. It always seems to upset White that these giants in the earth keep on screwing things up. But he never

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stops to question them at the time he is singing their praises.

For instance: White now recognizes that the "ablest civilian team" in the Pentagon may have got things wrong in Vietnam. Indeed, he now tells us that this team, and generals such as Creighton Abrams ("a singularly able general" in 1968), conducted the war with "mindless stupidity." But now in 1972 he is already inscribing new definitions of wisdom. He quotes Nixon and Kissinger endlessly on the mining and blockade of Haiphong in May of 1972 and on the Christmas bombing. He makes no effort to consult with neutral diplomats about whether in fact this bombing was necessary to gain the peace, or, indeed, as some Canadian observers have said, whether Nixon might have had this same peace from the day of his inauguration, without the killing and destruction.

He writes hyperbolically of Nixon's revenue-sharing and welfare-reform bills ("It was, as the White House staff called it, a blueprint for a 'new American revolution'"), without testing that judgment, or noting that it was the Nixon White House that gutted welfare reform, or that the original proposal ran

directly contradictory to Nixon's "work-ethic" professions. White quotes one of Nixon's economic advisers, talking about the 1971 wage-price controls, saying that "we couldn't have a do-nothing image... A vigorous, activist role was more important than content." He never elaborates this remarkable confession that the American economy is itself now held ransom to a presidential image.

The book's best sections by far deal with the doomed candidacy of George McGovern. Perhaps because McGovern does not carry the bedazzling props of presidential pomp, White seems able to make some relatively hard judgments about the McGovern character and candidacy. He can't quite bring himself to say that McGovern told untruths to people, but he can say that McGovern's "goodwill" made him want to tell everybody what they wanted to hear. He is especially good at charting some of the more consequential disasters: the establishment of an ethnic and sexual quota system at Miami, for instance. White has gone back to the transcripts of the reform commission to trace in detail how a vague suggestion became an ironclad rule. He also tells us how the proposal to "grant" every U.S. citizen \$1,000 crept into the McGov-

ern campaign without any serious challenge, and how the Eagleton affair torpedoed the last vestige of hope for his candidacy. Further, White has a chapter on the meaning of the 1972 census that ought to be read in every high-school civics class in the country; it is a model of extrapolation and analysis.

Perhaps that is so because there are no outsized personalities to hypnotize White

into uncritical acceptance; only cold numbers. So powerful is the effect of leaders on White that he even begins to write as his subjects talk. In writing about Nixon's people, phrases like "time frame" and "at that point in time" fill the page; but in writing about a young aide of McGovern, he writes that he "was into the anti-war movement."

I do not know why White

relies so uncritically on the opinions of the powerful; perhaps he is simply overwhelmed by the changes that have reshaped the political process. In 1960, after all, White's tableau made some sense. Politics was a business identifiable power blocs, in people, easy to talk to, with identifiable power blocs, in a time of relative national calm. Now the unspoken compacts have shredded apart; hundreds of thousands of people actively participate in the process. In a time when former Governor Averell Harriman loses a delegate's election to a 19-year-old sophomore from New Paltz College, White may feel compelled to rely on the opinions of people of unquestioned power.

I do know that "The Making of the President 1972" is a not-very-good book by a very good man. Decency and goodwill and tenacity are important virtues; but if White is going to do this in 1976, let him remember that as he was exchanging his earnest opinions with Richard Nixon, a spool of tape was silently, secretly unwinding in the White House basement. Perhaps that thought will make him angry enough to start asking hard questions about the wisdom of people in great power.