Theodore H. White

IN SEARCH OF HISTORY

A Personal Adventure

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PROLOGUE

THE STORYTELLER

Should he follow the sound of the drums?

He could hear it all beginning again: the nervous rattle of practicing drums, the shuffle that precedes the parade. The sound was almost irresistible, because in American politics it is when the parade is falling in that it is most exciting. He had followed those sounds for twenty years, across the country and back, again and again, and up with the crescendo to the conventions, on through the rallies with pretty girls in shakos and pompoms kicking in town squares and crowds yelling in big-city arenas until, suddenly on a November night, there would be a new President.

There is no excitement anywhere in the world, short of war, to match the excitement of an American Presidential campaign. He had loved that excitement and had made it his profession to be a storyteller of elections. Yet as summer faded in 1975 and the campaign for the Presidency reached speed, the more stories he gathered, the more confused he became.

Was there more to learn in one more story of the making of a President? There *was* something new in what Americans sought as they passed on their power—but how to define it? The excitement of the campaign was still there, but not the clarity that once gave the pattern of history to his stories.

Nor was there ever more than momentary escape from this confusion, behind any barricade. He would come back from his forays into the insane parade of the 1976 primaries with a sense of relief. For a few days, his office would be again, as it used to be, his cave. There were always chores at the office, and the mail to be answered—distractions he welcomed.

But now he found himself oddly irritated by the letters he used

to enjoy most—those from students of history, young or old, inquiring about some corner of the past he had witnessed: the revolution in China, the victory in Asia, the renascence of Europe, the turning of the hinges of American politics. Usually, the questioners wanted to know if he had more to say than he had reported in his public writings. They were pursuing what scholars called an "argument," and wrote to him to mine his reporter's memories and notebooks for raw material that would support those "arguments." Good reporters organize facts in "stories," but good historians organize lives and episodes in "arguments." It was a very rare learned man who would change his "argument" because of a reporter's response to his question. Yet such letters from history students were innocently accusatory, and before plunging back on the campaign trail, the storyteller would wonder whether, in his appetite for anecdote and detail, he was missing the "argument," the connection between this campaign and what was really happening in this two hundredth year of the American experiment in self-government.

As a storyteller he had always liked the lines in Archibald MacLeish's poem "Conquistador," in which Bernál Díaz, MacLeish's storyteller, is made to say: ". . . but I . . . I saw Montezúma: I saw the armies of Mexico marching, the leaning Wind in their garments: the painted faces: the plumes. . . . We were the lords of it all. . . ."

We Americans had, indeed, been lords of it all during this storyteller's time. But few serious students of history seemed to care about the sights, sounds and smells which now seemed to them irrelevancies on the trail by which America moved to its power, then disposed its power around the globe and at home. No one cared to listen about how it rained the weekend of the surrender and how drenched the Japanese must have been when the sun came out just in time for the thundering fly-by of American bombers; or how the same drought that had parched Europe in 1947 brought about not only the Marshall Plan but sugared the finest white Burgundy wines of the century; or exactly what the connection was between General Chennault's whorehouse in Kunming and the great debate between Chennault and Stilwell over the strategy of destroying Japan; or the wild and happy exultation in Boston's streets when John F. Kennedy came home in 1960, which seemed at the time like just another rally, but was not.

Strangers always ask reporters what it is "really all about." That question, now in mid campaign, began not only to irritate the storyteller, but to make him angry.

He was angry most of all with himself because for so many years he had neither paused nor dug deep enough to answer that question. Moreover, less and less frequently came those bursts of ecstasy when the hours of writing swept by like minutes, all the words flowing in paragraphs preshaped by unconscious thinking. This time his observations were outrunning his understanding. This America he was now reporting was swelling with strange, vague forms which his thinking could no longer shape into clean stories. No piling up of more reportorial facts, no teasing anecdote, no embracing concept, could hide from him what was wrong: his old ideas no longer stretched over the real world as he saw and sensed it to be.

Thus, as the campaign wore on, he found himself more and more bewildered. How had America come to this strange time in its history, and he with it? How had the old pieties and the new technologies come to this strange intermarriage in politics? He had seen most of it; reported much of it; but, by the code of reporters, had denied himself, in the name of "objectivity," the meaning of it.

The thought crept in: it was probably more useful to go back than to go on. It was just faintly possible he might learn more from what he had left out of his forty years of reporting than to go on and add more observation. What more was to be added with one more campaign swing, watching the wild mobs roar and cheer, hearing the drums beat, seeing the arc lights sweep the night sky—and reportorially wondering who had "advanced" this crowd, putting together what voting groups, to win which votes in this particular place, by what vision of how the American mosaic fits together?

To go back, however, meant that the storyteller would have to identify himself to himself before he could resume his old profession of spinning political stories in public which, he hoped, the readers could string together as history.

He had been, he now knew for certain, almost too fashionable in his reporting for too many years. He had been a mild Marxist at one time in his youth because that was the fashion of his generation. He had become entranced by power and force during the war years in Asia. Had become convinced of American virtue during the years of reconstruction in Europe. And then had come home to American politics and begun to see it as an adventure in which men sought their identity. If men made history, he would seek them out. This thought had lasted for years, as popular fashion went at the time—

the thought that leadership is a quest of men seeking to find themselves and that in so seeking, they shape the lives of other people.

Though he could not give up that old thought entirely, he knew it was insufficient to explain politics. Identities in politics, he now realized, were connected far more to ideas than to ego, to id, or to glands. At the core of every great political identity lay an idea—an idea imposed on the leader from his past, which the leader absorbed, changed and then imposed on the others outside. It was with some amazement that the storyteller realized that this simple thought was exactly where he had begun as Theodore H. White back in Boston many years ago, learning about ideas. He had discarded those boyhood teachings very early. He had later learned that money counted. That guns counted. That power counted. But the idea that *ideas* counted, that ideas were the beginning of all politics, was now, when he was sixty, pressing his thinking back to his adolescence. The men he had since reported in politics were all of them the vessels of ideas. The armies, the navies, the budgets, the campaign organizations they commanded flowed from the ideas that shaped them, or the ideas they could transmit and enforce. Whether it was Mao and Chou, or Nixon and Haldeman, or Kennedy and McNamara, or de Gaulle and Monnet, their identities came from the ideas that had been pumped into them, the ideas they chose in turn to pump out. Their cruelties and nobilities, their creations and tragedies, flowed far more certainly from what was in their minds than from what was in their glands.

You could separate people out into the large and the small, he thought, by whether their identities came from their own ideas or from the ideas of others. Most ordinary people lived their lives in boxes, as bees did in cells. It did not matter how the boxes were labeled: President, Vice President, Executive Vice President, Chairman of the Board, Chief Executive Officer, shop steward, union member, schoolteacher, policeman, "butcher, baker, beggarman, thief, doctor, lawyer, Indian chief," the box shaped their identity. But the box was an idea. Sir Robert Peel had put London policemen on patrol one hundred fifty years ago and the "bobbies" in London or the "cops" in New York now lived in the box invented by Sir Robert Peel. The Sterling Professor at Yale and all the great physicists at the Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge, England, alike lived in a box, labeled by someone else's idea. When a pilot awoke in the morning, he could go to the air strip feeling that he was

the hottest pilot in the whole air force—but he was only a creature of Billy Mitchell's idea. And even if he was the bravest astronaut in outer space, he was still a descendant in identity from Robert Hutchings Goddard's idea of rocketry.

All ordinary people below the eye level of public recognition were either captives or descendants of ideas. When they went out to work in the morning, they knew what they were supposed to do in the office, in the store, at the bench, on the line. They did their jobs either competently, or happily, or grimly. Sometimes they hated the man above or below them; more normally the attraction of the job, whether in a coal mine or in a newspaper city room, was not so much the money as the comradeship. Yet what a man did was what he was, and what you did, whether you knew it or not, fell to you from other men's ideas. Only a very, very rich man, or a farmer, could escape from this system of boxes. The very rich could escape because wealth itself shelters or buys identity. The very, very rich could become the greatest collectors of Picassos, Tang horses, rare books, stamps, stables, needlepoint, old coins or, simply, girls. They could exempt themselves from reality. And farmers, too, could escape from other men's ideas: A farmer made his own life in the fields; the weather, the market, the quality of his labor and devotion, connected him to another, primitive human condition which was not disturbed by ideas. Or—perhaps?—not even a farmer could escape. After all, at the time White was born, more than half of all Americans lived in villages or tilled the fields. And now only four percent worked the land. Some set of ideas—was it Justin Morrill's? or Mordecai Ezekiel's? or the Agricultural Adjustment Act?—must have had something to do with the dwindling of their numbers.

Thus, then, in the pauses between campaign rounds he began to ask himself: Whose idea was he? What was the label on the box that marked his trade?

The answer was not at all simple. The storyteller knew he was a trafficker in an undefinable trade, a popularizer of personalities, causes, revolutions, battles, campaigns; half public clerk, half private courtier. He told his stories, as troubadours had offered their songs, for attention, applause and a fee. But now, in the adventure of 1976, he no longer knew how to string the stories together in any way that connected them with history. He could read the notes as well as any—but the rhythm escaped him. For forty years, he had believed that any political problem could be solved with enough money, enough good will, enough common sense—and a dash of courage.

But now, in the campaign of 1976, he could sense contradictions developing that completely upset such thinking. He could no longer fit his stories into the old patterns, nor himself into the old box labeled "reporter." Moreover, he was uncomfortable in the shelf box labeled "historian." There was this jangle between the ideas he wanted to believe and the contrary ideas his reporting forced on him.

To explain his confusion, it was necessary to go back to the beginning. There, even at the beginning, was the clash of ideas.

The beginning lay in Boston, and his awareness of the Depression, and the sense of terror and fright that politics had let into his house and family, and the nights he listened in the little bedroom off the kitchen when his parents talked and thought he was asleep.

The first memory was of the sound of his mother crying late one night, crying to his father because there was no money to buy shoes for the children, who had to go back to school. Then his father came to bed; his father slept with him in the same bed, the two little brothers on another narrow bed in the same room, his mother sleeping with his sister in the other bedroom. That night his father did not sleep at all; he could feel his father twisting and turning and tossing in the bed, while he tried to make his father believe he was unaware.

The family was alone there in Boston. Except as a statistic, or to each other, they did not exist. He would always agree with the sociologues who said that the worst thing about a depression is not the hunger but the erasure of poor men's identities. The poor had no jobs; they were useless bodies; they fit nowhere; but worst of all, they were negatives in their own eyes, for they could not protect their own; as his father could not.

When his father died during the Depression, White was sixteen, and it was up to him, then, to protect his mother, sister and brothers. It was a sadness to him many years later, when his books won an audience, that his father, a compulsive reader, could not see them in bookstore windows. He had loved his father, and yet been resentful of him, for his father had thought of this son only as a "tough" kid, a child being swept into the rough culture of the streets, a culture that repelled the father. It was good, though, that he had been toughened, for his story began there on the streets. When a system breaks down, history always throws the breakage into the streets. It was there he found his first job.

It was a ten-hour-a-day job selling newspapers on the trolleys. Ten hours meant ten hours—from five in the morning until three in the afternoon, with no time off for lunch. He used to hop the streetcar, yell the headlines, squeeze through the crowded standees and then, if the motorman was friendly and slowed the car to reasonable jumping speed, he hopped out of the moving trolley and raced back to the corner to catch the next one—caught it, hopped out, ran back, caught another, and thus the treadmill all day long. It was good for the lungs and for learning.

The corner was "owned" by a rather friendly roughneck who "owned" many corners, and also "owned" the metal arm badges that the streetcar company gave out to newsboys or their bosses; the badge was the license that let its owner sell papers on streetcars. The boy had no right either to the corner or to the badge; that belonged to the boss. But at the time, he was grateful to the boss.

What he learned was important. He did not know then that he was in the news system, in the process. He was a newsboy, an old-fashioned newsboy. For each one hundred papers, sold at two cents each, two dollars came in—of which he could keep seventy cents for himself. When he took over the corner, it sold about three hundred newspapers a day; when he left, a year and a half later, the corner sold four hundred newspapers a day, and sometimes even five hundred, if he was smart enough to grab attention—or if history grabbed the headlines. That was the very beginning of learning—when to fake it with a yodeled subhead, and when to let history dictate the yell.

The yodel in Boston for newsboys on the streetcars always began: "*Globe, Post, Herald* and *Record* here! *Globe, Post, Herald* and *Record* here! Papers?" After that chant followed the "sell." The "sell" was of the newsboy's imagination. It is very cold in Boston at five o'clock of a winter morning, and he would stand over the trolley motorman's electric heater reading the paper for a good "sell" headline. A perfect one would be something from the headlines of the lurid Boston *American,* one of the worst Hearst newspapers of the day. One afternoon the *American* did a story on abortion and the newsboy could yodel: "Oh, read all about it, read all about it! Twenty-seven babies' bodies found pickled in a barrel in East Boston! Twenty-seven babies pickled in one barrel! " That sold. But from the world outside, the "they" of history could do even better for the young newsboy. When in the bitter cold of 1933, the American economy collapsed, "they" intervened—or Roosevelt did.

The yodel that morning ran: "Oh, read all about it, read all about it! Roosevelt closes the banks! All the banks are closed! Read all about it! "

The closing of the banks sold more papers than the pickled babies in the barrel. History, thus, was very important. The repeal of Prohibition brought an extra two dollars in newspapers sold that day, almost as much as the bank closing. What "they" were doing was obviously important, and he wanted to be "in on it"; and he got there by accident. He was granted a scholarship by a local college in Boston; and the boss who "owned" him and the corner agreed that he ought to take the scholarship, give up the corner and go on to college.

Now, in 1976, more than forty years later, he had been so long a part of the transmission system of news—of images, personalities, ideas—was so trained in packaging events as "stories," so convinced that if he caught the event right, he caught history right, that it was hard to go back to the boy who so suddenly and coarsely realized that Franklin Roosevelt and history sold newspapers.

He supposed his story should begin with that boy, who was given that scholarship to that local college. That local college happened to be Harvard, and Harvard was then at the apogee of its glory. It was there he would begin to rub the ideas of the street against the ideas of the academy. It was there he would begin to learn a trade, and his teachers would equip him to fit into an unfashionable box called "reporting." Reporters were supposed to *tell* what happened; scholars *explained* what had happened.

But, to be honest with himself, even Harvard was not the true beginning. The beginning of his search for history lay in his unabashed love of the American idea as it had been taught and passed on to him in his family. So that all the while he was trying to package the episodes of the campaign of 1976 into "events" that made a "story," the old idea of home, street and school kept intruding—the idea that America was the goal and the promise to which all mankind, including his immigrant grandfather and father, had been marching. He had followed this idea around the world. But now he knew that the old bundle of ideas made nonsense of the current story—or the ideas themselves had become nonsense.

Why this was so, what the connections were between the campaign of 1976 and the past—his past and America's past—slowly grew in his mind to be a more challenging assignment than

one more book on one more campaign. It might take one, or two, or several volumes to tell such a story. How did America get this power? How had America used it? How had the various Presidents sucked up this power to kill or to heal from what was thought to be the American "people"?

What the end of such a story might be he could not, as he began to write it, imagine. He was certain only of the beginning—and that was Boston.

PART ONE

BOSTON:

1915-1938

CHAPTER ONE

EXERCISE IN RECOLLECTION

I was born in the ghetto of Boston on May 6, 1915.

No one ever told me it was a ghetto, because the Jews who settled there, like my father and my grandfather, had left the idea of a ghetto behind in the old country.

America was the open land. Though they carried with them the baggage of a past they could not shed, a past that bound all the exploring millions of Jewish immigrants together, they hoped America would be different, and yearned that it prove so.

We were of the Boston Jews.

Each of the Jewish communities then a-borning in America was to be different, as I came to realize later when I traveled the country as a political reporter. Each Jewish community was to take on the color and quality of its host city. Chicago Jews, whether in politics or in business, were tougher, harder, more muscular than, say, Cincinnati Jews. Baltimore Jews were entirely different from Detroit Jews. Hollywood Jews were different from the Jews of university towns. Only New York had a community of Jews large enough to create a culture of its own, in which Yiddish newspapers could thrive, and Yiddish artists, poets, playwrights, actors, could develop an audience of their own; it was a culture in which Jewish employers sweated Jewish needleworkers, Jewish stonemasons built for Jewish contractors. Never, in all the history of the Jews since Titus plowed the Temple and sent them into exile, had so many Jews been gathered in one place at one time. New York's Jewry, before it dissolved into the suburbs and across the country, was unique in history—an implosion of hitherto suppressed and scattered energies and talents. The ferment of these New York Jews, as they came together from all over Europe in