

THE POWER GAME

HOW WASHINGTON
WORKS

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Hedrick Smith



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The Power Game

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To Susan, and the spark of renewal



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HEDRICK SMITH
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Introduction

We Americans are a nation of game players. From Friday night poker and Sunday bingo to corporate rivalry and the nuclear arms race, Americans are preoccupied with winning and losing. Competition is our creed; it is knit into the fabric of our national life. Sports and game shows are national pastimes. Either we play games ourselves or we take part vicariously. We swim, cycle, jog or play tennis—making it a game by matching ourselves against a rival, against par in golf, or against the stopwatch when we hike or run. Five out of six Americans spend several hours a week viewing football, baseball, boxing, bowling, or some other sport on television. One hundred million people tune into television game shows weekly—forty-three million to *Wheel of Fortune*. All over the world, people are playing at commerce on one hundred million sets of Monopoly.

Some people treat life as a game, to be won or lost, instead of seeing it in terms of a religious ethic or of some overarching system of values.

In Washington, senators and congressmen talk of politics as a game, and of themselves as “players.” To be a player is to have power or influence on some issue. Not to be a player is to be out of the power loop and without influence. The ultimate game metaphors in government are the “war games”—not just the military exercises for fleets of ships or regiments of troops, but those ghostly, computer-run scenarios that our policymakers and nuclear experts use to test their reflexes and our defenses in a crisis: human survival reduced to a game.

So it seems only natural to look at how we are governed—the way Washington *really* works today—as a power game, not in some belittling sense, but as a way of understanding how government actually works and why it does not work better. For the game is sometimes glorious and uplifting, at other times aggravating or disenchanting. It obviously is a serious game with high stakes, one in which the winners and losers affect many lives—yours, mine, those of the people down the street, and of people all over the world.

When I came to Washington in 1962, to work at the Washington

bureau of *The New York Times*, I thought I understood how Washington worked. I knew the usual textbook precepts: that the president and his cabinet were in charge of the government; that Congress declared war and passed budgets; that the secretary of State directed foreign policy; that seniority determined who wrote legislation in Congress; and that the power of southern committee chairmen—gained by seniority—was beyond the challenge of junior members; that voters elected one party or the other to govern; and the parties set how the members of Congress would vote—except for the southern Democrats, who often teamed up with Republicans.

These old truisms no longer fit reality. My years as a reporter have spanned the administrations of six presidents, and over the course of that time, I have watched a stunning transformation in the way the American system of government operates. The Washington power game has been altered by many factors: new Congressional assertiveness against the presidency, the revolt within Congress against the seniority system, television, the merchandising of candidates, the explosion of special interest politics, the demands of political fundraising, the massive growth of staff power—and by changes in voters as well.

The political transformations of the past fifteen years have rewritten the old rules of the game. Presidents now have much greater difficulty marshaling governing coalitions. Power, instead of residing with the president, often floats away from him, and a skillful leader must learn how to ride the political waves like a surfer or be toppled. The old power oligarchy in Congress has been broken up. The new breed of senators and House members, unlike the old breed, play video politics, a different game from the old inside, backroom politics of Congress. Party labels mean much less now to voters and to many candidates, too.

Altogether, it's a new ball game, with new sets of rules, new ways of getting power leverage, new types of players, new game plans, and new tactics that affect winning and losing. It is a much looser power game now, more wide open, harder to manage and manipulate than it was a quarter of a century ago when I came to town.

My purpose in this book is to take you inside each part of the political process in Washington and to show you how it works. And then, to show you how the whole game of governing fits together—and also to show where it doesn't fit together. My premise is that the power games—that is, how Washington *really* works—have unwritten rules, rituals, customs, and patterns that explain what Max Lerner once called “the ultimate propulsion of events”:¹

- Why presidents have so much trouble forming the coalitions it takes to govern,
- Why the Pentagon buys so many weapons that cost too much and don't work better,
- Why the secretary of State really can't run foreign policy and keeps getting into fights with the national security adviser, administration after administration,
- How the Democrats keep the Republicans from winning the House of Representatives,
- How the political money game generally helps finance the major deadlocks in government,
- Why some presidents such as Ronald Reagan are able to shed most of their political troubles and others such as Jimmy Carter get mired in them,
- Why the press goes after some politicians and leaves others alone,
- And how Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North wound up with so much power for secret dealings with Iran and underwriting the Nicaraguan *contras*—climbing out on a limb extending from a branch of precedent set by Henry Kissinger.

In using the metaphor of games, I do not mean to imply that politics is child's play. Governing the United States of America is a serious enterprise. Washington is a world where substance matters. Issues matter. Ideas matter. One political party, for example, can gain the *intellectual* initiative over the other party, and that is vitally important in the power game. The Democrats seized the "idea advantage" at the time of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal; the Reagan Republicans seized it in the early 1980s with their idea of cutting government and taxes.

But Washington is a city engaged simultaneously in substance and in strategems. Principles become intertwined with power plays. For Washington is as much moved by who's up and who's down, who's in and who's out, as it is by setting policy. Politicians are serious when they debate about Star Wars, arms control, a fair tax system, protectionism, and welfare reform. But they are no less serious when they devise gambits to throw the other team on the defensive, when they grandstand to milk a hot issue for public relations points and applause. They pursue the interests of their home team—their constituents. But in the special world of Washington, they also hotly pursue their highly personal interests in the inside power games—turf games, access games, career games, money games, blame games—each of which has an inner

logic of its own that often diverts officeholders away from the singleminded pursuit of the best policy.²

Politics in Washington is a continuous contest, a constant scramble for points, for power, and influence. Congress is the principal policy arena of battle, round by round, vote by vote. People there compete, take sides, form teams, and when one action is finished, the teams dissolve, and members form new sides for the next issues. Of course, team competition is our national way of life, but rarely does the contest take place at such close quarters, among people who rub elbows with each other, professionally and socially, day in and day out.

The lingo of games rings naturally on the playing fields of political combat. For analogies, our politicians often turn to the argot of the sports arena, the track, the boxing ring, the playing field, or the casino. Richard Nixon, as president, would not dream of operating without "a game plan." Jack Kennedy, comparing politics to football, told his press secretary, Pierre Salinger, "if you see daylight, go through the hole." When Gerald Ford was the House Republican leader, he could not resist using football clichés; hardly a major vote could take place without Ford's warning that the ball was on the ten-yard line and the clock was running out. More recently, Ronald Reagan's campaign strategists, like ring handlers coaching a prizefighter, tapped a "sparring partner" to warm up Reagan for the 1980 presidential campaign debates. They chose David Stockman as the person to prep Reagan for debates with John Anderson and Jimmy Carter. Later, Secretary of State Alexander Haig was dropped from the Reagan cabinet because the White House felt that he was not a "team player." Both admirers and critics saw how Henry Kissinger approached our national rivalry with Moscow as a global chess match, with other nations serving as his pawns.

The power game echoes Las Vegas and the daily double. Howard Baker, as Senate majority leader, fashioned the image that Reagan tax-cut economics was a "riverboat gamble." Politicians are forever citing the long odds against them, talking about front-runners and dark horses. Political reporters are kin to sportswriters, indulging in political locker-room talk: We compile "the book" on leading contenders and often devote more attention to the advance handicapping, the pace of the favorite, and the skill of his campaign trainers than to the issues and the national agenda.

But the purpose of this book goes beyond locker-room jargon and game analogies for American politics. The game metaphor helps to explain the patterns and precepts that skilled politicians live by, regard-

less of party or administration, as well as the consequences in all of this game playing, for all of us. Actually the Washington power game is not one game, but an olympiad of games, going on simultaneously, all over town. My aim is to take that olympiad apart, play by play, game by game, player by player, so that the overall game of governing is revealed.

Seeing the inner workings of Washington as a power game is a way of following the action amidst the babel. It's a metaphor for understanding what makes famous people—and faceless people, unknown but powerful—do what they do. Sometimes it explains why some good people don't play the game better, why they don't win.

Politicians themselves know that there are advantages for those who understand the rules and the moves, the power realities and the winning gambits, and for those who are savvy about the traps and escape routes of modern politics. Some like to say that the power game is an unpredictable casino of chance and improvisation. But most of the time politics is about as casual and offhand as the well-practiced triple flips of an Olympic high diver. The appearance of a casual, impromptu performance may add to its political appeal out in the country, as Reagan's TelePrompTer speeches and rehearsed press conferences do. But the real pros, like chess masters, rarely trust true amateurism in politics. They usually have a pretty good feel for how certain policy lines and maneuvers will play out, before they start.

The lessons of the game apply from one administration to the next. For example, a modern handbook of political tactics would say:

- The smart White House chief of staff knows that you don't let the president get committed to an all-out fight with Congress unless he has enough votes in advance for near-certain victory; then you complain constantly about the uphill battle, to disarm the opposition and to make the president's triumph more dramatic.
- The wise cabinet secretary knows you build a partnership with the chairmen of the Congressional committees that watch over your department, even if they come from the opposite party.
- The clever press secretary knows that you dump the really bad news on Friday night when it's too late for the television networks and sure to be buried by the print press in lightly read Saturday newspapers.
- The shrewd bureaucrat knows that the best way to control a program is to keep everyone else in the dark about it; then no higher-ups or Congressional committees will know enough to change the program or challenge the bureaucracy.

- The smart bureaucrat also knows the best way to keep the program alive is to provoke the loudest political protests: by underestimating the program's cost, leaking bad news about budget cuts to friendly members of Congress, and then making the cuts that cause the *most* political pain—not the least—to the program's constituents.
- The smart legislator knows that the best way to beat an objectionable piece of legislation is not to take it head-on in an up-or-down vote on the floor, but to water it down with amendments that reshape it, and then let it pass.
- The smart legislative staffer knows that if he will just let his boss, the senator or the House member, take the limelight and get the credit, the staffer can quietly shape much of the policy.
- The smart lobbyist knows that too.
- The smart lobbyist also knows that the best time to schedule a political fund-raiser in Washington is right after a Congressional recess because, as Tommy Boggs, one of the smartest lobbyists, told me, "Everyone wants to get together and swap the latest gossip because they haven't seen each other for two weeks."

Some of the most sophisticated people around the country often fail to understand the rules of the Washington power game, people who become cabinet members and even presidents and high corporate executives who frequently call at the White House. For instance, in late 1983, Thomas Wyman, former CBS board chairman, came to make a policy pitch to Edwin Meese III, who was then counselor to President Reagan. At the time, the television networks were fighting the Hollywood studios over control of the lucrative syndication rights for movies made for TV. It meant big money. Both sides went to Washington to get their way, and Wyman took his case to Meese.

As it happened, Meese was unable to keep the appointment because he was caught up in a sudden foreign policy crisis with the president. As a courtesy, Meese had Wyman sent to the office of Craig Fuller, then secretary of the Reagan cabinet and a top White House adviser to Meese. Fuller offered to help Wyman.

"I know something about this issue," Fuller suggested, "Perhaps you'd like to discuss it with me."

But Wyman waved him off, unaware of Fuller's actual role and evidently regarding him as a mere staff man.

"No, I'd rather wait and talk to Meese," Wyman said.

For nearly an hour, Wyman sat leafing through magazines in Fuller's

office, making no effort to talk with Fuller, who kept working at his desk just a few feet away.

Finally, Meese burst into Fuller's office, full of apologies that he simply would not have time for a substantive talk.

"Did you talk to Fuller?" he asked.

Wyman shook his head.

"You should have talked to Fuller," Meese said. "He's very important on this issue. He knows it better than any of the rest of us. He's writing a memo for the president on the pros and cons. You could have given him your side of the argument."

Washington insiders know that the staff is often the key on any substantive issue. In this case, they would have known that Fuller, as brain truster for Meese and hence for the president, was the key figure. Fuller had already been thoroughly lobbied for the Hollywood studios by Nancy Reynolds, a former Reagan White House aide and a well-known lobbyist. Not that Fuller would neglect to give Meese both sides of the argument, but Wyman had lost a golden opportunity. Time with Fuller was actually worth more on that issue than time with Meese was, because Fuller was drafting the administration's position.

Wyman's mistake was not unusual. Many people, not understanding how the game is played, are dazzled by political celebrities and feel they have to go to the top: to the president or his right-hand man, to the Treasury secretary, the senator, the committee chairmen. Washington insiders pay far more attention to the power and expertise of staff than outsiders do. The insiders pay their respects to the person with the title and then work the serious issues with less-celebrated staff people who actually draft policy. The wise game player always paves the way to the higher-ups through the staff person.

Wyman's experience was a small incident, but change the names and the issues and it happens hundreds of times every year, from the Carter administration to the Reagan administration to the next administration, not only in the White House but in Congress, at the Pentagon, at the Agriculture Department, all over town. It is not just a matter of understanding staff power; it's also a matter of knowing whose economic figures to trust, which House leaders can pull together coalitions, which senators personally provoke opposition when they sponsor legislation, when to press the attack, and when to lay back and let the normal rhythms of politics pass by.

Washington has its special political culture, its tribal customs, and its idiosyncrasies. These folkways can trip up not only an untutored network boss, but also a new president such as Jimmy Carter, a business

titan such as Donald Regan, and sometimes even a government careerist such as former Secretary of State Alexander Haig. All because these people really didn't know how to play the power game—or, in Haig's case, because he hadn't really absorbed the lessons of his own experience. These three men and others failed to understand the maxim that in political Washington, unlike in the military or industry, power is not hierarchical. Persuasion works better than unilateral policy pronouncements. Command is less effective than consensus.

Even as skillful a politician as Ronald Reagan can run into pitfalls when he forgets the basic rules of the game. Reagan was masterful as a political leader in 1981 and as president. During the brilliant launching of his first administration, he understood the game, or he relied on others who did. He followed a near-perfect script for presidential leadership, especially in his critical first year, which fixed the country's approving impression of his presidency for six years. So often, early on, Reagan made the right move, whereas Jimmy Carter, in the opening days of his presidency, made the wrong move, which lost his presidency ground that it never regained.

But strangely, after Reagan's reelection to a second term in 1984, he failed to follow his own successful game plan, and in 1985 he began to fare badly. His 1984 landslide with the voters did not, ultimately, have the dramatic consequences that were expected. But the way Reagan played the game did.

Let me emphasize that the outcome in American government does not always depend on game playing. Both the substance of policy and the political environment affect the success or failure of presidents. For example, Jimmy Carter was handicapped by skyrocketing world oil prices beyond his control, prices that shot up the rate of inflation in America; whereas Ronald Reagan was helped immensely in his battle against inflation by the tumbling of those same oil prices.

Nonetheless, over the past half dozen presidencies, there is ample evidence to suggest that regardless of philosophy or motives, some politicians have played the power game well and largely gotten their way, and others have played it badly and seen their policies falter. Beyond that, there are some political games that are vital to the effective functioning of our system, others that delude us for a time, and still others that tie our government in knots and stall the whole process. There are trivial games and weighty ones—the turf games of a bureaucrat protecting his piece of policy, the image games of the video politician, the “perk” games of access and proximity to the team captain. There is the blame game—dumping responsibility on the