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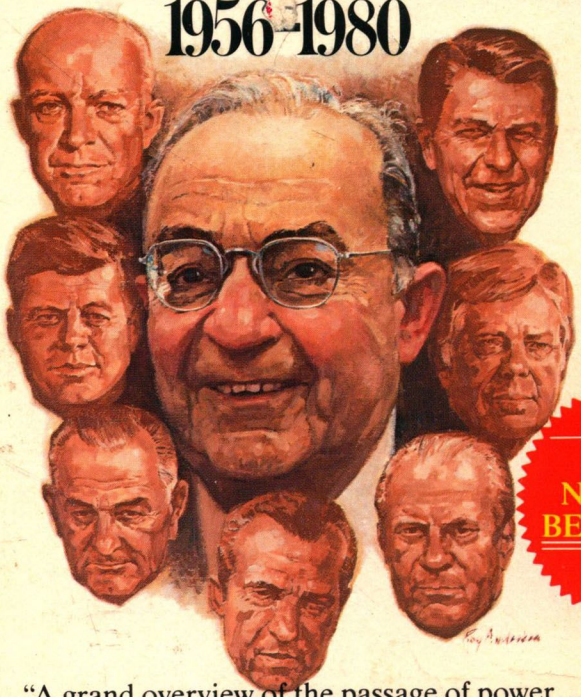

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THEODORE H. WHITE

AMERICA IN SEARCH OF ITSELF

THE MAKING OF THE PRESIDENT 1956-1980

A Cornelia and Michael Bessie Book

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For
John King Fairbank

AMERICA IN SEARCH OF ITSELF

The Making of the President 1956–1980

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DIALOGUE WITH THE READER BY WAY OF A PREFACE

There is always that first question in telling any story—where to begin?

This time it was particularly important to me to pick the proper beginning. The campaign of 1980 would be the last, I promised myself, in a series of stories about American politics that I had begun in 1960. The plan, back then, was to follow every four years with another book about the Making of the President until 1980. At the end there would be an account of twenty-four years of passage of power in American politics, telling how we got from there to here. This time I wanted to add it up. But where was there?

Elections are important; they give Americans not only their chief sense of participating in their government but, more importantly, a sense of control. Control is what politics are all about. But this time, in the campaign of 1980, there was a questioning not only of control but of national purpose itself. Somehow, public affairs had gone off the track, almost as if the country had lost its way into the future. There was no sense of coherence in government; it did not respond; it could not manage. Nor was it the fault of the Carter administration alone, or the Nixon administration, or the Johnson administration. It went much farther back than any of the seven national campaigns I had covered.

I had reported such campaigns for a quarter of a century and had seen what was, in retrospect, one of the great periods of change in American history. Historians are scholars who tell us later what it all means, after time has burned off passing detail, and left the ridges of change bare; their job is to make us aware of man in his time and

place, by dividing the past into periods, or epochs, or eras. We reporters are the servants of history, offering up our daily or passing tales for them to sort out. I could not present myself as a historian. But what I had been reporting in 1980 was so much more than a campaign that it simply had to be seen as a climactic episode in a much longer period of time than I had attempted to write of before.

Thus, insistently: where to begin?

Personalities are always a staple of both reporting and history, and so I could, if I wished, begin with that rich array of characters who have marched across the stage since the war:

- Truman, a man of such endearing candor and courage. No one since has had his gift of plain speaking. Once I wrote him a note congratulating him on his China policy. He answered with a curt "thank you," and said he had cut off aid to Chiang's regime because he found "our money was being poured down a rat-hole. They were a bunch of crooks."
- Eisenhower, rubicund, cheerful, charming, the most gifted among the storytellers at the White House until Reagan. Only years after he passed from the scene did I realize how cold, efficient, and calculating was his mind.
- Kennedy, so lithe and graceful. I remember him saying a few hours after his paper-thin victory in 1960: "The margin is thin, but the responsibility is clear."
- Lyndon Johnson, who tried so hard and failed so greatly. I remember my last meeting with him, as he jingled coins in his pocket, while scratching his groin. He presented me with a monologue, a lecture, telling me exactly how I was to present him to history, what his major accomplishments were—and then abruptly dismissed me.
- Richard Nixon, a quintessentially insecure man, so solid on the large decisions of state, so squalid in detail. He was uncomfortable with people. Once I asked him how he could bear campaigning, shaking hands all day, smiling, and he finished the thought for me: ". . . and all the while you're smiling you want to kick them in the shins."

I could run through the parade of candidate personalities, including the losers, all so intriguing: the jolly Humphrey, the thoughtful Stevenson, the innocent McGovern, the indignant Goldwater, the magisterial Rockefeller.

But if I had now learned anything after the years of reporting at home and abroad, it was that most personalities rise above the flow of events only when thrust up by forces under the surface. A rare personality—a Roosevelt, a Churchill, a Mao, a Monnet—might alter the direction of the forces, and make his own life a legend, a starting point of future departures. But I had met only one President who might qualify as a genuine hero in that range, John F. Kennedy. He had changed things.

Thus in 1980 I had to consider Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter. Neither seemed to me to carry in his personality the vitality that moves history. It seemed rather that they were both men who were carried up or borne down by forces outside themselves.

Carter had come to power on the tide of disgust following Nixon ("I want to see us once again have a nation that's as good and honest and decent and truthful and competent and compassionate and as filled with love as the American people"). And Reagan: He had been running for President for twelve years. Twice his own party had rejected him. Now, in 1980, it was not he that had changed but the American people. They were ready to listen to him describe the erring ways of their government.

So, then, there was the old reportorial way of beginning, with the classic engagement of ambitions, actions, and events. But since the forces that shaped the election of 1980 were so much more important than the personalities, that old-fashioned beginning would not do.

For a proper historian of our times there was only one overtowering beginning—the Year of Victory, 1945.

All things flowed from that victory, and for the historians, 1980 would close off what they would probably call the "Postwar Period."

The intoxication of that victory had lasted for a generation. First, the sense of power which had convinced a peaceful nation that its armed force, mobilized almost overnight, could and should forever police and reorder the world. Second, the seductive belief that in any contest between good and evil, good always triumphs. We, our soldiers, had proved that Right makes Might. The imperative legacy of Virtue also descended from the war. As Eisenhower's divisions tore open the Nazi concentration camps, Americans realized for the first time how deep human depravity could go. They accepted in their politics the moral mandate not to let such evil happen again. With this came an assumption of responsibility for the entire world—to

nurse it, feed it, encourage it, at whatever cost to the American people.

The spin-offs of the great victory were equally important. American learning had contributed so largely to the victory that it was impossible to ignore the role of scholars in American life. In the First World War, a deputation of American chemists visited Secretary of War Newton Baker and offered their services. Baker, according to James B. Conant's account, had thanked them, then added, "But the army already has a chemist." In World War II, mathematicians made American cryptography the finest among the warring nations, electronics wizards perfected radar, physicists made the bomb. Not only the physical scientists but the social scientists contributed: economists had surgically dissected the industries of Germany and Japan, psychiatrists had screened air force personnel. Modern management began with the war. Computer pioneers introduced the army to data processing, digital judgments of cost-effectiveness. They had begun data analysis by calculating the trajectories of artillery, by developing proximity fuses; and had gone on to operational analysis to master antisubmarine warfare. Without such people, the war might not have been won; and such thinkers, largely from the groves of academe, would go on to achieve in American life the status of a mandarinate until, like the Chinese mandarins, they lost touch with reality.

One last spin-off must be mentioned only because it is so scantily recognized in the transformation of American politics. To reward its war veterans, Congress passed an act almost as creative as the Homestead Act of 1862—the G.I. Bill of Rights, the first of the modern entitlements. In prewar America, to go to college was to pass from hoi polloi to the elite. In 1938, when I graduated from college, only one and a quarter million students attended all American universities. But the G.I. Bill of Rights invited all among the sixteen million veterans who had served in the armed forces to go to school on government grants. Almost half—7.8 million—took advantage of the invitation! They were to change American life, culture, and politics. By 1960, such veterans staffed the political corps of both John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon, ousting the old professionals who had until then made politics their calling. Scores of these veterans would soon be senators, hundreds congressmen. By the campaign of 1980, as they, in turn, were passing from the stage, they were leaving behind a different kind of nation, a nation of open politics. Reagan would probably be the last United States President to have worn a uniform in World War II—unless his Vice-President, George Bush,

succeeded him, in which case, Bush, a genuine war hero, might very well be remembered as the last national leader ever to have served in actual combat.

This book will have to come back again and again, in telling the story of 1980, to the legacy of the victory. But the victory of 1945 was as far away from 1980 as Theodore Roosevelt's presidency had been from Appomattox. To start this book with the legacy of victory would be to flavor the campaign of 1980 with grandfather tales. And the story of 1980 did not unroll in a victorious nation. It unrolled in a humiliated nation with a sense of victory squandered, searching itself and its way, questioning its own beliefs because the old ideas did not stretch to cover present reality.

Where would one begin a book about a nation that questioned its own beliefs?

That kind of book would, certainly, have to begin in the storm decade of the sixties, which opened an age of experiment, an age of hope.

Whether the final Reagan victory of 1980 would be seen as a restoration or a counterrevolution would have to depend on how you read the 1960s, a decade that began with a sense of total and unlimited power to do the nation's will both at home and abroad.

Perhaps the passage from the sixties to the seventies could be called a passage of paradox.

The sixties had begun with the great purpose of John Kennedy to make American life, American politics, and American opportunity open to all. But the seventies had ended with an attempt to peg citizens into categories by race, sex, and ethnic heritage. By the end of the seventies, America was, officially, in many jurisdictions a racist society. In trying to eradicate racism, the politics of the sixties and seventies had institutionalized it. Race and sex might now define who was entitled to what promotion and what job opportunity. The passage of paradox had begun by trying to eliminate the forced busing of little children to specified schools because of their race and color. It ended by insisting on it. Race and heritage defined, at least in the Democratic party, the precise proportions of delegates to political conventions.

The effort to save America's cities offered another paradox. More brains than ever before focused on the decay of America's cities. At the end, with all the attention and programs, big cities were on their way to tragedy: they had become warehouses for the very poor or

enclaves of the very rich, while common civility had become a memory.

Another paradox: The sixties had begun with a Kennedy Commission to examine the mechanics and financing of American elections. Reform had followed reform as men of good intention tried to purge the money changers from the temple. Such reforms had finally caught and trapped the Nixon campaign of 1972, and unzipped the Watergate scandals. But the reforms had incubated the political action committees of 1980, which poured unprecedented sums of money into politics. These committees, the vicious as well as the virtuous, made loose money more important in the purchase of political influence, in leverage on Congress and President, than at any time in living memory. Access was now openly for sale.

The passage from the sixties to the seventies is a blurred one, for Americans tend to think in terms of decades like the thirties, the forties, the fifties, the sixties, as if history turned a new chapter in each year beginning with a zero and closed ten years later with another zero year. But the underswells of politics do not work that way. The storm decade of the sixties, for example, ran from the death of John Kennedy in 1963 to the departure of Richard Nixon in 1974, a period of eleven years minus three months.

At the heart of the upheaval was the liberal idea, and guiding it was liberal dominance, in Congress, in academia, in the press, on television, in the great foundations and "think tanks." Under Republican Presidents, as under Democratic Presidents, the liberal idea prevailed—that the duty of government was to conceive programs and fund them so that whatever was accepted as right and just, at home or abroad, would come to pass, whatever the cost, whatever the contradiction between good intentions and prevailing reality. Nowhere was a warning more clearly voiced than by one of the dominant liberals of the time, John Gardner, then Secretary of Health-Education-Welfare, who warned his friends: "There are some people who have what I think of as a vending machine concept of social change. You put in a coin and out comes a piece of candy. If you have a social problem you pass a law and out comes the solution."

The trouble with this liberal idea was that liberals, looking back, could not distinguish between their genuine triumphs and their failures. Their peril in the eighties would be that the good they had done might be washed away with their blunders.

All in all, when I reflected on my reporting of the upheaval of the sixties and its consequences in the seventies, I realized I had

ignored the ferment of ideas within politics. But it was now too late to go back to analyze the ideas that had changed America, and brought about the election of Ronald Reagan, the most resolute ideologue in the modern presidency.

A story beginning with ideas was no proper starting place for a writer who had begun as an outdoors reporter.

In a book which was both a summing up and a story, I would have to start with a theme as well as a date. And neither the theme nor the date could be entirely novel.

The theme had to be, as all historians would probably accept, that the election of 1980 marked the end of an era. But what, exactly, was coming to an end? An end to the power of America around the world? An end to a system of politics that had outlived its time? An end to the good intentions of the sixties, which had tried to unleash goodwill and only imprisoned it in a codex of regulations beyond anyone's comprehension? An end to the politics of hope?

What had come to issue, it seemed to me, in 1980 was the nature of the federal government's power. The campaign was about the consequences and reach of government, about the murky limits that separate the public interest from individual right. It was about America's pride, and America's role in the turbulent outer world.

It was best, then, to choose as a beginning a specific arbitrary date, close enough to the events of 1980 to tell my last story of an election—yet significant enough to invite the reader to rove back and forth from that date to the forces shaping the candidates.

That date, November 4, 1979, with which this book now begins, is the most plausible date for the beginning of the action of 1980. If it happened to be exactly one year in advance of the voting day of November 4, 1980, that was accident. But November of 1979 could not be ignored. In the three months following that Sunday in 1979, all the forces that made the election of 1980 a watershed in American politics would surface sharply enough to become distinct.

November 4, 1979, was the day when a handful of wild people in faraway Iran seized the American Embassy in Teheran, held our emissaries as hostages, and humiliated the proudest nation on earth.