

Books

Washington Ethnography

Ross K. Baker

Unlike science fiction, war novels, murder mysteries or even hardcore pornography, political fiction as a literary genre has no cohesive corps of enthusiasts who anticipate publication, write newsletters, award statuettes for excellence or eagerly glance at the latest offerings in the corners of lunchconettes and bus terminals. Part of the reason for the primitive state of organization among political-novel lovers is unquestionably the retrograde state of the art. A follower of Ross McDonald, Agatha Christie, Ray Bradbury or Bruce Catton knows that he can rely on his author's interest in mysteries, galactic travel or the disposition of Hancock's Corps at Gettysburg to pique and enrich him. He can match wits with Hercule Poirot or experience vicariously the quandaries of Lew Archer. There is little to admire and even less to entertain in recent American political fiction. Indeed, much of it does not meet the test of its own typology: it is not even political in any profound sense. The vast majority of political novels written since 1960 have been little more than Washington ethnography; the hunting and gathering of America's migrating political élite.

Political fiction has its own identity crisis, which is part of the problem. Most authors who purport to employ a political motif simply fail to use politics as anything more than a backdrop. Where politics is more than backdrop, though, as in John Le Carre's *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* and Fletcher Knebel's *Trespass*, one is conventionally designated a "spy novel," the other a "political novel." Then there is Eugene Burdick's *Fail-Safe*, as much science fiction as political fiction, and Robert J. Serling's *The President's Plane Is Missing*, equally a novel of aviation as of Presidential politics.

What, then, constitutes a "pure" political novel? There are really few models of recent political fiction, for those who choose to write them become obsessively concerned with the externals of Washington life, and so bemused by the trappings of power and of the idiosyncratic rather than the structural elements of politics and power that what emerges at best is a kind of surface verisimilitude, at worst, a travelogue with coloration of plot.

In an attempt to establish their credentials as political observers, novelists provide us with exacting descriptions of the Oval Office, of some well-known Washington watering hole, the seemingly inevitable

description of the Lincoln Memorial by moonlight. But after reading a score of these novels, it becomes clear that a novel set in Washington and peopled by politicians is not, in itself, a political novel. I would go so far as to call many of them apolitical novels. In Fletcher Knebel's *Vanished* we are asked to believe that the disappearance of a close friend of the President's from his country club is sufficient to bring on a major domestic crisis. Even in the supercharged atmosphere of Watergate it is difficult to believe that Bebe Rebozo or Robert Abplanalp would really be missed. Allan Drury perhaps earned the title "political novelist" in publishing *Advise and Consent*, where he provided an interesting, if florid, account of the process of Senatorial approval. But Drury went on to write a number of sequels, culminating in the preposterous *Preserve and Protect*. So dazzled did he become with his own cleverness in fashioning acronyms (e.g., COMFORT—The Committee on Further Offers for a Russian Truce) and bizarre scenarios (a politician is shot by a laser gun at the Washington Hilton) that all pretense of looking at politics was lost.

It has become conventional to provide a crisis, which the author interprets in the narrowest fashion, and succession crises top the list. Who the next President is to be figures largely in Knebel's *Night of Camp David*; Irving Wallace's *The Man*; Drury's *Preserve and Protect* and *Advise and Consent*; and Serling's *The President's Plane Is Missing*. We see Vice Presidents or other subordinates, morally, intellectually or socially unfit for the highest office in the land, meet the challenge thrust upon them. In *Power, Corruption and Rectitude*, a study of unpromising politicians who become effective Presidents, Harold Lasswell and Arnold Rogow turned Lord Acton's aphorism on its head by saying that power may enoble as well as corrupt. This seems to be an article of faith among those who write political novels. The idea that assuming the mantle of executive leadership might not transform a fathead into a leader seems to be forbidden.

Usually little care is expended on the ideology of fictional Presidents; most could be classed as "cold-war liberals." Only in *The Jupiter Crisis* do we find a right-wing President, and he turns out to have been blackmailed and subverted by Communist agents. Many of the Presidents in recent fiction are patterned after John F. Kennedy, and if not exactly romans à clef, the novels do appear to draw upon the characteristics of actual Presidents. Two recent novels, *The Approach to Kings* by Patrick Anderson and *The President* by Drew Pearson, use elements of Lyndon Johnson as a model for the fictional President. These two novels are distinguished almost solely by the fact that outrageous, undignified and venal conduct

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on the part of a President is openly and fully discussed.

However, politics, as it emerges from most of these books, is described as being neither wholly honest nor essentially corrupt. This departure from the more traditional moralistic pattern (sagas of honest men battling a corrupt system) is noteworthy, especially when one recognizes that many political novelists are either sometime practitioners of politics or members of its symbiotic partner, journalism. Among political novelists we find such familiar names as John Kenneth Galbraith, Gore Vidal, Drew Pearson, Pierre Salinger and Tom Wicker. For them politics cannot fail to have at least some majesty.

Political novels, after all, tend to reflect a range of evaluation as well as an interesting story. And while it is true that we do not read political novels to learn about government, any more than we read detective stories to learn about penology or ballistics, an effective plot and good characterization alone cannot obscure other shortcomings. As detective novels inevitably cause us to admire the resourceful and persistent sleuth, so do political novels provide us with images of politics which we internalize. There is sufficient uniformity in these novels, moreover, to suggest the existence of some shared beliefs about politics, even if they are shared only by political novelists.

One figure emerges again and again—the young staff assistant or freshman Senator or Congressman, who, by deeds of brilliance, loyalty and toughness, comes to be regarded as trusted advisor to the President. What aspiring young bureaucrat or party loyalist, what callow provincial lawyer or youthful businessman has not dreamed of being driven to work in a White House motor pool car while reading the morning *Post* by the light of a gooseneck lamp and being waved through the gate by a reverential guard? It is not difficult to imagine the young John Dean reading *Night of Camp David* and identifying with the young Senator summoned to Aspen Lodge for a midnight conference with the President, or to visualize Herbert Porter and Gordon Strachan feeling kinship with Guy Pompey (the Presidential press secretary in Bert Hirschfield's *Moment of Power*), Colonel Casey (the President's military aide in *Seven Days in May*) or David Hyer (the young Presidential assistant in *The Approach to Kings*). Like their real-life counterparts, the important young men of the novels strive sedulously for their master and ask only to bask in the warm light of his approbation; to experience the bittersweet thrill of toiling into the morning hours over a position paper; and to receive as a reward that most cherished of all Washington icons, an autographed picture of the President, to which is appended a more than perfunctory salutation.

Unlike most of their real-life counterparts, a num-

ber of fictional heroes ultimately find it necessary to break with the President because of questionable actions on his part. Lest this appear to demonstrate the perspicacity of these novels, it should be pointed out quickly that consistent with the image of Presidential sanctity the loyal protégé discovers that the Chief Executive is either a lunatic or an imposter, and it is this realization that causes his great moral crisis. With the exception of Drew Pearson's *The President*, there are few allusions to Presidential venality; no suggestion that a President in his right mind might bug his own office or seek to control the nomination process of the opposing party. The crises which keep the plots moving are idiosyncratic rather than systemic, and Presidents who tamper with the system do so not out of hunger for power or totalitarian predilections, but rather because they are in the pay of the Chinese or suffering from anxiety neuroses brought on by overwork. In short, there are no Richard Nixons, and only pale intimations of LBJ.

We should not, however, condemn political novels as a class because none of them predicted Watergate. Their authors seem much more interested in producing exciting stories than in giving us political knowledge. Perhaps only *The Triumph*, John Kenneth Galbraith's relentless didactic novel of State Department politics, seeks to provide the reader with detailed information on some element of government. But if political wisdom tends to be discarded in favor of good storytelling, the exchange rarely succeeds, and we are left with political novels which are neither good politics nor good novels.

Tom Wicker's recent novel, *Facing the Lions*, is one of the better efforts. It is not a particularly engrossing book, but Wicker succeeds in drawing his characters with considerably more plausibility and depth than do the authors of most other political novels. Wicker's book succeeds partly because he really does spend some time on the development of the character of Senator Hunt Anderson, a Southern reformer, who almost wins his party's Presidential nomination and, having failed to achieve it, becomes a tragic figure, intermittently drunk, whose Senate colleagues are forced to cover for him.

Another strength of *Facing the Lions* is that Wicker undoubtedly feels secure enough to dispense with the kind of specious specificity that the less accomplished novelists are forced to employ. As I recall, Wicker gets by with one Lincoln-Memorial-by-moonlight scene and one aerial approach to the Capital. We are spared such details as the circumference of the Capital Beltway and the décor of the Fish Room—which are a mainstay of other novels. Wicker's setting, moreover, is only partially Washington; it is in some unspecified Southern state, where Hunt Anderson's political career begins and ends. Wicker goes all out with his Southern vignettes and makes them

believable. I had thought his Southern politicians were overdrawn until I had a chance to watch Sam Ervin for two months and came away commending Wicker for the modesty of his characterizations. So artfully does Senator Ervin advance himself as the barefoot boy from Harvard that no practicing political novelist could convey his subtleties and complexities.

Facing the Lions deserves a special accolade for the depiction of a truly complex and commanding woman in the person of Kathy Anderson, the Senator's wife. Fletcher Knebel and Charles Bailey, for example, rarely depict women as more than vacuous sex objects; and Drew Pearson's black newswoman in *The President* is likely to bring him posthumous condemnation from both NOW and the NAACP. Pearson's shortcomings in this area, however, are trivial compared to Knebel's—one of his characters is a black woman singer who emerges as an amalgam of Diana Ross and Angela Davis. The women who people these novels usually end up betraying the hero or causing him such anxiety and grief by their excessive demands and perfidious inclinations that the male protagonist cannot even battle to a draw the dragons he has set out to slay.

Marital infidelity is a modal form of behavior of heroes of political novels, since their wives rarely possess the intelligence and understanding required of a good helpmate for a man on the paths of destiny. Instead, the heroes turn to other women for love and understanding. These women are usually of a lower social class, or unfashionably ethnic—a kind of whore-heroine who is instinctively understanding and seductive in her very essence. Accordingly, the young Senator from Iowa in *Night of Camp David* has his liaison with an Italo-Polish mistress; David Hyer, the young staffer in *The Approach to Kings*, with an Irish-Catholic reporter; and Edward Deever, the special assistant in *The President*, succumbs to the exotic charms of Mona Varnum, a network reporter with "skin the color and texture of a coffee mousse." Other minorities and oppressed groups fare little better.

In at least three of these novels a Jew is Secretary of Defense because only a Jew could be crafty enough to bamboozle the military. In the later novels black militants make their appearance, and by the late 1960's we find domestic racial strife almost overtaking foreign policy crises as the principal themes of political novels. The archetypal militant—such as Abraham Lincoln Williams in Dan Britain's *Civil War II*; Kakamba Jones, vice president of the Black and Tan Party in *The President*; Chili Ambrose in Knebel's *Trespass*; and Elijah King in *The Approach to Kings*—approximate the white middle class's stereotypes of black activists, and are drawn in such a pedestrian and superficial manner that they approach burlesque. Their heads are invariably surmounted by wild Afros, and they talk in a patois that might be called low jiveass. All of these characters are out-

rageous and nihilistic, but are usually paired with some reasonable black who espouses incremental goals and works for HEW.

The authors of political novels might be forgiven for constructing implausible characterizations of black militants, but when they cannot even create believable bureaucrats and politicians the sin is of a different magnitude. Not one of these novels contains any hint of the transcendent banality of the bureaucratic dialect. Even before the Watergate hearings brought home so forcefully the debasement of the English language by government officials, anyone with the least sensitivity to language as a correlate of political behavior should have seized upon the Washington patois as a device for creating recognizable capital types. Nowhere in these books does the flavor of Monday morning senior staff meetings emerge with any cogency. Rarely is there any hint of the pain and boredom of the bureaucrat's life, nor of the pathological results of what is euphemistically termed "infighting."

The reasons for these deficiencies are not surprising inasmuch as novelistic premium is placed on the glamor and excitement of government; and it is fully understandable that political novelists choose to dwell upon the more charismatic elements of the government, such as the State Department, CIA and Congress, rather than the General Accounting Office or the Fish and Wildlife Service.

But even in their dealings with the "glamor agencies" the political novelists give no clue as to how policy is made, nor do they concern themselves overmuch with policy itself. Issues of public policy are rarely discussed, and the philosophical questions almost never emerge. Ideology is rarely more than a filmy cloak thrown over some character or a label haphazardly appended to an individual. The military establishment is peopled with either swaggering and sinister brutes or beleaguered patriots. Similarly, the press is either diligent and enterprising or hectoring and treacherous. Simplistic caricature triumphs over complexity and subtlety.

It may be that the next generation of political novels will take into account the perversion of trust and the self-righteous fanaticism of the Nixon circle and consider the possibility that Presidents can wantonly destroy the fabric of public trust without being either lunatics or Chinese spies. Paradoxically, the electoral process is viewed in several political novels as being fraught with treachery and fraud; but somehow, once a candidate becomes President, he is washed clean. However, virtually none of these novels deals with both the Presidential aspirant and his incumbency, so there tends to be a disjuncture between electoral politics and administration policies. This lack of a longitudinal perspective adds to the shallowness of the characterizations and accentuates the one-dimensional characteristics of these fic-

tional Presidents. But even more seriously, it raises questions about how a corrupt and debased electoral process elects only virtuous and majestic Presidents.

Perhaps the most serious indictment that can be leveled against these novels as a group is their almost complete reluctance to posit alternative futures and their almost complete acceptance of the state of the present society and polity. Where science fiction ranges far and wide in suggesting vastly different social arrangements, political novels have tended to be very conservative. H.G. Wells once advanced the novel as the ideal medium for innovative social thought. Perhaps the only sustained use of the novel as a device for speculative thought on the future of American politics came early in the 1960's with Eugene Burdick's *480*—which accurately suggested the widespread use of aggregate data and computer analysis to identify potential voters and their allegiances.

More typically, contemporary trends were projected into the future, and in a series of novels the intense black militancy and student activism of the sixties occur as important forces in future political settings. In Lawrence Louis Goldman's *Takeover*, a hippie President is elected by dint of the eighteen-year-old vote. This is at least an intriguing notion, even if belied by the result of the 1972 election. More quaintly, in other novels we find SDS and black militant groups playing kingmaker in future Presidential elections.

As a group, then, these self-consciously political novels of recent years are largely unsatisfying either as compelling narratives or sources of political insight and speculation. Dominated for the most part by the desire of the authors to be savvy about the interstices of Washington life, handicapped by slipshod characterization, impoverished by lack of imagination and dearth of speculative spirit, many of these novels do not rise above the status of subliterate pot-

boilers. The best of them make a valiant effort to be both interesting and insightful, but devotees of the political novel may have to look elsewhere for sources of political wisdom.

It is one of the more intriguing ironies of the genre that the two very best works of political fiction, Edwin O'Connor's *The Last Hurrah* and Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, are novels of local and state politics respectively. Perhaps it is easier to grasp the essence of a machine boss from Boston or a tyrannical Southern politician than it is to extract from the media-burnished, charisma-laden Presidency the true nature of the man who occupies it.

Driven by the inexhaustible public fascination with the occupant of the White House, novelists, however, have turned their backs on the ward, the precinct and the state house and have fixated on the President—a figure less explicable in human terms than the Dalai Lama or the Emperor of China. If any one man can be said to have spawned this paroxysm of fictional hagiography it was John F. Kennedy. Lyndon Johnson's Presidency, if anything, intensified the trend. One minor consequence of Richard Nixon's present plight may be a greater inclination on the part of novelists to divest the Presidency of some of its divinity.

Philip Green and Michael Walzer suggest that truly great literature is usually replete with political insight. It does seem possible, however, that apart from the hallowed realm of timeless literature, novelists without aspirations of immortality for themselves and their works might at least be able to hold our attention with a compelling tale of American politics that modestly assays the task of being both entertaining and perceptive. Perhaps one of the cultural aftershocks of Watergate will be the birth of a new orientation toward political fiction—less conventional, less adoring, less dazzled by power than the current genre.

West African Wager: Houphouet versus Nkrumah by Jon Woronoff

(Scarecrow Press; 371 pp.; \$10.00)

Naomi Chazan

The independence of Ghana in 1957 and the subsequent emergence from colonial rule of tens of other African states marked the beginning of a

new era in the black continent. Independence was expected to end Africa's many ills, and decolonization was hailed with optimism ap-

proaching euphoria. But with political autonomy came innumerable common problems and challenges demanding immediate attention. The quest for total answers marked the first decade of African independence. No two countries better symbolized the similarity of problems and diversity of solutions than the neighboring West African states of Ghana and the Ivory Coast.

Jon Woronoff's *West African Wager* is one of the first studies which attempts not only to examine these contrasting experiments in