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Gazette-Times

gazettetimes.com

Monday, November 29, 2004

Last modified Friday, January 30, 2004 1:57 PM PST

Books

Read 'em and weep

By Doug J. Swanson
The Dallas Morning News

Or take a nap! You'll learn as much about presidential potential either way

Those who yearn for Joe Lieberman's fond campaign memory of telling a long joke are in luck. "Ba-da-boom," Lieberman writes of the ensuing hilarity. "The Missourians roared, and were drawn more comfortably into my speech on the Gore-Lieberman economic plan."

Other readers, thirsting for Dennis Kucinich's Enron-scandal poetry, may now partake: Political contributions place. Regulatory controls erase. Energy supplies manipulate. Shortages create.

And for anyone who must know whether Howard Dean likes mowing the lawn, the answer lies on Page 85 of his autobiography. The former governor of Vermont also discusses his feelings on taking out the trash.

Running for president of the United States these days apparently requires a book bearing the candidate's name — in a space customarily reserved for the author — on the cover. Not necessarily a good book. And not necessarily one actually written by the candidate. But a book nonetheless.

Across the land, the store shelves groan with them. "Winning Back America." "A Prayer for America." "Al on America." "A Call to Service: My Vision for a Better America."

And so on.

It's not a new phenomenon. Candidate George W. Bush, for example, had "A Charge to Keep" in 2000. But this year's crop is the biggest ever, 1,779 pages in all.

All seven Democratic candidates have books for sale. So does Rep. Dick Gephardt, who dropped out of the race after the Iowa caucuses. These memoirs, musings and policy collections offer a variety of thoughts and declarations, including:

"I make and pour the coffee in our house every morning." — Lieberman on his domestic arrangements.

"The interchangeability of matter and spirit means the starlit magic of the outermost life of our universe becomes the soul-light magic of the innermost life of ourself." — Kucinich on stardust.

"I found real comfort in the show's last four and a half minutes when — week after week — that truly fine lawyer yanked another explosive confession from yet another cold, evil and wily villain." — John Edwards on "Perry Mason."

There's more: Wesley Clark refights the war in Iraq, and Al Sharpton delivers an assessment of human rights violations in Cuba. "I personally saw none," he observes. John Kerry mentions Vietnam 17 times in the first six pages of "A Call to Service."

Despite their investments of money and time, readers of such volumes should not expect great treasuries of deep thought or penetrating analysis, says David Greenberg, who teaches political science at Yale University.

"Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson were real intellectuals," he says. "John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were real intellectuals. That's not what politicians do anymore."

The post-presidential memoir has a long and storied past. Ulysses S. Grant wrote his in 1885; dying of cancer, he hoped that the proceeds would provide for the family he left behind. More modern volumes have given ex-presidents their chance to shape the historical record.

But the pre-presidential book aspires to introduction, not valediction. The one that has attained the most legendary status is probably "Profiles in Courage."

That 1956 collection of mini-biographies brought prominence to its author, a previously obscure senator named John F. Kennedy (though the book has been trailed by accusations that somebody else actually wrote it and that Kennedy's father bought him the Pulitzer Prize it won).

Nowadays, the candidate-tome functions generally as a campaign promotional. Some acknowledge this, and some don't. Adam Kovacevich, a spokesman for Lieberman, says the former vice-presidential nominee and his wife simply wanted to tell their story from the last election.

"They had so many wonderful memories from the 2000 campaign, they decided to put those in a book," he says.

On the other hand, Sharpton begins his book by listing the qualities the next president must have, then declares, "I am that leader."

No matter what form they take, books by today's office-seekers, says Greenberg of Yale, often have little more substance than their television ads.

"We seem to have this set of rules in our politics that force candidates into making certain gestures, even though those gestures may be obvious or bland or banal," he says. "All you want to do in one of these books is get your name out there."

All the current books but Gen. Clark's have the candidate's photograph on the cover, and the general takes up the back cover of his. Every bookstore display — or book review or newspaper story — therefore amounts to free campaign advertising.

And the candidate may profit from whatever prestige authorship conveys. "We think, 'Hey, if he can write a book, maybe he can balance the budget,'" says Judy Safern, former senior publicist for HarperCollins Publishers.

Then again, maybe he can't even do that. Of the current eight, only Gen. Clark and Kucinich do not acknowledge ghostwriters. The others either hired professionals or leaned on staff members to do the heavy typing.

Gephardt, for instance, collaborated with former aide Michael Wessel. The former House Democratic leader "spent a lot of time on planes and brought a laptop," says Wessel, whose job was to polish the prose later.

The Liebermans did some of their own writing, says campaign spokesman Kovacevich. On other occasions they would meet their for-hire wordsmith "at a diner near their home" and unload their memories — and, apparently, long texts of campaign speeches.

A few of the books make a stab at presenting the candidate as a regular guy. Dean, for example, favors a wash-and-wear JC Penney suit. Kerry likes Harley-Davidsons and NASCAR.

And most of these volumes have at their centers at least one searing experience that transformed the person who became the candidate.

For Kerry, it was "how close I had come to being killed by rifle fire and rocket launchers from the shore in our forays deep into Viet Cong territory." Dean cites his brother's death in Laos.

Sharpton talks of being stabbed during a Brooklyn protest march. "That's when I realized," he says, "I was willing to die for justice."

Edwards tells of the death of his teen-age son, Wade, in a car crash. It took Edwards, then a successful civil lawyer, six months just to get up the strength to leave his house and go back to work.

Such revelations present the candidates as both common and extraordinary. They must endure the same terrible pains visited upon others, yet they also possess the capacity to transcend.

However moving such passages may be, many question whether these books actually help in persuading voters to support the authors.

"Books by a candidate play a very small role," says Wessel, Gephardt's co-author.

Albert Greco, a publishing-industry expert at Fordham University, says such books are aimed at a narrow slice of buyers.

"Who's going to read them? Not the party faithful, but that candidate's party faithful," Greco says. "That's a really small number."

Political books in general don't sell all that well, Greco says. "The chance of striking gold doing a book by a politician is not very good. Of course, the exception is Hillary Clinton."

Clinton's "Living History" has sold well in excess of 1 million copies in hardcover, Greco says. "That is a bona fide blockbuster."

Publishers zealously guard information on print runs, so gauging the expectations for the Democratic candidates' books is difficult.

"The odds are they did not put a lot of money into these books, and they're rolling the dice that one of these will get the nomination," Greco says. "Then you might do some real sales."

The rest may end up in the mid-list graveyard. "In a short period of time, seven of those eight will probably disappear," Greco says. "A lot of these books are going to end up pulped."

On a more subjective level, are these books a good read? The reviews generally have been less than gushing but not always unkind.

Greenberg of Yale gives Edwards' "Four Trials" qualified praise for originality of structure and relative forthrightness, but he says it ultimately falls short. Reviewers have called Gen. Clark's book straightforward and thought-provoking, if stylistically unexciting. Booklist says the Liebermans' book is a "fascinating inside look," but Library Journal finds that it "offers few deep insights."

Publishers Weekly dismisses Kucinich's as "hastily assembled" and "short on logic, analysis and detail." The same publication says of Gephardt's: "While the book has its share of bland platitudes, Gephardt offers some real insight into such issues as American trade policy."

That's probably to be expected from a book that features chapters with titles such as "Taxes and Citizenship" and "Politics is a Service Business." John Le Carre it's not.

Says Wessel, the ghostwriter, "We didn't try to make this into a novel that people couldn't put down at night."

Some feel they should never be picked up at all. "There is no sorer branch of literature than the books that presidential candidates write to boost their campaigns," The Economist magazine sniffed recently.

"If literary standards count for anything, these sententious tomes should all be consigned to the flames."