

Teddy White Runs Again

THE MAKING OF THE PRESIDENT 1968
by Theodore White. 459 pages. Atheneum. \$10.

In two previous chronicles of President-making, Theodore H. White's talents were more than equal to the task: the creation of historical documents that read like suspense novels. This time the odds were against him. White's best reportage delineates character; portraiture is his forte. In 1968, events overshadowed individuals. It was a year of frustration and disruption, of groping and



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WHITE EDITING DOCUMENTARY OF "PRESIDENT"
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dismay. Many were killed, the timid endured, the vague were exalted, the hesitant lost. Finally the managers stepped in, good and gray but hardly the stuff to invigorate the imagination.

While White was dashing among the candidates—a day here with Nixon, a day there covering Romney (remember Romney?), with Rockefeller, with Robert Kennedy, even Johnson—the events that ultimately shaped the election were taking place elsewhere. In Viet Nam, the Tet offensive was finally shattering hopes for a clear-cut American military victory. On campuses across the country, a young political amateur named Alard Lowenstein was meticulously organizing a network of students to a force that would decisively help unseat the President and carve a niche in history for Eugene McCarthy. In cities a continent apart, two maimed minds were moving nearer their appointments with infamy. And in Chicago, Mayor Richard Daley was making himself a target for protest by ordering his police, eleven days after Martin Luther King's assassination, to "shoot to kill" arsonists in time of riot.

White's reconstruction of these events often bears the pastepot smell of news-

paper clippings. From Chicago, where he was an eyewitness to the uproar in the streets during the Democratic Convention, his reaction is detached and too concerned with the pattern of the old politics. He offers little more than a neat categorization of the participants in such efforts. There are "the curious . . . who want to be able to yell, 'I seen it, I seen it, I seen it myself.'" Next, "the crazies," identified by "their diseases (mainly venereal), their health (decayed from malnutrition and drugs) and the disturbances, rarely dangerous, of their minds." Then "the innocents [whose] morality urges them to stand witness for a cause." And finally, "those who seek to control, to move, to marshal [the crowd] into an unthinking mass of bodies."

New Portrait. White is more at home in smoke-filled rooms than tear-gassed streets (which in 1968 were probably more important). Teddy recounts in meticulous detail the cool precision of Nixon's staff as they marched unhaltingly toward victory. His cautiously sympathetic portrait of Richard Nixon is reassuring. Writes White: "There had indeed come to be a new Nixon. This one was a competent, able manager. Gone were the old pugnacity, the old sock-and-slash style, the old tendency to buckle under strain; it was a firmer, wiser, thoroughly mature man who was now in command."

There are nuggets of anecdote along the way. White places his finger firmly on some Nixon fundamentals that are just now becoming evident in the White House. "I've always thought this country could run itself domestically . . . You need a President for foreign policy," Nixon told White in 1967. He quotes an unnamed friend of L.B.J.'s recalling the President's comments on his own peacemaking efforts: "I got earphones in Moscow and Manila, earphones in Rangoon, and earphones in Hanoi, and all I hear on them is 'F___ you, Lyndon Johnson.'" The historical value of other of his recollections is dubious. "Over the thirteen years that I have been following Humphrey," he writes, "I have never known any candidate who turns more to cheese as a natural provender in crisis."

After eight years and three elections, White has established his own political system. He has a vast network of friendly power brokers, governmental aides, trend watchers, reporters, poll takers and precinct vigilantes. This book is almost overwhelmed by his efforts to preserve—and not to offend—this intricate organization. Nelson Rockefeller is ei-

evated to near sainthood before he is politically buried. Even Lyndon Johnson, sulking back on the ranch—the man who White points out was most responsible for Viet Nam, fragmented his party, nearly destroyed the nation's trust in its government—gets his requiem. "Few men have done more good in their time . . ."

White's third account ultimately disappoints. What is bothersome in the book is bothersome in the nation. As White himself explains: "It is difficult to be precise about the nature of the nightmare year out of which came Nixon's election. No phrase, no thought can catch, hold and bind together in one frame all the roaring events, the blood and disorders, the inflation and uprisings."