Campaign Books Bring Controversy, but Not Big Sales

By Stephen Isaacs
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"The one that really got me started in this business," says Victor Lasky — writer, biographer, sometime political hatchet man — was Arthur Schlesinger Jr. Back in 1960, he wrote a thing called 'Kennedy or Nixon—Does It Make Any Difference?' which really was a hatchet job on Nixon. Incidentally, it's a very fine, fine book. It was a superb, brilliant job. It was aimed at the Jewish, intellectual, liberal community. I responded to it with a little pamphlet and, two or three years later, that turned into "JFK, The Man And The Myth."

Lasky's book on Kennedy, published in 1963, might not have gained the notoriety his strangely underwritten 1970 job on Arthur Goldberg is receiving, but it sold better.

Arlington House, the conservative publishing firm in New Rochelle, N.Y., printed 116,000 copies of Lasky's "Arthur J. Goldberg, The Old & The New." The printing was financed by a straw company backed by Laurance Rockefeller, brother of the then New York governor, Nelson A. Rockefeller Goldberg's 1970 opponent for the governorship.

Of those copies, 100,000 were sent to Republican county chairmen across New York, and 16,000 were put on sale. Most of the 16,000 came back unsold, says Arlington House president Neil McCaffrey. "But JFK, The Man and The Myth" was another story. "We've gone close to 300,000 copies in hard cover," says Lasky.

McCaffrey bought the rights to "JFK" from Macmillan, which also published Schlesinger's 51-page polemic. Schlesinger insists it was no hatchet job.

"I think it's a perfectly balanced book," said the historian, who has twice won Pulitzer Prizes and once a National Book Award. "It's not a hatchet job in the Lasky sense. And it's a view of Nixon which holds up well over time, in view of what's happened since."

Lasky and Schlesinger are not unique in having written campaign books, an art form as old and as enduring as the American political system itself. Most campaign books are pro, rather than con and one former aide to the late President Johnson said that "It seems to me that I've never known of a candidate taking off without one."

Most national candidates have had them in recent years, from President Nixon's biography by Earl Mazo (which was not subsidized) to "McGovern," the book that Sen. George McGovern (D-S.D.) asked Robert Sam Anson to write in 1972 and then wasn't so pleased with when it came out.

There was an authorized, supposedly subsidized book on Hubert Humphrey, whose campaign never paid for the copies it ordered, and the authorized Lyndon Johnson biography by Booth Mooney that ended up in 50 foreign editions.

There have been any number of books that have died shorning or, in galleys when candidacies collapsed.

While most of Lasky's attack on Goldberg consists of one innuendo piled upon the next, occasionally it is blunt:

- "To the manor (sic) born he (Goldberg) was not; but he certainly acts as if he were."
- "Mr. Goldberg's lack of candor."
- "He was on his way to being recognized as the important man he considered himself to be."

Schlesinger's "Kennedy or Nixon" uses no innuendo. Instead, it is blunt. For instance:
- "The hard fact is that Nixon lacks taste."
questions of public policy."

...he would not give the ex-

schlesinger denies this. And

The reason, simply, is that

The Humphrey campaign

The book was on news-

De Toledano insists that

DeToledano borrowed

on TV and said it was por-

Another self-published

Mrs. Schlafly's book was

Another principal differ-

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Lasky's name will not sell

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De Toledano wrote, however, had more 

so-called "liberal organizations"

as "a self-serving book, a 

since then. He has written

books, the last of which,

me solely because of his name 

on the jacket.

Lasky's name will not sell 

books in itself—least not so far. 

He has written six 

books, the last of which, "The 

version of the Nixon presidency 

up to January, 1972, in 300, 

words is going begging for 

a publisher. He says he 

made a great deal of money 

—he would not give the exact 

amount—from his critical 

book about John Kennedy, 

though his original advance, 

he recalls, was $15,000. He was 

paid $10,000 to write "Arthur J. Goldberg: The Old & The New."

Another principal difference 

between the two books 

is the fact that Schlesinger 

was writing of a presidential 

contest, Lasky of a candidate 

for state office.

"In the case of Arthur Goldberg," says The New 

York Review's co-editor 

Robert Silvers, "it really 

was special. Who would've paid 

to buy a book on Goldberg?"

The fact is, according to a 

number of publishers, cam-

paign books generally just 

don't sell well.

An example was "Where I 

Stand," a 1964 Barry Gold-

water campaign book, in 

which the publisher hoped 

to somehow duplicate the 

massive sale of Goldwater's 

privately published "The 

Conscience of a Conservative." Tony Smith, Goldwa-

ter's long-time press aide, 

described "Where I Stand" 

as "a self-serving book, a 

part of the campaign. It was 

a collection of his policy pa-

pers and speeches, printed 

in paperback.

"It was a huge mistake," 

said Smith, "because whoe-

ver handled the deal had no 

idea what the publishing 

business was all about. They had the book 

printed and had absolutely 

no distribution system set up."

Hubert Humphrey's 1968 

biography, entitled "A Man 

for All People; A Pictorial 

Biography," is another ex-

ample of a campaign book 

that didn't sell.

Lew Gillenson, president of T.Y. Crowell, was then 

editor-in-chief of Grosset 

& Dunlap. "It was a typical 

campaign book," says Gill-

enson, "but it was mildly 

interesting."

The Humphrey campaign 

ordered and reordered cop-

pies and Grosset eventually 

printed some 48,000 of them, 

even binding some in simu-

lated leather for Humphrey 

to autograph for friends and 

large contributors.

"Everybody did a beauti-

ful job on the book. The only 

thing was, the Democrats 

never paid us any money," says Gillenson.

Grosset's bath ended up 

somewhere between $45,000 

and $56,000, he said.

"They're not in general a 
good investment unless a 

publisher—has some assur-

ance from a campaign or-

ganization," says McCaf-

trey. They mostly bomb 

without it. I would not have 

published the Goldberg 

book without it."

Sometimes publishers and 

authors go ahead on an 

unauthorized but "pro" cam-

paign book, hoping that a 

campaign later will decide 

to buy them in bulk.

Ralph deToledano says his 

"anti" book on Robert Ken-

nedy, entitled "RFK: The 

Man Who Would Be Presi-

dent," published in 1967 by 

G.P. Putnam's, "sold very 

well. I think it sold about 

30,000 or 40,000 copies in 

hardback and several hun-

red thousand in paper un-

til Bobby was assassinated. 

Then they took it off the 

shelves."

Another book deToledano 

wrote, however, had more 

"unusual origins" called 

"Calude Kirk's Man and 

Myth," came out during 

Florida Gov. Claude Kirk's 

re-election campaign in 1970. 

It was not a positive book 

about Kirk. As deToledano 
says, "Kirk had generated 

a great deal of hostility."

"The book was on news-

stands all over Florida dur-

ing the primary," says deToledano, "and it caused 
great controversy. Kirk got
An authorized biography of Johnson was first done by erstwhile staffer Booth Mooney in 1956.

"I was on his payroll part of the time when writing it," says Mooney, "but it wasn't a subsidized book." Anyway, a great many were bought in bulk by Johnson's friends.

The book, called "The Lyndon Johnson Story," sold moderately well after its 1956 publication.

Then, says Mooney, "Rogers Straus [of Farrar, Straus & Co.] called me up the night of the day Kennedy was assassinated," and asked him to update it in two weeks.

The new version, says Mooney, "did quite well." As for the book, it had improved somewhat but not all that much. I think it sold 25,000 in hard cover, it was syndicated, it was an Avon paperback, and it went into approximately 50 foreign editions. "I'll never do that well again."

During the 1972 campaign, McGovern used to tell reporters how Bob Anson had made mistakes in his biography. But eventually, says Anson, "I think he came to realize it was good because the press bought it."

The book, says Anson, "was hardly definitive. It was based on six weeks' reporting."

Anson struck an unusual financial arrangement on the book, published by Holt. "They paid me $6,000 as an advance, which didn't last. I ended up taking a loan from Household Finance. He [McGovern] got $3,500 out front to sit for the interviews, and then he got all the royalties. As a matter of fact, I suggested this. I didn't want to make money off of this."

The most significant book in the last several decades on that score was James MacGregor Burns' book on John Kennedy, which narrowly tread the line between the campaign book genre and political scholarship.

"I'm always upset when my book is referred to as a campaign biography," says Burns. He defines a campaign biography strictly as "a biography written to help a candidate get elected instead of a kind of independent scrutiny. My main motivation as a scholar was to try an experiment, to do a biography of a man of the type we do when he is dead, but do it when he is alive when it seems much more appropriate for people to know about him then, when they need to know the information."

He feels he was successful. "It was well received from a scholarly standpoint," he says, "and not so well received by the Kennedys, which was to be expected."

Above all, he [Kennedy] was concerned, he had a lot of things he questioned, particularly my questioning of how much heart he was willing to put into the thing."

Burns' "John Kennedy—A Political Profile" was in some measure a turning point in Jack Kennedy's political career.


"I was in Michigan at that time as a Kennedy organizer," recalls Navasky, "and the book had a big role in persuading the reform wing of the party that he was acceptable."

Navasky feels the Schiesinger book a year later helped, too. "For the speechwriting types who were themselves having trouble trying to articulate what the difference was."

Some political professionals feel that the campaign books may have a marginal value inside a campaign, not outside.

F. Clifton White, Goldwater's campaign manager in 1964, who has run a number of successful conservative campaigns and who helped found the American Association of Political Consultants, says that, "I doubt if those books have any impact at all in terms of the general electorate."

"They may have a certain utility for the workers, at least in the case of the 'pro' book. It gives them a way to establish quick familiarity with the candidate. As for the 'anti' books, the people they are anti of, spend an awful lot of time worrying about them, instead of doing something useful."

"I think television did a tremendous amount to minimize the effectiveness of these things. Earlier in American history, print was the basic mode of communication. We're all oriented to the tube nowadays, whether we think so or not."