

# The Unmaking Of Enchantment

By Richard Harwood

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Eight years ago, Theodore White introduced a new art form to journalism—the instant history of a presidential campaign. It won extravagant praise, made him wealthy, famous and much-admired by his literary peers. He repeated that triumph with his history of the 1964 campaign. His third effort is already a commercial success. But there is a difference. The critics, by and large, are disenchanted. In their eyes, he has become the Uncle Tom of political journalism.

The reasons for this disenchantment are not hard to find. In 1960 and in 1964, his view of men and events was entirely consistent with the dominant view of the liberal-academic community in this country. They were all in agreement that John F. Kennedy was preferable to Richard Nixon in 1960 and that Lyndon Johnson was preferable to Barry Goldwater in 1964.

But White's judgments on the political events and personalities of 1968 are almost heretical in terms of the present intellectual fashion. He finds, for example, considerable virtue in the Nixon of 1968. While critical of the war in Vietnam, he is sympathetic to the ideology that got us into it. While shocked by the violence at the Democratic convention in Chicago, he is even-handed in assigning the blame. Above all, he believes in the American political system and the people who run it and that, in itself, is a kind of heresy to the patrons of Ramparts magazine and the New York Review of Books.

No doubt anticipating (if not provoking) the howls his book would draw out of the New Left, he wrote in one of his most perceptive chapters:

"Out of cynicism and despair, the new avant-garde has come to despise its own country and its traditions as has rarely happened in any community in the world . . . The thought that thousands of good dull men in public life may honestly be trying to govern well, and that many of them are succeeding is regarded in the critical climate almost as absurdity . . ."

He even assigns to this avant-garde a measure of responsibility for the violence that has so upset the country in recent years:

"By (their) standards, no exploration of sensation in film, criticism, novel or drama can be condemned simply for qualities of hate, depravity, sickness, violence or obscenity.

"Whether obscenity is right or wrong, whether homo-

sexuality is good or bad; whether mind-expanding drugs are dangerous or not; whether killing is reprehensible or not—few voices in the established critical mood of the country dare exercise a moral judgment on the phenomena. Violence in the abstract is deplored; but in art, in cinema, in drama, in literature, violence is judged by style, and atrocity is examined as curiosity. From such critical leadership there seeps down to disturbed minds at the mass level an implied permission to explore their own nightmare fancies as well; and in the streets, brutality and violence color the outline in blood.”

What White is affirming, in these passages and throughout his book, is his Squareness, by the standards of the avant-garde. This has exposed him and the book to a great deal of avant-garde criticism, much of it irrelevant, much of it unfair.

There are better grounds for criticism. It is indisputable that at times there is a sycophantic quality

## THE MAKING OF THE PRESIDENT

By Theodore H. White

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to his judgments on the men involved in the presidential events of 1968. He has become, in the last decade, such an insider with the great men of politics that it is difficult to distinguish his thinking from theirs. He has, in that sense, become a captive of the people he describes, people who, in his rendering, seem to have acquired very few warts.

Beyond this, there is a suspicion that he has gotten tired of this quadrennial game and, as a consequence, his reporting has suffered.

His diaries would show how many days he spent on the road with the candidates in 1968. Perhaps he was out a good deal. But that is not the impression of reporters who spent the whole year on the road. White seemed to appear a day or so before a primary election,

closet himself with the candidates, and then disappear again for weeks at a time. In the case of the George Wallace campaign, he admits that his exposure consisted of a couple of hours one afternoon in Cicero, Ill.

The result is a book of uneven quality. There are brilliant essays on the failure of the American government to develop an understanding of Vietnam, on the nature of the student protest movement, on the origins and dimensions of the “law and order” issue. There are also those fascinating “insider” reports that have adorned all of his books—Nixon, the night of the nomination; Humphrey in Chicago; Robert Kennedy arriving at a decision to run.

What is missing is much of the flavor of the campaigns themselves, both before and after the primaries, and much of the sense of evolution that candidates go through as the weeks go by.

For all that, it is the best book around on the events of 1968, which was surely one of the strangest years in our political history.