

John P. Roche

Critics of White's Book on Election Condemn a Sound, Balanced Work

THE APPEARANCE of Theodore H. White's "The Making of the President, 1968" triggered a good deal of criticism among the reviewers.

The gist of it was that White is just an Establishment apologist, an antiquated liberal who does not realize that 1968 was the "year of the new politics." It is hard to know how to deal with this assault since what is at issue is not a matter of opinion but a matter of fact.

Anyone with a Group IV Army General Classification Test score—or better—can therefore state with confidence that 1968 was the year of the "old politics." After all, Richard Nixon, not Eugene McCarthy, is President of the United States.

White has also been worked over for asserting that hooliganism, even in support of alleged virtue, is still hooliganism, and for suggesting that Lyndon B. Johnson was not a monster, Hubert Humphrey not a clown and Richard Nixon not a conditioned reflex.

In short, White, while anything but uncritical, takes American politics seriously and, on balance, clearly thinks that our system with all its faults is a lot better than that existing in some 90 per cent of the nations in the world. He cherishes democratic government, as any liberal must, and (perhaps because he has experienced the seamy side of the world) finds real meaning in the process by which 200 million people, with all the bumbling and phony theatrics that go into it, exercise the precious right of self-government.

AS A CONSEQUENCE, he sees 1968 as a year of tragedy, not of "melodrama." Lyndon Johnson

emerges from these pages not as a wild war-monger, but as a complex figure caught in a historical trap—unwilling to wage full-scale war with an attendant mobilization of patriotic fervor; unable to create support for a nasty limited war or cope with the ferocious attacks that this half-war generated.

White senses, as no other writer has, the meaning of the President's March 31, 1968 speech: That this was no "trick," but a nonpolitical attempt to take the war out of politics and hopefully end it. It is hard to conceive of Lyndon Johnson acting nonpolitically, but I think that those who were associated with him will testify that this elemental and often baffling man was totally committed to this extraordinary course.

From my own knowledge of what went on among the Democrats in 1968, I can state that White has superb factual control. I wish the book were longer because he throws up many points that merit further exploration (for example, the idea of the Humphrey-Rockefeller "coalition ticket"). But at the same time the book's great virtue is that White has not included everything

but the kitchen sink. It is crafted in terms of a hard set of priorities.

ABOVE ALL, he never loses sight of Richard Nixon, who is the invisible man in accounts of 1968 written by aficionados of the new politics. Like most liberal Democrats, White had trouble coming to terms with Nixon, but he is scrupulously fair. His conclusion (which parallels my judgment expressed here last October) is that between 1962 and 1968 Richard Nixon demonstrated a remarkable, and cheering, capacity for intellectual and political development.

Because of his close personal relationship with the late Sen. Robert Kennedy, White has provided us with insight into the acts and motives of this talented, driven man that surpass those of any other commentator or biographer. Some will feel that his treatment is unduly compassionate, with respect to both Kennedy and other principal figures, but his reporter's eye is not affected by his compassion. He has written a superb and moving chronicle of democracy at work.

© 1969, King Features Syndicate, Inc.