The White House Beat

Books

MERRIMAN SMITH'S BOOK OF PRESIDENTS: A White House Memoir. Edited by Timothy G. Smith. Foreword by Robert J. Donovan.

(Norton, 250 pp., illus., $7.95)

Reviewed by Edward T. Folliard

The reviewer, who retired in 1966, covered the administrations of six Presidents as White House correspondent for The Washington Post.

In his long tour as a White House reporter, from the Roosevelt era to Nixon's term of office. Merriman Smith covered six American Presidents. His job was first to report what they said and did, but, being a perceptive fellow, he learned a lot about their temperamental peculiarities.

He was never so presumptuous as to put tags on them, however, and he mistrusted those who, viewing Presidents from a distance, sought to psychoanalyze them and assign them images. He himself was wary of that vogue word, and used it only to show how deceptive it could be.

Take, for example, the case of Lyndon B. Johnson. "Smitty," as his friends called him, got as close to Mr. Johnson as any White House reporter ever got. He was fascinated by Johnson, especially by the contrarieties in his make-up, and he decided finally that the Texan was fathomless."

"LBJ was a perfect example of the frailty of image," Smith wrote. "He was the sort of person whom a hundred psychiatrists could not have figured out, whom a thousand PR men could not have produced or changed, yet he was the most typecast personality to occupy the White House since Truman. He was a lot of different things, but one thing he definitely was not was a dumb cowboy."

The passage quoted is from "A White House Memoir," made up of Smitty's notes, diary entries and excerpts from books he wrote in his nearly 30 years of covering Presidents for United Press International. The famous reporter, who had a "drinking problem," took his own life in 1970, and so this volume was put together by his son, Timothy G. Smith, a graduate student at New College, Oxford.

There is some graceless writing in the book, especially in the notes and diary entries, but this is understandable and pardonable; it is writing that Merriman Smith dashed off hurriedly and intended to smooth out later. Young Tim Smith deserves credit for not tampering with it.

Robert J. Donovan, who was long with the old New York Herald Tribune and is now an associate editor of The Los Angeles Times, has written an excellent foreword—with a faithful word picture of Smitty, his skill, prodigal exertion, his gall and aggressiveness, and the historic events he covered in his exciting career.

Donovan recalls what happened the day after John F. Kennedy was elected President in 1960, when there was still a cloud of doubt over the outcome because of the razor-edge closeness of the vote. Kennedy was heartened when he spotted Merriman Smith among the reporters in the Hyannis Armory, and said: "If you're here, Smitty, I 'guess I've really been elected." For a President, Smitty came with the job.

Donovan, a new reporter at the White House, first encountered Smitty in 1947. A rented limousine was about to take reporters to a hotel where President Truman was to speak, and Donovan took a seat in front next to the driver. Smitty came out and demanded that Donovan give up the seat and go to the back; the front seat, he made clear, belonged to him by right.

The incident took on poignant significance 16 years later when Smitty, riding up front in a pool car with a radio telephone, heard three shots ring out, and began dictating the flash and the bulletins that gave him a resounding beat on the assassination of President Kennedy. His work on that tragedy won him a Pulitzer Prize. In the book there is a chapter given over to Dallas, and to the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt in Warm Springs, Ga., in 1945. Smitty was there, too; "he was always there."

The book deals with just about every aspect of the White House, and there is a chapter on "First Ladies" (Smitty admired Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis much more than did the girl reporters). I liked it all, but found most interesting the chapter headed, "President-watching: The Trouble with Images."

Smitty noted that the two Presidents born to wealth, Roosevelt and Kennedy, liked to wear old clothes, FDR doting on a greenish tweed suit inherited from his grandfather; he also noted that Lyndon Johnson, not born to wealth, went around turning off the lights while dressed in a $300 suit, alligator shoes that cost between $150 and $200, and wearing a wristwatch worth more than $1,500.

Merriman Smith was a fine example of the detached wire-service reporter. Not only did he avoid putting image tags on the Presidents, he never tried to rate them, believing that a task for historians of a later time. He evidently believed, though, that all of those he covered did their utmost to serve the country well.