



Presidential Campaigns

Paul F. Boller

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Campaigning for the presidency demands strength and courage. Teddy Roosevelt was once shot in the chest just before a campaign speech--but he insisted on delivering his hour-and-a-half oration anyway. Presidential nominees have to know how to play the game, moreover, whether they care for it or not. When Andrew Jackson was visiting one town, according to a campaign tale, a proud mother handed a dirty-faced baby up for him to hold. "Here is a beautiful specimen of young American childhood," said Jackson obligingly. "Note the brightness of that eye, the great strength of those limbs, and the sweetness of those lips." Then he handed the baby to his friend John Eaton. "Kiss him, Eaton," he cried, and walked away. And all presidential hopefuls have to find ways of smoothing over the unfortunate gaffes they sometimes commit. During the 1992 campaign, Bill Clinton provoked so much mirth when he said he once tried marijuana but found he couldn't inhale, that he subsequently appeared on television to play his saxophone and told the host he took up the instrument because it didn't require inhaling: "You blow out."

Now, in a revised and updated edition, this enlightening and endlessly entertaining book unveils the whole history of American presidential elections from Washington to Clinton--those clamorous showdowns that have so perplexed, pleased, amused, irked, and fascinated the American people from the very beginning. As Charles Dickens observed, American voters are scarcely finished with one campaign when they start in on another.

Presidential Campaigns brings these boisterous contests to life in all their richness and complexity. In the old days, Boller shows, campaigns were much rowdier than they are today. Back in the nineteenth century, the invective at election time was exuberant and the mudslinging unrestrained; a candidate might be called everything from a carbuncle-faced old drunkard to a howling atheist. But there was plenty of fun and games, too, with songs, slogans, rallies, leaflets, torchlight parades, picnics, and, inescapably, a lot of hyperbolic oratory, livening up the scene as party workers sought to get people to the polls. Despite the mudslinging and hot air, however, many of the campaigns touched off popular debates about vital public issues, and there were many candidates (like Adlai E. Stevenson in 1952) who insisted on "talking sense to the American people." *Presidential Campaigns* takes note of the serious side of the elections even as it documents the frenzy, the frolic, and the sleaze. Each chapter contains a brief essay describing every election from 1789 to 1992, and then presents some "campaign highlights"--songs, poems, slogans, jokes, and anecdotes--that help bring to life the quadrennial confrontation in all its shame and glory.

Presidential Campaigns makes one thing clear: the "great American shindig" (as one Englishman called it) is, for all its shortcomings, an essential part of the American democratic system and, for better or for worse, tells us much about ourselves.

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