

The Washington Post Book World
June 30, 1996, Sunday

Suiting Up for The Race

David J. Garrow

PAGES 1, 9. **LENGTH:** 1123 words

THE CHOICE. By Bob Woodward. Simon & Schuster. 462 pp. \$ 26

THE CHOICE? Yes, the choice: Would you let Bob Woodward rummage around in your daily life for weeks at a time, interviewing your closest friends and colleagues, including your spouse, in order to produce an impressively researched and compellingly written first-hand account of your private thoughts and doubts?

Bob Dole did, and Bill Clinton didn't -- and boy, does the difference show -- perhaps even in some ways that Woodward doesn't fully appreciate.

Woodward's starkly contrasting portraits of the Republican and Democratic presidential contenders represent a first-rate piece of reporting. Early in the book, Woodward declares that "character is what matters most," but from Woodward's own journalistic vantage point, there's no denying that access -- or the lack of it -- is what really matters most.

The newsworthy information in *The Choice* concerns -- surprise, surprise -- Bill and Hillary Clinton. The first couple may have sought to keep Woodward at arm's length, but plenty of people close to them talked very frankly. Mrs. Clinton's staff may well have foreseen the potential damage that Woodward's revelation of the First Lady's previously unpublicized friendship with spiritual and psychological advisor Jean Houston could do; the only pre-publication mention of the friendship I've been able to find was a seemingly inoculatory reference to Houston in the First Lady's syndicated column of June 9. Woodward may or may not have actually heard the White House tape recording of the April 1995 "virtual therapy" session where Houston successfully encouraged the First Lady to talk out loud to such long-deceased historical figures as Eleanor Roosevelt and Mohandas K. Gandhi, but his conclusions are less than subtle: "Hillary's sessions with Houston reflected a serious inner turmoil that she had not resolved." From a historical perspective, some of the crucial ingredients here -- White House tapes, Bob Woodward -- ought to someday remind someone that first families ought to take advantage of recording technology rather more sparingly than has oftentimes been the case.

Far more crucial than the Jean Houston story is Woodward's explicit allegation that President Clinton's direct personal control of some \$ 25 million worth of Democratic National Committee (DNC) television advertising spending during the winter of 1995-96 violated the spirit and perhaps the letter of federal campaign finance statutes. Clinton's use of the DNC funds "enabled him to exceed the legal spending limits" for his re-election bid and represented a definite circumventing of the Watergate-era reforms. No matter how well-documented such an allegation may be, however, the arcane niceties of federal campaign spending limits may not be fertile ground for generating public concern or condemnation.

But, news headlines aside, far and away the most fascinating portions of *The Choice* concern Bob and Elizabeth Dole rather than Bill and Hillary Clinton. The Doles gave Woodward a surprising amount of entree into their lives, and not only has Woodward made the most of it as

reporter and author, he also -- whether knowingly or unknowingly -- has repaid the Doles' openness in ways that may offer a significant boost to Dole's presidential candidacy.

Almost all of the dramatic tension in *The Choice* revolves around Bob Dole: not Dole versus Clinton, not Dole versus Buchanan or Forbes, but, in essence, Dole versus Dole. True, a reader not previously aware of the well-publicized Clinton campaign tussles featuring Dick Morris versus George Stephanopoulos and Harold Ickes will quickly get brought up to speed, but the most notable contribution of *The Choice* -- and for Republicans "contribution" may be the right word in more ways than one -- lies in how Woodward succeeds in making Bob Dole a more intriguing and complex character than Bill Clinton.

Some unhappy Democrats may complain that *The Choice* is in many ways a big, wet, sloppy kiss on the cheek for Bob Dole, but there's no denying that Woodward's access to the Dole campaign has resulted in scene after scene that presents Dole in a positive light. When unnamed aides privately suggest targeting gays, Dole's response is blunt and immediate: "We're not going to pick out a group and discriminate against them for political gain." In mid-April of 1996, when Woodward himself tells Dole that Clinton is still angry over how the Republican candidate two years earlier had spoken out sharply about Whitewater on the very day that Clinton's mother had died, Dole is both nonplussed -- "That's not something Bob Dole would do" -- and upset that perhaps he had -- "Maybe I owe him an apology." Just two days later, after a review confirmed the timing, Dole sent the president a letter of apology, saying he was writing "not as a Senator or presidential candidate, but as an individual whose parents instilled in him a sense of common courtesy."

Woodward hardly overlooks Dole's weaknesses as a candidate, and Dole's unending challenge to be a passable public speaker provides the book's unifying thread. Woodward is understandably intrigued by Dole's puzzlingly languid attitude toward his own campaign; Dole hired his campaign spokesman, Nelson Warfield, after one listless, seven-minute conversation. "In some ways, the central feature of [Dole's] personality was his passivity -- particularly under pressure or at key moments." Woodward wonders "What might this mean during a Dole presidency?," but he does not pursue the question.

Woodward's remarkable access to Dole and Dole's top aides serves him well when it comes to vice presidential prognostication -- Richard Lugar and Dick Cheney are among the names worth remembering -- but Woodward has spent so little time traveling with the Dole campaign that *The Choice* conveys none of the dreary tedium that Michael Lewis recently described in the *New Republic* as "listening to Bob Dole deliver a speech written by someone else to a group of people he knows nothing about in a place to which he will never return." In that regard, *The Choice* may offer a story that's better in Woodward's telling than it ever could be any place else.

For political junkies, *The Choice* is no doubt required reading, but they will find no great surprises here about either the Republican or Democratic campaigns. Bob Woodward's top-notch journalism as instant history is an impressively well-done product, but almost inescapably, its shelf-life is destined to be relatively brief.

David J. Garrow, author of "Liberty and Sexuality" and the Pulitzer Prize-winning "Bearing the Cross," is Distinguished Historian in Residence at American University.