

Political Booknotes

The Legacy Thing

By David S. Broder

THE GOVERNOR OF TEXAS AND Republican presidential hopeful is perhaps the most familiar unknown in American politics. We think we know him, because his name is so well worn and his parents, the former president and first lady, have been so much a part of our lives. But the eldest of their children, affable and engaging as he appears, is someone most voters are just beginning to define.

This book will help. It is not the place to go for a clear evaluation of George W.

Bush's record as governor or his manner of governing. It is skimpy on those points, which are properly the subject of much other solid journalistic work.

Bill Minutaglio, a special writer for the *Dallas Morning News*, does exactly what his title says, places its subject solidly in the context of his family—and that is the right place to start figuring out who and what George W. is.

He is a Bush, which means he is part of a clan which has lived comfortably at the heights of affluence and influence for four generations. One great-grandfather, Samuel P. Bush, was the first president of the National Association of Manufacturers and a close advisor to President Herbert Hoover. Another, George Herbert Walker, founded Brown Brothers Harriman, the oldest and largest private investment house on Wall Street, and was an early backer of FDR for the presidency.

The governor's grandfather was a senator; his father, a president; and for almost his entire life, favors flowed to George W., not because he sought

them, but as part of his inheritance.

As Minutaglio demonstrates more fully than anyone else I have read, literally everything in Bush's resumé up to his election as governor in 1994 was to a substantial degree handed to him. Schools, summer jobs, college, military service, marriage, and a succession of short-term, increasingly lucrative employment opportunities all were facilitated by members and friends of the Bush clan.

During much of that time, Bush himself was casual to the point of

being lackadaisical about capitalizing on his many opportunities. He was a cut-up, a young man with many friends and few clear goals. But he was also the first son, and eventually, the expectations of his parents

and the whole family broke through his natural nonchalance and he became a competitor. Less than a year after his father was defeated for reelection to the White House, George W. stepped forward as a candidate for governor of the nation's second largest state. The legacy would not be allowed to lapse.

Minutaglio offers no deep insights into the emergence of this late-blooming purposefulness. Chances are, there is no deep complexity of character to probe. But the narrative is clear and the writing is well above the level of most campaign biographies. I could discern no evident bias—either adulatory or cynical.

And there are some important clues to the character of a second Bush presidency. Anyone reading of the alienation George W. felt during his years in the Ivy League—his active distaste for the cultures of Yale and Harvard Business School—has to wonder about the prospects their alumni would have of gaining major posts in a Bush administration. I suspect they'd have to prove they were as

uncomfortable with the Old School Tie as Bush himself is. And even then, Bush is likely to be more comfortable—as in Texas—with people who have bummed around in less intellectually-pretentious precincts, as he has himself.

That's the part of George W. that is distinctly different from the earlier generations. "For decades," Minutaglio writes, "the tendencies from both sides of the Bush-Walker clan had seemed to work in concert as dozens of family members moved from the most powerful academic settings, into the almost requisite military roles and then into the most influential positions in business and politics."

But a new era, he says, brings "obviously different demands, different rules." George W.'s father figured out how to follow Ronald Reagan but not how to defeat Bill Clinton. Now, as his son tries to succeed Clinton, we will find out how far the inheritance, and the differences, can carry him.

DAVID S. BRODER is a political reporter and columnist at The Washington Post.

Goodnight Vietnam

By David J. Garrow

TWENTY-TWO YEARS AGO, Frank Snepp published *Decent Interval*, a stunningly powerful account of how American officials in Saigon abandoned thousands of South Vietnamese compatriots when North Vietnamese troops captured the city in April 1975. Snepp had been a 32-year-old CIA agent in the U. S. Embassy, and he had anticipated all too well how his superiors' wishful thinking and inadequate planning would lead to a chaotic American evacuation once the North Vietnamese forces moved in. Overcome by anger at how many committed South Vietnamese had been left behind to face tortured futures at the hands of their captors, Snepp pressed for a thorough inquiry into the American failure. The CIA was not interested, and

FIRST SON:
**George W. Bush and the
Bush Family Dynasty**
by Bill Minutaglio
Times Books, \$25

once Snepp decided to write just such a study himself, his resignation was a foregone conclusion.

Decent Interval became justly famous as much for the circumstances of its publication as for its riveting and painful narrative. Snepp chose to believe that his several CIA secrecy agreements—one dating from when he joined the Agency, and a second decidedly different one from when he resigned—obligated him to submit the manuscript to CIA censors only if it contained classified information, which he firmly (and correctly) believed it did not. Random House editor Robert Loomis worked assiduously with Snepp to assure that no government intervention would delay publication, and in November 1977 the book's appearance was heralded by a front-page story in *The New York Times* and extended coverage on CBS News' *Sixty Minutes*.

But the CIA was not about to let Snepp enjoy his triumph. Overcoming initial vacillation by the Carter Justice Department, the government filed suit against Snepp in federal court, seeking to seize all of the income generated by *Decent Interval* and to impose official censorship on anything Snepp might write in the future. The government's suit was assigned to a spectacularly biased federal district judge in northern Virginia, Oren R. Lewis, and a pathetically unfair trial resulted in an across-the-board CIA victory. Eighteen months later, the U.S. Supreme Court issued an opinion affirming both portions of the judgment without even deigning to hear arguments. An all-but-bankrupt defendant paid \$144,931 to the U. S. Treasury and mailed the manuscript of a never-to-be-published novel to the CIA.

Irreparable Harm is Snepp's richly autobiographical account of all his trials and tribulations, and it is the first book he has published since *Decent Interval*. It is powerfully written, confessional and self-critical, and its central story is the ease with which the CIA's fallacious claims beguiled the federal judiciary. The Supreme

Court's behavior in *Snepp v. United States* has been roundly criticized from the day of its decision, but *Irreparable Harm* uses the now-available case files of Justices Thurgood Marshall and William J. Brennan, Jr., to provide an historically eye-opening behind-the-scenes account. The files document how Justice Lewis F. Powell, Jr., a military intelligence officer during World War II, single-handedly convinced his colleagues to rule against Snepp. Initially Powell was the sole justice who wanted to address the merits of the case, but his insistence won over Chief Justice Burger as well as Justices Stewart, Blackmun, Rehnquist and White. Justice John Paul Stevens (joined by Brennan and Marshall) filed a powerful dissent. Still, anyone with access to a legal database can readily see how often *Snepp* is cited by courts when public employees unsuccessfully seek legal shelter for blow-

ing the whistle on some government malfeasance that involves unclassified, but nonetheless "confidential," information.

Snepp worries that the litigation reduced him to little more than "an italicized metaphor for a very bad First Amendment case." But despite the magnitude of that disgraceful Supreme Court ruling, Snepp fails to appreciate how enduring a book *Decent Interval* truly is (even now that it is regrettably out of print).

Irreparable Harm's most revealing confession, however, concerns a story which appears only fleetingly in *Decent Interval*. In *Decent Interval*, Snepp included the following story about Saigon's penultimate day:

"Around midmorning a Chinese girl, an old acquaintance, called to ask my help. Her American husband had abandoned her and her children, she explained tearfully; she had no one else to call on but me. I told her wearily I could do nothing at the moment. I was chained to my desk. 'But contact me again in an hour,' I said. 'I'll see what I can do.' There was a brief silence on the other end of the line. Then her voice drifted in,

cool and distant. 'If you won't help me,' she said, 'I'm a dead woman. I'll kill myself and my children. I've already bought the pills.' ... 'Look,' I said, 'just phone in an hour. I'll help you then.'

Precisely on schedule, an hour later, she called again. As it happened, I was away from my desk. She left a message with the duty officer: 'I would have expected better of you. Goodbye.' That was the last I heard from her."

Now, in *Irreparable Harm*, Snepp tells the story differently, disclosing that it was to this woman, named Mai Ly, he had dedicated *Decent Interval*. She had been a barroom hostess whom he slept with in early 1973:

"Nearly two years passed before I heard from her again, before that winter's night in 1974 when she showed up at my door with a year-old baby boy in her arms and a sly smile on her lips. As always, she was coy. First she claimed the child was her brother's; then, her own by an American friend; and then, shockingly, the American friend became me.

I still have a picture of the three of us from that time, that brief five-day reunion that would commit me forever. ... Almost immediately after that picture was taken, she and the child disappeared again, not to resurface until the day before the evacuation."

Only indirectly does Snepp indicate why that missed phone call left him with "a sense of guilt that has taken years to overcome": "My God, were they truly dead? The Vietnamese cop who'd climbed over the wall of the embassy the last day to deliver the news had been nearly incoherent with fear. Had he gotten it right?"

In 1975, and perhaps also in 1977 when he wrote *Decent Interval*, Snepp may well have been appropriately uncertain as to whether he actually was the father of Mai Ly's child. As the years passed, however, whatever doubts he had felt dissipated. One friend understandably told him to "forget Vietnam and move on." But he couldn't. And in 1991, when he revisited Saigon for the first time, under the watchful gaze of a Viet-

IRREPARABLE HARM

by Frank Snepp

Random House, \$26.95

nameless police agent, he managed to ride by the "three-story tenement where Mai Ly had once lived with the child I believed to have been my own." He wanted to stop, to ask if there was any chance he had misapprehended her death and the child's, but dared not.

Snepp's account of that trip, including a visit to his old office in the partially abandoned former embassy, is deeply moving, and the journey seems to have given him as much closure as he can attain. In Saigon, he realizes that "the only real enemy here now was my memory." Yet, he mourns that, "had my son lived, he would be eighteen by now." But most tormenting of all, Snepp is fated to live with the knowledge that the neglect he showed Mai Ly and the boy directly mirrored the neglect that this country showed its Vietnamese allies, who trusted us just as she had trusted him.

DAVID J. GARROW is *Presidential Distinguished Professor at Emory University School of Law.*

Forgettable

By Jonathan Alter

FITTINGLY ENOUGH for a book about Ronald Reagan, I forget who told me this, but it makes sense:

Bob Loomis, the Random House editor responsible for Edmund Morris, apparently fell down on the job. Loomis should have told Morris during his "writer's-block years" to go ahead with the fictional device as a way of getting going, then stripped all of it (including Morris' poems) out of the final draft.

If Loomis had done so, *Dutch* would have been less controversial (maybe that's why he didn't) and a helluva lot better. The fictional world Morris creates, complete with a radical son and a group of ancient friends, is jarring, phony, boring and totally unnecessary. Most of the insights conveyed by the fictional characters could have been stated in

the author's own voice, which would have been completely in tune with the quirky, epigrammatic, non-biographical tone of the rest of the book.

For instance, a fictional character explains that Nancy Reagan and Jane Wyman were cut from the same cloth: "Both bruised, flinchy, pushy, short fused to the point of paranoia, neurotically tidy, love to give orders." Good point; no need to adorn it with fiction. Same with the pithy characterizations of Reagan's men.

The biggest revelation in the book is how astonishingly ungrateful the Reagans were. When long-time devoted aide Mike Deaver got into legal trouble, they never called him. When the Bush family gave them expensive gifts, there were no thank you's. Morris asks Holmes Tuttle, a rich California car dealer and supposedly close friend, if there was anything he ever wanted in return for bankrolling Reagan's entire political career and serving in the kitchen cabinet that got him into government. Tuttle said that all he ever asked for was a night in the Lincoln Bedroom. The Reagans finally invited him just as they were about to vacate the White House. "Too late," Tuttle told them. Isn't there something between selling the place off, à la Clinton, and stiffing those who helped you most?

Morris makes occasional good use of his access, telling us, for instance, what those Reagan-Bush weekly lunches were like. (Reagan at one point simulated masturbation with a Tabasco Sauce bottle.) Some deftly told anecdotes succeed in conveying just how distant and ultimately cold Reagan really was. Even now it still amazes me that he didn't even recognize his own adopted son Michael at his graduation.

But if the book works as impressionism, it fails as history. The larger conclusions ("There was never a politician less interested in the past") are forced and often false. And Morris is disturbingly uninterested in American politics. The critical 1980

campaign gets all of a page. When, during their last White House interview, Reagan starts to tell the story of the 1968 convention, Morris, by now deeply bored by Reagan, starts daydreaming (about Lord David Cecil of all people) and he never tells us what Reagan said. This is valuable history, obtainable by no one else. Having chosen to be a "writer," Morris should turn all of his notes and tapes over to a real historian.

JONATHAN ALTER is a columnist at Newsweek and a contributing correspondent to NBC News.

The Eisenhower Method

By Fred Greenstein

DWIGHT DAVID EISENHOWER is the least well understood of the modern presidents: enormously popular with the American public from his time as supreme allied commander in Europe during World War II through his death in 1969, but long held by analysts of American politics to have been a non-performing president.

A poll of specialists on the presidency conducted the year after Eisenhower stepped down relegated him to the rank of 19th century nonentities like Chester Arthur. Within two decades, however, a transformation of Eisenhower's reputation had begun in the scholarly literature. As the inner records of his presidency came into the public domain, an Eisenhower emerged who was far removed from the image he cast as figurehead president—giving the lie to the 1950s joke that it would be terrible if Eisenhower died and Vice President Nixon became president, but infinitely worse if Sherman Adams (Ike's stony-faced chief of staff) died and *Eisenhower* became president.

How interesting to discover, in the declassified record, that Eisenhower really was president—a skilled political operator with an interesting and complex personality who engaged in the kinds of politicking that many believed he left to subordinates. But he politicked in a non-

DUTCH:
A Memoir of Ronald Reagan
by Edmund Morris
Random House, \$35