

Karl Helicher

Political Biography

• 2008 (1/3)

Political biographies are similar to sports biographies, in that to be worthy of the reader's time they have to get beyond the locker room and the back room. Opportunistic campaign books, published near election time, that offer nothing more than Norman Rockwell portrayals wrapped in clichés soon find their rightful place on remainder tables. A good political biography is grounded in sound research and delves into the men, women, and the times that makeup the political arena of their respective eras. The following are ten that I have gratefully encountered during more than twenty-five years of political book reviewing.

THE WALLS OF JERICHO: LYNDON JOHNSON, HUBERT HUMPHREY, RICHARD RUSSELL, AND THEIR STRUGGLE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS, by **Robert Mann** (Harcourt, 9780151000654). This sweeping narrative of the civil rights legislation of the 1950s and 1960s shows that the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act took much hard work and bipartisanship to turn into law. Hubert Humphrey played a key role, but passage was only possible because of the support of Everett Dirksen and the Republicans and the reluctant acceptance of Richard Russell and the segregationist Southern Democrats.



CRAZY RHYTHM: FROM BROOKLYN AND JAZZ TO NIXON'S WHITE HOUSE, WATERGATE AND BEYOND, by **Leonard Garment** (Da Capo, 9780306810824). Richard Nixon once told Garment, when he served as the president's counsel, that he was left out of the power loop because, "you just don't know how to lie." Before he joined the same law firm that employed Nixon and later became a member of RN's administration, Garment played saxophone for Billie Holiday. Garment shares many amusing stories about his life in this entertaining memoir.



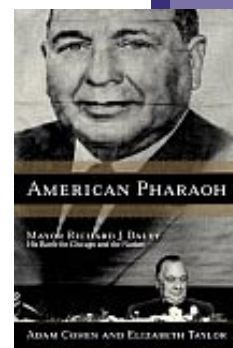
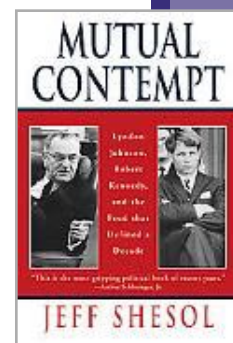
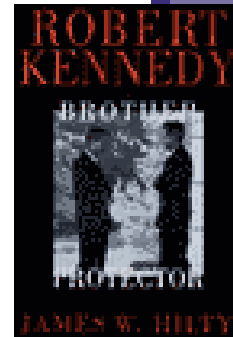
• 2008 (2/3)

ROBERT KENNEDY: BROTHER PROTECTOR, by **James Hilty** (Temple University, 9781566395663). This is the story of Robert Kennedy before he stepped out from his brother's shadow and became a political force in his own right. Kennedy was despondent for years following JFK's assassination, and this fascinating account shows how RFK took lessons from JFK's life and began his painful transformation from a ruthless politico into a tribune of the masses.

MUTUAL CONTEMPT: LYNDON JOHNSON, ROBERT KENNEDY, AND THE FUED THAT DEFINED A DECADE, by **Jeff Shesol** (W.W. Norton, 9780393318555). Kennedy hated Johnson because he saw him as a threat to the Kennedy presidential dynasty. Johnson loathed Kennedy because he felt he was a risk to his presidency, which had become mired in the Vietnam War and urban riots. How this fight played out is the subject of this lively narrative that captures the strengths and pettiness of both men during the reign of sixties liberalism.

AMERICAN PHAROAH: MAYOR RICHARD J. DALEY: HIS BATTLE FOR CHICAGO AND THE NATION, by **Adam Cohen and Elizabeth Taylor** (Back Bay Books, 9780316834896). For twenty years Daley reigned as mayor of Chicago and as presidential kingmaker: "the boss" wielded patronage and corruption to control the votes and neighborhoods of his city. More than thirty years after his death, his presence is still felt in Democratic national politics. This outstanding political biography, sometimes sympathetic, sometimes unforgiving, unravels the complexities and controversies of urban government like few other books have.

BEFORE THE STORM: BARRY GOLDWATER AND THE UNMAKING OF THE AMERICAN CONSENSUS, by **Rick Perlstein** (Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 9780809028597). Although the 1964 presidential election ended in the rout of Barry Goldwater, it gave birth to the modern conservatism, which dominated national politics for more than forty years. Perlstein skillfully brings to life the players and events of this seminal election that changed the face of modern politics.



• 2008 (3/3)

THE SURVIVOR: BILL CLINTON IN THE WHITE HOUSE, by **John Harris** (Random House, 9780375508479). This is the best book written yet on the Clinton administration, refreshingly free of psychobabble and sensationalism. The author, who covered the Clinton presidency from 1995-2001, shows that Clinton's antics tarnished his presidency, but deficit reduction, job creation, and his ability to connect with people are achievements that for which he should be most remembered.

FRATERNITY: A JOURNEY IN SEARCH OF FIVE PRESIDENTS, by **Bob Greene** (Three River Press, 9781400054657). The bestselling author takes the reader on the ultimate road trip as he visits former presidents Nixon, Carter, Bush, Ford and Reagan during the 1980s and 1990s. Greene reveals the human side of the men who occupied the most important job in the free world. Among the entertaining tidbits we learn is that Jerry Ford's favorite movie was "Mrs. Doubtfire."

A MATTER OF JUSTICE: EISENHOWER AND THE BEGINNING OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, by **David A. Nichols** (Simon & Schuster, 9781416541509). Although Presidents Kennedy and Johnson are credited with fighting the good fight for civil rights, Nichols makes an excellent case that this acclaim rightly belongs to Dwight Eisenhower, who is frequently considered indifferent to the plight of African-Americans. Eisenhower was not a vocal advocate, but his quiet, behind the scenes leadership, Nichols says, paved the way for the important 1960s civil rights laws.

1960 vs. JFK vs. NIXON: THE EPIC CAMPAIGN THAT FORGED THREE PRESIDENCIES, by **David Pietrusa** (Union Square Press, 9781402761140). Not since Theodore White has an author presented such a lively account of this election, which saw three political icons go toe-to-toe in the battle for the presidency. All three candidates are shown to be adept at playing politics, fairly and dirty. Although JFK emerged the winner, he did not do so with a mandate because much of electorate did not trust him, claims the author.

