

BUSH AND THE REPUBLICANS IN THE 1992 CAMPAIGN

INTERVIEW WITH CLIFTON WHITE

Editor's Note: Throughout the 1992 campaign, we will be publishing the perspectives of leading analysts in both parties. F. Clifton White, a veteran of Republican politics for over four decades, is currently director of the Ohio-based Ashbrook Center for Public Affairs, an academic forum for the study of American constitutional government and politics, and chairman of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems in Washington, DC, a body dedicated to supporting democratic governments throughout the world through election counseling. A participant in every Republican convention since 1948, White is perhaps best known as leader of the Draft Goldwater Movement of the early '60s. He was Barry Goldwater's 1964 convention chairman, and then director of Citizens for Goldwater-Miller. In 1968, he was Ronald Reagan's convention chairman.



Public Perspective: Is George Bush in "real" trouble in terms of re-election?

Clifton White: Well, you are always in trouble, in any presidential election. First, you are never quite sure what events or circumstances may intervene. I maintain that the 1964 defeat—that is, of Barry Goldwater's run for the presidency—really came when Jack Kennedy was assassinated. I also maintain that we would have nominated Ronald Reagan in 1968, and elected him, if Bobby Kennedy hadn't been assassinated. There are always those unforeseen circumstances. With regard to Bush, if the economy whirls on downward and we are in a severe recession next fall, he's in big, big trouble. On the other hand, I think you have to remember that more elections are lost than are won. The Democrats have been incredibly cooperative with the Republicans for the last two or three decades. They're still searching

for their soul. I think they're going to make it, but I'm not sure they're going to make it in 1992. It may be 1996 before they manage to pull themselves together.

PP: Before going on, tell us why you feel that Robert Kennedy's assassination was a key factor preventing Reagan's nomination in 1968.

CW: In the first place, if you read *An American Melodrama* [Lewis Chester, *et al.*, New York: Viking Press, 1969] on the 1968 campaign, you'll see that we were somewhere within 10 to 15 votes of stopping Nixon on the first ballot. Had we stopped him on the first ballot, we'd have won. Secondly, with regard to the Bobby Kennedy assassination, it was my judgment that the Republican convention would not nominate Nixon to run against another Kennedy. Republicans were nervous about that, as was Nixon himself.

PP: Turning back to the Republican campaign this year, does David Duke's candidacy present much of a problem for Bush or the party?

CW: In terms of the practicalities of the nomination, the answer, of course, is that Duke is no problem. As a symbol who might get identified with the Republican party, he is a problem and ought to be disassociated from the party and denounced as frequently as possible. They are doing just that. The man's message is not all wrong. The problem is that David Duke is an evil man.

PP: What about Pat Buchanan's challenge to the president? What impact will it have?

CW: I don't think Pat is going to win the nomination, and I suspect he doesn't really think he's going to win. The situation here is that the conservatives took control of the Republican Party in 1964, and really had control right through the Reagan years. Nixon ran as a conservative in 1968. Thus the conservatives were long in place as a unified major bloc, in charge of the machinery and the nominating process of the Republican party. Reagan made that unification complete and total.

George Bush was the nominee of the Republican party only because of Ronald Reagan. Bush is not a conserva-

"Buchanan is articulating conservatives' unhappiness. I suspect Pat will get votes, and he may even get some delegates, but it's not a realistic candidacy."

tive. Conservatives accepted him because Reagan accepted him. Now, I don't mean that Bush is a liberal, either. But in the basic nominating context, to use one of our phrases, he is clearly not a "movement conservative." And therefore when he turned around on what was his strongest principle, the strongest part of his 1988 campaign—no new taxes, which of course is a strong conservative position—the conservatives became very unhappy. Bush hasn't done anything to reassure them.

No one should be surprised that there is a lot of frustration and anger among many conservatives. In the Bush admin-

istration the people who were for George Bush before Ronald Reagan won the presidency have for the most part been the ones who have been rewarded. That left a certain number of conservative activists outside. They didn't get appointments. Or if they had somebody inside the government whom they had sponsored, those people did not get promoted, and were sometimes even shunted aside. Conservatives had it so good for eight years under Reagan, at least in terms of philosophy and leadership, the subsequent adjustment has been tough.

Buchanan is articulating conservatives' unhappiness. I suspect Pat will get votes, and he may even get some delegates, but it's not a realistic candidacy.

PP: Will he hurt Bush?

CW: It's possible, but I'm not at all sure. Most politicians and certainly most candidates always dislike an internal fight, a party fight. After 45 years in this business, I am one of those who does not. I'm inclined to think a good party fight strengthens the party. It gets the juices flowing. The only people who really get bitterly angry are the relatively small group of activists sitting at the top of the operation, not the people who are out there in the precincts doing the voting. And, as you know, one of our major problems in this country is getting people to vote. If you stir people up—and Pat will be stirring up conservatives—and they end up voting, they're going to vote Republican. In addition, Buchanan's run gives Bush the opportunity to satisfy the conservatives on certain issues. If he does so, all the better. Conservatives are there, alive, ready to go vote. On the other hand, if in the end conservatives just sit and sulk because they feel Bush has betrayed them, or because he's doing the wrong things, or because he's not a conservative, then there is the possibility that they might not vote....

The honest truth is that the conservative movement in the US today does not have a leader. It has been very fortunate, at least during my lifetime, in never having had to select a leader; it simply ac-

quired one. Bob Taft died and some character from Arizona stood up, made a great speech, and became the leader with virtually no competition. And then another character from out West made another great speech articulating conservative programs and positions, and he became their leader. There has never been any struggle for conservative party leadership in my lifetime. Now, with Reagan riding off into the sunset, the conservatives don't know who their leader is. They're looking for one.

PP: Who fills the bill?

"Tom Dewey was essentially a pragmatist. He wasn't a big liberal, but he was not a conservative either. In fact I happen to think that was one of the reasons he never made it to the presidency. I don't think he ever had an ideology, or a philosophy."

CW: I think there *are* people. There are individuals who have the capability and who would be great at it, but who don't want to take the position of opposing an incumbent Republican president elected with conservative support. It was easier when we didn't have an incumbent president. The question is, do you attack your president?

You might say that Jack Kemp could come close to filling the conservative leadership void, but I think Jack is over the hill. I don't mean chronologically, but in terms of how he is seen. The Republican party—even though it doesn't know it—is going through what every party has to go through, generational change. But the Republican party's generational change has been complicated by that old guy from California who held down a whole generation of able people. Literally held down. Take a look at the bright, relatively young people the Republican party has who have the qualifications to be president—Dan Quayle, Jim Baker, Dick Cheney, Lamar Alexander, Phil

Gramm and Newt Gingrich. All of them competent, experienced individuals, and yet their opportunities have been frustrated at least until 1996.

Against this background, Pat Buchanan's effort is an interesting one. I suspect, though I've not talked to him about this, that because Pat's a bright guy he sees the conservative leadership void and hopes he can fill it. The problem is that I don't think Pat is candidate material. Candidates need to have both the ability and qualifications, and to be *seen* as having them. Pat's a polarizer. He's great, but normally we don't really nominate polarizers for the presidency. We need somebody a little more reasonable who, even while loved by the hardcore of the conservative movement, appeals as well to moderate conservatives. And then, of course, you've got the neo-isolationism issue; conservatives are going to have to make some big decisions on this matter.

PP: Back in the 1940s and 1950s, it wasn't stretching things to say that there was a liberal wing to the Republican party. But that doesn't make any sense anymore, does it? There aren't any liberals in the party.

CW: Well, no avowed or admitted liberals (even Democrats don't admit they're liberals anymore), but I think the way you describe them is simply the way historians tend to describe them, and it's not wholly accurate. In the 1940s and through 1952, they could as easily have been called pragmatists. Tom Dewey was essentially a pragmatist. He wasn't a big liberal, but he was not a conservative either. In fact I happen to think that was one of the reasons he never made it to the presidency. I don't think he ever had an ideology, or a philosophy. He was a very good and able man. I had the greatest respect for him. He stood for efficiency, competency, honesty. And he was all of these things. He restated many times his belief that good government is good politics. But he never really bothered to articulate ideological or philosophical positions—either liberal or conservative. You did not find him making the kinds of speeches that Ronald

Reagan, or Bob Taft, or Barry Goldwater made. When you say there are no liberals in the Republican party today, that is probably true. On the other hand, there are people properly described by conservatives and others as pragmatists.

PP: And Bush is a pragmatist in the Dewey tradition?

CW: I suspect, to a degree. George Bush is one of the nicest guys in the world, and he can be classified as a top-flight public servant. He's been a very comfortable president. He is motivated by a sense of duty, not driving ambition. You have to give him credit. He is one of those "good government" men. But such officials are not initiators. They lack a big guiding philosophy.

PP: Well, what can Bush do? What should he do?

CW: That's a tough one. He needs to get some good politicians into his campaign, but where will he find them today?

The problem with American politics was perfectly epitomized in the 1972 Democratic convention when they kicked Mayor Daley off the floor of the Democratic convention. They thereby kicked politicians out of political conventions. That's like kicking lawyers out of Bar Association conventions. And as a result of the reform rules, this is what has happened to politics in the US today. What you have as a result is a terrible deterioration of political parties. And what we have are not politicians, but political consultants. Or, campaign strategists. It would be fun to take a survey of the members of the American Association of Political Consultants and find out how

many of them have ever lived and worked in a precinct, or have ever been county chairmen. What we have today are political consultants who are political strategists, and, forgive me, pollsters, who identify

"It would be fun to take a survey of the members of the American Association of Political Consultants and find out how many of them have ever lived and worked in a precinct, or have ever been county chairmen. What we have today are political consultants who are political strategists, and, forgive me, pollsters, who identify people on the basis of numbers, not individuality or personality."

tify people on the basis of numbers, not individuality or personality. These consultants then sit down and put together a communications program that is put on network television to create a perception of issues and candidates.

PP: It all seems hollow, and brittle, and artificial, and manipulative, then?

CW: That's right. I was once a county chairman [in Tompkins County in upstate New York]. I didn't take surveys because we didn't have surveys then. But I knew I had better surveys than any Roper or Gallup ever took—and I think they take great surveys—because after a year or two of my being county leader, my ward leaders knew their territory. They told me what was going on in that ward. Not on the basis of a survey, but on the basis of living with the people, going to church with them, hanging around the bowling

alley with them. My precinct leaders knew every Republican in their precincts. And in many cases, they also knew the Democrats. And when I would ask them about the issues people are concerned with, they would tell me. They knew based upon people's emotions, not upon responses to questions asked of them impersonally over the telephone. You're listening here to an old politician who regrets the loss of the political party organization, but I don't think it's just nostalgia. The party is an institution that is essential to good democratic government.

The people around Bush are too inclined to react to events. One of the most telling recent examples, and there have been several, was the abrupt cancellation of the president's trip to the Far East one morning after an embarrassment—losing the Senate seat in Pennsylvania. A politician wouldn't have done that in a hundred years. These guys were just dealing with the matter of immediate perceptions.

There are things Bush can do and should do. His acceptance speech in 1988 at the Republican Convention was a strong, tough, aggressive leadership speech. He's got to do that again. People vote for a candidate for president based on total image. They need to have decided he's somebody with whom they can identify and look to as a leader. George Bush has to be the guy they can look to as a leader who can solve their problems. He did that marvelously in the field of foreign affairs. But variously negotiating with the Congress and blaming the Congress—those are not the instruments of leadership. The president needs to set direction forcefully, in domestic as well as foreign policy.