

How Robert Scheer's *Playing President* Might Help Remediate the Problem of Shallow Textbooks and Political Apathy

Playing President: My Close Encounters with Nixon, Carter, Bush I, Reagan, and Clinton—and How They Did Not Prepare Me for George W. Bush

by Robert Scheer, Akashic Books, 2006. 334pp., \$14.95

Reviewed by James Michael Mamer

We all know that many American high school and college students have a shallow understanding of the founding fathers, but many, many more have virtually no knowledge of more contemporary leaders.

Ask almost any student about the presidents since Nixon and the responses won't simply be shallow. You are likely to encounter replies that are little more than clichés: Nixon was a crook, but he got us out of Vietnam. President Ford? Did he make cars? Carter was a peanut farmer. Reagan beat the Soviet Union. Bush I was the father of Bush II. Clinton was pretty smart, but had sex with Monica. Bush II is the son of Bush I and he got us into that war in Iraq. In any kind of democracy, this degree of ignorance is dangerous, but it is a predictable product of ahistorical and apolitical textbooks, isolated curriculums, sound-bite journalism, and managed media.

It is a depressing fact that American students know very little about history and politics, but most news reports imply an educational crisis primarily in math and science. My own experience suggests that whatever the problems in those fields, they pale in comparison to the mess in history and social science. Sadly, we no longer seem to be a serious people. In a country where national pride often seems unbounded, many Americans don't

know their own history. In a democracy, where political information is essential, many are clueless.

While most remedies are likely to be complex, some improvement can be made quickly and easily if we just rethink what students read and where they read it. Over the past three decades I have taught high school history and government classes; but in the last seven years, I have taught in a humanities program that offers hope. I am convinced that stand-alone curricula, especially those isolating English language study from the study of history and politics are, at best, counterproductive.

There are a variety of accessible and well written books on contemporary politics that should be integrated into high school and college courses in English, journalism and government. One of the best, I suggest, is the new book by veteran reporter Robert Scheer, *Playing President: My Close Encounters with*



Akashic Books
Nixon, Carter, Bush I, Reagan, and Clinton—and How They Did Not Prepare Me for George W. Bush.

Scheer has been writing about American politics for a long time and over the last four decades he has elicited a series of presidential quotes so memorable that even the most apolitical students are likely to be familiar with them. Most famously he got

born-again Jimmy Carter to admit to a lustful heart; but perhaps most chillingly, he got the first president Bush to explain how one might win a nuclear war: “You have survivability of command in control, survivability of industrial potential, protection of a percentage of your citizens.... That is the way you can have a winner....” In each of Scheer’s six presidential portraits there is a noteworthy record of the kind of revealing impatience, unrehearsed remarks, and rhetorical excess that makes the study of politics and political history vital and

interesting. It is exactly the stuff that, left on the editing floor, never makes it into the textbooks.

Richard Nixon, Scheer's first presidential subject, is arguably the most important. Unfortunately, for the majority of today's students his reputation is overshadowed by Watergate, but Nixon was a very serious presidential player and his accomplishments were as real as his shortcomings. Scheer shows him to be self-consciously aware of his own awkwardness, but always thinking about policy. There is nothing simple about him. In one post-resignation interview he offers advice that would be useful today—if only George W. would listen: "Periods of confrontation," Nixon said, "strengthen dictatorships, and periods of peace weaken them."

Jimmy Carter is portrayed as consciously creating himself. And Scheer's rich description of the Carter family makes them seem more like a collection of William Faulkner's characters than the family of a president. His most famous interview should be required reading if only for the overlooked commentary that outshines the lust in Carter's heart; in the 1976 essay "Jimmy, We Hardly Know Y'all," Scheer paints a vivid picture of a complex American South uneasy about confronting its own history. When he asks Carter's mother about the history of an integrated communal farm not far from Carter's Plains, his mother, Miss Lillian, snaps back, "Why do you want to bring that up? It's over with."

Ronald Reagan, portrayed as knowing just how to turn his head toward the camera, comes alive on stage. Even when he is spouting complete nonsense his audience wants to believe him. Summing up this rare talent for rhetorical illusion, Scheer reports that "Reagan can be magical on the stump, because he can convince even a cynical observer that he is a highly moral, honest, and purposeful man ... [and] that allows the audience to ignore serious gaps in his knowledge, his lackluster eight years as governor, and the reality that his own family life has been quite disorderly.... People want the image more than the truth." It is insights like this,

that many Americans may prefer—image over truth—that can fill a classroom with conversation.

As president, the larger-than-life Ronald Reagan was a hard act to follow, and his successor, George Herbert Walker Bush, is portrayed as the impossibly maladroit player, uncomfortable and arrogant at the same time. Scheer's encounters with this first Bush are thoroughly engaging and, at times, enjoyably hostile. Consider this bizarre response to a simple question about the Pentagon Papers: "I told you," snapped Bush, "I don't have a judgment; I don't have—I don't remember all that ancient history." The notion that a then-presidential candidate would dismiss the Pentagon Papers as "ancient history" should provide inviting fodder for discussion. But the surprising responses don't stop there. Pages later, at the interview's end, Scheer asks Bush to be more explicit in reflecting on a situation in the Middle East. Again candidate Bush responds with anger, "No, I couldn't. I've given you that, and that's all I'll give you." I doubt many students will remain uninterested in this kind of unedited exchange.

Similar to Reagan, Bill Clinton comes off as a natural actor, always very smart, but sometimes twisting a fact or two for convenience. In the middle of a long chat, Scheer asks Clinton to point out the best example of the get-off-welfare program that the Arkansas governor had been touting. Clinton tells him to check out Project Success in Forrest City (Arkansas), but when Scheer gets there he finds no evidence of any real project—successful or not. The reader comes away from this section convinced of both Clinton's unrealized potential and his real accomplishments.

The last section, on George W. Bush, is different from the others. Partly this difference is because Scheer has never engaged George W. in an extended interview, but partly it is because George W. Bush really is different from the others. The section title: "George W. Bush—Perpetual Adolescence," hardly needs further explanation.

This is all fun stuff to read, but it is

also very important. Significantly, for students and teachers alike, *Playing President* offers disheartening evidence that playing at president has become more important than being responsible. The prose is accessible and the vast majority of students will learn more than they ever expected possible. Many might even begin to enjoy discussing politics with a sense of confidence. Every chapter rescues some of our immediate past from myth by facilitating a better appreciation of the complexity behind the sound bites.

In an era of instant internet news and 24-hour news cycles *Playing President* illustrates how vital it is to have reporters willing to spend the time, to listen, to investigate, and to write of complexity. The cliché that journalism is the first draft of history is often amended by suggesting a conflict between getting it first and getting it right. However, over the years some journalists have done both. This book demonstrates that Robert Scheer has been both first and right for decades. Getting high school and college students to read the book and discuss it—especially in classes other than history and government—will help move us toward becoming a country serious about our own future. *Playing President*, and other similar books, deserves a place in a variety of classrooms and in a variety of disciplines. 📖

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This might be regarded as the moral equivalent of our legal right not to incriminate ourselves. Good men will be in no hurry to surrender it, though there are reasons for doing so sometimes, and among these are or might be the reasons good men have for entering politics. But let us imagine a politician who does not agree to that: he wants to do good only by doing good, or at least he is certain that he can stop short of the most corrupting and brutal uses of political power. Very quickly that certainty is tested. What do we think of him then? Develop and implement rapid and sustained economic growth policies and programs, in areas such as health, education, nutrition and sanitation, allowing the poor to participate and contribute to the growth. Studies show that a 10 percent increase in a country's average income reduces poverty by as much as 20-30 percent. Improve management of water and other natural resources. Invest in and implement agricultural programs. China has helped 800 million people out of poverty since 1978. As a part of its strategy to eradicate poverty by 2020, the Agricultural Bank of China will lend more than \$400 billion to help develop rural areas, fund education, infrastructure, and crop production. Encourage countries to engage in trade as a path out of poverty.