ARTICLES

New Media and Old

Peter Berkowitz on **The Way to Win: Taking The White House in 2008** *by* Mark Halperin and John F. Harris

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Mark Halperin and John F. Harris.
The Way to Win: Taking the White House in 2008.
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T he pre-election message, pronounced separately by a trio of distinguished professors but reflecting broader anxieties among Democratic Party activists and media elites, was grim. In Is Democracy Possible Here? Principles for a New Political Debate (Princeton University Press, 2006), Ronald Dworkin of New York University School of Law argued that "the very legitimacy of our political society is now threatened." In Does American Democracy Still Work? (Yale University Press, 2006), Alan Wolfe of Boston College warned that changes in American democracy "threaten to undermine some of America's most cherished values, including the liberal values that encourage robust debate, rely on the separation of powers, and recognize the need for a loyal opposition." And in Our Undemocratic Constitution: Where the Constitution Goes Wrong (and How We the People Can Correct It) (Oxford University Press, 2006), Sanford Levinson of the University of Texas School of Law contended that nothing short of a new constitutional convention could remedy the "many structural provisions of the Constitution that place almost insurmountable barriers in the way of any acceptable notion of democracy." Learned though all the books are, a skeptical reader could be forgiven for suspecting that the professors' fears that democracy in America was limping along perilously close

to collapse were connected to their dismay at the people's recent propensity to return Republicans to office.

And then, notwithstanding the professors' considered opinion that democracy in their country was on the demise, the people in election 2006 changed course and brought congressional Democrats back to power. Despite years of hand-wringing by scholars and journalists about the bitter polarization of American politics, despite alarm about the partisan redistricting over the past 20 years that has amplified incumbent advantage, and despite dread that George W. Bush and his evil-genius political strategist Karl Rove had managed to assemble an evangelical Christian-led majority that was cementing its hold on all three branches of government, the center stood up and swung from right to left. It was not only that the war in Iraq was unpopular and that Bush was blamed for a slow and sluggish response to Hurricane Katrina's inundation of New Orleans. Republicans in Congress had grown fat, lazy, and profligate, abandoning the limited-government and reformist principles that had swept them into power in 1994. Discontented voters registered their unhappiness, giving Democrats majorities in the House and the Senate.

In the aftermath of election 2006, and contrary to the apocalyptic anxieties to which professors Dworkin, Wolfe, and Levinson give voice, it's worth underscoring that the system is working: The public remains closely but not deeply divided; a significant segment of the electorate is capable of voting for a Democrat or a Republican depending on the qualities of the candidate and the priorities of the moment; and any presidential candidate who neglects the center will put his or her election 2008 prospects very much at risk.

I lluminating the challenges that candidates will face in the next presidential election — and explaining how the candidates can overcome them — is the task that journalists Mark Halperin and John Harris take on in their entertaining and informative book. Halperin is political director of ABC News and creator of "The Note," a daily online compendium of news and gossip about Washington power players that has become

and now editor in chief of the recently launched and much ballyhooed website “The Politico.” They are two of the best in the business, and together they bring a wealth of reportorial experience and political savvy to their task.

Halperin and Harris also bring to their task, and indeed define it by, one of their business’s proclivities: “As political reporters we share the obsession with electoral strategy and maneuver, not to mention with the gaudy carnival of presidential elections.” This obsession — disciplined by the authors’ sense of humor and desire to get the story right — gives their book’s profiles — of Bill and Hillary Clinton, of Al Gore and John Kerry, of George W. Bush and Laura Bush, of Matt Drudge, and of Karl Rove — their vivid colors, supple texture, and acutely observed details. Their careful scrutiny of the political process does not quite extend to a thorough examination of the characteristic prejudices of their own profession, however, and this omission impedes their assessment of the current relation between candidates and the media — a relation which, the authors rightly insist, has undergone dramatic changes in the past decade and has substantially altered our politics.

H alperin and Harris’s main theme is, quite simply, how to become the next president of the United States.

> We do not know who will win the presidency in 2008, but we feel sure it will be the candidate who has the smartest and most disciplined approach to three basic challenges: fashioning a political strategy that addresses the elemental changes in media and technology that have reshaped current politics; executing this strategy despite innumerable and unpredictable distractions; and combining personal ambition with credible and concrete ideas about how to change the country.

To meet these challenges, candidates will have to understand what Halperin and Harris

assassination, and extreme partisanship has displaced civilized and measured consideration of political issues and candidates. The new milieu is already well-entrenched, they argue, and it has changed the rules and requirements of politics at all levels, but especially at the presidential level:

> The Freak Show is about the fundamental changes in media and politics that have converged to tear down old restraints in campaigns and public debate. The power of the Freak Show has developed through a confluence of generational and technological forces, including the destabilization of political journalism practiced by the so-called Old Media, which includes the broadcast television networks, major newspapers, and national weekly news-magazines. The relative decline of the Old Media has been caused partly by the rise of the New Media, which includes the Internet, talk radio, and cable television.

The new media did not invent polarization but greatly amplify it by encouraging "more extreme and uncompromising positions, provoking the ruthless tearing down of adversaries." On the Freak Show stage, "opponents are portrayed not simply as wrong but as morally flawed." The last candidate standing in November 2008 will be the one who manages to maintain "control of his or her public image in the face of the Freak Show's destructive power."

Despite their insistence on the new media's transformation of America politics, the ultimate secret to success in the new environment, according to Halperin and Harris, is surprisingly straightforward. Echoing the observation of the ancient Greek historian Polybius that the best way to appear virtuous is to be virtuous, Halperin and Harris assert early on in their book that the best way to overcome the Freak Show "is to have something important to say." And they identify a kind of modern-day corollary to Polybius: "The way to be a successful political hack is to be something more than a hack." In other words, showing character and defending principle can be conducive to victory. Indeed, notwithstanding the dozens of maxims they disseminate about how to manage the new media, they keep coming back to the conclusion that a key to winning in 2008 is to convince voters that one is seriously committed to serious ideas: "The

ability to defend that rationale, not just with words but with convictions that flow from experience."

Y et if, in the end, old-fashioned common sense provides the answer to the Freak Show's destructive power, perhaps the eclipse of the old media by new may not have the revolutionary impact on American politics that Halperin and Harris ascribe to it. And it may have consequences that they don't contemplate.

Halperin and Harris assert that Freak Show politics favors Republicans and offers "virtually no advantages for Democrats," a claim hard to separate from their charge that the sphere of the new media "is largely indifferent to the truth of charges and elevates the personal and negative over impartial appraisal of an allegation's relevance in determining a person's qualifications for the office." The implication seems to be that the new media benefit Republicans because the new media have driven out ideas and debased political debate. That this is so, maintain Halperin and Harris, is illustrated by John Kerry's loss of control of his public image in 2004.

Although their portrait of Kerry's undoing is loaded with interesting detail, the role played by the new media in sending Kerry to defeat shows something rather different from what Halperin and Harris emphasize. Consider the case of the attack on Kerry's Vietnam war record and his anti-war activism in 1971 and 1972. In late July 2004, in an effort to blunt Bush's advantage as a war president, Kerry made the decision to place his military service, for which he received three Purple Hearts, front and center at the Democratic National Convention. Surrounding himself on stage in Boston with several of his fellow Vietnam veterans, Kerry opened his speech accepting the nomination by saluting and proclaiming, "I'm John Kerry, and I'm reporting for duty."

The decision to present himself to his party and the nation as, first and foremost, a war hero was a dubious one for several reasons: because of his controversial opposition to the Vietnam War, including the leveling of war crimes accusations against his fellow

and, notoriously, initially voting in favor of a supplemental appropriation of $87 billion for troops in Iraq before he ultimately voted against it in November 2003). Making a big show of his military service could have been expected to galvanize opposition among those who took a different view of the war, especially the small group of veterans who, like Kerry, served on swift boat duty patrolling coastal waters and rivers in Vietnam and who had been dogging him ever since his Senate testimony more than 30 years earlier. They claimed that Kerry lied about his exploits and injuries to secure his three Purple Hearts, which enabled him to cut short his one-year tour of duty after four months, and that Kerry smeared his fellow soldiers in his nationally televised Senate testimony and in appearances on the Dick Cavett Show and Meet the Press.

Thanks to robust discussion on high-powered conservative websites such as Captain's Quarters and Powerline and leading centrist ones such as Instapundit and thousands of smaller blogs, Unfit for Command, by John O'Neill (who assumed command of Kerry's boat [PCF 94] some months after Kerry had already completed his abbreviated tour) [Editor's Note] and Jerome Corsi, which made the case against Kerry, skyrocketed to the top of Amazon rankings in the first two weeks of August. And short ads that a new organization, Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, made and posted at its website ricocheted around the Internet. According to Washington Post reporters Lois Romano and Jim Vandehei, writing on August 19, 2004, "During the week ending Aug. 8, 966,000 people visited the anti-Kerry group's Web site, 34,000 fewer than those who visited Kerry's official site, according to Nielsen/Net Ratings. The new CBS poll found Kerry winning 37 percent of veterans' votes to Bush's 55 percent. (The two were tied at 46 percent after last month's Democratic National Convention, where Kerry highlighted his service.)"

Kerry and his supporters cried foul. Indeed, many on the left insisted that the accusations against Kerry were so false and malicious that they should not even have been covered by respectable newspapers, magazines, and networks. In truth, the old media were slow and sluggish in their coverage, but eventually found themselves unable to ignore the story, though the standard line among them was that Kerry's critics were partisan hacks peddling outrageous lies unworthy of public notice. Halperin and Harris seek to assimilate the new media-led attack on Kerry's war record and anti-war activism to Freak Show politics. Yet the facts don't fit their theory. Indeed, Halperin and Harris

coverage, was a fine article in Harris's newspaper, "Swift Boat Accounts Incomplete," by Michael Dobbs (Washington Post, August 22, 2004), which, focusing on one of several disputed incidents, found that neither Kerry's account nor his critics' entirely squared with the evidence.

In other words, instead of seeking, in good liberal and democratic fashion, to confront arguments they opposed with better arguments, left-liberal opinion makers sought to preempt an entirely warranted public debate by claiming that the opinion they opposed should not be heard. But for the new media, the debate over Kerry's military service would not have existed, even though it was Kerry himself who made it a central issue in the campaign. In an important sense, then, the new media did influence a change in the terms of political debate in 2004 — not, as old media stars Halperin and Harris suggest, by lowering the tone, but rather by contributing to the breaking down of the old media's gatekeeper monopoly on determining what news is fit to print and when it deserves to be printed.

Consider also the case of former CBS Evening News anchor Dan Rather's September 2004 report on Sixty Minutes II reviving old allegations that three decades earlier President Bush had shirked his Air National Guard service obligations. In conjunction with the broadcast, CBS posted online documents supposedly proving that Bush disobeyed a direct order. Within hours, conservative bloggers from around the country had raised serious questions about the documents' authenticity. Charles Johnson of Little Green Footballs posted one of the damning letters cbs had displayed along with the same letter typed in Microsoft Word using default settings, flashing in sequence. The documents were virtually identical. Within days, bloggers, reaching out to experts in typography and printing technology, had demonstrated that the cbs documents, replete with proportional spacing and raised and miniaturized superscripts, could only have been produced in the early 1970s on sophisticated typesetting equipment not to be found in offices of the National Guard. Once again, the old media's reaction was slow and sluggish. Indeed, for weeks after it had become clear to all disinterested observers that Dan Rather had been duped and that, but for blog-driven reporting and analysis, he might have duped the nation right through the presidential election, Rather continued to insist on the documents' authenticity and the critics' ignorance and partisanship.

reporting by the new media which prevented disgracefully unprofessional old media journalism from swinging an election.

T he most revealing parts of The Way to Win consist in portraits of Internet impresario Matt Drudge and Bush political strategist Karl Rove. Growing up on the edge of Washington, D.C., in Takoma Park, Maryland, Drudge was a loner and a slacker. He had a fascination with the entertainment industry and, after graduating from high school, moved to Los Angeles, where he rose from obscurity as manager of the cbs Studios gift shop in the mid-1990s to become an Internet pioneer and now, going on ten years, one of its most influential voices. Halperin and Harris even call Drudge "the Walter Cronkite of his era." His site contains links to a mixture of salacious gossip, weird events, daily headlines, and political scoops. Sometimes the links are a combination. For example, it was Drudge who, in 1997, forced Newsweek's hand by revealing that it was conducting internal deliberations about a story in the works by investigative reporter Mike Isikoff concerning Kathleen Willey's allegations of sexual harassment against Bill Clinton. Halperin and Harris report that "Drudge receives between 180 and 200 million page views a month, along with around three million unique visitors." Drudge himself admits that no more that 80 percent of his items are entirely true.

Yet "Members of the Gang of 500 — which according to the New Yorker includes 'the campaign consultants, strategists, pollsters, pundits, and journalists who make up the modern-day political establishment' — all read the Drudge Report. Gang members have the site bookmarked." For those readers, Drudge is not merely a guilty pleasure but, according to Halperin and Harris, a must read. The old media types' need to consult Drudge daily, if not hourly, comes from Drudge's capacity to break stories that often, though by no means always, are based on tips fed him by Republican operatives who lack access to or do not trust the old media. By widely disseminating conservative opinions about what is newsworthy, Drudge plays a starring role in the new media's erosion of the old media's control over the content of political debate in America, compelling the old media to report stories many would prefer to pass over.

search for the epithet will produce tens of thousands of hits), Halperin and Harris show that the man Democrats love to hate has become the premier campaign consultant of his era through hard work, determination, and intelligence. Rove, according to the authors, is a renaissance man who understands all facets of campaigns, cultivates a wide circle of acquaintances, puts himself at the center of an "information universe," and, unlike many campaign consultants, studies political history, contemporary ideas, and the intricacies of public policy.

He first made a name for himself in the early 1970s as an undergraduate at the University of Utah by becoming the national executive director of the College Republicans. In 1978, he entered Texas politics, working on the campaign of, and then serving as the deputy chief of staff to, Bill Clements, "the first Republican elected governor of Texas in 104 years." After leaving state government in 1981, Rove opened Rove & Co., a political consulting firm that specialized in direct mail, a technique for getting the message out then still in its infancy. Rove became a master of the new approach, which enabled the conservative candidates whom he advised to communicate with the conservative segment of the electorate unfiltered by old media judgments. The importance of circumventing the old media was a lesson Rove carried with him to the presidential campaign of George W. Bush., and it played a crucial role in enabling his candidate to win two close national elections in 2000 and 2004, both of which were well within the reach of his Democratic Party opponents. Carrying the lesson too far may have contributed to Republicans overplaying the base strategy in 2006 and neglecting the center.

I n addition to offering an engaging chronicle of campaign politics and the media since 1992, Halperin and Harris offer advice on taming the Freak Show. They believe that "political success can be demystified — reduced to tangible rules that can be labeled and replicated." They call these rules "Trade Secrets" and disseminate dozens throughout their book, but there is nothing very secret in what are really recommendations of political prudence in a media-saturated age: "Don't stop thinking about tomorrow — Clinton and Bush share this ability." "Never forget who is boss, and

positions, and that the political damage from unpopular ones is effectively contained."

Their rules also suggest that in our media-saturated age, as in previous ages, a public reputation for manipulation undermines the capacity to manipulate and to win elections and that political victory in the United States remains available to candidates who have the courage of their convictions and the wherewithal and wit to persuade voters of their readiness to stand by their principles in a pinch and to compromise, when necessary, for the public interest.

In heaping reproach on the new media for corrupting presidential politics in America, Halperin and Harris overlook that democratic politics has always had a low-down and dirty side, and so long as it remains democratic, politics probably always will. Evidence of the persistence of underhandedness and viciousness can be gleaned from a look back at, say, campaign 1800; confirmation of the inevitability of ambition and the partisan spirit in democratic politics can be found in a glance at the analysis in the opening pages of The Federalist of the interplay among interest, passion, and reason in public affairs.

Moreover, Halperin and Harris exaggerate the responsibility of the new media for the current state of American politics. In fact, the new media are both cause and effect, transcending mere "freak show" as a response — and in crucial ways a corrective — to the old media behaving badly.

In October 2006, on new media star Hugh Hewitt's radio show, Halperin himself acknowledged, in the face of questioning of the sort that the old media are in the habit of subjecting candidates to but rarely face, that the old media suffer from severe bias:

> I will say that many people I work with in ABC, and other old media organizations, are liberal on a range of issues. And I think the ability of that, the reality of how that affects

Accordingly, progress in reforming the political culture of “personal attack, unyielding partisanship, and prurient indulgence” that Halperin and Harris deplore depends on grasping that the old media, in which Halperin and Harris have prospered, have been part of the problem and that the new media, notwithstanding its members’ own prejudices and excesses, are part of the cure.

Halperin and Harris end on a hopeful note: “Someday an enlightened public will punish the politics of cynicism and destruction and reward the politics of creativity and civil dialogue. That truly will be the way to win.” But in a representative democracy an enlightened public needs leaders and an elite worthy to represent it — and worthy to inform it. Public opinion data convincingly show that in contrast to polarized party activists and leaders, and intellectual and cultural elites, the center in American politics remains wide. One way to win in 2008 will be for an enlightened leader to overcome the polarizing tendencies of the parties and the media, old and new alike, and harness the untapped energies of the underrepresented center in American politics.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The original print version of this article incorrectly said "Unfit for Command, by John O'Neill (who served with Kerry in Vietnam)..." Corrected February 12, 2007.