

IT TAKES ASTUTE OBSERVATION, NOT MEA CULPAS

Mark Halperin has a hysterical op-ed in the NYT today, designed to be a mea culpa for the failures of presidential campaign journalism. Halperin reveals the reason behind the press corps' obsession with horse race politics—they all read Ben Cramer's *What It Takes*—and then admits that success in a political horse race does not necessarily equip someone to run the country.

For most of my time covering presidential elections, I shared the view that there was a direct correlation between the skills needed to be a great candidate and a great president. The chaotic and demanding requirements of running for president, I felt, were a perfect test for the toughest job in the world.

But now I think I was wrong. The "campaigner equals leader" formula that inspired me and so many others in the news media is flawed.

Wow, Mark, that's one doozy of an insight. You mean all this horse race campaign journalism is counter-productive to choosing a good president? Who could have imagined that?!?!?!?

The reason I say it's hysterical, though, and not just pathetic, is in Halperin's description of how he determined that he had been wrong—his analysis of the two presidents he has covered in the last sixteen years. See, Halperin describes those two presidents as both being great politicians—"wildly talented."

Our two most recent presidents, both of whom I covered while they were governors seeking the White House. Bill Clinton

and George W. Bush are wildly talented politicians. Both claimed two presidential victories, in all four cases arguably as underdogs. Both could skillfully serve as the chief strategist for a presidential campaign.

And then he proceeds to describe how the characteristics that made these "wildly talented" politicians made them failed presidents. Of note: he sees them **both** as failed presidents, Clinton and Bush. Here's how he supports his claim that Clinton's was a failed presidency:

For instance, being all things to all people worked wonderfully well for Bill Clinton the candidate, but when his presidency ran into trouble, this trait was disastrous, particularly in the bumpy early years of his presidency and in the events leading up to his impeachment. The fun-loving campaigner with big appetites and an undisciplined manner squandered a good deal of the majesty and power of the presidency, and undermined his effectiveness as a leader. What much of the country found endearing in a candidate was troubling in a president.

See where I'm going with this? Halperin claims that a guy who presided over tremendous economic growth, some innovative policy solutions (many of which I dislike, but admire for their pragmatism), and real success in foreign policy, had a failed presidency. He claims that a guy whose approval ratings stayed high during a trumped up impeachment "ran into trouble." Halperin clings to the Village's caricature of the Clinton presidency all so he can claim **both** Clinton and Bush failed. And in the process, he ignores a great deal of hard work and policy wonkiness that, in fact, made Clinton a successful president. Precisely the kind of characteristics you'd want good presidential

journalism to cover—a candidate’s comfort with the complexity of policy issues that translates into competent governance.

You see, Halperin tries hard to explain away his **failures of judgment and discernment as failures of process**. But in the process, he only emphasizes those failures of judgment. If Halperin really believes that Clinton and Bush experienced the same level of failure in office; if he remains ignorant of Clinton’s considerable discipline (in all matters not involving his penis) and hard work and policy acumen, then he has proved his own failures of basic observation, not a failure to cover the right topics.

With his op-ed, Halperin proves he couldn’t identify good governance if it looked him in the face. Sure, he calls for a different kind of campaign journalism. But at the same time, he proves he’s not the guy to provide it.

Update: Hahahahaha! A friend sends along this poignant review of *What It Takes* by Matt Bai.

I remember exactly where I was sitting when I started reading “What It Takes,” Richard Ben Cramer’s 1,000-page, tiny-print history of the 1988 presidential campaign. It’s not a hard thing to remember, because I couldn’t sit anywhere else: I had mangled my knee in a touch football game, and all I could do was sit on the couch with my leg strapped into a motion machine. Like a lot of young journalism school graduates then and now, I had come to see political journalism as a lesser form of the craft, populated mostly by the effete and the unindustrious, while the real reporters were out there braving crack corners and foreign wars. “What It Takes” showed me something else entirely.

From the first unforgettable pages, when he described in minute detail the

logistics needed to move George Bush, who was then vice president, out of his field box at a Texas Rangers game (accompanied by his hot-headed and ambitious son, George W.), Cramer told his obsessively reported campaign story not just from the inside, but from inside the heads of a half-dozen painfully human and complex candidates: Bush, Bob Dole, Michael Dukakis, Richard Gephardt, Gary Hart and Joseph Biden. "What It Takes" was the ultimate campaign book. [my emphasis]

Figures.

Though I wonder. Does Matt Bai fancy that his own reporting tells stories "from inside the heads" of his subjects? Is that why he got my motivations so horribly wrong (not to mention reported the facts inaccurately)? Because he thought he was inside my head but was in fact in his very own little fantasy world?

Update: PhoenixWoman is right. Krugman kicks Halperin's non-observant ass much more effectively than I.