

Commentary

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The Man Behind the Men

Review of 'The Man Who Ran Washington' by Peter Baker and Susan Glasser

by **Edward Kosner**

READING ABOUT JAMES A. BAKER III IN THE TWILIGHT OF THE TRUMP PRESIDENCY is like taking a long ride in a time machine back to the days of Henry Clay or, more recently, Harry Truman's man Clark Clifford—adroit, tough-minded statesmen and pols who actually knew what they were doing.

Whether as legislators, cabinet members, or backroom operators, these men and their like used their nerve, disciplined intellect, gift of gab, savvy negotiating skill, relentless focus, and sheer stamina to enact historic legislation, elect presidents, master crises, and leave an imperfect but honorable record of their time in Washington.

One of the most effective political figures of this or any age, Baker was a dazzling one-man band. The smooth, steely Texas lawyer ran presidential campaigns for Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, and George H.W. Bush; served as masterful chief of staff, then secretary of the Treasury for Reagan; secretary of state for Bush; and savior of Bush's son, George W., in the 2000 Florida recount shenanigans with Al Gore. In the back rooms and out front in Washington, Baker had a decisive hand and an often commanding voice in all the big moments at home and abroad of the dozen-year Reagan-Bush ascendancy.

For all that, Baker remains an elusive figure, a pro's pro who never left much of an impression outside the Beltway. Now, he's the subject of a couple-of-warts-and-all biography by Peter Baker, the chief White House correspondent for the *New York Times*, and his wife, Susan Glasser of the *New Yorker*. Their accomplished book is entitled *The Man Who Ran Washington*, but it could just as well have been called "The Fabulous Baker Boy." Exhaustively reported and fluently written, the book, appropriately for its subject, is a throwback. Like Theodore H. White's "Making of the President" series, it celebrates the traditional arts of American politics and governing—not excluding strategic deception, faux histrionics, horse-trading, turf-guarding, lethal leaking, and ass-covering—all in a good cause. Rarely is heard a revisionist word.

OVER THE course of their 586 pages, the authors lather on the superlatives, their own and borrowed from others. Besides "the man who ran Washington when Washington ran the world," Baker is "the [Reagan] revolution's most capable executive," "the very definition of the Establishment," "the most important unelected official since World War II," "co-president," "the-unTrump," and, of course, his not entirely unflattering nickname, "the Velvet Hammer." The former UN ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick called him "Iago," but she's in a small chorus of hard-line Reaganites who think Baker went wobbly too often. Still, the authors capture Baker's character—political and personal—in unflinching detail.

"A princeling of the new-found Houston aristocracy," Baker was born into a family that migrated to Texas from Huntsville, Alabama, in the 19th century in time to be chummy with Sam Houston. They quickly became influential in the city named for him. Lawyers who made their fortunes toiling for the railroad and oil interests that nurtured and ruled the city, the Bakers founded the storied firm Baker, Botts, helped establish Rice University, and produced a succession of James Allison Bakers. Jim Baker III was actually the fourth given that name, and he followed his antecedents into the law after going east to prep school at The Hill in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, and then Princeton, where he excelled at tennis. During summer breaks, he worked as a thimble roughneck on oil rigs down home. So he combined eastern polish with Texas grit—a combination that would serve him well in Washington. And he absorbed the family mantra, the Five Ps: "Prior preparation prevents performance problems."

Baker owes the launch of his Washington career to chance. A top lawyer, he was tennis champion at his Houston country club when gangly George Herbert Walker Bush, a transplanted New Englander making his way in the oil business, came looking for a doubles partner. Baker and Bush clicked on the court—the start of a friendship and co-dependent Republican political relationship that ran successfully for decades.

Bush got Baker his first Washington job as undersecretary of commerce in the Ford administration that succeeded Nixon after Watergate. Soon enough, Ford tapped Baker as delegate hunter in his campaign for the 1976 GOP nomination. Ford lost the election to Jimmy Carter, but Baker escaped blame, a Houdini act he perfected over the years. He was a natural to run Bush's campaign against Reagan, Bob Dole, and others four years later. When Reagan got the nod, Baker maneuvered Bush into dropping out early enough so that Reagan chose Bush as his running mate despite Bush's "voodoo economics" zinger about Reagan's supply-side nostrums. And just like that, the Reagan campaign put Baker in charge of the debates with Jimmy Carter.

That campaign marked the first time Baker flirted with political dirty trickery, but it wouldn't be the last. One day before the first debate, Baker suddenly came into possession of the Carter campaign's debate playbook. He later said he got it from Bill Casey, Reagan's pick for CIA director, who denied all. Eight years later, heading Bush's run against Michael Dukakis, Baker encouraged the daredevil political strategist Lee Atwater to savage Dukakis. One result was the infamous Willie Horton killer-rapist TV ad run by a supportive political-action committee. And when he ran Bush's campaign against Bill Clinton in 1992, he directed staffers to check the Democratic candidate's old passport applications over gossip that, while a student at Oxford, Clinton had tried to give up his U.S. citizenship to evade the Vietnam War draft. That triggered a three-year special prosecutor's investigation that ultimately cleared Baker.

He was hypersensitive about his growing reputation as a fixer and craved respect as a Washington power broker. But Baker could be mouthy. He would curse like an oil-field roustabout and loved dirty jokes. "Did you get laid last night?" he quizzed a staffer every morning during one campaign. He called portly Ed Meese, his rival in the early days of the Reagan regime, "Poppin' fresh," the Pillsbury dough boy. He called Ross Perot a "juggy-eared prick." When Jack Kemp, then housing secretary, stepped out of his lane to press Reagan to recognize Lithuania during the collapse of the Soviet Union, Baker exclaimed, "F--- you, Kemp!" in the Oval Office.

As Bush had steered him to Washington, Reagan took Baker out of the back rooms and made him chief of staff. Meese was supposed to be co-equal as head of domestic policy, but Baker got him to sign a contract defining their roles that made Baker the dominant player. And dominate he did, running a tight, early-on-deck ship with a small group of loyal aides to execute his orders. He divided problems into three categories: "easy, hard but doable, and impossible." The authors write: "The first he left to others, the last he wrote off, and the middle is where he focused his energies." He liked to sign memos JAB III—a tactical warning as well as his initials. And there was substance: Among other coups, Baker collaborated with House Speaker Tip O'Neill, the Democratic pol out of central casting, to stabilize Social Security in 1983—a classic example of Baker's gift for bipartisan dealmaking.

Baker told a reporter he was a "s--- detector," saying, "It's my job to keep the president from getting into trouble—and when he gets into trouble to get him out of it." Fortuitously for Baker if not for Reagan, he had swapped jobs with Donald Regan, the prickly Treasury secretary, when Oliver North, John Poindexter, and the rest of the gang were cooking up the Iran-Contra arms-for-hostages fiasco that nearly sunk Reagan's presidency in his second term. Typically, the authors write, Baker escaped the stigma of the scandal while others went to prison.

He loved the prestige of being a top cabinet member, and he was good at it. At Treasury, he masterminded the Plaza Accords, an international agreement that lowered the exchange rate and made U.S. exports more competitive. And he played ball again with O'Neill to push through a tax-reform bill in 1986.

Baker's reward for running George Bush's victorious 1988 presidential campaign against Dukakis was the job he most craved: secretary of state. Baker was mostly AWOL when the Chinese notoriously massacred student protesters in Tiananmen Square in 1989. But he was at Bush's side or out front leading during the epic moments of 41's presidency. Baker flew all over, forging—and funding—Bush's coalition that chased Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait in 1990. He was in the thick of it with Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin as the Berlin Wall came down and the Soviet Union collapsed. Later, he played the key role in the ticklish negotiations that led to Germany's reunification and entry into NATO. Bush's domestic policy stumbles doomed his presidency, but his foreign achievements shaped our times.

Bush and Baker's fraught dealings with Israel are another story. Right after the Gulf War, Baker threatened to expel Israel's ambassador to the U.S. for complaining about Washington's failure to compensate Israel for war damages. He declared Bibi Netanyahu, then a third-string foreign-ministry hand, persona non grata for a different beef. Then he caused a furor when he told a conference of the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee to "forsake the unrealistic vision of a Greater Israel."

If that weren't enough, Baker was quoted as responding in a White House meeting to criticism of his tough approach to Israel, "F--- [the Jews]. They didn't vote for us." He later argued that he'd actually said, "Screw AIPAC"—in other words, attacking a pro-Israel pressure group, not simply Jews. But the episode confirmed the suspicions of many that the über-WASPY Bush and Baker had little sympathy for Israel. The result was that 89 percent of the Jews really didn't vote for them in 1992, the lowest number ever.

Against his will, Baker was pulled back in to try to salvage Bush's 1992 reelection campaign, but his heart wasn't in it. Barbara Bush called him "the invisible man." Eight years later, he outplayed Warren Christopher for Al Gore in the legal wrangling over the 2000 Florida recount, assuring 41's son that he would be 43. And he turned down 43's overture to become Defense secretary late in the Iraq War, although the job would have given him the hat trick of having held the three most senior cabinet posts.

Finally out of government, Baker made millions as a rainmaker at the family law firm and for Enron and the Carlyle fund, inevitably sparking criticism that he was profiteering. Characteristically, he bailed out of Enron before the Houston energy company collapsed in scandal. As he approached 90, Baker took his biographers on tours of his old haunts in Houston and his beloved ranch in Wyoming. They talked politics. Baker acknowledged all Donald Trump's flaws but told the authors that he had voted for the man who had savaged his beloved Bush family—the patriarch, President George W., and candidate Jeb.

Still, Baker's and Glasser's verdict on Baker is judiciously admiring: "He was no visionary, no innovator. He articulated no grand plan for the country or the world. He did not start Reagan's revolution, nor the one that later swept Eastern Europe. Yet he figured out how to channel those forces, to harness them and focus them on constructive outcomes while averting potential disasters."

The Velvet Hammer had left his mark.

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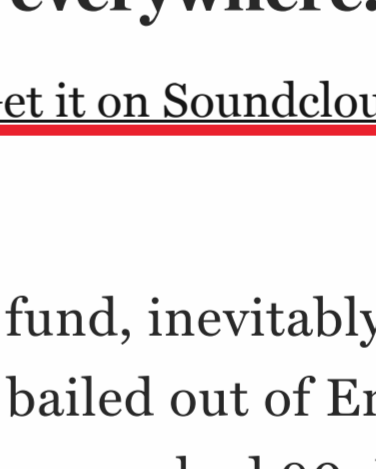
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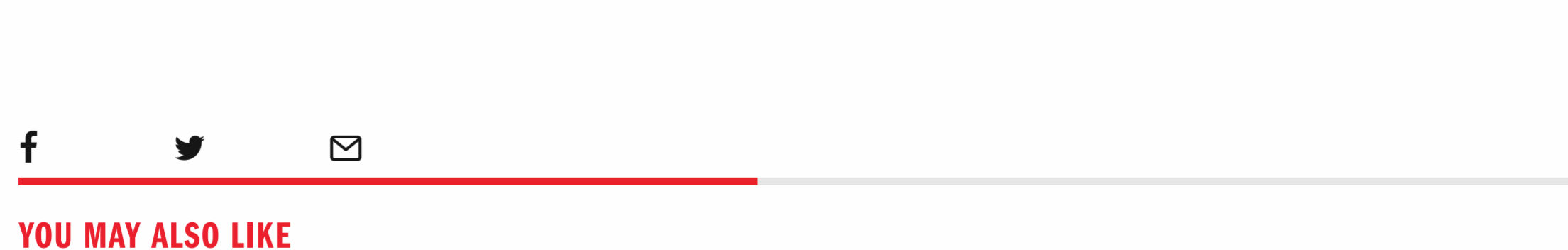
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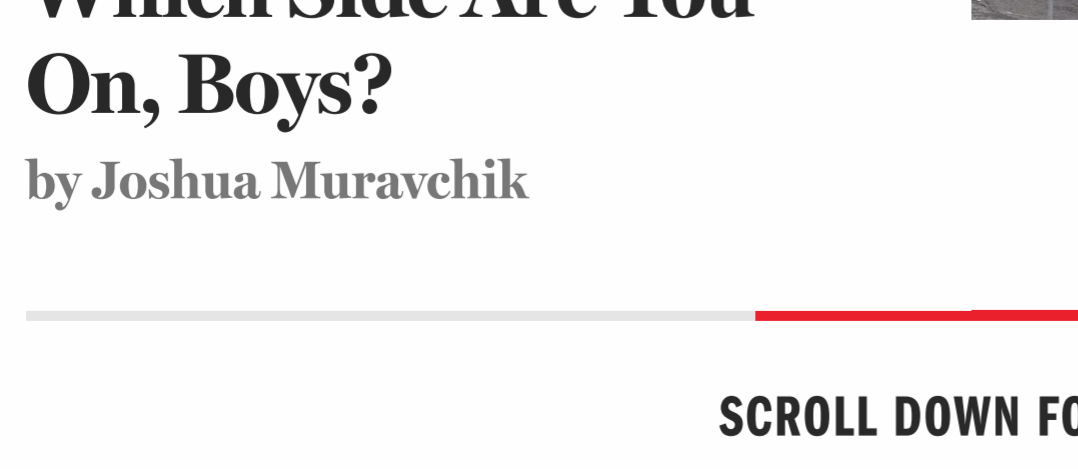
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