

Crazy days on the campaign trail

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If you have ever wondered what it's like to be in the middle of a political stoush, you should pick up John Heilemann and Mark Halperin's colourful account of the 2008 US presidential campaign, *Race of a Lifetime*.

This is a book for political junkies, not policy wonks. It describes the campaign trail in all its weirdness - the hotel food, the mood swings, the outsized personalities, the crisis meetings among the canned goods in a supermarket stockroom.

The book's publication in the US (under the title *Game Change*) caused a political sensation. The lack of criticism of the book's methodology, whereby the authors drew on hundreds of interviews with unnamed sources, is evidence of the accuracy of their work.

Inevitably, Barack Obama emerges as the most impressive of the candidates: even-tempered, disciplined, capable of swooping rhetoric and deadly organisation. He appears to have a refreshingly normal take on politics. One of his favourite comments to aides was: "This shit would be really interesting if we weren't in the middle of it."

The backbiting chaos of Hillary Clinton's campaign is shocking to those reared on stories of the Clinton political machine. After she pulled out of the race, Clinton railed that the Obama people are "vindictive and small". Yet she was proved wrong a few months later when Obama appointed her to the most important office in his administration.

The moral emptiness and sheer awfulness of John Edwards is astonishing; his wife, Elizabeth, doesn't come off much better. Joe Biden is portrayed as monumentally self-regarding - he is fond, for instance, of giving "my word as a Biden" - but compared with other characters in the book this is a venial sin.

The picture of John McCain is not flattering. He retains his famous sense of humour, commenting after Obama decided to pick Biden as his running-mate: "Well, good for Joe. But, boy, Obama will never get a word in edgewise now."

Yet the old McCain - the fiercely independent, joyful insurgent who nearly beat George Bush in the 2000 Republican primaries - hardly makes an appearance. The 2008 McCain is erratic and impulsive, unwilling to prepare for the presidential debates and then wandering around the stage, in the words of an aide, "like a crazy uncle in search of a bathroom". By the end of the campaign, McCain was seen by observers as "a typical, and faintly desperate, politician - and his campaign a campaign of stunts".

His greatest mistake was to select an unknown, first-term, small-state governor, Sarah Palin, as his running-mate after only a few days of vetting - "less investigation than a potential assistant secretary of agriculture would receive". The choice made short-term sense in light of Palin's raw political talent and charisma but it undermined McCain's case for the presidency, which was based overwhelmingly on his long experience.

A disconcerting portrait of Palin is painted by her campaign aides. Even after extensive briefings, "her grasp of rudimentary facts and concepts was minimal. Palin couldn't explain why North and South Korea were separate nations. She didn't know what the Fed did. Asked who attacked America on 9/11, she suggested several times that it was Saddam Hussein. Asked to identify the enemy that her son [Track Palin, a US soldier] would be fighting in Iraq, she drew a blank."

There is more background on Palin's infamous interview with Katie Couric, in which the Republican vice-presidential candidate couldn't name the newspapers or magazines she read to stay abreast of events. Palin had neglected to prepare for the interview in favour of filling out a questionnaire from her hometown newspaper, the *Mat-Su Valley Frontiersman*.

The abiding image of Palin is rather a forlorn one. Her preparation for the crucial vice-presidential debate was "a total train wreck" in which she struggled even to remember, for example, Biden's name. "When her aides tried to quiz her, she would routinely shut down - chin on her chest, arms folded, eyes cast to the floor, speechless and motionless, lost in what those around her described as a kind of catatonic stupor." Palin rallied to perform creditably in the debate but it is hard to imagine her withstanding the rigours of a future presidential campaign.

Race of a Lifetime is not flawless. The authors insist on creating new words by stringing together old ones: they write, for example, of the "future-is-nowness" and the "not-the-same-old-same-old-politician-ness" of Obama, whom McCain thought was a "go-along-to-get-alonger". Yet the narrative zings along and the pages turn themselves. The use of multiple sources gives the reader a striking sense of omniscience, for example in the description of a conversation between Clinton and David Axelrod, Obama's chief strategist, after Clinton has conceded defeat. "Axelrod was elated with how the talk had gone. It was a really good conversation, he said. But Hillary had a slightly different view. It was like a root canal, she told her friends. 'I wanted to throw up.' "

Judging from this book and recent tell-alls by Australian political advisers, the days of the staffer's code of silence are over. There is much to regret in that. On the other hand, this book is a valuable piece of history - and tremendous fun.

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Race of a Lifetime

By John Heilemann and Mark Halperin

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