

what it takes by richard ben cramer

What It Takes by Richard Ben Cramer is a profound exploration of the intricate world of American politics, focusing particularly on the presidential campaigns of the 1980s. Cramer, an accomplished journalist and author, provides readers with a unique perspective on the individuals involved in these campaigns, the strategies employed, and the underlying motivations that drive candidates to seek the highest office in the land. This article delves into the themes, insights, and impact of Cramer's work, shedding light on the complexities of political ambition.

Overview of the Book

Published in 1992, "What It Takes: The Way to the White House" stands out as a seminal work in political literature. The book chronicles the 1988 presidential campaign, focusing primarily on the lives of several candidates, including George H.W. Bush, Michael Dukakis, and others who sought the presidency. Cramer spent years researching and interviewing these political figures, providing readers with an in-depth look at their personal and professional lives.

Key Themes

Cramer's narrative weaves together several key themes that resonate throughout the text:

1. **The Personal Cost of Political Ambition** - Cramer highlights the sacrifices candidates make in their personal lives, including relationships and mental health, in pursuit of political power.
2. **The Nature of Power** - The author explores what drives individuals to seek power, examining the psychological and emotional factors that compel them to run for office.
3. **The Role of Media** - Cramer provides insight into the media's influence on shaping public perceptions of candidates, emphasizing how media narratives can make or break a campaign.
4. **Character and Authenticity** - The book raises questions about the authenticity of candidates, discussing how perceived character traits can significantly impact voter support.

In-Depth Character Studies

Cramer's approach to profiling the candidates is one of the book's standout features. He does not merely focus on their political platforms; he delves into their personal histories, motivations, and the internal struggles they face. This section examines some of the prominent figures featured in "What It Takes."

George H.W. Bush

George H.W. Bush is portrayed as a man shaped by privilege and a strong sense of duty. Cramer examines Bush's upbringing, his experiences during World War II, and his rise through the ranks of American politics. The author illustrates how Bush's background influenced his approach to governance and his relationships with other political figures.

Michael Dukakis

In contrast to Bush, Michael Dukakis is depicted as a more intellectual and policy-oriented candidate. Cramer explores Dukakis's roots in Massachusetts politics and his vision for America. However, the book also highlights Dukakis's struggles with public perception and his difficulty in connecting with voters on an emotional level.

Other Candidates

Cramer does not limit his focus to the main candidates. He also examines lesser-known figures in the race, providing a comprehensive view of the political landscape. From Jesse Jackson to Pat Robertson, each candidate represents different facets of American society and the diverse motivations that drive individuals to seek the presidency.

The Campaign Trail: A Grueling Journey

Cramer takes readers behind the scenes of the grueling campaign trail, shedding light on the physical and emotional toll that campaigning takes on candidates and their families. The book captures the frenetic pace of life on the campaign trail, including:

- **Exhaustion and Burnout:** Candidates often find themselves juggling countless events, speeches, and press conferences, leading to severe fatigue.
- **Family Strain:** The demands of campaigning frequently place a strain on family relationships, as candidates must balance their political ambitions with their responsibilities at home.
- **Media Scrutiny:** The relentless coverage by the media can exacerbate stress and anxiety, as candidates are constantly under a microscope.

The Impact of Media and Public Perception

One of the book's critical examinations is the relationship between candidates and the media.

Cramer explores how media narratives shape public perception and influence the trajectory of campaigns. He discusses:

Media as a Double-Edged Sword

While the media can elevate a candidate's profile, it can also be detrimental. Cramer outlines various instances where media coverage significantly impacted a candidate's campaign, such as:

1. **The "Dukakis in a Tank" Incident:** This infamous photograph symbolized Dukakis's struggle to connect with voters, illustrating how a single moment can alter public perception.
2. **George Bush's "Read My Lips":** Bush's famous pledge not to raise taxes became a pivotal point of contention, showcasing how promises can backfire with voters.
3. **Jesse Jackson's Media Strategy:** Jackson's ability to leverage media to amplify his message and reach marginalized communities is also a focal point of Cramer's analysis.

Lessons Learned

"What It Takes" is not just a historical account of the 1988 campaign; it also serves as a commentary on the nature of political ambition and the American electoral process. Several lessons emerge from Cramer's exploration:

Understanding the Human Element in Politics

Cramer emphasizes the importance of understanding candidates as individuals rather than mere political figures. Recognizing their vulnerabilities, aspirations, and personal histories can provide deeper insights into their policies and decisions.

The Importance of Authenticity

In a world saturated with political rhetoric, authenticity becomes a valuable currency. Candidates who can connect emotionally with voters are more likely to succeed, as demonstrated by the contrasting fortunes of Bush and Dukakis.

The Role of Storytelling

Cramer illustrates that effective storytelling is crucial in politics. Candidates who can convey their

narratives compellingly can resonate more with the electorate, making their messages memorable and relatable.

Conclusion

"What It Takes" by Richard Ben Cramer remains a vital work for anyone interested in American politics. Through meticulous research and compelling storytelling, Cramer captures the essence of political ambition, the human cost of seeking power, and the intricate dance between candidates and the media. The book not only provides a snapshot of a pivotal moment in American political history but also offers timeless lessons about the nature of leadership and the complexities of the electoral process. For those looking to understand what it truly takes to navigate the treacherous waters of politics, Cramer's work is an indispensable resource.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main theme of 'What It Takes' by Richard Ben Cramer?

'What It Takes' explores the personal stories, motivations, and challenges faced by the candidates in the 1988 presidential election, providing insights into the nature of ambition and the pursuit of power.

Who are the main candidates featured in 'What It Takes'?

The book primarily focuses on the campaigns of George H.W. Bush, Michael Dukakis, and other notable figures like Pat Buchanan and Bob Dole.

How does Richard Ben Cramer approach the storytelling in 'What It Takes'?

Cramer uses a deeply immersive narrative style, combining extensive interviews and personal anecdotes to create a vivid picture of the candidates' lives and campaigns.

What unique perspective does Cramer bring to political journalism in 'What It Takes'?

Cramer emphasizes the human side of politics, delving into the personal sacrifices and emotional struggles of the candidates, rather than just focusing on policy and strategy.

What impact did 'What It Takes' have on political literature?

'What It Takes' is often regarded as a groundbreaking work in political journalism, setting a new standard for political biographies and campaign literature with its in-depth character studies.

Did 'What It Takes' receive any awards or recognitions?

Yes, 'What It Takes' won the Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Journalism in 1990, highlighting its significance and contribution to political reporting.

How does Cramer depict the concept of ambition in 'What It Takes'?

Cramer portrays ambition as a double-edged sword, showcasing both the drive it instills in candidates to achieve greatness and the personal costs it entails, including relationships and mental health.

What writing techniques does Richard Ben Cramer employ in 'What It Takes'?

Cramer employs techniques such as narrative storytelling, character development, and rich descriptive language to engage readers and bring the political landscape to life.

How does 'What It Takes' compare to other political books?

'What It Takes' is often compared to classics like 'The Making of the President' series, but it stands out for its deep psychological insights and focus on the candidates' internal lives.

What lessons can readers take away from 'What It Takes'?

Readers can learn about the complexities of leadership, the sacrifices required for ambition, and the often-unseen struggles that accompany the quest for power in politics.

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