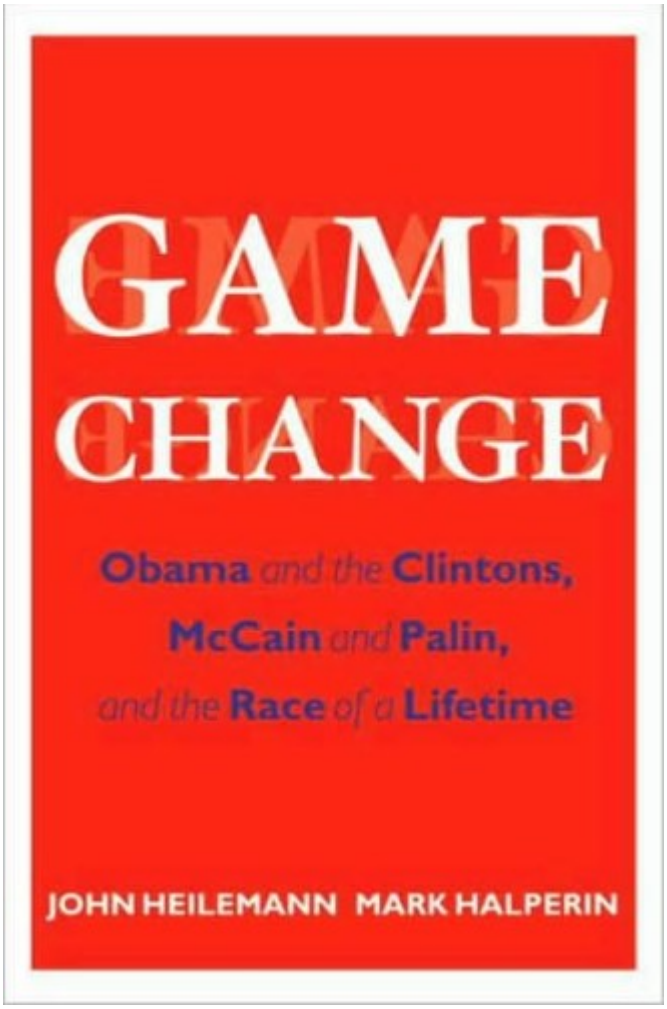
Campaign couples

by Lillian Daniel in the August 24, 2010 issue

In Review



Game Change

John Heilemann and Mark Halperin
Harper

John Heilemann and Mark Halperin's book about the 2008 presidential campaign has people talking about the private lives of the politicians and all the scenes we didn't

see during the campaign. These two respected reporters had remarkable access to campaign staff, and they pull away the curtain to show us the human beings behind the political ads and debates.

The book reads like a soap opera script. Hillary Clinton shuts her husband out of her campaign but defends him when he all but destroys it. John McCain is so sentimental and superstitious about New Hampshire that he campaigns there even when it serves no purpose. Sarah Palin gets exposed to world history (which she declares "awesome") by flipping through handwritten index cards while having her hair done. Barack Obama smokes and uses the "f" word. John Edwards stays on the road to avoid his unpleasant marriage, feed his rock star ego and flirt with a New Age sycophant.

When I described this book to a friend, she asked if we might change the subject. "I've decided to give up backstabbing and gossipy conversation."

But is it really gossip when you are talking about famous people running for president? Can you backstab someone who doesn't know you exist? I suspect that my friend was worried less about the effect such talk would have on the subjects than the effect it was having on the speaker.

This is the book that prompted Senate majority leader Harry Reid to apologize to Obama for being quoted as saying the country was ready to embrace a "light-skinned" African American "with no Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one."

What is amazing about *Game Change* is that well-known and respected people say all kinds of outrageous things throughout the book. You wonder what they could have been thinking, speaking the way they do to reporters. (Most of the quotes come secondhand, but while some have complained at how they were described, remarkably few have denied saying what was recorded.)

That quote from Reid had some calling for his resignation, although apparently the president was not concerned. That's understandable when we learn from *Game Change* that Reid was one of many Democrats who secretly encouraged the young senator from Chicago to challenge the obvious front-runner Hillary Clinton.

And therein lies a fascinating tale. What allowed the unknown Obama to rise to such heights in such a short time? The authors describe a perfect storm of events—"game changers"—that left a young man of preternatural confidence and gifts in the right

place at the right time, while Clinton stumbled. Clinton had her enemies in the Democratic camp, and Obama was always aware that the presidency was within reach—long before others saw it, including his own wife.

Marriages get a lot of attention in *Game Change*—so much so that the reader feels a bit like a kid caught at the bedroom door keyhole. We are undeniably curious about what goes on behind other people's locked doors. It's not that we think our marriages are better than others. Often we are just looking for reassurance that we're not the only couple carrying around a big bucket of crazy. If you're looking for that kind of reassurance, *Game Change* delivers.

Among this crowd, the Clintons are one of the more stable couples. Their marriage is complicated, of course, but mostly for campaign reasons. The authors seem to believe that Hillary could have won had she drawn more on Bill's political instincts. But she was determined to go it alone, fearing that his charisma would leave her in the shadows. She put together a campaign staff that never gelled as a team, and she herself didn't have her husband's magnetism or his appetite for eating donuts with the common man.

By the time Hillary let Bill share in the decision making, her campaign was beyond salvaging. At that point, his bulldog behavior in defense of his wife (like his accusations that Obama's campaign cheated in Iowa) hurt more than helped. Only after the campaign did Hillary acknowledge any of that damage, and then, remarkably, she did it in a late-night phone conversation with Obama. But more on that later.

The peek at Palin's life on the campaign trail shows her making phone calls to her pregnant teenage daughter, her sadness about being away from her new baby, and her constant worries as to what people were saying about her back in Wasilla. More disturbing is the portrayal of the instant superstar's mood after a few rounds of public criticism. She became so depressed and unfocused that some of her staffers thought she was having a mental breakdown. She refused to prepare for interviews, and when her exchange with Katie Couric exposed her thin grasp of the issues, her team was mainly surprised that it hadn't happened sooner. According to *Game Change,* many Republicans, including some on Palin's staff, came to feel guilty for nominating her to be the person a heartbeat away from the presidency. Vice President Cheney saw her from the beginning as a reckless choice.

John and Cindy McCain seem to do best when leading relatively separate lives. After reading about the rigors of the campaign trail, one can see why. One painful passage concerns the weeks in which the *New York Times* was researching and threatening to run a story saying McCain had had an affair. That section of the book is humanizing, as we read about Cindy McCain's tears and see how hard that kind of scrutiny would be on any marriage.

As for John and Elizabeth Edwards, much attention has already been given to what the authors call "the lie of Saint Elizabeth." They say that it was the consensus of everyone in the Edwards orbit that Elizabeth was difficult, self-centered and crazy. But no one comes off worse in the book than her husband. The authors believe that Edwards lost his ballast long before the 2008 campaign and had drifted out to sea on waves of vanity. Rielle Hunter, who had an affair with Edwards and gave birth to his child (Edwards denied the child was his until January of this year), entered his inner circle to film a documentary. She had no real experience in filmmaking, but she did have an appealing resemblance to the singer Stevie Nicks and an insatiable interest in the candidate's every move.

On the basis of *Game Change,* the Most Functional Family award goes to the current First Family. Apparently Obama brightens up whenever his wife appears. Michelle Obama comes off as level-headed and realistic, an anchor at home for her ascending star of a husband. When she made her politically damaging comment about "finally" being proud of her country, she was devastated, and so was Barack—on her behalf. Her speech at the Democratic Convention seemed to be the highlight of the event for Barack, who was just waiting for America to fall in love with her as he did.

Did the authors go easy on the president's family life? If history is written by the winners, sometimes it may be written for the winners. Perhaps it is no coincidence that in *Game Change* the losers come off as losers.

Heilemann and Halperin assume that a candidate's family life matters. The best campaigner, the one with the coolest head, also seems to have the steadiest marriage and the most well-adjusted kids. Candidates' marital and parenting woes are portrayed almost comically, as if to wink at the reader and say, "Now you see why it all turned out the way it did."

But political life doesn't always follow that pattern. There are great leaders whose marriages are a disaster, and there are happily married people who couldn't lead

ants to a picnic. The Bible is full of that kind of human complexity, even if *Game Change* isn't.

While some have complained that the Obamas are treated too well in *Game Change,* the authors do dig into the biggest controversy of Obama's campaign, his relationship with his pastor Jeremiah Wright and Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. Obama is presented as a serious person of faith, reluctant to cut ties to his pastor and his church until forced to do so by Wright's comments at the National Press Club. The authors portray Wright as hurt by Obama's distancing behavior and by the lack of communication with him afterward. It is a heartbreaking story of a clash between leaders of different generations in the midst of a media frenzy.

Entirely missing from the book is an analysis of why Obama was drawn to Wright in the first place. The authors do not mention, nor do they seem to get, how an intellectual and faithful person could listen to Wright. They see Wright only in terms of the sound bites everyone else saw on television. They do not discuss the dynamic and multifaceted ministry of Trinity Church or the inclusive, justice-oriented message of the denomination. As a United Church of Christ pastor, I admit I have a dog in this fight. But I would have loved to hear more about what brought Obama to Trinity, and that discussion would have underscored the poignancy of the eventual split.

Of course, Obama had other relationships to tend to. The account of his selection of Joe Biden as a running mate is fascinating. Biden managed to play the role of adviser to both Clinton and Obama during the primary and retain the trust and friendship of both. But tension grew between Obama and Biden late in the campaign. After telling reporters that he was more qualified to be president than Obama, the campaign cut back on Biden's access to the press, beginning a huge rift between the two. The irony here is that this was yet another instance in which the younger man was hurt by off-the-cuff remarks of an older and more experienced mentor.

Apparently, Biden and Obama now have a strong relationship. That is a relief, since they are running the country together. The message of the book again seems to be that these powerful people are no different from you and me—they get mad, they hold grudges, and they work things out or they don't. But here the stakes are a lot higher.

It is a bit surprising that the authors describe the relationship between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama as a long and tortured love story. As they tell it, she was enamored with him from first contact, campaigned for him enthusiastically and gushed over his gifts. The gripping last chapter centers on his desire to get Clinton to join his team as secretary of state. Fearing she would turn him down, Obama refused to take her calls, eventually phoning her near midnight and begging her to take the position. Despite having already drafted her "no thank you" speech, by the next morning Clinton accepts. One can almost hear the romantic music swelling in the background as one begins the final chapter, titled "Together Again."

The romance imagery does not work, and it trivializes Clinton. Clinton's relationship with Obama is described as a crush that turns into a bitter contest but ends up with them "together again"—together, with Hillary Clinton in her proper place, next to her man and below him in status. Perhaps the authors are cleverly using the love-story metaphor to point to the sexist ways we still view women politicians. Or perhaps they are just being sexist themselves.

It's the relationships that drive this book and keep readers turning the pages. We learn that the candidates are just like us after all. They lie awake at night imagining what they would say to their enemies, and then they blow it in real life. They curse, they argue and they make hasty, sloppy decisions. Their family lives are messy and their friendships are fragile. We will have to look elsewhere for a savior.

Read Amy Frykholm's review of The Bridge *by David Remnick.*