Running for Congress The Secret Motives

by Walter Shapiro

It was "Wife Appreciation Night" at the Livonia, Michigan Jaycees. The featured speaker was the state Jaycee president, whose evangelistic style reinforced every liberal stereotype about the Junior Chamber of Commerce and Midwestern Babbitry. At one point he recited a bit of inspirational doggerel entitled "The Will to Win," and then urged the young businessmen of Livonia "to overcome the mediocrity that is within you." Turning to the tightly coiffed wives of the real estate brokers and insurance salesmen, the state president instructed these helpmates that "your task is to be an element in your husbands'—our fellow Jaycees'—development and growth."

I was there because the Jaycee meeting was to be followed by a candidates' forum, but throughout a dozen mind-numbing speeches by candidates for everything from U. S. Congress to county commissioner, I kept thinking about the Jaycees and their "development and growth." It was watching Bill Joyner, an obscure candidate for state representative, that helped me see the relationship between seeking public office and the Jaycee model of young men striving to get ahead. Joyner—yes, that's really his name—who has one of those cherubic faces that he had not yet outgrown at 24 or 25, is an officer of the local Jaycee chapter and an assistant to the local mayor, a minor politician who had run one losing race for lieutenant governor. As Joyner spoke for his allotted three minutes, I noticed that I was standing next to his young wife. She was intently following her husband's every word, one moment biting her lip, the next minute wringing her hands. Perhaps some day she may grow to lament the

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fate of political wives, but for those three minutes in Livonia, it was as if both her and her husband's lives depended on that one speech, that one campaign for state representative.

For most of us, job-hunting is an intense, but private, agony. For Bill Joyner, and the thousands like him seeking political office this year, the job-hunting is done in public, but the process is qualitatively the same. While some may regard the job of a state representative with the same fondness that W. C. Fields reserved for Philadelphia, few would doubt that becoming something like a U. S. congressman is a form of "making it" in America. True, two terms on the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee may not have the same literary prestige as, say, four years at the helm of *Commentary*, but it does produce the kind of notoriety that is neither easily attained nor quickly forgotten.

This celebrity is an important factor in understanding what motivates people to run for Congress. While the editor of *Commentary* has concrete responsibilities, a freshman congressman has one of the most unstructured jobs in America. Since he can often get away with doing little more than answering quorum calls and voting, the motive generally ascribed to those who seek public office—the drive for power—seems strangely inappropriate. A number of prerogatives come with being a freshman congressman, but power—in the sense that an agency head in the federal, or even state, government has power—is not one of them.

Political campaigns are almost always presented to us as clashes over national issues or clear-cut tests of party loyalties. Later this month there will be laborious efforts to explain the mid-term congressional results in terms of the economy, the reaction to the Nixon pardon, the lingering

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residues of Watergate, and voter attitudes toward political reform. The flock of incoming congressmen will be scrutinized to divine the mood of the electorate and to pick out new faces to watch, much in the way that small boys scan minor league batting averages looking for the baseball stars of the future. But it is unlikely that much attention will be paid to what motivated these people to run for Congress or what their ascension to national office means to them personally.

These are not irrelevant questions. In the long run, attempts to delve into the character and the aspirations of newly elected congressmen are probably more important than analyzing their positions on abortion or gun control. Yet the conventions of political reporting dictate that questions like these are off-limits unless the congressman or senator becomes a serious presidential candidate. In a sense, trying to follow politics is like trying to understand the causes of inflation—you read so much and learn so little. This is unfortunate because a political campaign is often the best time to gauge the character of a future congressman, for once in office, self-images quickly change, public faces quickly harden.

There is an autobiographical reason why I am fascinated by what prompts people to run for Congress. Two years ago I sought the Democratic congressional nomination in the district where John Reuther is now the nominee and finished a respectably close second in a six-way primary. During my campaign I explained that I was running to express my outrage over the Vietnam war and the "to get along, go along" attitudes of most congressional incumbents. What I didn't discuss were the personal reasons behind my decision to make this long-shot race for Congress. In early 1972 my life was somewhat in disarray. Bored with graduate school and chastened by the effort to find a job in a recessionary economy, I calculated that I had everything to gain and nothing to lose by getting into politics. Putting it another way, others in my position might have gone into therapy, I ran for Congress.

Early in October, 1974, David Broder of *The Washington Post* gave Bob Carr, Jim Blanchard, and John Reuther, all young Michigan Democrats, a reasonable chance of winning Republican-held House seats. Carr made his first bid for public office in 1972 and came within 2,500 votes of defeating veteran Republican incumbent Charles Chamberlain in a district that is dominated by Lansing, but also includes Republican farming areas and the sprawling campus of Michigan State University (MSU). Chamberlain is retiring, and this year Carr is opposed by Charles Taylor, a conservative businessman. Both Blanchard and Reuther face the task of unseating Republican incumbents. Running in the militantly anti-busing suburbs north of Detroit, Blanchard is trying to oust conservative zealot Robert Huber, who was first elected to Congress in 1972. Reuther is opposing moderate Republican Marvin Esch in a diverse district that includes both Detroit suburbs and the extremely politicized university community of Ann Arbor. Carr and Reuther are considerably more liberal than Blanchard, but all three are stressing economic issues like unemployment, tax reform, and national health insurance in their campaigns. In early October I spent some time with Carr, Blanchard, and Reuther. My primary interest was not their chances in November or their attitudes toward congressional reform. Instead, I was seeking answers to far more personal and elusive questions.

Bob Carr: Almost a Congressman

Sitting in his tiny law office, now filled more with campaign research material than law books, Bob Carr displays the frustration of someone who is so close to being a congressman he can taste it, yet each morning has to come to grips with the reality that after 30 straight months of running for office, he is still just a candidate.

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At times Carr gives the impression that he senses he has lost control of the entire process: "I sometime feel like I'm part of a thing that is being acted out. In a way I have become more than just Bob Carr. Bob Carr has become a symbol to people who believe the same sort of things that I do."

The inexorable chain of events began in 1968 when Carr, who grew up in Wisconsin, came to the Lansing area on a Ford Foundation grant after a stint in Washington with Senator Gaylord Nelson. The grant involved working part-time with the Michigan legislature, and from there Carr drifted into the state attorney general's office, a Democratic bastion in a Republican state government. In 1971 Carr went into private practice in East Lansing, which he quickly abandoned for his first congressional race. As a political newcomer, Carr finessed the local Democrats so effectively that he was handed the congressional nomination without a primary. Despite the Nixon landslide, Carr's collegiate style and antiwar convictions had a strong appeal to the district's large student population, and he received 49.4 per cent of the vote in an agonizingly close election.

According to Carr's campaign literature, he announced his intention to run for Congress again the day after his 1972 defeat. Rather than demonstrating Carr's indomitable spirit, it suggests how depressing his alternatives were. His law practice was virtually nonexistent, and there is little evidence that Carr relished the idea of devoting the next 10 years to becoming East Lansing, Michigan's leading ACLU lawyer. Nor did a return to state government seem like an attractive possibility. Underlying Carr's attitudes about his two years in the state attorney general's office is the implication that he had little patience with the second-raters who gravitate to the periphery of state Democratic politics. And pride, an important element in unraveling Carr's complicated make-up, ruled out returning to Washington as anything less than a congressman.

When Chamberlain announced his retirement from Congress earlier this year, Carr recalled that he began to be regarded as the district's "non-incumbent incumbent" because of his close race in 1972. It is clear that in his own mind Carr no longer sees himself as just a candidate for Congress. He took great pains to tell me about the friendships he has made with House Democrats like Ed Mezvinsky, Les Aspin, and Gerry Studds. Similarly, Carr is proud that because of friendship, Tony Schwartz, considered by many to be the best in the business, is producing his radio commercials for half price—a still hefty $10,000. While I was with him, Carr received a call from the *Lansing State Journal* informing him that they planned to purchase two half-hour segments on local television for a debate between him and his opponent. Carr's immediate reaction was that he had been "screwed" by the Republican-oriented newspaper. Part of his anger was political because any joint debates would give exposure to his less well known opponent. But the vehemence of Carr's response almost suggested that he felt debating was beneath him since he was now the de facto incumbent. "Where were you two years ago when I wanted to debate Chamberlain?" Carr asked the newspaper official sarcastically.

The discrepancy between Carr's self-image and his status as merely a candidate seemed to be having an impact on his enthusiasm for campaigning. Greeting MSU students on their way to class, Carr looked so perfect with a Mark Spitz moustache and long, blue stadium coat that I half-expected Ali McGraw to yell, "Hey, preppie." But between handshakes, Carr confided that he was bored with the whole ritual, and he complained somewhat sourly that his staff expected him to do this kind of thing all day.

The same slightly acid tone crept into his voice when I mentioned that a

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voice on one of Tony Schwartz' radio commercials had a distinct New York accent. Carr laughed and said, "Out here they probably won't even recognize a New York accent." Some locals have begun to resent this kind of attitude. Unlike 1972, this year Carr faced primary opposition. Although he won with over 70 per cent of the vote, Carr admitted that the challenge represented the feeling by some East Lansing liberals that "I was aloof." Some degree of emotional estrangement from your constituents is inevitable after taking office, but with Carr, it seems to be happening while he is still a candidate.

While Carr's staff would like to see him constantly shaking hands, the candidate apparently wants to leave large gaps in his schedule for "office time." Part of this is devoted to the elaborate courtesies of political phone calls and the intricate machinations of campaign strategy. But he also seems to spend an inordinate amount of time refining his policy stands. There is a meticulousness about issues in the Carr campaign that is rare for a congressional race beyond the purview of a major newspaper. I saw it displayed when PIRGIM, a local Nader offshoot, issued a report detailing how the military budget causes economic dislocations in Michigan. Carr and several staff members went over the PIRGIM report carefully and mapped out a response that meshed these findings with Carr's own advocacy of a $14 billion cut in military spending.

The enthusiasm with which Carr dissected the PIRGIM report made it clear that he felt that this—and not campaigning—was the kind of work that he ought to be doing, that this was the job of a congressman. But all Carr really did was take one study written by someone else (in this case, an alternative defense budget prepared by the Center for Defense Analysis) and combine it with another (the PIRGIM report). It is striking how proud Carr is of the paraphernalia of this make-work, cerebral world. Showing me into his office, he pointed to two bound volumes of the *National Journal* as if they were his fondest possessions. Obviously, there is nothing wrong with taking pains to ensure that you have a solid factual base for your speeches and position papers. But Congress—and Washington as a whole—is full of well-intentioned people who have come to believe that producing meticulously detailed press releases really has a beneficial effect on peoples' lives.

Carr gives the impression that he has changed considerably in the 30 months he has been running for Congress. When he mentioned the need to go to Congress with "realistic expectations," he implied that he didn't have them in 1972. It is probable that a certain passion and a certain sense of mission has been lost in pursuit of these "realistic expectations." The driving force behind Carr now is his desire to take part in the debate, the rituals and the cloakroom conferences that come with being in Congress. Carr gave the game away when he said—in words that Blanchard and Reuther echoed—"It will be exciting to be in the 94th Congress. There will be more newer faces, more younger people than anytime since World War II." What Carr meant, in part, is that he relished the idea of joining the kind of company that was not available in a backwater like East Lansing. What keeps Carr going during the last month of his second congressional campaign is the belief that life on Capitol Hill would be infinitely more exciting than handling landlord-tenant disputes in a cubbyhole law office, two blocks from the Michigan State campus.

Blanchard: Out from Behind the Scenes

Sitting at the bar of the London Chop House in Detroit, I was talking about Jim Blanchard with a friend who had just begun covering Michigan politics for a local newspaper. The reporter, who considers Blanchard to be something of a lightweight,

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complained, "I can't understand why Blanchard has any more right to be in Congress than I do." I was somewhat surprised by my vehemence when I answered, "He's hungry for it, he's been willing to sacrifice for years to get it and you're not."

There are a dozen young men like Jim Blanchard in every state. They gravitate to prominent state politicians and manage their campaigns, write their speeches and carry their bags. In other states they might end up running a government department or handling legislative relations for a governor. But these prizes have been out of reach for Michigan Democrats since the rise of George Romney in 1962. That's why Jim Blanchard has had to content himself with five years in the state attorney general's office.

It is easy to understand the frustrations of someone like Blanchard who has been active, behind the scenes, in losing statewide races since his student days at Michigan State in the early 1960s. Talking with him at his campaign headquarters—a small, second-floor office at a grimy intersection, just a mile north of Detroit—it was apparent that he is keenly aware of his years in the political desert. "The generation of us between 30 and 35 is a special group of people," he said, gesturing to friends from state government who were helping with the campaign. "We represent a generation of people about to break through. We are a generation that was in college when John Kennedy was President. And that had a far greater effect on us than the Vietnam War. We're not the New Left, we're not angry young men. We grew up under presidents you could believe in, not Johnson and Nixon. We never grew up believing that politics is just war and assassination. That's why we'd like to restore the New Frontier, maybe mold it a little with populism, but we also recognize that things can't be that way again."

Someone who knew Blanchard in state government described him as "one of those people who talked constantly about how he would be governor of Michigan someday." It is easy to picture him much earlier, perhaps as a freshman at Michigan State, plotting his first political campaign. At the University of Michigan in 1965, I remember listening to a young politico like him counseling an ambitious freshman that he should enlist in the Green Berets "because a good war record is really important for a political career."

Blanchard decided the day after the 1972 election that this was going to be his year to finally run for office. He faced some large problems. Although raised in the district in which he was running, Blanchard had far better political connections in Lansing than he did at home. Thanks to a skillful primary campaign that was built around walking tours of the district, Blanchard narrowly won a four-way race to get the nomination. A major ingredient in Blanchard's upset victory was $30,000 he was loaned by his family. Blanchard denies that there is anything like a family fortune, although he admits, with a smile, that such rumors discouraged candidates from entering the primary. According to Blanchard, the son of a surgeon, the $30,000 represented a significant fraction of his family's cash reserves. It is easy to picture Blanchard asking for the money, much in the way another 31-year-old might borrow a similar sum to buy a piece of a new shopping center development.

Seeing Blanchard in a stark white raincoat with too many buckles, it is apparent that his candidacy would fail to go over in Ann Arbor, where John Reuther sports a blue blazer, or in East Lansing, where Bob Carr wears a corduroy suit and a red turtleneck sweater. Similarly, Blanchard was shocked when he went to Washington to try to get the endorsement of an environment group and discovered that they were more interested in his views on abortion (he's against it) than on the energy crisis. But Blanchard's clothes and his lack of concern for the pet issues of litmus-

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test liberals are assets in a district which is largely composed of white ethnics living in tract developments. It is also fitting that Blanchard is the only one of the three Michigan Democrats who is married and has a child.

It is disconcerting the way Blanchard freely admits his ignorance of many subjects. The Nader paperback, *Who Runs Congress?* is a major source of his knowledge about the inner workings of the office which he is seeking. Asked about his views on the defense budget, Blanchard replied, "So much about defense is classified, how can I speak intelligently?" Blanchard's lack of Washington sophistication masks an intuitive grasp of the kind of politics he did come in contact with when he worked in state government. His experiences in the attorney general's office provided him with a framework which he uses to generalize about other issues. For example, he stresses the need for independent congressional fact-finding because he has learned the hard way that a legislative body cannot depend on any bureaucracy to adequately assess its own performance. Once he becomes interested in a subject, Blanchard tends to go off on tangents, his syntax lagging far behind. Talking about congressional fact-finding, Blanchard suddenly began echoing Don Riegle's complaint that there are too many lawyers in Congress, although he himself is an attorney. Blanchard said the problem is that lawyers tend to think like abstract legalists, rather than administrators. "The only thing real in a lawsuit," said Blanchard, relishing the one-liner, "is getting a check after the settlement."

For all his diamond-in-the-rough qualities, there is no question that Blanchard is a driven man. His hunger meshes well with the insecurities of the second-generation ethnics who fill his congressional district, but his needs are somewhat different from theirs. What motivates Blanchard is a desire for recognition after years of working behind the scenes. This is linked with a desire for acceptance within Congress which is much stronger than his feelings about particular issues. "I doubt that you'll see Jim Blanchard as a crusader in Congress," he said, adopting the third person for the only time in the interview. "Jim Blanchard wants to be effective, to do the other is not in my nature." Money is also important to Blanchard, but it is something that he takes for granted. I asked him what he would be doing if he weren't running for Congress, and Blanchard responded without a moment's hesitation, "I'd be in private law practice, involved in politics as a hobby, and making lots of money."

Young Man Reuther

It is easy to mistakenly stereotype John (nephew of Walter, son of Victor) Reuther. Taking a Friday night flight from Washington to Detroit, I accidently found myself sitting behind Reuther and his campaign manager. They were talking about the segment they had filmed for the "Today" show and their three-minute appearance on John Chancellor earlier in the week. The whole thing seemed like an out-take from the movie "The Candidate" and both seemed perfect for their parts. Reuther, tall, hair brushed forward like a young Kennedy, slouched contentedly in his aisle seat. His campaign manager, hair greying at the temples, had a Frank Mankiewicz look, complete with a Brooks Brothers striped, button-down shirt.

The bare outlines of the situation seemed right for a Robert Redford movie. Reuther, heir to a famous labor name, moves into a Michigan congressional district in 1973 and gets a management job at Ford Motor Company. Less than a year later he is running for Congress with United Auto Workers' support, a Washington fund-raising party featuring Birch Bayh and a team of political professionals managing his campaign. As

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someone who ran in a Democratic primary in the same district with none of these advantages, it was very easy for me to develop the idea that the well-connected are different from you and I.

There was evidence that undermined this stereotype, but I tended to disregard it. For one thing, Reuther was welcomed by local Democrats with less than total enthusiasm. Rather than being handed the nomination, Reuther was thrown into a five-way primary in which he eked out a victory by less than 100 votes after a protracted recount. As for his professional campaign staff, I should have remembered watching them back in February demonstrate with elaborate over-laid maps of the congressional district that they had discovered where the large student vote was concentrated. It was, they announced with pride, in the precincts surrounding the University of Michigan campus.

This additional information did not destroy my preconception that young man Reuther was a hustler, it just suggested that he was somewhat inept at it. It took a full day campaigning with Reuther for me to realize that I was totally wrong. His congressional race was not prompted by greed or ambition, but rather motivated by a kind of insecurity and the hope that election to Congress would provide a focus that his life had thus far lacked. On a cold October afternoon, we had just finished a visit to a large apartment complex between Ypsilanti and Ann Arbor. As we headed back to the car, Reuther mentioned that his master's thesis was due at American University three days after the election. It was not said with the kind of arrogance of someone who has achieved success and now regards a master's degree as an irrelevant credential. Rather, the remark reflected the bemused anxiety of someone who was genuinely concerned about what would happen to him if he failed to get his degree and lost his bid for Congress.

The long-delayed master's thesis is somehow typical of John Reuther's first 30 years. Like Winston Churchill's pudding, his life lacks theme. After graduating from Cornell, Reuther worked for Birch Bayh and served on the congressional liaison staff of the OEO in the last days of the Johnson Administration. Then came two years in Russia, which came about when he was invited to study there by a delegation of Russian trade unionists he met in his uncle's home. Returning to the United States in 1970, Reuther took part in Teddy Kennedy's Senate campaign and then joined the staff of Birch Bayh's ill-fated presidential effort. When Bayh withdrew, Reuther went to the McGovern campaign, working in Massachusetts and Minnesota.

Reuther's primary interest outside of nuts-and-bolts politics is relations with the Soviet Union. But despite his fascination with the subject, he has little to say about Russia that would be unfamiliar to readers of *The New York Times* or a *Newsweek* cover story on Solzhenitsyn. His favorite story about his two years in the Soviet Union involves a drunken evening he and Birch Bayh spent with Soviet students in 1969 that climaxed with Bayh playing "Blowing in the Wind" on a borrowed guitar. According to Reuther, the students were very impressed that a United States senator would do something like that.

This predictability of outlook seems to spill over into his political views. His orientation is liberal, but listening to Reuther has all the suspense of reading a *New Republic* editorial. I asked Reuther who his models in Congress were, and all he came up with was a routine reference to Phil Hart's integrity. It's not that Reuther is unable to discuss issues intelligently (I heard him give a detailed presentation on the intricacies of national health insurance), it's just that there is no particular passion or originality to his point of view.

There is an unassuming air about

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Reuther, a basic modesty that is ingratiating personally, but rather deadly in a political candidate. The stories are legion about Reuther's natural tendency to gravitate to the nearest corner at political gatherings. Yet Reuther seems determined to make a success out of his political career. I asked what his plans were if he lost his congressional bid this year. If the election were close, Reuther said that he planned another race in 1976 when the incumbent, Marvin Esch, is rumored to be running for the Senate. If he were soundly defeated, Reuther said that he would try to work for a corporation that was active in trade with the Soviet Union.

One can argue that Reuther is almost doomed to a certain kind of frustration because of his family name and political connections. Those without either are eventually forced to make some difficult choices about career and aspirations before the age of 30. When you have a name like Reuther, you are often given far more latitude than the rest of us. Often this ability to be able to endure a series of long-shot gambles until one pays off is an important element in success, but sometimes this excess of freedom can be crippling. John Reuther's congressional campaign represents a kind of benchmark for him personally. It can be seen as a last desperate gamble, a last defiant gesture, before he settles for something ordinary or returns to a political patron like Birch Bayh.

Seduction and Betrayal

It is important to stress that these three Michigan Democrats are not villains, nor are they simply updated versions of Sammy Glick. In many ways they are among the most promising congressional candidates in the country. Each of them is unquestionably preferable to his opponent in this month's election. Both Carr and Reuther have the potential to be among the most liberal members of Congress. And Blanchard has a certain intuitive understanding of government that distinguishes him from most other anti-abortion, anti-busing Democrats.

It is difficult, and slightly distasteful personally, to delve into the psyches of these likeable people, especially since my own motivations for running for Congress in 1972 were qualitatively little different from theirs. But the exercise is important if we are ever to realistically understand—and thus evaluate—the people who purport to represent us in Washington.

Although the factors that prompted Carr, Blanchard, and Reuther to run for Congress are different, none of them displays any sense of mission about why they want to go to Washington. Their collective goal is to be congressmen, rather than to do anything specific in Congress. Carr talks about going to Washington with "realistic expectations" and Blanchard promises that he won't be a "crusader." What this means is that each is apt to measure his own success on the basis of how readily he is accepted by his colleagues, rather than on the basis of whether his work has an impact on anyone's life. There is an illusionary air to life on Capitol Hill, and it is easy for a congressman to believe that he is doing important work when he is merely issuing press releases, making speeches to disinterested audiences, and racing from one ill-focused committee hearing to another. That's why it is so important to send legislators to Washington who won't be seduced by the rituals of just being a congressman. ■

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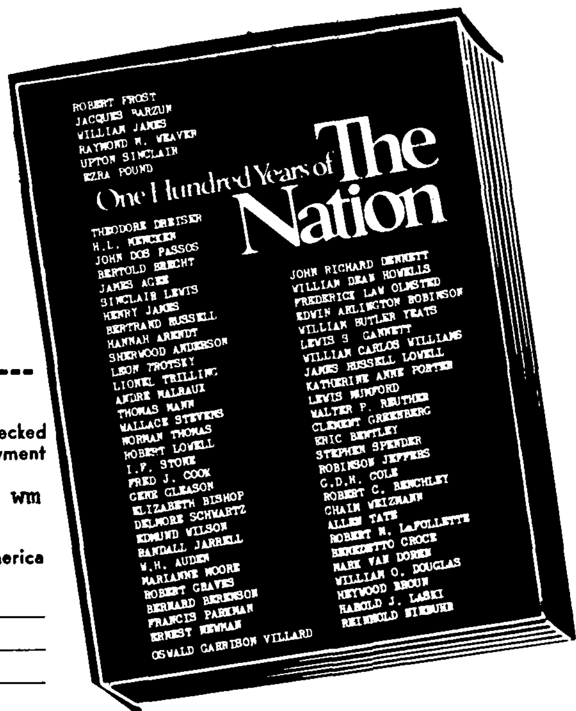

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political book notes

Public affairs books to be published in November.

America After Nixon. Robert Scheer. McGraw-Hill. The title is a come-on—the book is really motivated by Scheer's passionate hatred of the multinational corporations. There are all kinds of insufferable problems—a bit of a conspiracy outlook toward the multinational corporations, a fawning view of China, and a picture of the Arabs as brothers of the Third World. But with all his faults, Scheer sees something many proponents of the new age of scarcity don't. Instead of the beautiful world of bicycles and homegrown vegetables, he tells us that there are many powerful men and institutions with a great stake in preserving their power, and that they will not shirk from destroying us all rather than relinquish their profits and growth. A valuable antidote to the Udall book noted below.

Against the Law. Leonard W. Levy. Harper & Row, $12.50.

Big Brother and the Holding Company: The World Behind Watergate. Steve Weissman, ed. Ramparts, $10.00, $3.45. This collection is for people who haven't kept up with the radical press in recent years. With varying degrees of credibility, the authors attempt to show that Nixon was tied to Mafia hoodlums, corporate swindlers and low-life snoopers. Chuck Colson is the prime target of many of the articles as, among other things, the alleged mastermind of an attempted paramilitary coup and of the Wallace shooting.

Big Business. C. Northcote Parkinson. Little, Brown, $9.95. The author's usual amusing comments about corporate culture are accompanied by this important, if unfashionable, insight: "Any reconciliation. . . of big business and government can take only one form: a more international form of government."

The Common Millionaire: And How to Get That Way. Robert Heller. Delacorte, $8.95. This is the story of how the rich get that

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