

BOOKS

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The Original Rockefeller Republican

Kept from the public during a 35-year political career were his compulsive philandering and his dyslexia

On His Own Terms

By Richard Norton Smith

Random House, 842 pages, \$38

BY ROBERT K. LANDERS

IT WAS the most memorable scene from the 1964 Republican National Convention in San Francisco: Nelson Rockefeller standing tall on the speakers' platform, insistent on having his say—"This is still a free country, ladies and gentlemen"—as conservative yahoos below sent up a roar of hatred to this embodiment of the despised Eastern Establishment who dared denounce extremism. Operatives of the party's impending presidential nominee, Barry Goldwater, aware of the damage the nationally televised scene was doing to his image, frantically tried to quiet the delegates, but to no avail.

So the scene made its fateful impression, not only of extremism on display but of its brave antagonist. Rockefeller, wrote Norman Mailer in *Esquire* later that year, "had an odd courage which was profound—he could take strength from defying a mob. Three hundred thousand years ago, a million years ago, some gorilla must have stood up to an enraged tribe and bellowed back and got away alive and human society was begun. So



warfare" (or, as Ike later described it, for "Cold War strategy"), with a vague mandate to explain America to the world. Taking the mandate and, to the dismay of the State Department, running with it, Rockefeller assembled a panel of academic heavyweights in advance of the 1955 Geneva Summit. The group's brainstorming led to Eisenhower's proposal there for "open skies" aerial inspection of military facilities on American and Soviet soil. Rejected by the Soviets, the proposal proved a propaganda coup for the U.S., showing the Soviets to be not as committed to nuclear disarmament as they pretended. The brainstorming group's success, Mr. Smith observes, "foreshadowed [Rockefeller's] later reliance, as governor of New York and would-be president, on a dizzying array of study groups, commissions, and grand planners." Yet doubts arose about the practice. "He is too used to borrowing brains instead of using his own," Ike once observed.

After leaving the Eisenhower administration in December 1955, Rockefeller assumed the presidency of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the foundation that served as a vehicle for Nelson and his brothers' philanthropy, and set in motion a study of the challenges facing America and the world at midcentury. The massive study, which involved more than 100 "prominent citizens," was expensive, Mr. Smith notes.

Rocky finally had his political moment which was precisely right for him."

Richard Norton Smith builds a 20-page prologue around that telling moment in his splendid biography of Rockefeller. "On His Own Terms" is a clear-eyed, exhaustively researched account of a significant and fascinating American life.

In retrospect, Rockefeller's moment in San Francisco told of more than his courage and a changing GOP. It also vividly suggested that, if he wanted to be president, he was in the wrong party. It was not the first such suggestion. Franklin D. Roosevelt had tried to get Rockefeller, his coordinator of inter-American affairs during World War II, to change his political affiliation. Harry Truman, too, had urged him to become a Democrat. Rockefeller's answer: "If I became a Democrat, I'd always be in the position of holding the party back, whereas if I stayed a Republican, I'd be pushing the party forward." He wanted the presidency but, as Mr. Smith's title suggests, on his own terms.

When Rockefeller made his entry into elective politics, running for governor of New York in 1958, he proved a terrific campaigner, plunging into crowds, heartily offering a "Hiya fella!" to one and all, enthusiastically eating blintzes and giving voters the impression that he was a backslapping regular guy. In a year in which the GOP nationally suffered its worst defeat since 1936, he crushed incumbent Democratic Gov. Averell Harriman by 557,000 votes.

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In contrast with his New York campaigns, Rockefeller's repeated efforts to win the presidency in the 1960s "appeared amateurish," Mr. Smith notes. Instead of vigorously going after delegates (as he did in New York in 1958 by wooing county chairmen), he treated the nominating process as "an unwanted distract-



Bernard Gotfryd/Getty Images

BRAND NAME Nelson Rockefeller campaigning for his fourth term as governor of New York, 1970.

tion" from the general election, in which the GOP candidate would need the votes of independents and Democrats. Hence he tried to show from the start that he was different from the typical Republican—he was a *progressive conservative!* It was a "fundamental misunderstanding" of the process, Mr. Smith says.

But Rockefeller was unmistakably different, not least in his strong support for the civil-rights movement. (He provided money to Martin Luther King Jr. and his crusade at various junctures, such as when he helped pay the bail costs for hundreds of youngsters who had been jailed after marching in Birmingham, Ala., in 1963.) "The struggle for racial equality is as much a part of his family lineage as oil wells and art museums," Mr. Smith observes. Rockefeller's grandfather had endowed Atlanta's Spelman College to educate black women; his father had supported the United Negro College Fund and the Urban League. When Rockefeller was vice president under Gerald Ford in the mid-1970s, his support for

filibuster reform in the Senate and for a tough Voting Rights Act fired Southern opposition and, by some accounts, led to his being dropped from the 1976 ticket.

During Rockefeller's 35 years of public life, two things were kept largely hidden. One was his compulsive philandering, which only began to come to light in 1979 with his sensational death in the company of his latest mistress. (It had not taken an aggressive press long to shred the official fiction that his fatal heart attack had occurred when he was at his desk, working in his office, alone except for a security aide.) The other hidden trait was his dyslexia, a condition that is generally characterized, as Mr. Smith says, by "poor reading, writing, and spelling skills, the misuse of words, and the transposition of numbers." This difficulty helped to shape his approach to public life, giving him a preference for the visual over the written and a pronounced inclination to rely on supposed experts as a kind of "intellectual security blanket."

Rockefeller liked to use visual aids to get his points across. Early in the Eisenhower administration, when he became undersecretary at the new Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, he insisted on a bigger conference room, opening up his own wallet to equip it. He turned the large space into "the Chart Room" and took over an adjoining room to serve as a staging area, from which the charts could be rolled out on tracks.

His difficulty reading persuaded him that, as he said, "the best way to read a book is to get the author to tell you about it." When he was governor of New York and trying to fathom the moral complexities of abortion, he saw a reference to Thomas Aquinas in a newspaper editorial and asked a staffer to arrange a meeting with the eminent theologian.

When venturing forth to meet a new challenge, Rockefeller resorted almost reflexively to summoning experts to advise him. After he left HEW in late 1954, he became a special assistant to President Dwight Eisenhower for "psychological

But for Rockefeller "money posed no obstacle." The project's first report, appearing soon after Sputnik was launched by the Soviets in October 1957, sounded an alarm about American military strength. It led to Pentagon reform—and to public concern about a (nonexistent, as it turned out) "missile gap" with the Soviets.

Rockefeller had no liberal guilt about his inherited wealth. Once, on the campaign trail, a young woman asked him how it felt to be rich. "Fine!" he replied. "How's it feel to be good-looking?" In public office, he didn't hesitate to use his own money, as well as the taxpayers', to hire the people he wanted and push the causes he wanted to advance. When he was growing up on West 54th Street in New York, his father, John D. Rockefeller Jr., feared that money would spoil his children and so "devised a system of rewards wherein cash was doled out to the most charitable or dutiful of his offspring," Mr. Smith says. Nelson eventually learned to play his "tightfisted father," deploying at Dartmouth, for instance, his incipient political skills to extract from him a car, essential for entertaining girls. The grandson of "robber baron" John D. Rockefeller also pleased his father with a college thesis defending the Standard Oil Co.

Mr. Smith is not the first author since Rockefeller's death to attempt a full-scale biography. In the excellent first volume of Cary Reich's "Life of Nelson A. Rockefeller" (1996), Reich took his subject, in about 780 pages of detailed but lively text, from his birth in 1908 to his election as governor in 1958. Reich, alas, did not live to complete the second volume. Mr. Smith, who properly pays homage to Reich's work, had access to some material that Reich did not, and, writing in his own way, covers those same years in fewer than 300 pages, leaving some 440 for the eventful rest of Rockefeller's life.

Elected in 1958 and re-elected three times, Rockefeller left a legacy in New York of accomplishment and controversy. As he himself once said, he loved "to see the dirt fly," and the tangible result, as Mr. Smith recounts, included "a state university expanded from 38,000 to 244,000 students, 55 new state parks,

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109 hospitals and nursing homes, and 200 water treatment plants." The South Mall, a marble-clad government complex later named for him, was a Modernist behemoth that critics deemed a monstrosity, but there was no denying that it transformed downtown Albany—"for better *and* worse," Mr. Smith says. Rockefeller also "blazed [trails] in funding the arts, protecting the consumer, restoring the environment, and advancing transportation, human rights, highway safety, and a dozen other causes."

But the achievements came at a cost: State spending quadrupled between 1959 and 1974, and the tax burden grew rapidly, as did borrowing. Seeking, as always, "inventive ways to balance social responsibility and the bottom line," Rockefeller stubbornly refused to recognize limits to what could be done, Mr. Smith says. His budgetary excesses triggered a state credit crisis in the mid-1970s, though Mr. Smith says that "the challenges [then] confronting the state," which was "solvent, if overextended," should not be conflated with those that would bring New York City to the brink of bankruptcy in 1975.

During Rockefeller's final years as governor, liberals were dismayed by his donning the plumage of a budgetary hawk, his rightward shift on welfare, his brutal suppression of the rebellion at Attica state prison in 1971, and his draconian drug laws in 1973. Many thought his turn to the right was prompted by his unrealized presidential ambitions. They were a factor, Mr. Smith says, but just part of "a complex reassessment" that

he had made of government's capacity to meet social needs—finally, he recognized there were limits. Rockefeller was a pragmatist, not an ideologue. As speechwriter Joseph Persico put it: "He wasn't a liberal. He was a problem solver."

Having taken himself off the 1976 ticket at Ford's request, Rockefeller may have entertained the unrealistic notion that Ford and challenger Ronald Reagan would deadlock and that he, Rockefeller, would emerge as the nominee, but if he did so, it was only fleetingly. He nominated his replacement, Bob Dole, at the GOP convention in August and played no significant role in the fall campaign.

"Reconciling himself to the fact he would never be president," Mr. Smith writes, "didn't immunize Rockefeller from regrets. 'If only I did it the way [Jimmy] Carter did it,' he reflected." In the ensuing years, he stopped exercising, his girth grew. "Old friends detected a loss of vitality, the source of which was not hard to trace. . . . Pondering the miscarriage of his presidential hopes, he characterized his life as a failure."

After his death, no less a conservative than William F. Buckley, long impressed by Rockefeller's staunch anticommunism and more recently by his ability as governor to learn from his mistakes, wrote—in a judgment that would have appalled the yahoos at the 1964 convention—that it was "altogether possible" that Rockefeller "would have been a great president."

Mr. Landers is the author of "An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell."