

Dan Balz. *Collision 2012: Obama vs. Romney and the Future of Elections in America*. Viking, 2013. 381 pp.
Mark Halperin and John Heilemann. *Double Down: Game Change 2012*. Penguin Press, 2013. 499 pp.

The Making of Campaign 2012: *Collision 2012 and Double Down*

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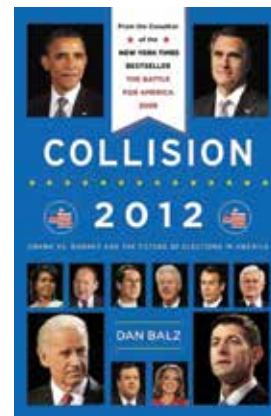
For 50 years now, political reporters have authored presidential campaign books in the shadow of Theodore White's *The Making of the President, 1960*. As historian Alan Brinkley explains, White's "awe-struck descriptions of the electoral world" seem absurd today because "politics and elections are more often than not tawdry, cynical, corrupt, and self-aggrandizing events."¹ Subsequent reporter-authors shifted the genre to reveal behind-the-scenes realities. Joe McGinnis exposed the Svengali ad men who sold candidates in Madison Avenue fashion with *The Selling of the President, 1968*; and Timothy Crouse recounted with *The Boys on the Bus*, how a sometimes jaded, sometimes critical press corps followed White in 1972.

After 2008, Dan Balz and Haynes Johnson produced *The Battle for America, 2008* and Mark Halperin and John Heilemann wrote *Game Change*. Both are impressive accounts that helped this reader understand the intense battle between leading political characters. Balz has repeated with *Collision 2012* (without Johnson), and Halperin and Heilemann with *Double Down*.²

Political science teachers should consider the genre and these new titles. They explain the roles and relationships of White House officials and campaign operators. They show how campaigns shape the message, and they tell off-the-record truths that only surface after the election. They update the reader on campaign technology, new party agendas, the role of super PACs, and the emerging voting blocs.

Collision and *Double Down* are comparable in length and are told in three chronological parts: Obama's post

mid-term administration, the Romney-dominant Republican primary contest, and the general election campaign. These books put 2012 in context. They each convey the trials and tribulations of Obama's first term and the circus-like GOP field (they give much more space to Donald Trump than Ron Paul). They both include backroom discussions and pressures that almost led to Chris Christie's candidacy, and Romney's near decision not to run. Romney's early misgivings and perhaps closer-than-remembered primary run shed light on his lack of confidence, which made him a hard sell in the general election campaign. Entire chapters are devoted to Clint Eastwood's bizarre performance at the GOP convention (one Romney staffer was reportedly so aghast, he vomited backstage). The books painstakingly explain campaign processes, especially the VP selection, the scripted conventions, and debate prep.



Collision and *Double Down* are different in their styles. Dan Balz, a seasoned *Washington Post* reporter, writes more formally, relies more

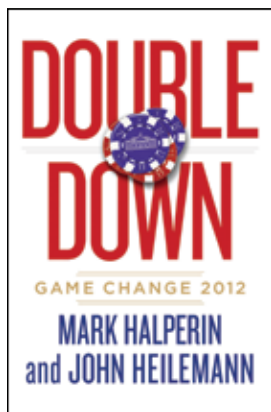
on data and traditional research, and provides paragraph-length quotes. His explanations more effectively reach the non-political junkie.

Balz explains technology and social media. Televised debates are no longer shaped afterward in the spin rooms, but in several stages on Twitter, following each moderator question and candidate response. In recruiting independent voters, Obama's political arm, Organizing for America, wrote a high-tech computer program specifically to reach such voters. Some fence sitters are inspired by a personal knock on the door; yet the Obama camp found many others preferred an email or text. The computer program matched and employed the preferred technique.

Both books follow trends of the post-White era. As Jonathan Yardley notes,

the genre has evolved with two developments: the rise of “new journalism,” first-person reporting that puts the writer into the story; and reportage driven by the desire to amuse or shock the reader.³

Balz, more than in his conventional reporting or his 2008 account, frequently writes in first person and explains his experiences with his interview subjects. If Balz has flirted with the new journalism approach, Halperin and Heilemann have taken shock and awe to a new level. They retell 2012 “with an eye toward the high human drama behind the curtain.”⁴ They give much space to West Wing palace intrigue, devote an entire chapter (“Uncle Joe”) to the vice president’s reckless mouth, and reveal how Team Obama floated a trial balloon about Hillary Clinton as the president’s new running mate.



Double Down’s authors did not offend this reader with their ever-present profane language, but forget photocopying any

sizeable passage for students, as you won’t find any without F-bombs from the polls as well as the authors. The *Double Down* team has made unsavory language a selling point. They quote President Obama atop the inside dust jacket as he prepared to debate Romney, “What am I supposed to do when he starts spewing his bullshit?” The promo copy arrived with a list of 13 sensational quotes, six of which are political notables or presidents using four-letter words or making sexual references.

Halperin and Heilemann do offer an original narrative that is hard to put down. They color characters and situations with spot-on pop culture analogies. They enhance our political lexicon. They’ve rightly labeled the Fourth Estate and its new extended family “the freak show,” and Romney’s inability to overcome his “Richie Rich” persona as “affluenza.”

Beyond reading these works for enjoyment or understanding, teachers can use authors’ findings or quotes to illustrate electoral concepts. Both books pointed to the GOP’s primary and the struggle to select an ideologically pure or electable nominee. The oft-quoted Haley Barbour, a former national chairman and skilled retail politician, noted, “Politics is about addition and multiplication; purity is

about subtraction and division.”⁵ For the classroom, such a quote might spice up a Power Point, spark discussion, or make a good essay prompt.

Journalists’ increased reliance on anonymous sources is worthy of examination. Halperin and Heilemann defend their 500-plus interviews done “on deep background,” saying, “In an ideal world, granting such anonymity would be unnecessary; in the world we actually inhabit, we believe it is essential to elicit the [necessary] level of candor.”⁶ Balz says some of his interviews “were embargoed until publication of the book,” and others were done with the promise of anonymity.⁷

Whether you’re teaching an audience that observed this past election or not, the Obama-Romney contest will—for at least three more years—be the example, and the authors of *Collision 2012* and *Double Down* have given us accurate and useful references. 🌐

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Notes

1. Alan Brinkley, “From Theodore White to *Game Change*: A Review Essay,” *Political Science Quarterly* 125, no. 3 (2010): 493–495. After winning a Pulitzer Prize for his first campaign book, Theodore White went on to write three more, *The Making of the President 1964*, *1968*, and *1972*.
2. Dan Balz and Haynes Johnson, *Battle for America, 2008: The Story of an Extraordinary Election* (New York: Penguin, 2010); John Heilemann and Mark Halperin, *Game Change: Obama and the Clintons, McCain and Palin, and the Race of a Lifetime* (New York: Harper, 2010); Dan Balz, *Collision 2012: Obama vs. Romney and the Future of Elections in America* (New York: Viking, 2013); Mark Halperin and John Heilemann, *Double Down: Game Change 2012* (New York: Penguin Press, 2013).
3. Jonathan Yardley, “Sharp Pencils,” *Smithsonian* 37, Issue 8 (November 2006): 100–108.
4. Halperin and Heilemann, authors’ note, 475.
5. Balz, 107.
6. Halperin and Heilemann, 476.
7. Balz, xii.

OTHER PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN NARRATIVES

Theodore White. *The Making of the President, 1960*. Atheneum, 1961. 400pp.

Joe McGinnis. *The Selling of the President, 1968*. Simon and Schuster, 1969. 253 pp.

Lewis Chester, Godfrey Hodgson, and Bruce Page. *An American Melodrama: The Presidential Campaign of 1968*. Viking, 1969. 814 pp.

Timothy Crouse. *The Boys on the Bus*. Random House, 1973. 383 pp.

Hunter S. Thomson. *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*. Straight Arrow, 1973. 505 pp.

Jules Witcover. *Marathon: The Pursuit of the Presidency, 1972–1976*. Viking, 1977. 684 pp.

Elizabeth Drew. *Portrait of an Election: The 1980 Presidential Campaign*. Simon & Schuster, 1981. 459pp.

Richard Ben Cramer. *What it Takes*. Vintage, 1993. 1051pp.