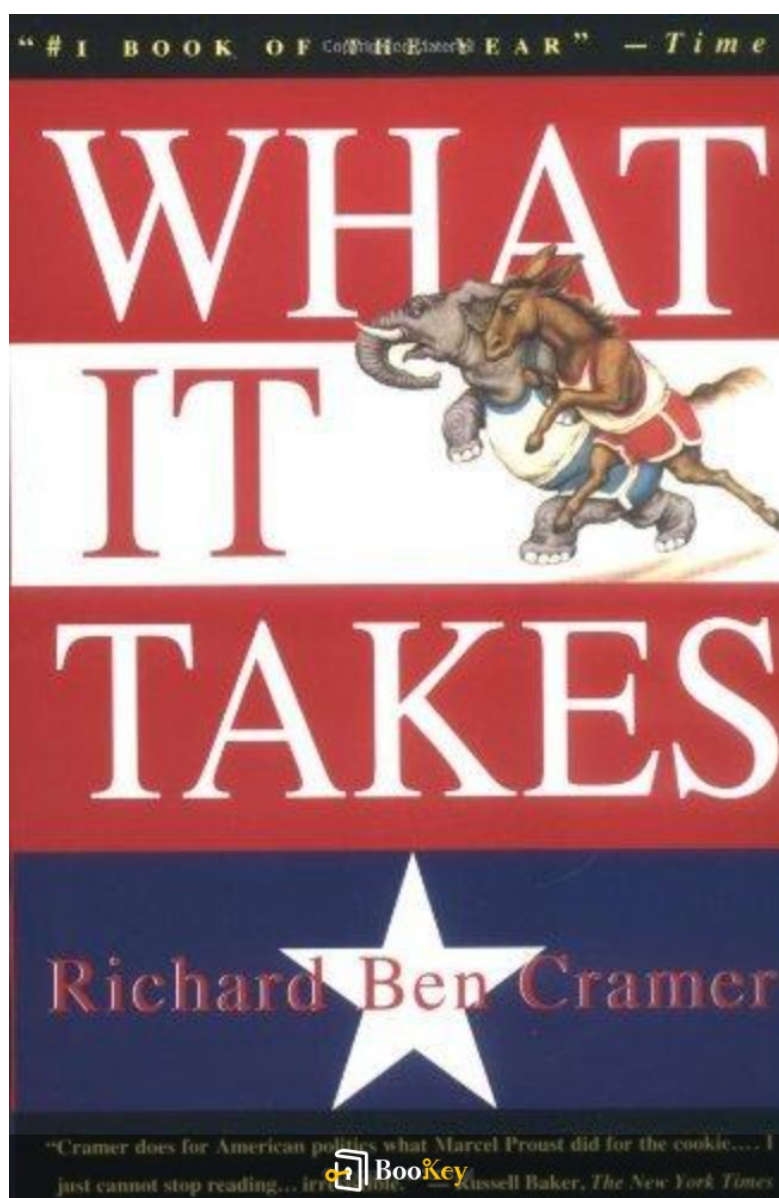


What It Takes By Richard Ben Cramer PDF

Richard Ben Cramer



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About the book

Book Summary: "What It Takes" by Richard Ben Cramer

In this captivating exploration of the 1988 presidential campaign, Richard Ben Cramer delves into the intricate and often tumultuous journey toward the U.S. presidency. With a unique combination of engaging storytelling and thorough investigative reporting, Cramer unveils the personal narratives that underlie political aspirations.

Each candidate's story is vividly portrayed, showcasing their struggles, resilience, and the immense pressure of the race for the nation's highest office. Cramer goes beyond conventional political commentary, offering a deep dive into the ambitions and vulnerabilities that drive these men to pursue the top position.

By examining the emotional and psychological toll of a presidential campaign, Cramer presents an insightful portrait that prompts readers to re-evaluate their perceptions of leadership and ambition. This thought-provoking narrative also encourages reflection on the personal sacrifices involved in the relentless pursuit of power.

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About the author

Profile: Richard Ben Cramer

Overview:

Richard Ben Cramer, a distinguished American journalist and author, was renowned for his immersive narrative style that brought stories to life with depth and detail.

Birth and Early Life:

- Date of Birth: June 12, 1950
- Place of Birth: Rochester, New York

Career Highlights:

- Cramer made a significant impact in both print and broadcast journalism.
- He received the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for International Reporting in 1979 due to his exemplary work covering the Middle East for The Philadelphia Inquirer.

Notable Works:

1. What It Takes - A comprehensive analysis of the 1988 U.S. presidential campaign, celebrated for its in-depth portrayal of the political landscape.
2. Joe DiMaggio: The Hero's Life - A thought-provoking biography of the legendary baseball player, revealing the complex life behind the icon.

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Legacy:

With his unique storytelling abilities and commitment to detail, Cramer set a high benchmark in political and biographical writing, influencing countless readers and writers. He passed away in 2013, leaving behind a rich legacy in journalism.

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Summary Chapter List

1. Introduction: Understanding the Political Landscape of American Presidential Campaigns
2. Chapter 1: The Unforgettable Characters: Candidates Who Defined the 1988 Election
3. Chapter 2: Struggles and Triumphs: The Human Side of Political Ambition
4. Chapter 3: Media Influences: The Role of Television in Shaping Elections
5. Chapter 4: Lessons Learned: Key Takeaways from the 1988 Presidential Race
6. Conclusion: Reflections on Campaigning and the Nature of American Politics





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1. Introduction: Understanding the Political Landscape of American Presidential Campaigns

Understanding the political landscape of American presidential campaigns is an essential endeavor for anyone interested in the dynamics of democracy and governance in the United States. This landscape is characterized by its complexity and ever-evolving nature, shaped by a multitude of factors such as cultural shifts, technological advancements, and the unique personalities of the candidates themselves.

In his compelling narrative, "What It Takes: The Way to the White House," Richard Ben Cramer delves deep into the 1988 presidential election, providing a rich tapestry of insights that illuminate the mechanisms behind campaigning at the highest political level. This election is particularly significant as it marked a turning point in the modern political arena, setting precedents in campaign strategy, media interaction, and voter engagement that resonate even in today's political climate.

Cramer takes us through the intricate world of political ambition, illustrating how candidates navigate the treacherous waters of public opinion, media scrutiny, and the relentless pursuit of winning. The candidates of 1988, especially figures like George H.W. Bush, Michael Dukakis, and Jesse Jackson, exemplify the diverse and often conflicting motivations that drive individuals to seek the presidency. Each candidate brought their unique



background, beliefs, and strategies to the campaign trail, reflecting broader societal changes and aspirations.

The 1988 race is also notable for the way it highlighted the evolving role of media, particularly television, in shaping public perception. As candidates became increasingly aware of the importance of media representation, their campaigns began to pivot towards more theatrical and visual strategies; this shift not only transformed how politicians presented themselves but also how voters engaged with political narratives. The implications of these changes continue to be felt today with the rise of social media influencing election cycles.

Another crucial aspect Cramer emphasizes is the human element of campaigning. He illustrates how personal stories, charisma, and relatability can often eclipse policy discussions in the eyes of voters. This is epitomized in the way George H.W. Bush's personal narrative of service and integrity resonated with the public, contrasting sharply with Dukakis's more abstract policy-focused approach.

Through this exploration, Cramer provides readers with an understanding of the relentless competition and the psychological dimensions of politicians as they strive for the highest office. Candidates are depicted not just as political figures but as individuals wrestling with their ambitions, fears, and the



burdens of public life. The willingness to endure the personal sacrifices required for a bid for the presidency is a theme that Cramer weaves throughout the narrative, presenting a poignant commentary on what it truly means to aspire to lead a nation.

In essence, the introduction to "What It Takes" offers a profound perspective on the political landscape of American presidential campaigns. It serves as a reminder that behind the headlines and sound bites, each election cycle is a microcosm of human ambition, resilience, and the intricate dance between public perception and personal narrative. Understanding this landscape is not merely an academic exercise but a crucial step in comprehending the functioning and evolution of American politics.

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2. Chapter 1: The Unforgettable Characters: Candidates Who Defined the 1988 Election

The 1988 presidential election in the United States was noteworthy for its defining characters, a cast of candidates whose personas, backgrounds, and ideologies painted the political landscape vividly. Richard Ben Cramer masterfully illustrates how these individuals not only shaped the election but transformed American political dialogue. The election season was a rich tapestry woven with ambition, scandal, and charisma, providing voters with a dramatic choice that would influence future political paradigms.

At the forefront of this election cycle were George H.W. Bush and Michael Dukakis, two candidates who represented starkly different visions for America. George H.W. Bush, the Republican nominee, was a seasoned political figure with a background in international diplomacy, having served as Reagan's Vice President. His campaign was marked by a commitment to a continuation of Reagan-era policies, wrapped in a persona that projected moderation and stability. Bush's charm was effective; he often leveraged his long-standing relationships within the political establishment to bolster his candidacy, positioning himself as a safe choice for a nation anxious about the future.

In contrast, Michael Dukakis, the Democratic nominee and then-Governor of Massachusetts, represented a shift toward liberalism. His campaign

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promised a focus on domestic issues, particularly in economic reform and health care. Dukakis embodied the intellectual, technocratic approach that was emblematic of a new breed of politicians; he prided himself on a data-driven methodology, which, while appealing to some, often stripped away the emotional appeal voters typically seek. His campaign, however, became mired in difficulties, most notably with the infamous "Willie Horton" ad, which drew attention to issues of crime under his watch as governor and raised questions regarding his effectiveness as a leader.

Cramer paints a vivid portrait of these candidates, showcasing how their personal stories and public personas clashed in the unforgiving arena of the election. Bush often played the role of the affable family man, drawing on his experience as a World War II veteran and a father, which made him relatable to ordinary Americans. In contrast, Dukakis's polished, cerebral demeanor sometimes alienated voters who found him cold and disconnected from common experiences.

The 1988 election also featured other significant characters, such as the independent candidate H. Ross Perot, whose entrance into the race highlighted a growing disenfranchisement with traditional party politics. A billionaire businessman, Perot's unfiltered style and innovative use of media – particularly his televised infomercials – attracted significant attention and showcased a populist message centered on patriotism and fiscal



responsibility. His campaign illustrates the shifting dynamics in American politics, where traditional two-party loyalty was increasingly being challenged by outsider candidates willing to confront the status quo.

Throughout this election cycle, Cramer emphasizes how each candidate's narrative played a crucial role in their campaigns. The personalities behind the politics became focal points; for instance, Bush's portrayal as a family man willingly clashed with Dukakis's depicted technocrat persona. This stark contrast was critical in defining the electoral battle lines.

By analyzing the unforgettable characters of the 1988 election, Richard Ben Cramer encourages readers to reflect on the nature of political ambition and the profound impact that individual narratives have on shaping electoral outcomes. The characters were not mere candidates; they were embodiments of ideologies, ambitions, and the American spirit itself. Each played a role in engaging voters, for better or worse, with the hopes and fears of a nation at a pivotal moment in its history.

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3. Chapter 2: Struggles and Triumphs: The Human Side of Political Ambition

Political ambition is often portrayed as a cold game of strategy, where numbers and polls drive decisions. Yet, Richard Ben Cramer's "What It Takes" takes a deep dive into the human side of this ambition, illustrating that behind each candidate is a tapestry of struggles and triumphs that define their journey. In chapter two, Cramer explores the personal experiences, hardships, emotional challenges, and ultimate victories that shaped the candidates during the tumultuous 1988 presidential campaign.

At the heart of political ambition lies the relentless pursuit of a dream. Cramer vividly details the stories of the candidates, showcasing their motivations and the hurdles they faced. For example, we observe how George H.W. Bush, driven by the legacy of his father's political career and a desire to carve out his own path, faced the interior struggle of defining his identity away from his family's shadow. While he had the experience and connections, the constant comparison to his father and the expectation to perform stifled his genuine self at times.

Cramer also dives into the stories of lesser-known candidates, such as Douglas Wilder, the first African American elected governor in the United States. Wilder's path was fraught with apathy from the political elite and a society reluctant to embrace change. His triumph was not just being a



contender in the presidential race but also serving as a beacon of hope for many marginalized communities. This dichotomy of struggle and triumph highlights the emotional weight that candidates carry as they navigate the labyrinth of politics.

Furthermore, Cramer juxtaposes the grand ambitions with the personal sacrifices that candidates must make. Take the case of Michael Dukakis, the Democratic candidate whose ambitious campaign became overshadowed by personal tragedies, including his wife's battle with cancer. This situation humanized him in the eyes of the voters; he was not merely a politician but a man grappling with very real, devastating personal challenges while attempting to hold his campaign together. His struggle showcased both vulnerability and resilience—a mix that Cramer adeptly illustrates as integral to the essence of political ambition.

Additionally, the chapter doesn't shy away from discussing the balance between public persona and private reality. Candidates like Jesse Jackson, who sought to express the hopes and frustrations of the African American community, often faced immense pressure to translate that ambition into palpable results amidst systemic resistance. Cramer reveals that Jackson's triumphs were often intermingled with palpable struggles, illustrating the precarious balance of fighting for recognition and overcoming societal barriers.



Cramer's portrayal extends beyond mere individual narratives; he emphasizes that political ambition is rarely a solitary journey. Instead, it thrives in the community—supporters, family, and friends are intricately woven into these narratives of struggle and triumph. For instance, the support network that champions a candidate during adversities often becomes a critical factor for success. When Dukakis was under heavy scrutiny, it was his close-knit team that rallied behind him to withstand the pressures and maintain his vision for a better America.

By revealing these personal dimensions of political ambition, Cramer highlights the complexities that often go unnoticed in electoral politics. The human struggles of candidates are as significant as their political ideologies, shaping their electoral strategies and how voters perceive them. This chapter effectively conveys that ambition in politics is not merely the manifestation of desire for power; it is crafted through personal narratives filled with heartaches, victories, and the relentless pursuit of purpose.

Ultimately, Cramer's insights provide a nuanced understanding of the human side of political ambition. He underscores that while politicians are often viewed as aspirants for power, they are also individuals—tangled in their fears, aspirations, and the realities of their personal lives—striving to forge connections with constituents, prove their worth, and fulfill the often



conflicting demands of their ambitions. This exploration of struggles and triumphs paints a richer picture of the political landscape, encouraging readers to empathize with the human elements behind the ambitions that shape American politics.

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4. Chapter 3: Media Influences: The Role of Television in Shaping Elections

In the landscape of American presidential campaigns, television has emerged as a powerful force, altering not just the way candidates communicate but fundamentally reshaping the fabric of political discourse. The role of television in the 1988 presidential election, vividly examined in Richard Ben Cramer's "What It Takes," reveals the complex interplay between media influence and political outcomes.

Television's pervasive reach means it dictates the narratives surrounding candidates, often favoring style over substance. In the realm of politics, the visual medium magnifies personality traits and personal stories, crafting relatable images of candidates that can either elevate or tarnish their public perception. Cramer illustrates this with the contrasting images of George H.W. Bush and Michael Dukakis. Bush, with his charismatic presence and warm demeanor, connected with voters on a personal level, a critical advantage in an era where television could elevate a candidate's appeal with just a well-crafted appearance.

Conversely, Dukakis struggled to translate his policy ideas into a compelling visual message. His infamous tank ride, which was meant to project a robust image of leadership, instead backfired, as it became a punchline rather than a statement of strength. This failure highlights how television can easily



misinterpret intentions and render candidates vulnerable to public ridicule, impacting their electoral viability.

Cramer carefully navigates the landscape of visual politics, noting how debates and televised appearances become pivotal moments in a campaign. The 1988 election witnessed pivotal debates becoming a focal point of media coverage and public discourse. The famous debates, particularly the second one, illustrated how candidates could sway public perception in mere minutes through sound bites and body language. Bush's performance, characterized by his calm and composed demeanor, showcased a stark contrast to Dukakis's perceived aloofness and disconnection.

The implications of media influence extend beyond individual candidates to encompass larger themes such as political messaging and voter engagement. Cramer discusses how advertising on television became a cornerstone strategy in campaigns, with candidates utilizing slick production values to create memorable ads that encapsulate their messages. The memorable 'Willie Horton' ad campaign against Dukakis exemplifies how negatively charged content can shape public perception dramatically. This advertisement not only capitalized on fear but also effectively linked Dukakis to perceived weaknesses in crime policy, demonstrating the potency of targeted television ads in swaying voter sentiment.



Furthermore, Cramer examines the fragmentation of media sources and how that has affected the electoral landscape. While the 1988 election was still defined largely by traditional television networks, the seeds of a changing media environment were already being sown. Future elections would see candidates needing to navigate not just television, but also emerging platforms that would further amplify or distort their messages, complicating how voters receive information.

Ultimately, the case studies from the 1988 election encapsulated in Cramer's observations underline a critical lesson: the ability of a candidate to succeed in modern politics is increasingly intertwined with their media savviness and adaptability to television's demands. As elections continue to evolve with the advent of new technologies, the foundational influence of television remains central, illustrating the dynamic nature of how political narratives are shaped and reshaped in the public arena.

Cramer's exploration underscores an essential truth about American politics: the battle for the presidency is as much about the powerful images projected on screens as it is about policies and platforms. Candidates must learn to navigate this treacherous media landscape, where their public persona can be a deciding factor in their electoral fate.



5. Chapter 4: Lessons Learned: Key Takeaways from the 1988 Presidential Race

The 1988 Presidential Race was a watershed moment in American political history, encapsulating lessons that resonate far beyond its immediate context. Richard Ben Cramer's extensive exploration of this period illuminates several key takeaways that are essential for understanding the evolution of American presidential campaigning.

One of the most striking lessons from the 1988 election is the importance of authenticity in political communication. The candidates, George H.W. Bush and Michael Dukakis, portrayed markedly different images to the electorate, and these perceptions played a crucial role in shaping voter preferences. George H.W. Bush, with his background in public service and his ability to connect on a personal level, projected an air of authenticity and confidence, traits that appealed particularly to undecided voters. In contrast, Dukakis, often seen as stiff and overly intellectual, struggled to humanize himself. His infamous moment in the debate, where he failed to convey a visceral response to a question about his wife's hypothetical rape and murder, underscored the peril of being perceived as detached. This election highlighted that voters crave candidates who appear genuine and relatable, lessons that are evident in subsequent campaigns where emotional resonance often trumps logical arguments.



Another significant takeaway is the evolving role of media in political campaigns, which was starkly illustrated in the 1988 race. The power of televised debates and news cycles came to the forefront, dictating not only the narrative but the momentum of the candidates. The infamous Willie Horton ad, used by the Bush campaign, exemplifies how negative advertising can decisively shape public perception. It was a precursor to the aggressive media strategies seen in later elections, underscoring the significance of dominating media narratives. Candidates learned that the media could serve as a double-edged sword; it could propel them into the limelight or bring devastating scrutiny. This understanding led to a more calculated approach in subsequent elections where candidates often befriend the press while simultaneously preparing to combat unfavorable coverage.

The 1988 election also revealed the importance of grassroots mobilization and the changing dynamics of voter coalitions. The Bush campaign made effective use of ground operations, engaging volunteers who managed local outreach efforts that built personal connections with voters. Similarly, Dukakis's campaign experienced a backlash from voters who felt unmotivated and disconnected from the campaign's message, illustrating the essential nature of fostering enthusiasm and dedication at the ground level. This aspect of campaigning went on to influence future electoral strategies significantly, leading to the establishment of data-driven campaigning techniques and the prioritization of engagement in local contexts.



A crucial lesson as well was the significance of party unity and strategic endorsements. Throughout the campaign, Bush benefited from a cohesive Republican base that was unified in their mission to regain the presidency following the two terms of Ronald Reagan. In contrast, Dukakis faced challenges in consolidating support among various Democratic factions, which diluted his campaign's potency. This demonstrated the necessity for candidates to not only possess a message that resonates with the electorate but also the ability to unify their party in support, a lesson that future candidates have strived to implement.

Lastly, the 1988 race emphasized the need for candidates to adapt and innovate in their approaches. With the electorate becoming more polarized and sophisticated, the ability to pivot in response to evolving political climates became essential. The evolving demographics and priorities of the electorate meant that candidates could not afford to remain static in their strategies. Lessons about adaptability and understanding the shifting political ground are pivotal for any candidate aiming to succeed in modern elections.

In summary, the 1988 Presidential Race, through its memorable candidates, pioneering media strategies, grassroots mobilization, and the importance of authenticity, provided a rich tapestry of insights into effective campaigning



in American politics. Cramer's narrative encapsulates these lessons, offering a robust framework for understanding the challenges and strategies that characterize presidential elections.

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6. Conclusion: Reflections on Campaigning and the Nature of American Politics

In the final analysis of Richard Ben Cramer's "What It Takes," we are left not only with a vivid recollection of the events surrounding the 1988 presidential election but also a deeper understanding of the intricate and often tumultuous nature of American politics. Campaigning is recognized as both an art and a battle—one that requires strategic acumen, an understanding of human nature, and a readiness for the unpredictable. Cramer paints a detailed picture of the candidates who ran, the media landscape they navigated, and the intense pressures that come with politicking at such a high level.

One of the most profound reflections Cramer offers is that every candidate must contend not only with their opponents but with their own vulnerabilities and ambitions. The personal journeys of figures like Michael Dukakis and George H.W. Bush are particularly illuminating. Cramer delves deep into their backgrounds—Bush as the son of a prominent political figure, and Dukakis with his own rich, albeit tumultuous, history in Massachusetts politics. These insights underscore the idea that behind every candidate lies a complex interplay of personal and professional motivations, external pressures, and the constant need for reinvention.

Cramer's work also highlights the unavoidable influence of media in modern



campaigning. The way candidates are portrayed—be it through television commercials, news coverage, or public debates—shapes public perception and can ultimately determine the success or failure of their campaigns. Cramer notes painful examples where missteps were amplified by a voracious media landscape; for instance, Dukakis's infamous tank photo op became a flashpoint that signaled his disconnection from the electorate, while Bush's carefully curated image was beneficial in establishing his persona as a seasoned leader. Here, Cramer implies that image often matters as much as substance in American politics, leading to reflections on whether this reliance on optics betrays the democratic process.

Furthermore, Cramer doesn't shy away from exposing the brutal realities of political warfare. The relentless nature of campaigning, characterized by endless travel, speeches, and fund-raising, takes a personal toll on candidates and their families. The emotional and psychological strains are palpable; candidates are often stripped bare before the electorate, their decisions scrutinized, and their weaknesses exposed. This raw reality serves as a reminder of the sacrifices involved in seeking the highest office and raises essential questions about the health of the political system itself. Are we, as a society, demanding too much of our candidates? What toll does this take on governance once they are elected?

As Cramer reflects on the lessons learned from the 1988 campaign, he urges

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consideration of the broader implications for the future of American politics. The trends observed during this election cycle—intensified media focus, increased partisanship, and the challenge of authenticity—set the stage for future campaigns and the manner in which candidates relate to voters. In the years that followed, we have witnessed the rise of social media, altering the dynamics of campaigning further and creating new challenges and opportunities for political figures.

In conclusion, "What It Takes" serves as a lens through which we can examine not just the 1988 presidential election but the evolving nature of American political culture. Cramer compels us to appreciate the complexity of campaigning, where human emotion, ambition, and the juggernaut of media converge. As we navigate contemporary political landscapes, reflecting on these narratives can provide valuable lessons in understanding the pressures that shape our leaders and the overall health of our democratic practices.

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