

War and Politics by Other Means: A Journalist's Memoir

Shelby Scates

University of Washington Press (October 2000)

\$24.95 (224pp)

978-0-295-98009-6

This workmanlike memoir takes Scates from hardscrabble Depression Tennessee to the Pacific Northwest and onward to thirty-five years of exploring America and the world, first as a young merchant seaman, then a fledgling reporter, and eventually a prize-winning journalist for the International News Service, UPI, AP, and The Seattle Post-Intelligencer. The book's title, loosely drawn from Von Clausewitz, refers to the author's beat—war and politics—and he has surely witnessed plenty of both, and much more.

He's done everything from watching a knife fight in a sailor's bar in India to crisscrossing America with Lyndon Johnson aboard Air Force One as LBJ agonized over whether to run for reelection in 1968. His first big story, in 1957, took him to Little Rock, Arkansas, where Governor Orval Faubus defied a federal court order to desegregate Central High School until President Eisenhower dispatched the 101st Airborne to hold back angry white mobs; more than twenty years later, he was filing reports from 18,000 feet as a member of the first American expedition to summit K2, the Himalayan peak second only to Everest. In between, he's heard the crackle of gunfire in half a dozen countries, from the Golan Heights to the Cambodian jungle, witnessed a remarkable variety of historic events, and met an astonishing roster of colorful people. He's a newspaperman of the old school, and his stories evoke such scenes as the Louisiana Statehouse under Earl Long, a clandestine PLO headquarters in Cairo, and a firefight between Khmer Rouge guerrillas and the invading Vietnamese army.

The book is not without its flaws, the foremost of which paradoxically stems from the very thing that made Scates an able reporter. Vivid, exciting, and often genuinely historic as his chronicle is, his instinct is to follow an unfolding story, not elaborate on it, so these are frequently sketches rather than portraits and the reader may sometimes wish he had added a bit more detail, although he provides fine background accounts to put his own role and perspective into context. Here and there, the editing leaves something to be desired, most of all in the final chapter, which leaps confusingly back in time to discuss the author's Tennessee forebears; logic would suggest that this worthwhile material belongs toward the front of the book, not as a somewhat awkward endpiece.

These quibbles aside, *War and Politics by Other Means* offers an eventful, perceptive glimpse of many people and places that made headlines from mid-century on, both here and all over the globe.

PEYTON MOSS (November / December 2000)

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