



***Perfect and Otherwise:
Documenting American Politics***

R.J. Cutler

Full Frame's annual Thematic Program allows the festival the opportunity to address ongoing issues and ideas by showcasing films from the past. Some years, the Thematic Program focuses on concepts unrelated to current events, but other years, it seems almost imperative that we reference the times in which we live. As we speed toward the 2016 U.S. presidential election, amid a piercing din of increasing media coverage, we are compelled to examine the ways that documentary films have captured our American electoral process and the candidates at its center.

We are thrilled to have filmmaker R.J. Cutler join us to curate this year's Thematic Program. From *The War Room* to *A Perfect Candidate* to *The World According to Dick Cheney*, Cutler's films have illuminated significant moments and personalities within American politics, preserving pivotal events through unforgettable images.

Thirteen documentaries, spanning more than 60 years of filmmaking, give viewers a chance to revisit decisive historic moments, and prove that some customs and rituals of the campaign trail and political life never change.

In this interview, R.J. Cutler speaks with director of programming Sadie Tillery about his selections.



SADIE TILLERY

*Let's start at the beginning. Robert Drew made **Primary in 1960** and **Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment in 1963**, landmark documentary films, in terms of *cinéma vérité* and in terms of documenting political processes. How have those titles influenced the political documentary genre?*

R.J. CUTLER

There are many ways to view the films collected in "Perfect and Otherwise: Documenting American Politics," but those who choose to do so chronologically will experience a narrative of both American politics and documentary filmmaking over a 65-year span. *Primary* and *Crisis* provide a Rosetta stone to both of those narratives. Joining Bob Drew on the filmmaking adventure for both films were Ricky Leacock, Al Maysles, and DA Pennebaker, a Murderers' Row of *vérité* filmmakers who would go on to create the most important and influential films of the genre for decades to come.

With *Primary*, of course, we see two young senators, future president Jack Kennedy and future vice president Hubert Humphrey, battling for the 1960

Wisconsin Democratic presidential primary. The story of this campaign is told using what was at the time breakthrough technology: a hand-held camera synced to a portable sound recorder so that filmmaker and subject are equally mobile. Moving from private places to public, the camera brings viewers inside the campaign as the candidates themselves are experiencing it and reveals the subjects in ways that had simply never been seen before. As a result we witness Kennedy and Humphrey as they experience startling moments of transformation and revelation, which turn out to be defining cornerstones of each of the *vérité* films in this program. Remarkable moments range from the mundane (JFK enters a building, walks through a crowd, maneuvers backstage, and takes the stage, where he joins his wife and brother Bobby) to the sublime (both Humphrey and Kennedy await the results of the primary, and we gaze into their eyes and perhaps even their souls, as they contemplate the implications of both victory and defeat).

In *Crisis* the connection to the subjects goes even deeper. It's 1963, JFK is president and Bobby Kennedy is the attorney general. Their antagonist is the boyish governor George Wallace of Alabama, whose inaugural



address featured his declaration of, “Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.” When we meet him, Wallace has just declared that he will not allow African Americans to register at the University of Alabama regardless of what the Supreme Court has decided. As I recall, he said something like, “Over my dead body,” and something else like, “You can tell Bobby Kennedy I said so.”

As a showdown between the southern state governor and executive branch develops, Drew and his collaborators are given truly remarkable access. Building upon the relationships they developed with the Kennedys during the campaign, there is clearly a foundation of trust between subject and filmmakers, and down in Alabama, Wallace takes to the filmmaking process like a fish to water. The drama surrounding the showdown is powerful and emotional, and even features the federalization of the National Guard, which goes from being under Governor Wallace’s command to President Kennedy’s at what seems to be a moment’s notice. But the film’s true greatness comes from its presentation, before our very eyes, of the moral maturation of President Kennedy, who at the relentless urging of his brother determines to engage Wallace and his vision of America head-on in spite of the fact that it might jeopardize his presumed upcoming re-election bid. The film culminates with Kennedy’s televised address to the nation only weeks before his assassination, in which he exhorts the American people to look into our hearts on matters of race and equality and to decide, finally, what kind of a people we truly want to be.

From its inception, one of the defining conceits of the vérité movement was that real people—Bible salesmen, high school students, popular musicians, politicians—could be every bit as compelling on screen as actors performing roles might be. Shot observationally by filmmakers who had earned their trust, these subjects could carry entire films by themselves. In short, through cinéma vérité, real people could become movie stars. In the political realm, with *Primary* and *Crisis*, for the first time we see that come to pass.

Do you think it is still possible to make political films like that today? I think the world is much more conscious of being recorded—and what’s recorded can be shared in ways that weren’t possible in the 1960s. I wonder if that has an impact on access and authenticity.

This question arises every election cycle, and it’s an important one. One might be inclined to argue that the kind of access required to make these films is simply no longer available in today’s hyper-savvy media culture. In the age of Donald Trump and the Cable News Media—Industrial Complex, one could wisely point out that subjects are too self-aware around anything with an on-off switch, political candidates and those who run their campaigns are too protected and insulated, everyone is media-trained and suspicious of someone with a camera, and no one would possibly allow a filmmaker the kind of insider access required to make a vérité film along the lines of *Primary* or *Crisis*.

But one could have easily made that same argument in 1992, when I first spoke with George Stephanopoulos and pitched him the idea of making a film about that year’s presidential campaign as seen from the perspective of then-governor Bill Clinton. George was kind, respectful, and blunt. “That’s a great idea,” he said, “and I would love to see that film. But it’s never going to happen. My job is to stop you from making that film.”

One could have also made that argument two years later, when David Van Taylor and I first approached Mark Goodin and Mike Murphy, who were running Oliver North’s Senate campaign. We met with the same resistance. “It’s never going to happen,” we were told. “No one around here is looking to be a movie star. This isn’t Bill Clinton’s campaign.”

A wise mentor once taught me that “no” was just a pathway to “yes,” and that at least when someone is saying, “no,” they’re engaging in a conversation with you, so on some level you have them exactly where you want them. As a result, neither of these initial conversations dissuaded me, and both *The War Room* and *A Perfect Candidate* came to pass. But it’s true: The Clinton and North campaigns were functioning in a far more media-savvy universe than the Kennedy and Humphrey campaigns, and they each had plenty of people whose very jobs, as George explained it, were to stop us from gaining inside access.

How then can a filmmaker in the early 21st century gain the kind of access necessary to make films along the lines of *Primary*, *Crisis*, *The War Room*, and *A Perfect Candidate*? The answer is surprisingly simple, and it’s the same thing that Drew, Maysles, Leacock, and Pennebaker had to do in the early 1960s: earn the subject’s trust.

I learned this lesson indelibly early on during the filming of *The War Room*. In spite of his initial resistance, and his continued refusal to give our team access to Clinton himself, George had agreed to allow us to film with him and his fellow strategists during that year's Democratic convention ("Oh, you want to film with me," he said. "What exactly did you have in mind?") During the course of that week, we filmed with all of the key Clinton figures, including James Carville—then still known only to political insiders as the Ragin' Cajun, but irresistible to us—as he electrified the Clinton team and energized them with a non-stop flurry of full-frontal attacks on everything associated with George Herbert Walker Bush. ("He reeks of yesterday; he's the stench of yesterday; he is so yesterday, if I think of an old calendar, I think of George Bush's face on it.") By the time we got the 16mm dailies processed and threaded through the eight-plate Steenbeck in directors Chris Hegedus and DA Pennebaker's Upper West Side edit suite, it was evident that James was something special. As we sat watching the dailies, Pennebaker said, "That guy's a movie star. We should make a film about him." It was, of course, a brilliant idea. Now we just needed to convince James.

After much wrangling, George and James invited us to come meet with them in Little Rock. We made our pitch to James, and he thought it through. Finally he said, "There's only one thing that matters to me, and that's getting Bill Clinton elected president. If I'm worrying about how I look on camera, or what my momma's going to think when I cuss, then I'll be getting distracted from doing my job. So why would I let you film me?" There was a long pause, and my impulse was to fill it with persuasion—Do it for history! Do it because you're awesome! Do it because it will make you famous! Whatever you need to hear, just do it! But Pennebaker knew better. "That's up to you, James," he said. "Everyone decides to be part of these films for his own personal reasons. If you decide to do it, I will be here, because this is my life's work. And if you change your mind, you'll just let us know, and we'll go away, knowing we all gave it our best shot. But why you would do it has to be your own decision. It's really none of my business."

I was shocked. Where was the hard sell? We were going to let him decide for himself?! As we went back to our hotel room to await James's decision, I couldn't have been more nervous. I asked Pennebaker about his approach. "He has to either trust us or not," he said. "That's the only thing that matters, and it's up to him. And he needs to know that we understand that, or the trust can't begin."

Two hours later, James called the hotel room. "Come on down to the War Room and start filming tonight," he said. It was the last discussion about access that we ever had. The movie was being made.

As long as filmmakers can earn their subject's trust, access-driven movies will continue to be made. And while one would be naive to ignore the obstacles of making a vérité film in the Media Age, one should also think of some critical advantages to making such a film in 2016. Camera equipment is so much more affordable and less obtrusive than it was in years past. Audio recording is so much more advanced. Subjects have treasure troves of home videos and still photographs just sitting on cell phones waiting to be accessed by industrious filmmakers.

The bottom line: We must make these films. They tell extraordinary stories about remarkable characters. They get to important issues about the men and women who lead our country, and the process by which we choose them. They ask crucial questions about who we are as a nation. If nothing else, I hope the films in this program are an argument that these kinds of documentaries must continue to be made, and will serve as encouragement, even inspiration, to do so.

Caucus is the most recent film in the series. Do you see a distinction between it, having been filmed in 2012, and some of the older work in the series?

Caucus tells the story of the 2012 Iowa Republican presidential caucus and is fascinating to watch in the context of the other cinéma vérité campaign films in this program. It's a film made with a keen observational eye, one that allows the viewers to engage fully and have their own complete experience, and in that way it is very much a descendent of the early vérité films that we've been discussing. But unlike those films, which present their narratives through the eyes of inside-the-campaign characters, *Caucus* provides a more observational view of the campaign. In doing so, director AJ Schnack brings to the fore a central character who exists only in the background of the previous films: the American voter.

When seen in the context of films like *Primary* and *The War Room*, *Caucus* is a primer on the way that the campaign universe has changed over the last six decades. It should come as no surprise that the biggest change of all is the presence of the media. Early on, Schnack shows us a gigantic television screen, as if to announce that this film exists in the literal and metaphorical context of an overwhelming media presence. But the film simultaneously underscores a central theme of all of the movies in this program: The more

things change, the more they remain the same. Retail campaigning is fundamentally the same, whether it's Michele Bachmann doing it in 2012 or Hubert Humphrey doing it in 1960. The issues that arise have been central to our national argument since John Adams ran for president: The connections to the voters (or lack thereof) are the connections to the voters (or lack thereof). Talent, money, negative campaigning, crucial strategic decisions, and the zeitgeist all play their roles. And, at the end of the day the voter-candidate relationship is deeply personal; we see that playing out before our very eyes in *Caucus*, most compellingly in the engagingly empathic portrayal of Senator Rick Santorum and the various voters with whom he engages.

In the context of this program, *Caucus* also serves as a bridge to 2016. As clearly as the dots connect throughout these films, so that each one provides its own insights into the current state of American politics, it becomes much easier to draw the line through them all with *Caucus* as the last reference point. Could it be that the giant television I mentioned earlier is Schnack's prescient foreshadowing of the Trump to come? As with many of the other vérité films, *Caucus* serves as a corollary to Thomas Jefferson's insistence (warning?) that in a democracy we get the leaders we deserve, and that, of course, is that we get the campaigns we deserve as well.

One thing that seems to exist through the years is an inability to talk about issues. Debate quickly turns to sport. Candidates seem interested in attacking each other, and it costs serious money to launch that sort of offense. Budgets come up over and over again in films about campaigns. Are there other through lines you see—universal truths, if you will—that run across these films and still resonate today?

Looking at the films together reveals all sorts of fascinating through lines in American politics over the last 60-plus years. As I've said, the most resonant common theme is that as so many things change and evolve, the very defining fundamentals of the process remain the same. So it becomes deeply interesting, for instance, to examine the role of the campaign strategist as it grows and alters (and doesn't) throughout the series, and particularly so as we see James Carville emerge as a strategist celebrity in *The War Room*, only to have his role, his profession, and the company he created post-*War Room*, thoroughly deconstructed in *Our Brand Is Crisis*. Similarly, the role of the media in these films evolves (as does the size of the screens on which campaigns are delivered to the citizenry),

and you can see that role being confronted in a striking way over time with the whole series being viewable through the prism of *Medium Cool* or *A Perfect Candidate*, each of which features a journalist as its main character.

The presence of the outsider candidate turns out not to be unique to recent electoral politics in America by any stretch of the imagination, a fact evident in many of these films. A woman running for president; an African American running for president. Is it 2008? Nope, it's 1972, and Shirley Chisholm is making exponential history all by herself as documented in *Chisholm '72: Unbought & Unbossed*. Does anyone recognize the narrative of the upstart outsider left-wing candidate who shocks the mainstream establishment by energizing the youth vote and achieving a near game-changing triumph in the New Hampshire primary? Of course we do—that's *The Bernie Sanders Story*. Nope, it's *America Is Hard to See* and the candidate is Eugene McCarthy. Again and again we see resonances with our own moment, as when the Republican base forges a partnership with a right-wing faction only to find the arrangement backfiring and causing many to wonder if they've created a monster they'll be unable to control. Is it the Tea Party or even Donald Trump? Indeed not, it's the Moral Majority, whose relationship with Ronald Reagan is chronicled in David Van Taylor's *With God On Our Side: Prophets and Advisors*.

Those who view the films in this series will find many other common themes and through lines but my personal favorite involves the interplay between cynicism and romanticism. Scratch a cynic, after all, and you'll find a romantic, and nowhere is this truer than on the battlefield of American politics. This dynamic plays out in *Crisis*, *Medium Cool*, *With God on Our Side*, *Taking On the Kennedys*, and *Our Brand Is Crisis*, and the relationship between the romantic and the cynic was a driving concern while David Van Taylor and I were making *A Perfect Candidate*, a film we promoted as "The Dark Underbelly of *The War Room*." *A Perfect Candidate* is also a film filled with people who are desperately crisscrossing the state of Virginia looking for something in which to place their faith. And that's the motif that speaks loudest to me: the search for something to believe in.

You said earlier that "moments of transformation and revelation turn out to be defining cornerstones of each of the vérité films in this program." Can you explain?

Documentary is often seen through the prism of its subject. Even in this discussion we're talking a lot about the facts of the campaigns or the events of the times that these films portray even more so than the filmmaking, the specifics of the narrative, or the characters at the core of the films. But the films in this series are first and

foremost about their characters and they are all constructed as narratives. This is particularly true of the vérité films, which have the unique ability to present their characters in a deeply revealing manner, and we see that evident throughout the films in this program (though *With God On Our Side* and *Chisholm '72* are as character driven as archival and interview-based documentaries can be). Accordingly, the films we've collected are filled with remarkable moments in which we see our main characters transform before our very eyes. They learn things, and we see them come to the realizations that alter their lives, even if those realizations include the fact that their lives are not going to change in the manner they were hoping. And this, of course, is the essence of drama.

I've already spoken of the moments of transformation in *Primary* as JFK, tensely pulling on his cigar, and Hubert Humphrey, surrounded by his family, each await the returns and come to realize the full implications they represent. In *Crisis*, we watch as Bobby Kennedy gets the phone call informing him that his brother will indeed make a speech on national television to challenge the American people to "stop and examine their conscience," and then we witness President Kennedy as he gives that very speech. We also watch the moment in which George Wallace determines that in fact it's time to acquiesce to the now-federalized National Guard, but we also see him make the choice to declare to the passenger riding with him in his car, "The South this year will decide who the next president is . . . because you can't win without the South. And you're going to see that the South is going to be against some folks."

Many of these moments come in defeat, as when Shirley Chisholm puts the phone down in *Chisholm '72* after releasing her delegates to the Democratic convention and confronts the meaning of her campaign's conclusion. ("We have to pray over the matter," she says.) Equally powerful is Kevin Vigilante's realization towards the end of *Taking On the Kennedys* that his opponent's star power and negative campaigning are going to prevail. And, of course, there's Mark Goodin's summary of his lessons learned and his promise-of-sorts to change in the immediate wake of Oliver North's losing bid for the Senate against Charles S. Robb in *A Perfect Candidate*. Reflecting back on one of the ugliest campaigns anyone can remember, he says, "We should just never have let off the gas on the guy. I'll never make that mistake again. We should have just kept pounding away."

Many other moments come in victory, with my very favorite taking place towards the end of *The War Room*. It's late afternoon on Election Day. The Secret Service

is doing a security sweep of campaign headquarters in case the candidate decides to come by to celebrate and thank the staff later that night. As a result, the War Room has cleared out, and only James Carville and George Stephanopoulos have been allowed to remain inside. It has already become clear to both men that Bill Clinton is going to win in a landslide. In that very moment we see two men whose lives will never be the same again. Their subject becomes how to address the about-to-be-elected President.

"When I try to say it," George says, "it's going to be hard."

"I don't know," James asks. "What do you say? 'Mr. President Elect?'"

"I . . . I . . . I assume you just gotta say, 'Mr. President,'" answers George. "You just say, 'Congratulations, Mr. President.'"

And then there is a long pause. James, who is holding a cardboard tube, whacks it on the table in front of him a bunch of times and looks ahead. George just smiles. After a while he says, "That's weird." James continues to whack the cardboard tube.

And there, sitting on a kind of existential precipice, contemplating not the void, but all the possibilities that lie before them, James Carville and George Stephanopoulos try to figure out what the future will hold.

This is the kind of moment that only vérité can capture. And it is as powerful a moment in cinema as there can possibly be.

There's a quote in A Perfect Candidate where Mark Goodin says, "Getting people elected has a lot to do with dividing . . . but that is different from what it takes to govern. Because what it takes to govern is all about finding consensus on difficult issues and bringing people together—people who don't always agree—under some sense of common purpose. And we are obsessed with getting people elected, and we are obsessed with the show. And so are you, or you wouldn't be here." To me, that sung out as a thesis of sorts for the films you've selected. Sometimes the titles seem less about the candidates at their center and more about the bureaucratic labyrinth that is our political process. I'd love to know your thoughts on that.

Yes, yes, I'm so glad you brought that up! I love Mark Goodin's quote there, because it functions on so many levels. On one hand it accurately describes the conundrum at the center of political campaigns in a democracy. In order to win you have to beat the other guy, which means separating yourself out from your opponent and reducing his support as much as possible. You can accomplish your goal by attracting more support for your cam-



paign, or you can accomplish your goal by creating a situation in which your opponent's campaign gets less support. That's why negative campaigning is so valuable—if you can get more people to dislike the other guy, you don't have to worry about getting more people to like you. And the more you can smash the other guy's support to bits the more effective you can be. But, as Goodin explains, that's the opposite of what it takes to govern in a democracy. Because in a democracy you have to find ways to achieve common ground. And that takes bringing people together, often through compromise. Of course in the era of the permanent campaign we find ourselves in a situation where governing has taken a back-seat to campaigning, and that's how you have an environment of permanent gridlock in Washington, D.C.

But then Goodin goes on to say the thing that really excites me: "We are obsessed with getting people elected, and we are obsessed with the show. And so are you, or you wouldn't be here." And the reason it excites me is because it's so true. We are *all* implicated! We, the filmmakers love the show. David Van Taylor and R.J. Cutler love the show. Otherwise we wouldn't have spent a year of our lives chasing after Oliver North across what he called the length and the breadth of the Old Dominion. And we the American people love the show, otherwise we wouldn't tune in in droves to watch Donald Trump call people idiots and make fun of Carly Fiorina's face and degrade Megyn Kelly for menstruating and call the junior Senator from Florida Little Marco and talk about the size of his penis with the desperate insistence of a man who has reason to worry about the size of his penis. Because as much as some voters think it's a gruesome car crash, others find it appeals to their Nationalist Authoritarian zeal—and between both sides we as a nation can't seem to take our eyes off of it. Goodin explained all of this in 1994, and it's been that way since Adams and Jefferson went at it (or at least their surrogates in the press did) in 1796. We love a democracy that functions. But we also like a good mudsling. And we have since the beginning of our Republic. It's one of the prices we must pay in a democracy. Can we survive it? What role does the media play in all

of this? Does it matter who owns that media? We must discuss!

In the films gathered in this program, we see these conflicts and contradictions explored, examined, considered. We can't avoid them because they are defining elements of our democracy. From *Primary to Crisis to Campaign Manager*. From *Medium Cool to America Is Hard to See to Chisholm '72 to With God On Our Side*. From *The War Room to A Perfect Candidate*. From *Taking On the Kennedys to Our Brand Is Crisis*. From *Caucus* to whatever news program you watched today on whatever channel you watched it. Goodin's defining speech provides an enlightening perspective to the whole damned thing.

We are all obsessed with the show. Otherwise we wouldn't be here. For better or worse. And that's fascinating stuff. ■

The 2016 Thematic Program is provided with support from the Sanford School of Public Policy Innovation and Impact Fund. Fellows from The Center for Politics, Leadership, Innovation, and Service (POLIS) at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University attend Full Frame to understand how documentary skills can impact their work in shaping public policy.