

Swint, Kerwin. *Mudslingers: The Top 25 Negative Political Campaigns of All Time*. Westport, CT.: Praeger, 2006. 254pp.

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Political campaigns in the United States were negative from the start. John Adams's Federalist supporters described Thomas Jefferson in the 1800 election as "a mean-spirited, low-lived fellow, the son of a half-breed squaw, sired by a Virginia mulatto father" (p.183). Professor Kerwin C. Swint's *Mudslingers* stands as further evidence that this tradition is fully intact. Starting with Bush v. Kerry in 2004 and ending with George Wallace's racist campaign for governor in 1972, Swint counts down the most negative presidential, congressional, gubernatorial and mayoral campaigns in American history.

Mudslingers is an accessible book, and should find a large, popular audience. Swint's style of prose is punchy, entertaining and engaging, occasionally sprinkled with Dan Rather-isms. Senator Alphonse D'Amato's support in the New York Jewish community "crumbled like a day old cookie" (p.28) and Jesse Helms reversed an opponent's attack during a debate "in an act of political jujitsu" (p.41). *Mudslingers* is also loaded with mocking and caustic remarks. To Nixon's pledge to run a clean campaign against Helen Gagahan Douglas in 1950, Swint snorts "right!"(p.170) and "what a whopper"(p.166). To Nixon's financial support of George Wallace's opponent, Albert Brewer, Swint sneers "oh the irony"(p.226). All in all, it appears that Swint enjoyed writing the text and his tendency to editorialise should bear fruit in the form of sales, if not accolades.

Frustratingly, Swint does not offer justification for his selection of negative campaigns. Nor is the ordering of the campaigns rationalized or legitimised. And in what appears to be his own clever jujitsu move, Swint argues there is no objective criterion on which to base such assessments, meaning there is no reliable solution to the question of which campaigns to include and exclude. Swint simply challenges his reader to "take it all in" and "see if you agree with the presence and rank of the campaigns" (p.xv).

This approach seems a missed opportunity to explore some of the broader trends in American politics which informed political campaigns. A candidate's fear of a widespread electoral realignment, which likely intensified close races, is eschewed. The growing dissolution of the liberal consensus in the mid-1960s receives little play. And the Republican Party's organisational and institutional strengths, such as the development of sophisticated advertising and fundraising techniques through direct mail, the compiling of voter lists, and of political action committees are accorded little attention. Swint's format, wherein the 25 mini-essays essentially stand on their own, allows these threads to fray when he had a chance to weave them into a seamless garment. This is nit picking, however, and one should be cautious in criticising an author for failing to achieve a goal he/she did not intend to achieve.

More problematic is the use of source material by Swint. A survey of the citations indicates there is little original research in *Mudslingers*. Swint deigned not to visit any archives, nor conduct any oral interviews. Besides the work of print and internet journalists, he utilises only secondary sources to chronicle the 25 most negative campaigns. Though a conjecture, one would think the 2006 midterm elections quickened the publishing process. And considering *Mudslingers* is as amusing and accessible as it is, it could serve as a useful teaching tool for undergraduate students devoid of long attention spans in a climate of twenty second sound bites and overheated political excitement.