

what it takes by richard ben cramer

what it takes by richard ben cramer is a seminal work that delves deeply into the intricate lives and characters of American political figures. This influential book offers an unparalleled glimpse into the 1988 presidential campaign, focusing on the ambitions, strategies, and personalities of key candidates. Richard Ben Cramer's masterful storytelling and investigative journalism provide readers with a vivid portrait of political ambition and the personal costs associated with seeking the highest office in the United States. Throughout this article, the comprehensive analysis will explore the book's background, themes, critical reception, and its lasting impact on political literature and electoral studies. This exploration will also highlight how "what it takes by richard ben cramer" stands out for its detailed character studies and the humanization of political figures, making it a must-read for enthusiasts of political history and campaign dynamics.

- Background and Context of "What It Takes"
- Key Themes Explored in the Book
- Major Political Figures Featured
- Writing Style and Narrative Approach
- Critical Reception and Influence
- Impact on Political Journalism and Literature

Background and Context of "What It Takes"

"What It Takes" by Richard Ben Cramer was published in 1992 after several years of meticulous research and interviews. It chronicles the 1988 U.S. presidential election, focusing on the lives and campaigns of the major candidates. Cramer spent extensive time with politicians such as George H.W. Bush, Bob Dole, Michael Dukakis, and others, providing readers with an intimate look at the personal and political struggles they faced. The book emerged during a period when political reporting was often surface-level, making Cramer's in-depth approach revolutionary. His work captures the complexity of American electoral politics during the late 20th century, revealing the intense preparation, strategic maneuvering, and emotional resilience required to contend for the presidency.

Key Themes Explored in the Book

"What It Takes by Richard Ben Cramer" explores numerous profound themes that resonate beyond the 1988 campaign. The book investigates the nature of ambition, the role of personal sacrifice, and the psychological toll of political life. Cramer also addresses the concept of power and leadership, scrutinizing what qualities define a successful presidential candidate. Another central theme is the interplay between public image and private reality, illustrating how candidates carefully craft personas while grappling with their vulnerabilities. Throughout the narrative, the tension between idealism and pragmatism in politics is a recurring subject.

Ambition and Sacrifice

The book portrays ambition as a driving force that compels candidates to endure immense personal and professional sacrifices. Cramer reveals how the pursuit of the presidency demands unwavering dedication, often at the expense of family life and personal well-being.

Leadership and Character

Cramer delves into the character traits that influence a candidate's leadership style, such as resilience, empathy, and decisiveness. The exploration of leadership qualities extends to the ethical dilemmas candidates face during campaigns.

The Public vs. Private Persona

A significant portion of the narrative focuses on how candidates manage their public images, balancing authenticity with the strategic need to appeal to voters. This theme exposes the complexity behind political branding and media interaction.

Major Political Figures Featured

The richness of "What It Takes by Richard Ben Cramer" lies in its detailed character studies of the 1988 presidential candidates. The book profiles several key figures, providing biographical context and insights into their motivations and campaign tactics. Cramer's access to these individuals enables a rare portrait of their personalities and campaign dynamics.

George H.W. Bush

As the eventual winner of the 1988 election, Bush's journey is examined

thoroughly. The book highlights his political career, personal background, and strategic approach to winning the presidency, including his relationships within the Republican Party.

Bob Dole

Dole's long political career and his perseverance in the face of setbacks are central to his depiction. Cramer explores Dole's legislative achievements, campaign challenges, and his efforts to connect with the American electorate.

Michael Dukakis

The Democratic nominee's rise and campaign strategies are analyzed, focusing on his policy positions, personal style, and the obstacles he encountered during the race.

Other Candidates

The book also profiles other less prominent candidates, such as Joe Biden and Gary Hart, adding depth to the overall narrative by showing the varied paths and experiences within the same electoral contest.

Writing Style and Narrative Approach

Richard Ben Cramer's writing style in "What It Takes" is notable for its literary quality combined with journalistic rigor. His narrative approach blends biography, political analysis, and storytelling, creating an engaging and informative read. Cramer employs vivid descriptions and direct quotes to bring characters to life, while maintaining a balanced, objective perspective.

Immersive Storytelling

Cramer's immersive method involves spending significant time with subjects, which allows him to capture nuanced details about their personalities and campaign environments. This technique results in a richly textured narrative that reads almost like a novel.

Detailed Character Portraits

The book's emphasis on character development distinguishes it from typical political reporting. By focusing on the human side of politics, Cramer provides readers with a deeper understanding of what drives presidential

candidates beyond policy and strategy.

Comprehensive Research

Extensive interviews, firsthand observations, and meticulous fact-checking underpin the book's credibility. Cramer's dedication to thorough research ensures that the narrative is both accurate and insightful.

Critical Reception and Influence

Since its publication, "What It Takes by Richard Ben Cramer" has been widely acclaimed by critics, historians, and political analysts alike. The book is often cited as one of the greatest political campaign books ever written, praised for its depth, detail, and human insight. It has influenced how journalists and authors approach political biographies and campaign coverage.

Acclaim from Critics

Reviewers have lauded Cramer's ability to humanize political figures and provide a behind-the-scenes look at the electoral process. The book's narrative style and comprehensive scope have been particularly highlighted as strengths.

Impact on Political Reporting

The detailed, character-driven approach pioneered by Cramer has inspired subsequent generations of political journalists and writers, encouraging a more nuanced and empathetic portrayal of candidates.

Use in Academic and Political Circles

"What It Takes" is frequently referenced in political science courses and campaign training programs, serving as a resource for understanding the complexities of presidential campaigns and candidate psychology.

Impact on Political Journalism and Literature

The lasting legacy of "What It Takes by Richard Ben Cramer" extends beyond its immediate subject matter. The book set a new standard for political journalism by blending investigative reporting with literary storytelling. It opened the door for more in-depth political biographies and campaign narratives that explore the human dimensions of political life.

Evolution of Campaign Coverage

Cramer's work contributed to a shift in campaign coverage towards more comprehensive and personal portrayals of candidates, moving away from superficial or purely policy-focused reporting.

Inspiration for Future Works

Many prominent political writers and journalists have cited "What It Takes" as an inspiration for their own work, demonstrating its influence on the genre of political literature.

Legacy in Political Culture

The book remains a reference point in discussions about political ambition, leadership, and the demands of public service. Its insights continue to inform debates about what qualities are essential for those who seek the presidency.

Key Takeaways from "What It Takes by Richard Ben Cramer"

- The presidency demands extraordinary personal sacrifice and resilience.
- Leadership qualities are complex and multifaceted, extending beyond political skill.
- Political campaigns are as much about managing public perception as they are about policy.
- In-depth character studies enrich the understanding of political figures.
- Thorough, immersive journalism can transform political reporting.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main theme of 'What It Takes' by Richard Ben Cramer?

The main theme of 'What It Takes' is an in-depth look at the 1988 U.S.

presidential election, focusing on the personal and political lives of the candidates and what it takes to run for the presidency.

Who are the primary subjects featured in 'What It Takes'?

The book primarily profiles George H.W. Bush, Bob Dole, Joe Biden, Michael Dukakis, and Gary Hart, offering detailed insights into their campaigns and personalities.

What makes 'What It Takes' a unique political book?

Richard Ben Cramer provides an unprecedented, intimate portrayal of presidential candidates, blending political analysis with rich storytelling that reveals the human side of politics.

How did Richard Ben Cramer research for 'What It Takes'?

Cramer conducted extensive interviews, spent significant time with the candidates and their families, and followed their campaigns closely to gather detailed information.

What impact has 'What It Takes' had on political journalism?

The book is considered a landmark in political journalism for its depth and narrative style, influencing how political biographies and campaign coverage are written.

Is 'What It Takes' only about the 1988 presidential election?

While it focuses on the 1988 election, the book also explores broader themes about ambition, character, and the nature of leadership in American politics.

What writing style does Richard Ben Cramer use in 'What It Takes'?

Cramer uses a narrative nonfiction style that combines detailed reporting with storytelling techniques to engage readers deeply in the political process.

Why is 'What It Takes' recommended for political

enthusiasts?

Because it offers a comprehensive and humanized view of presidential candidates, providing insights into their motivations, challenges, and the complexities of running for president.

Has 'What It Takes' received any notable praise or awards?

Yes, the book has been widely praised by critics and political figures alike for its meticulous research and compelling narrative, often cited as one of the best books on American presidential politics.

Additional Resources

1. *What It Takes: The Way to the White House* by Richard Ben Cramer

This is the original book that offers an in-depth look into the lives and campaigns of the 1988 U.S. presidential candidates. Cramer provides a detailed and humanizing portrait of the ambition, strategy, and personal struggles involved in running for the nation's highest office. It is widely regarded as a definitive work on American political campaigns.

2. *The Audacity to Win: The Inside Story and Lessons of Barack Obama's Historic Victory* by David Plouffe

Written by Obama's campaign manager, this book gives an insider's perspective on what it takes to run a successful political campaign in modern America. It details strategy, organization, and the personal dedication required to achieve a historic presidential victory.

3. *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation* by Drew Westen

This book explores how emotions, rather than facts alone, influence voter decisions. Westen argues that understanding the emotional underpinnings of political behavior is crucial for candidates seeking to connect with the electorate and win campaigns.

4. *Game Change: Obama and the Clintons, McCain and Palin, and the Race of a Lifetime* by John Heilemann and Mark Halperin

A comprehensive account of the 2008 U.S. presidential election that highlights the strategic moves and personal dynamics behind the scenes. The book illustrates the complex interplay of personality, media, and political tactics necessary to succeed in a high-stakes campaign.

5. *The Making of the President 1960* by Theodore H. White

A classic political narrative that chronicles John F. Kennedy's campaign and victory in 1960. White's detailed storytelling captures the challenges and triumphs that define what it takes to win the presidency during a transformative era in American politics.

6. *Hardball: How Politics Is Played, Told by One Who Knows the Game* by Chris Matthews

Offering a candid look at American political strategy, this book breaks down the tactics and maneuvers used by politicians to gain advantage. Matthews emphasizes the grit, calculation, and resilience needed to navigate the often ruthless world of politics.

7. *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Change* by Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky

Though broader than politics alone, this book provides essential insights into the leadership qualities required to drive change and overcome resistance. It highlights the emotional stamina and strategic thinking necessary for leaders facing high-pressure situations, such as political campaigns.

8. *The Victory Lab: The Secret Science of Winning Campaigns* by Sasha Issenberg

This book delves into the data-driven revolution in political campaigning, showing how analytics, psychology, and technology have transformed the way candidates connect with voters. It reveals the behind-the-scenes innovations that contribute to modern campaign success.

9. *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* by Doris Kearns Goodwin

Focusing on Abraham Lincoln's leadership style, this historical biography illustrates how political skill, empathy, and coalition-building are critical components of effective leadership. It provides timeless lessons on what it takes to lead and succeed in the political arena.

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