

The 'Washington read' and the 'Clindex'

What is the Washington read? In May 2004 Jennifer Lee in the *New York Times* offered the following 'politically savvy' definition: 'the perusal of a book by checking the index for references, usually to oneself, and reading only those parts of the book'.

The earliest known citation of the term, according to Mary Battiata in the *Washington Post*, goes back to 1985: 'There was the usual jesting about the "Washington read," which consists of a flip through the index in search of one's name. "I always thought what I'd do was list people in the index but not put them in the book," said former Carter press secretary turned political columnist Jody Powell.'

More recently, the Washington read was mentioned in a hearing of the September 11 commission:

MR. THOMPSON: Have you read this book?
MR. ARMITAGE: I'm the only honest person in Washington.
MR. THOMPSON: (Laughs.)
MR. ARMITAGE: I gave it the Washington read.
MR. THOMPSON: You looked in the index to see if your name was in it.
MR. ARMITAGE: And then what was said about me.

Some authors, or their publishers, seek to avoid this phenomenon by omitting the index from the book. Richard Ben Cramer's *What it takes: the way to the White House* (1992), a 1000-page account of the 1988 US presidential campaign, was published without an index. As the Wordspy website reports, the author explained to the *New York Times*: 'For years I watched all these Washington jerks, all these Capitol Hill, executive-branch, agency wise guys and reporters go into, say, Trover bookstore, take a political book off the shelf, look up their names, glance at the page and put the book back. Washington reads by index, and I wanted those people to read the damn thing.'

James D. Pinkerton, an adviser to the 1988 Bush-Quayle campaign, 'had his secretary pre-read the book, combing it for any references to him', but the result was a mere two mentions.

Jennifer Lee wrote:

Walter Shapiro, a political columnist for *USA Today*, chose [the same] strategy for *One-car caravan: on the road with the 2004 Democrats before America tunes in*, a book about the early stages of the presidential campaign. As he explained in the book's introduction: 'All of us on the fringes of the political game have stood in book stores riffling through the alphabetized final pages of a new book to see if we are mentioned. This egoistic ritual inspires either the transient joys of relevance or the lasting agonies of rejection. To spare everyone further emotional turmoil, I have dispensed with the editorial feature that has caused more heartbreak than the senior prom.'

But ABC News assigned an intern to index Mr Shapiro's book and posted the results on its web site. 'The book came out and we were so disappointed that a classic Washington book didn't allow for the Washington read, and inspired by *Spy* magazine's famously creating an index for the unindexed *Warhol diaries*, we decided to do the same thing,' said Mark Halperin, the political director of ABC News.

Mr Shapiro is said to have been amused.

Peekers piqued?

One of the most widely perused indexes to a book of political memoirs in recent times must be the 'Clindex' – a coinage by *Newsweek* to refer to the index to Bill Clinton's autobiography, *My life*. Purchasers of this book, as well as those who merely peeked at the index instead of purchasing, were allegedly outraged to discover that, as Peter Canellos reported in the *Boston Globe*:

The 38-page index isn't complete. It isn't even accurate. And thus the one thing that made the book a 'Washington read' – the chance to learn who was or wasn't included – was lost like an invitation that got caught in the mail.

Why, for instance, among the foreign-policy gurus listed on page 103 are ambassador Edwin Reischauer and diplomat George Kennan listed in the index, while New York Timesman Harrison Salisbury and Massachusetts' own General James Gavin are not?

Worse, some mildly promising mentions are wrong. The index says page 563 refers to Barbra Streisand's friendship with Clinton's mother, but it actually discusses presidential appointments, the National Child Protection Act, and crafts chosen by Hillary as 1993 Christmas decorations.

Meanwhile, Christopher Buckley's 'revised' Clinton index in the *New York Times* caused general amusement, with spoof entries such as

Clinton, William Jefferson, 42nd President of the United States
Achievements of: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8–246, 248–488, 490–587,
589–957

and

Woman, That, see also Lewinsky, Monica.

Purists might object to this last entry that the 'see also' cross-reference should be a 'see' one, and that in any case there is no entry for 'Lewinsky, Monica'.

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