

Henry Bellmon with Pat Bellmon, *The Life and Times of Henry Bellmon*. (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Council Oaks Books, 1992) pp.381. \$24.95 ISBN 093303147.

A day or two spent with Henry Bellmon's reminiscence of his 44 years in public service is the equivalent of taking a three-hour graduate course on Campaigns and Elections. Clearly, retrospection endows one with marvelous insights about whatever the matter at hand, but Bellmon's account of his various campaigns leaves little doubt that much of his success can be attributed to his innate sense of "politics." Presented in anecdotal fashion, the author reveals time and again that understanding and mastering the fundamentals is an imperative. How simple it is to walk the streets meeting the voters, but how important not to spend more than a few seconds before moving on. Or, who would naturally think to begin working a pool hall from the rear of the building rather than the front in order to avoid being waylaid by boozy conversationalists? Many are the lessons to be learned about the "art" of politics from this master practitioner.

But more than a political primer, the book is a catalogue of events that reveals how an ordinary American farmer responded to one of the most exciting and challenging periods in American history. In Bellmon's accounting, the ordinary becomes uncommon and the results are history.

Those who have had reason to observe Oklahoma politics over the years are familiar with Henry Bellmon, and although constituent enthusiasm for his brand of representation may have been seriously challenged on occasion, most can agree that his hallmark has been his integrity. In this book his character is more fully revealed by the stories he tells, and as he does so, a personality emerges that enables the reader to better understand the motivation that powered his most controversial choices.

Bellmon's wartime experiences were paramount in the development of his interest in elective office. The juxtaposition of killing Japanese on Iwo Jima one week and fraternizing with them in Hawaii the next cast the concept of war in such a bizarre light that he was never able to get over the senselessness of the military solution. This experience contributed to the development of a sense of fairness that is revealed often as he recounts the subsequent events of his life.

Returning to Oklahoma as a highly decorated marine officer, he was easily elected to the state house of representatives. Two years later, he was defeated because he failed to campaign for the seat he held. It was the only loss he ever sustained in his long career and one of the most important political lessons he ever learned.

When serving as Oklahoma's first Republican governor and the first Southern Republican governor elected since Reconstruction, his sense of fairness led him in the opposite direction of his party and most other Oklahomans as well.

He readily declared his support for the federal mandate to integrate the schools by busing students if, when, and where necessary. This position, repeated again on numerous occasions after Bellmon was elected to the U.S. Senate, was not popular with much of his constituency, but the forthrightness of his declaration inured to his benefit. He was reelected to the Senate by voters who said, "I don't always like his position, but at least I know where he stands."

Bellmon goes to great lengths to justify his vote on the Panama Canal protocols. It apparently was the one event in his career that made a greater impact on him than anything else and his feelings for it show through as he reprints for the reader his speech on the floor of the Senate. Here again, his thoughtful approach to making his decision focused on fairness and conflict resolution by peaceful means. Unfortunately, his constituents were not as concerned with peace and reason as Bellmon was and many considered his vote an act of treason.

Bellmon writes his memoirs in a Hubert Humphrey, "Happy Warrior" style. Can life be all that great? After 44 years of dealing with politicians at all levels of government, isn't there something mad, bad, or mean you would like to say? For instance, after confounding his constituents for the better part of his life, Bellmon is true to form by confusing his readers about his feelings for Ed Gaylord, publisher of the *Daily Oklahoman*. In his book, Bellmon tells us much about his friendship with Gaylord but fails to reveal how he really felt when Gaylord abused him unmercifully on his editorial pages for years.

On another occasion, Bellmon tells the story of his hairbreadth victory in the U.S. Senate race in 1974. After a lengthy court challenge by his opponent, followed by Senate consideration of the dispute, Bellmon won the race by one vote, which he attributes to Senator Lloyd Bentsen. His anger and dismay over the whole proceeding, mildly summed up in one word, "Baloney", is not convincing. If Senators Humphrey and Muskie had been more emphatically characterized by deleted expletives for their deceitful behavior, the reader could have experienced a greater level of edification and Bellmon would have been more believable.

Bellmon's relatively benign reaction, as recounted in these remarkable events, is a reflection of the manner in which he responded to most things. He rarely lost control of his temper. When confronted by disconcerting news, he would often just shake his head, ponder the information in a detached sort of way, and move on to the next subject.

In his final chapter entitled "Swan Song", Bellmon reminisces about President Bush's visit to the state during the campaign of 1992. It is a fitting, though melancholy, note on which to conclude the story of a distinguished political career. Bellmon, whose popularity has sagged under the burden of years of as-

suming controversial positions, was denied a place on the platform with the official presidential greeters, in spite of the fact that he was the Oklahoma State Chair of the Bush for President campaign two years earlier. Instead, he stands alone in a crowd of partisan enthusiasts, watching the congressman, senator, and candidate for governor – all of whom denied the Bush candidacy in its early days – posture for the cameras and crowd as they try to soak up as much reflected glory as they can. The hypocrisy of the moment is not lost on Bellmon as he considers the irony of it all. He concludes that he had been there too long, and leaves – the symbolic finale of his political career.

After all the anecdotes and riveting references to people and events long gone, Henry Bellmon offers advice on what it takes to serve the public. In his words,

“My own career has shown that it is not necessary for an individual to be rich, handsome, eloquent, famous, brilliant, charismatic, or clairvoyant to be elected and serve in high political office. What seems to be necessary is a common touch, a closet free of skeletons, an abundance of energy, the ability to communicate clearly and directly, a supportive family, and a wealth of friends. A refusal to be cowed by long odds helps, as does a sense of humility and a thick skin. Most of my political life, even in the midst of heated controversy, I have felt good about my involvement in politics and government. Sometimes I won; sometimes I lost; but on balance my sense of accomplishment greatly exceeds the frustrations... Its been a good forty-four years. At the same time I'm glad the phoniness is over for me and my family.”

As historical and political science literature, *The Life and Times of Henry Bellmon* should be required reading. It covers a period of nearly fifty years and sheds light on a raft of people, some forgotten and some still in power. It is a volume that is easily read and full of insights. However, other accounts of the Bellmon years must be added to the literature because this one autobiography simply does not do justice to the subject of Henry Bellmon: enduring, respected, public servant.

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