



Private Lives/Public Consequences: Personality and Politics in Modern America

William H. Chafe

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A political leader's decisions can determine the fate of a nation, but what determines how and why that leader makes certain choices? William H. Chafe, a distinguished historian of twentieth century America, examines eight of the most significant political leaders of the modern era in order to explore the relationship between their personal patterns of behavior and their political decision-making process. The result is a fascinating look at how personal lives and political fortunes have intersected to shape America over the past fifty years.

One might expect our leaders to be healthy, wealthy, genteel, and happy. In fact, most of these individuals--from Franklin Delano Roosevelt to Martin Luther King, Jr., from John F. Kennedy to Bill Clinton--came from dysfunctional families, including three children of alcoholics; half grew up in poor or only marginally secure homes; most experienced discord in their marriages; and at least two displayed signs of mental instability. What links this extraordinarily diverse group is an intense ambition to succeed, and the drive to overcome adversity. Indeed, adversity offered a vehicle to develop the personal attributes that would define their careers and shape the way they exercised power.

Chafe probes the influences that forged these men's lives, and profiles the distinctive personalities that molded their exercise of power in times of danger and strife. The history of the United States from the Depression into the new century cannot be understood without exploring the dynamic and critical relationship between personal history and political leadership that these eight life stories so poignantly reveal.

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