

PERIODICALS

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POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Predictable Candidates

"Why Great Men Still Are Not Chosen President" by Stephen Hess, in *The Brookings Review* (Summer 1987), 1775 Massachusetts Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

In 1888, Oxford law professor James Bryce, author of *The American Commonwealth*, accused American voters of accepting "mediocrity" in their presidential candidates. Powerful political organizations, he wrote, only supported candidates from large states since "the objective was winning, not governing." Today, "political parties are in decline," argues Hess, a Brookings senior fellow, "and there is still no certainty that great men will be chosen president."

The growth of presidential primaries since 1904 and the erosion of party patronage have complicated the race. However, "the common denominator that describes those who would be president," says Hess, "is the depth of their ambition."

All politicians are subject to "progressive ambition"—a desire to rise in office. But only a select few are willing to face the physical costs, loss of privacy, and general "onslaught on your life" that result from a presidential campaign: "the ultimate in progressive ambition."

"Lateral entry" into politics from other fields has long been commonplace. Explorers (e.g., John C. Fremont, "The Pathfinder of the Rockies"), journalists (editor Horace Greeley), ex-generals, ex-astronauts, and most recently "clerics-turned-politicians" such as Pat Robertson have joined in the quest for the presidential prize. However, whether 20th-century candidates climb the political ladder or not, their motivations would still be recognizable to Bryce. The one-time "coalition-builders" of the 19th century have become "expert persuaders" in a 20th-century political free-for-all. Politicians "have changed less than the process," claims Hess, "as the nation moves from party democracy to media democracy."

A candidate must race against the "biological time clock," since a president must be at least 35 years old. The author estimates that contenders who can hold onto their staff and wait out an incumbent's renomination have at most four chances to run. Given the odds, the urgency with which candidates run becomes understandable. "In short," Hess concludes, "contenders have remarkably little maneuvering room, and much of their strategic planning is held hostage to fortuity."