

Arts and Leisure: The rules of disengagement

by Arthur Salm

Thrust! "If Democrats Had Any Brains, They'd Be Republicans," by Ann Coulter.

CAST YOUR BALLOT - Recently, nonfiction best-seller lists have been choked with books on politics and politicians. CNS Photo Illustration. Parry! "Why We're Liberals: A Political Handbook for Post-Bush America," by Eric Alterman.

Divert! "I Am America (And So Can You!)," by Stephen Colbert.

While it remains true that most political biographies and autobiographies are fast-tracked to the Remainder bins - Barack Obama's and Bill Clinton's being notable exceptions - in recent years, nonfiction best-seller lists have been choked with books on politics. And they're coming from all over the map. If Bill O'Reilly scores ("Who's Looking Out for You?"), his nemesis Al Franken comes right back with an in-your-face ("The Truth: With Jokes").

Publishers, not being fools, couldn't help noticing that the specialty outfit Regnery was making big money with right-wing political tomes, using the Clintons as cash cows with bull's eyes on their rumps. (Ambrose Evans-Pritchard's "The Secret Life of Bill Clinton," a Regnery title, painted the then-president as a drug trafficker and murderer.)

So some major publishers have created conservative-oriented imprints - smaller, semi-independent presses - to fill what they saw as a niche. Penguin came up with Sentinal, Crown with Crown Forum, and Simon & Schuster with Threshold Editions.

You'd think they'd all be licking their red-meat-flecked chops over the political year to come. But Louise Burke, executive vice-president and publisher of Threshold, is guarded on the political-book prospects for

2008.

"Anyone who was delivering a book up till six months ago wanted it out well before the election," she said from her Threshold office in New York. "Now they say, 'I don't want it out till after the election.' In the heat of the race, they feel they don't get enough airtime, unless the book is about a candidate."

Threshold, which has done well with John Bolton's "Surrender Is Not an Option" and Glenn Beck's "An Inconvenient Book," won't be passing up 2008; titles include "Onward Christian Soldiers," by Deal Hudson, and "Why You're Wrong About the Right," by S.E. Cupp & Brett Joshpe. And Sentinal will offer "Leaving the Left," by Keith Thompson.

Not that mainstream publishers eschew the right. In March, William Morrow offers Grover Norquist's "Leave Us Alone: Getting the Government's Hands Off Our Money, Our Guns, Our Lives."

But not, on the other hand, that the left won't be well represented as well. From Nation Books: "The Man Who Brought America to War: The Extraordinary Life, Adventures and Obsessions of Ahmad Chalabi," by Aram Roston, and "Land of Sin: Inside the Movement That Controls the Republican Party," by Max Blumenthal.

PublicAffairs will be putting out "By His Own Rules: The Story of Donald Rumsfeld," by Bradley Graham; "Republicans in the Wilderness: The GOP and Environmental Politics From Teddy Roosevelt to Tomorrow," by Osha Gray Davidson; and "What Happened: Inside the Bush White House and What's Wrong With Washington," by Scott McClellan. (PublicAffairs is a somewhat more ecumenical outfit.)

In short, there'll be no shortage. No doubt some of the above titles will find a place in the slipstream of an onrushing political notion of the moment, and arrive fat and happy in Bestsellerdom. Whether any of them amounts to more than preaching to the choir - and passing the collection plate - remains an open question. And not a bad subject for a book.

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