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Review / Film Festival

Another Making of a President, Starring the New Spin Doctors

By JANET MASLIN

Is there any stone left unturned in a modern Presidential campaign? When every last whistle-stop and handshake is thoroughly documented in print and on television, can there be anything more for a film maker to find? When D. A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus set out to chronicle the Clinton campaign, they were treading on familiar territory, taking on a seemingly redundant task. And yet "The War Room," their glimpse of behind-the-scenes maneuvers among Clinton strategists, finds new facets of the story and manages to coax cliffhanging suspense out of a fait accompli.

However much "The War Room" reveals about how Mr. Clinton won the election, its real subject is why he won. The true focus of this watchful, frankly admiring film is the Clinton campaign staff, with James Carville and George Stephanopoulos receiving star billing. The film presents these two as tireless new-breed strategists whose fast, aggressive tactics helped to reshape their party's political thinking, and who themselves played a high-profile role in the election. There was an attitude that promised something different in Presidential politics, and this film examines that attitude in riveting detail.

"The War Room" crystallizes both the idealism and the cunning that cast Mr. Clinton as a departure from candidate stereotypes like the one in "The Candidate," and swept him to victory. In the process, it looks right through the public masks both Mr. Carville and Mr. Stephanopoulos adopted to defend, champion and otherwise spin their man for the media's benefit. The film makers capture these political operatives in their natural element, working the phones, conducting planning sessions and trading casual assessments of their man and his opponents. The film also captures both the exhilarating and daunting aspects of the campaign for relative newcomers thrust suddenly into the major leagues.

An immediate question raised by "The War Room" is whether individuals as image-conscious as these two, or the other Clinton strategists who wander through the film, can ever have behaved naturally in the presence of a camera. The answer is self-evident as the film moves along, starting in storefront campaign headquarters in wintry Manchester, N.H., (where the Clinton corps is feuding with other factions about tearing down each other's campaign signs) and ending with



James Carville anticipating victory on Election Night in "The War Room," a film about how President Clinton won the race.

The War Room

election-night euphoria in Little Rock, Ark. Given that its subjects are all extraordinarily skillful politicians, this film does achieve moments of remarkable candor.

The principals can be seen eyeing the camera warily at first and sometimes speaking grandiosely for its benefit. But they can also be watched as they grow acclimated to the film makers' presence, to the point where Mr. Carville can relax his attack-dog public aspect and Mr. Stephanopoulos can make some surprisingly un-self-conscious phone calls. One of the film's more memorable glimpses finds Mr. Stephanopoulos talking down an 11th-hour blackmailer threatening to go public with gossip about the candidate's sexual peccadilloes. Mr. Stephanopoulos

calmly moves from dismissal ("You would be laughed at") to flat-out threat ("I guarantee you that if you do this, you'll never work in Democratic politics again") to Godfatherese ("You'll know that you did the right thing, and you didn't dishonor yourself") without missing a beat.

Mr. Carville's distinctive brand of Southern charm emerges equally clearly. "The country's goin' el busto," he says flatly. "Fix it. If you can't, get out of the way." Since both he and Mr. Stephanopoulos appear to believe in that sentiment fervently, their strategy sessions are seen to go beyond the cynicism and dirty tricks associated with too many political campaigns. Confronted with the specter of Gennifer Flowers, Mr. Carville speaks fiercely to a small group of campaign workers in

New England, telling them that if they let Mr. Clinton sink under the weight of such a story, they will be giving up their own hopes of changing the political process. That same motif is heard throughout the film, most movingly as a tearful Mr. Carville thanks his staff on election eve.

Since Mr. Carville is also capable of grinning broadly and spouting imaginary press reports of a rousing Bush victory, "The War Room" also includes its share of wry moments. The Tracy-Hepburn aspect of Mr. Carville's public persona is captured through his occasional run-ins with Mary Matalin, now his fiancée and then a bulwark of the Bush campaign. "Everybody's got an opinion," he says, in answer to a question about how the two of them get along without seeing eye to eye about the election. "This is just the most American thing you can do."

"The War Room" watches as Mr. Carville and his fellow strategists leap gleefully at every opportunity (even at a potential Bush-related scandal that turns out to be a nonstory) and sweat out the terrible suspense. By the morning of Election Day, Mr. Carville and Mr. Stephanopoulos are un-self-conscious enough to allow the camera to watch them in their otherwise empty War Room headquarters, wondering whether their hopes and their labor will be worth anything at all. But, as Mr. Carville puts it playfully at one point, "The harder you work, the luckier you are." "The War Room," a revealing film and an invaluable document, illustrates exactly what that means.

"The War Room" will be shown tonight at 6:15 as part of the New York Film Festival.

The War Room

Directed by D. A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus; director of photography, Nick Doob, Mr. Pennebaker and Kevin Rafferty; produced by R. J. Cutler, Wendy Ettinger and Frazer Pennebaker; released by October Films. At Alice Tully Hall, Lincoln Center, as part of the 31st New York Film Festival. Running time: 92 minutes. This film has no rating. With: James Carville, George Stephanopoulos, Heather Beckel, Paul Begala, Bob Boorstin, Michael C. Donilon, Jeff Eller, Stan Greenberg, Mandy Grunwald, Harold Ickes, Mickey Kantor, Mary Matalin, Mitchell Schwartz and others.