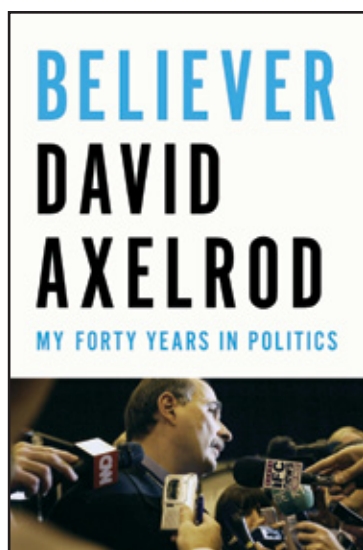


These challenges are still with us. And they will require new bridge-builders, hopefully inspired by the words and deeds of Victor Goldbloom, to tackle them. **P**

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Being in the Game for the Right Reasons

David Axelrod

Believer: My Forty Years in Politics.
New York: Penguin Press, 2015.

Review by Lisa Van Dusen

Until 2012, when he shaved it off for charity, David Axelrod was known to the general public as “The David with the moustache” from the supporting cast of Barack Obama’s epic presidential narrative; the rumpled mensch message guru Oscar to David Plouffe’s clean-shaven, intense, organizational-wizard Felix.

In *Believer: My Forty Years in Politics*, Axelrod relives a passion that began when he was five—perched on a mailbox on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, listening to John F. Kennedy stump for the 1960 election—and peaked with his role in the historic 2008 campaign that made Obama, against formidable odds, the

first black president of the United States.

There are campaigns and then there are campaigns. The 2008 US presidential campaign was exceptional because of Obama’s race and the myriad ways in which it defined the story—from the time-has-come appeal of his biography to the crucial way in which his opponents underestimated him as a force to be reckoned with until he won the Iowa caucuses to the Rev. Jeremiah Wright eruption and the landmark Philadelphia speech that cut through the code and addressed the issue head-on.

It was also a great story because of how, as became increasingly obvious as Obama prevailed over the Clinton machine, race became less and less of an issue. As Axelrod’s book reveals and as Obama proved in the 2008 general election against John McCain and in 2012 against Mitt Romney, Obama was the better candidate.

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But for those of us who covered it—I went from volunteering for the Obama campaign in Columbia during the South Carolina primary to covering the campaign and the first 18 months of the administration in Washington for Sun Media—the 2008 campaign was exceptional for another reason, which is central to Axelrod’s book.

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If I hadn’t seen it for myself in decision after decision on the ground in South Carolina, where deputy national campaign director Steve Hildebrand presided, I probably would have rolled my eyes at this passage in “Believer”:

“Let’s never forget that it’s not just about winning, it’s about why,” I would tell my team. “That’s our edge. We lose that we can’t win.”

While acknowledging that there have been times, including in the toughest days in 2008, when he deviated from that ideal, Axelrod is that rarest of political animals who doesn’t operate on the

default mode of jungle protocol.

There have been other political organizations that have tried to replicate the messaging and mood of the 2008 Obama campaign without adhering to the principles; selling change and social media mastery while making judgment call after judgment call that betray classic political cynicism. The long game isn’t easy in the age of Twitter.

“Believer” isn’t hagiography; it’s the tale of a fateful partnership between a gifted political romantic and the once-in-a-lifetime candidate who combined all the intellectual, personal and retail qualities for a national run, plus a gut reflex to do the right thing.

In an exchange that pollsters, politicians and operatives will laugh out loud at, Axelrod walks in on the eve of the 2008 Indiana primary with new numbers showing them 12 points down, to which Obama responds, “Get the fuck out of here,” adding, “You’re a big downer.” In another exchange, Obama calls Axelrod a motherfucker during the dispiriting debate prep ahead of the first, rattling 2012 showdown with Mitt Romney.

So, he’s not invariably Spock-ish, and he’s not always a handler’s dream: His aversion to the performance art of debates is dwarfed only by his allergy to sound bites. But on issue after issue, in crisis after crisis, as Axelrod recounts, Obama chooses principle over political expediency, which, in our current political universe, can seem downright eccentric. It will quite likely be the presidential attribute people miss most about him when he leaves the White House.

In his epilogue, Axelrod laments the fact that Washington now seems a more polarized place than it was when Obama was elected on a mandate to change it. It’s an admission that reminds me of standing on the National Mall on inauguration day, 2009, amid a swarm of two million faces and realizing that, aside from being witnesses to history, they represented an infarction-inducing challenge to the status quo.

Still; saving the economy, reviving the auto industry, enacting health reform, repealing “Don’t ask Don’t Tell”, normalizing relations with Cuba and negotiating a tentative nuclear deal with Iran are no small achievements. Governing is always less fun than campaigning, and governing in a backlash is much more complicated. **P**

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