



# **Off Script: An Advance Man's Guide to White House Stagecraft, Campaign Spectacle, and Political Suicide**

*Josh King*

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Being a public figure is no walk in the park - the world focuses on every move that politicians make and highlights their every mistake. "Image collapse" can befall anyone whose carefully cultivated persona is pitted against intermediaries in the broadcast booths of cable news networks or behind the photo desks of newspapers, magazines, and today's host of digital platforms.

As a world-traveling "advance man," an operative who orchestrates TV- and photo-ready moments involving important political figures, Josh King has unique experience working with the reputations of officeholders, candidates and other public figures. In *Off Script*, King leads readers through an entertaining and illuminating journey through the Hall of Infamy of some of the most catastrophic examples of political theater of the last quarter century. Readers might remember these cringe worthy moments as simple cases of bad luck. King argues, instead, that they were symptomatic of something larger: our broad appetite for public embarrassment, the media's business imperatives in satiating that craving, and the propensity of politicians to serve it up on a platter, often by pretending to be someone they're not while strutting on the public stage.

We tour recent history – King calls it “the Age of Optics” – to establish this syndrome, and then turn to the Obama administration and what Josh calls the emergence of the “Vanilla Presidency.” King argues that Barack Obama has been more guarded and more protective of the presidential persona than anyone in history, and as we look to the elections of 2016 and beyond, we have to wonder: Will our future president follow Obama's example? If so, how will that influence the relationship between our nation's citizens and their leader?

## Off Script: An Advance Man's Guide to White House Stagecraft, Campaign Spectacle, and Political Suicide Details

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# **From Reader Review Off Script: An Advance Man's Guide to White House Stagecraft, Campaign Spectacle, and Political Suicide for online ebook**

## **John says**

Before reading this book I was unaware of just how meticulously presidential appearances were prepared. They're highly detailed and use all the tricks of the "presentation" trade: chisel your symbolism to high floss, use visual stunts to the max, measure all camera angles precisely. Yet sometimes things go wrong. Sometimes a slight mishap (or off script) turns into fodder for late night comic TV ridicule. Examples: The 1988 effort to portray candidate Mike Dukakis as General Patton in an army tank, GW Bush and the "Mission Accomplished" banner. Much of this narrative is based on the author's personal experiences and enhanced from interviews with similar workers, both Democrat and Republican. It's full of lingo of the presentation craft ("game day," "big board," "tight shot"). Overall, an engaging read.

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## **Josh says**

I decided to read this book based on a "Book of the Times" article I saw in the NYT (that, for some reason, I cannot find anymore.) Incredibly detailed account of the responsibilities of advance teams and the increasingly theatrical aspects of our political scene. The book shines in the middle section when King recounts various political gaffes of the last 30 years and near the end when discussing the ongoing Clinton and Trump campaigns. Though it is interesting, feel free to skip the first section on the Dukakis tank fiasco in favor of the aforementioned middle section.

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## **Drew says**

The book is touted as a "pull back the curtain" type book to show what it's like developing and staging political but it's mostly a deconstruction of the biggest political blunders of the last three decades with a little bit of his own stories sprinkled in. I'm a bit of a political junky and I didn't find it terribly fascinating, and would only really recommend it if you work in (or are thinking of working in) politics. Overall it's well written but only tells you what you already know, that politics are more about optics and substance and that if you do something stupid (or not even that stupid) it can and will be magnified and end badly for you.

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## **Mark Simon says**

Josh does play-by-play for the famous "Michael Dukakis in a tank" photo op from the 1988 election and does it well. It's funny ... I've read a bunch of reviews that said this part was too long and that the rest of the book was the good stuff. I actually liked the Dukakis stuff best because the level of detail was so great. The rest of the book looks at other instances in which the optics of notable moments played an important role in an election or primary. A good read for this time of year if you like behind the scenes political stories.

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## Robert says

I would call myself a "political junkie" of the highest order. I'll find myself refreshing *Politico* throughout the day, checking 538 for the latest updates, and boring friends incessantly when discussing national politics by bringing up Senators from states they don't care about.

All of that being said, *Off Script* was ultimately a disappointing read for me. Maybe its because it didn't read as advertised. Maybe its too "inside baseball" among the "inside baseball" crowd. Or maybe I just don't get it.

Either way, I found myself bored throughout the entire time reading it. There's nothing particular wrong with the author's topic or word usage, but rather over-emphasis on the events being discussed in the book. If you polled people about Dukakis at the time in '88, the "Willie Horton" stuff had far bigger impact and play than the tank incident that gets 135 pages of time in this book.

Furthermore, most of these events cited really didn't end up playing the impact it seemed to make as the book weight gives it. The only event most people can probably recall in the modern time is the "Dean Scream" and that's largely because of Youtube alongside analysts constantly referring back to it every time someone makes a gaffe. In other words, it lives on in memory like the 1919 White Sox because the people telling the story keep bringing it up.

This book might end up being found more interesting to other people, but unfortunately I'm just not one of them.

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## Mac says

Having seen Josh King on TV, I assumed his book would provide rich insights into how an advance man creates presidential campaign appearances, and my assumption was correct. *Off Script*, focusing primarily on campaign stops during election cycles, describes the objectives, tactics, techniques, and pitfalls of presenting a president to the public. King covers what he calls the Age of Optics beginning with Michael Dukakis's 1988 misguided tank ride all the way through Trump's current carefully staged rallies.

The book has anecdotes galore covering all the prominent candidates of this almost 30-year period so there are lots of behind the scenes tidbits to savor. Additionally, in describing the advance man's work, the book captures the complexity of the role, scope of the task, multiplicity of coordinating efforts, and scrupulous attention to detail as well as the joys of success and the mind numbing fear of failure. With *Off Script*, there's lots to enjoy and lots to learn.

Having seen the Contents page, I assumed King's book would have its share of confusion, and my assumption was correct again. A book that begins with a Preface, a Prologue, an Introduction (not to mention an Advance Praise section, a Dedication, and a lengthy Quotation) is probably going to have its clarity problems, and *Off Script* has its share.

The book's overall structure is well organized with three main sections clearly defined and the chapters

arranged chronologically. That said, within each chapter, King shifts back and forth in time to insert anecdotes and relevant personal career moments into the presidential campaign event he is analyzing. As a result, I was continually unsure where I was chronologically, and I was frequently seeing again the same analysis or idea. So the book is held together by its overall structure, but at a more granular level, the hopscotching around the author's career experiences is distracting and ultimately annoying. With a little reorganization and some light editing, King's presentation would match his interesting content, and that would make *Off Script* an even more satisfying read.

One other note. Though informative, *Off Script* lacks drama. That's in part because the book is built on fairly famous events--Dukakis and the tank ride (discussed in interminable detail), Bush and the supermarket scanner, Dean's scream, and Kerry's windsurfing, to name a few. But the lack of drama is also due to King's writing. He has a way of circling a topic so there's plenty of interesting information, but an absence of energy and suspense. A former advance man like King should know the importance of drama when telling a story.

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### **Rachel Blom says**

The first part of the book dragged on forever and almost made me quit, but the second part was way more interesting. The first part digs deep into the story of Michael Dukakis and the tank, so deep that you drown at times in the many names and details. That's also because we keep switching between the Dukakis story and general info and background on being an advance guy. I get that that epic blunder was a watershed moment for advance people, but a little less detail would have worked better. The second part of the book was way more interesting, where we learn the real story behind some other visual blunders in politics. It set the record straight on several accounts, including Bush sr.'s infamous moment with the supermarket scanner. I recommend the book for political junkies, but brace yourself for the first part.

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### **Michelle says**

Fascinating look at a part of political life I hadn't give much thought to before. Especially interesting reading during a presidential campaign.

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### **Secka says**

#### **I've had this book since it came out**

It took me a year and a half to finish this book, and I had it in hardcover, e-book, and Audible. I felt I was reading in circles because he found a way to bring it back to Dukakis to use for every example, a man who I have never heard of and ran before I was even born. I finally finished it because I started it and it never got better.

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### **Elle says**

This book desperately needed an editor. First of all, redundancies should be removed first. (I can't even count

how many times that sentence structure cropped up.) The first ~40% of the book is dedicated to introducing the book, Dukakis' helmet, and then *reintroducing* what the book is going to talk about. I honestly thought my audiobook app had accidentally reverted to the opening chapter, but, nope, the author was just telling us what he was going to tell us about halfway through the book. The other topics (outside of Dukakis and that damn tank) felt brief, rushed, and much less dramatic than the title would lead you to believe.

Also, I know it's unfair to criticise his thoughts on the 2016 election AFTER the election has occurred, but the summary of/musings on Clinton and Trump felt extremely pithy and off the mark for someone who claimed to have lived and breathed this stuff for nearly their entire life. I guess I'm still too bitter for this stuff.

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### **Rick Parker says**

An interesting look behind the curtain at the advance work that precedes a candidate's or incumbent's public appearance. So much has to go right and it only takes a second for something to go woefully wrong.

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### **Biblio Files (takingadayoff) says**

First off, you really do have to love reading about politics to enjoy this book. But of course you do if you're even considering it. Josh King has worked for several campaigns over the years and in the Bill Clinton White House. He's a partisan, but you won't notice until the end when he talks about the upcoming elections. The bulk of the book is about political ancient history starting with Michael Dukakis's ride in a tank, moving on to George H. W. Bush's astonishment at bar code scanners, all the way up to Obama's appearances on online interview shows. King doesn't seem to consider setting the stage as deceptive, rather as ensuring the candidate is shown in the best light, and that the desired message is communicated. It's really fascinating, inside politics, behind the scenes, especially in this election year. Good stuff.

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### **A. S. says**

“Off Script: An Advance Man's Guide to White House Stagecraft, Campaign Spectacle, and Political Suicide” by Josh King follows the art of political campaigning—or rather the disasters that past presidential campaigns have faced. Stories recounted include presidential nominee Michael Dukakis and the tank (with the tank dwarfing the 5'8 governor), George H. W. Bush and the supermarket scanner (with his seeming amazement at it making him look out of touch with daily life), Bob Dole falling (emphasizing his status as a senior citizen running for the world's most powerful position), Al Gore canoeing (with extra water being released especially so that the canoe could drift, being caught on camera and leaving Gore's environmentalist image in question), Howard Dean screaming in the middle of a post-primary speech (although it was really just one word, thirty-seconds into his speech, but that was enough to question his mental state), John Kerry windsurfing while the Republican Convention was going on, etc.

During the current election year cycle, I think this book is especially timely. A big theme running throughout the book was the discrepancy between image and actions. At times, presidential campaigns are almost like producing a movie—there's always a big emphasis on the male lead (the nominee), the staging, the sound bites, the orchestration of seemingly spontaneous scenes meant to be captured on camera (which also tend to

go wrong--hence the "Off Script" title) and then purveyed through the media, etc. As someone who enjoys politics, I was looking to find out more about the behind the scenes atmospheres of presidential campaigns, and this book provided that. Overall, an interesting read.

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### **Connie Curtis says**

Proof positive that politicians are nothing more than smoke and mirrors, staged speeches and photo ops, and arrogant folks who assume we the people fall for their tricks.

Unfortunately, most people do fall for it.

Mr. King is clearly a Democrat, but he wasn't offensive in his description of Republicans like so many on opposite sides can be. I think he treated all rather fairly.

It was an interesting but WAY too detailed trip down campaign lane with many politicians of the past, including Michael Dukakis, Reagan, Clinton, Obama, Bush, Romney, and more. I like hearing what goes on behind the scenes, and this book was very eye-opening as to the spectacle politics has become.

I've always noticed the staging of events and photos; to me it's quite obvious; but perhaps people are more swayed by visuals than not.

The book was interesting to me but it could have been cut by at least 25% and still made the point.

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### **Michelle says**

I NEARLY quit reading this book in the first section. It was sooo detail-dense, an entire huge section just on the Mike Dukakis tank-and-helmet episode. I almost didn't make it out, but that would have been a tragedy, because this book is a gem. If you want to understand politics today, how what we see of candidates and officials is "produced", you need to read this book. A lot of it is in the details that can go wrong (which means parts are pretty funny!) but, although I knew a lot of what we see is staged, I had no idea how far and deep this went. Fascinating, kind of depressing and scary at the same time, but real and detailed, this begins with the year of the Dukakis event and runs up to today, with some time spent on Hillary and Trump. (Although that final, added-on chapter has some typos--someone fell down on the editing there). Kind of dense but a very worthwhile read.

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