
Book Reviews

McClendon's story is delightful reading

by Nancy Spannaus

Mr. President, Mr. President! My Fifty Years of Covering the White House

by Sarah McClendon, with Jules Minton

Los Angeles: General Publishing Group, Inc., 1996
288 pages, cloth, \$22.95

The major purpose of this review is to recommend that people read this book by White House correspondent Sarah McClendon. McClendon is one of the feistiest women I know, and the story of her life aroused my admiration even more. When Sarah is convinced that something is true, or that an injustice has been done, she will be intimidated by no one. That's the kind of journalist whom one does not find very often these days.

Maybe it's because of that fierce independence that neither the *Washington Post* nor the *Washington Times*, the self-appointed censors of the nation's capital, have even acknowledged the book's existence.

What impresses one about this book is McClendon's character as a journalist with a mission. There is just enough personal history here to give you a sense of where she came from, but there is a near-total absence of gossip. Instead, the reader follows McClendon's encounters and political crusades through each of the 11 Presidencies which she has covered, starting with that of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, and coming up to President Bill Clinton today.

Younger people will also find it very interesting to look at the developments over her career, from the standpoint of current history. Here is a woman 87 years old, who lived through the Depression, joined the Army, and pioneered a female journalist's career in Washington, D.C. Her questions at Presidential press conferences have brought her into the limelight on numerous occasions, even leading to her being the subject of cartoons. One, from 1982, showed President Reagan checking to see if the coast was clear to leave the White House, as the Secret Service guard told him, "The coast is clear. . . . There is no sign of Sarah McClendon."

Already, when the era of the "organization man" began in the 1950s, McClendon stood out, as cut from a more inde-



Sara McClendon, known for her passion for truth.

pendent cloth. Through the next three decades, she didn't change with the times. She remains committed to telling the truth, even when it's inconvenient, a trait which many Baby Boomers apparently find incomprehensible.

It's not as though McClendon was not subject to intimidation over the course of the years, the kind of intimidation that would have led others to quit. Most striking was her challenge to President Kennedy on a question of national security, a challenge which led to the President's obvious embarrassment, and a flurry of attacks on McClendon throughout the media. She was called a "gadfly" and a "President baiter," and there was mooting of a Justice Department investigation into applying limits to a reporter's questions. Only later, when it became clear to the White House that McClendon was right, did she gradually become permitted to carry out her normal functions.

Today, a journalist would either never get a chance to ask such a question, or would be immediately fired. McClendon, who runs her own news service, can't be fired, and she wouldn't quit.

While I don't agree with all of her assessments of the Presidents whom she confronted, and knew, her insights into their character, as shown in their responses to her challenges, add a significant dimension to the historical record. By fighting with people, and institutions, you learn a lot about them.

One year after the publication of her book, Sarah McClendon is still touring the country, getting out her story. She remains committed to her goal of being "a bridge between big government and little people." Another of her mottos is, "I can't afford to die, I have too much to do." One can only hope, for the country's sake, that she has many more years in which to do it.