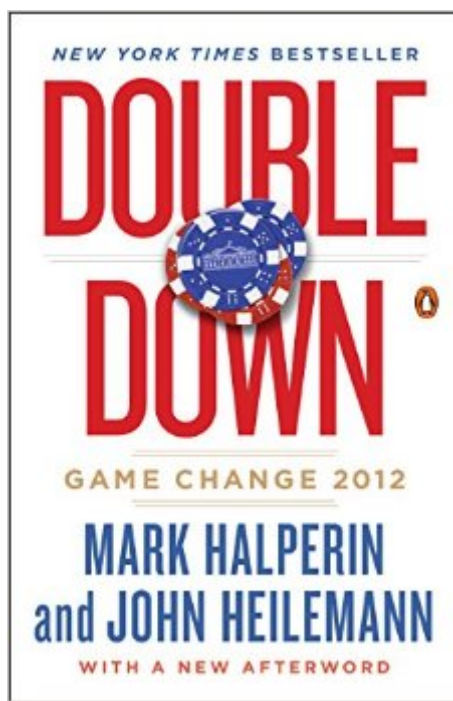


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Double Down: Game Change 2012



Synopsis

Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*: "Those hungry for political news will read *Double Down* for the scooplets and insidery glimpses it serves up about the two campaigns, and the clues it offers about the positioning already going on among Republicans and Democrats for 2016 ... The book testifies to its authors' energetic legwork and insider access... creating a novelistic narrative that provides a you-are-there immediacy... They succeed in taking readers interested in the backstabbing and backstage maneuvering of the 2012 campaign behind the curtains, providing a tactile... sense of what it looked like from the inside." In their runaway bestseller *Game Change*, Mark Halperin and John Heilemann captured the full drama of Barack Obama's improbable, dazzling victory over the Clintons, John McCain, and Sarah Palin. With the same masterly reporting, unparalleled access, and narrative skill, *Double Down* picks up the story in the Oval Office, where the president is beset by crises both inherited and unforeseen—facing defiance from his political foes, disenchantment from the voters, disdain from the nation's powerful money makers, and dysfunction within the West Wing. As 2012 looms, leaders of the Republican Party, salivating over Obama's political fragility, see a chance to wrest back control of the White House—and the country. So how did the Republicans screw it up? How did Obama survive the onslaught of super PACs and defy the predictions of a one-term presidency? *Double Down* follows the gaudy carnival of GOP contenders—ambitious and flawed, famous and infamous, charismatic and cartoonish—as Mitt Romney, the straitlaced, can-do, gaffe-prone multimillionaire from Massachusetts, scraped and scratched his way to the nomination. *Double Down* exposes blunders, scuffles, and machinations far beyond the klieg lights of the campaign trail: Obama storming out of a White House meeting with his high command after accusing them of betrayal. Romney's mind-set as he made his controversial "47 percent" comments. The real reasons New Jersey governor Chris Christie was never going to be Mitt's running mate. The intervention held by the president's staff to rescue their boss from political self-destruction. The way the tense détente between Obama and Bill Clinton morphed into political gold. And the answer to one of the campaign's great mysteries—how did Clint Eastwood end up performing Dada dinner theater at the Republican convention? In *Double Down*, Mark Halperin and John Heilemann take the reader into back rooms and closed-door meetings, laying bare the secret history of the 2012 campaign for a panoramic account of an election that was as hard fought as it was lastingly consequential.

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Customer Reviews

This is a comprehensive and surprisingly unbiased account of the 2012 campaign and the backstories behind the candidates who took part in it. The book is in three parts, each of which is comprehensive enough to be a stand-alone book in its own right. The first "book" (Part I) is the backstory of Obama's Presidency from 2008 to 2012. This was my least favorite part because it was clinically written without much emotion or new insights. Authors Mark Halperin and John Heilemann describes Obama as a moderate, pragmatic sort of person who has as little use for the self-serving Black Civil Rights establishment as he does for the Conservative Tea Party activists. According to Halperin (a Conservative) and Heilemann, Obama may come across at times as a petulant professor, but he's hardly the extreme Liberal-verging-on-Marxist maniac that has taken root in popular Conservative folklore. Halperin and Heilemann give a fair account of Obama's political battles with the Republican House of Representatives over healthcare reform, banking bailouts, and federal budgets. But a politically savvy reader will already be familiar with this material. I'd suggest skimming this part or skipping it altogether and getting started with the second part, which makes the book a worthwhile read. The second part --- describing the Republican primary candidates' machinations to win the nomination --- has all the drama and excitement you'd expect in a political book. It starts out with a fair-minded account of Mitt Romney's career. Nothing new here, because Mitt has been around long enough for most of us to know his story. He's one of those incorruptible personalities whose scandal-free life seems dull by its very absence of misconduct. The only surprise is that the real money brokers in the Republican party seem to have viewed Mitt as a

penny-ante operator:=====Trump was publicly sniffy about Romney as a capitalist, denigrating him as a "small-business guy," and privately disdainful of Bain. "They'd buy a company and fire everyone," he told his associates.=====Where my interest was really piqued was in Halperin and Heilemann bringing to life the second-tier challengers like Jeb Bush, Mike Huckabee, Donald Trump, Mitch Daniels, Jon Huntsman, Rick Perry, Tim Pawlenty, Michelle Bachmann, Herman Cain, Newt Gingrich, and Rick Santorum. Jeb Bush and Mike Huckabee had spent years as low-paid governors of their states. They had belatedly achieved comfortable wealth in the private sector after retiring from public service. Going into 2012 they had to face the agonizing decision of whether to risk every penny of their personal wealth on the time-consuming and expensive campaign to be President. Little wonder that they declined to enter the contest. I especially enjoyed the curious stories of tension between fellow Minnesotans Tim Pawlenty and Michelle Bachmann who appear to have detested each other as bitter home state rivals. The same close rivalry poisoned relations between fellow Utah Mormons Mitt Romney and John Huntsman. Rick Perry, Herman Cain, and Newt Gingrich also have their interesting personal and professional stories told, usually in good-natured ways. And I LOVED the antics of Republican campaign consultants Karl Rove and the delightfully mischievous Ed Rollins. The candidates may have been courteous to each other in the television debates, but their professional campaign staffs dished the dirt behind the scenes. If the authors' sources are correct, minor candidate Jon Huntsman's impish staff sabotaged Mitt Romney's campaign by leaking information about his overseas tax havens and brought down Herman Cain by going public with the womanizing stories. I came away disappointed with Donald Trump, whose three billion dollars would have enabled him to campaign. But Trump let his devotion to personal fame and fortune trump his desire to serve the American people by campaigning to be their President. He felt that running for public office would cost him money by taking him away from his business. But the most meaningful insight is about New Jersey Governor Chris Christie. The book should be read for that reason alone. Halperin and Heilemann don't cheerlead for any candidate, but the stories of Governor Christie as told through the eyes of others is a powerful endorsement of him as a candidate for 2016. The Third Part of the book, about the presidential race between Obama and Romney, is, like the first part, only so-so. That's probably because most of the stories are still fresh on our minds --- the Bain Capital controversies; Obama's dreadful first debate; Romney's "47% moochers and takers" gaffe; and Romney's search for a running mate that culminated the selection of Paul Ryan. The strength of this book --- its completeness --- is also its weakness. Some may feel that it is TOO complete. For example, I was not at all interested in the pages devoted to minor non-candidate Haley Barbour who never got into the Republican primaries.

There is also a "facts, just the facts" tone to the book. There is no opinionating by the author about WHY the nomination process and the election turned out the way it did. The dry facts are presented, and the readers are left to draw their own conclusions. The book is more like an encyclopedia of pick-and-choose topics. I spent most of my time on Part II, which by itself justified the purchase. The entertaining dramas of the Republicans competing against each other made for some delightful stories, as well as getting to know these second-tier candidates (some of whom will be first-tier in 2016 or 2020) made this a worthwhile read. The best was the part devoted to understanding what makes Governor Chris Christie tick. I came away feeling even more comfortable with him as a Republican candidate for 2016 than I already was. The book may be over-long and perhaps contains some material that is not of the highest interest. BUT it is THE encyclopedia of the 2012 political campaigns, the candidates who participated in them, and the backstories that went into making the candidates and their campaigns. It's the one "all you need to know" source for the life and times of every political personality of any relevance to the 2012 campaign.

In early October 2012, things seemed to be going very well indeed for Mitt Romney. He faced an unpopular incumbent presiding over a still-lethargic economy. He had access to a staggering amount of money (both sides spent over a billion dollars, with Romney's spending surpassing that of the president), although he had limited control over the significant fraction of it that passed through the Romney-aligned Super PACs. Finally, he was in complete control of the first debate, coming out of Denver as the clear winner. Yet a few weeks later, he would lose the election by millions of votes, with the president claiming over 60% of the electoral college. There have already been a number of books written about the 2012 election, and will no doubt be many more, but Double Down has been hotly anticipated as a sequel to 2010's Game Change. As in Game Change, the authors appear to have been granted extensive access to hundreds of people involved in the campaigns; they credit over 500 interviews (all, naturally, on deep background). But does the book live up to the hype? For the most part, the writing is very good and kept me turning pages. The authors do have an annoying tendency to never use a common word where an obscure word will do, which detracts from the readability; I consider myself to have a pretty good vocabulary, but I found myself pulling out my phone more than once to look up yet another obscure adjective. Otherwise, the book flows fairly well. The first section, by far the shortest, covers the Obama administration in the lead-up to the election season. I got the sense that the authors felt they had already covered Obama sufficiently in Game Change and now wanted to concentrate on the republicans. Section two covers the republican primary season. As with the primary voters, the text jumps from one candidate to

another as Bachmann, Perry, Cain, Gingrich, and Santorum become ascendant, but always returns to Mitt Romney as the current not-Mitt flames out. Romney is definitely the star of the book, and where Obama intrudes in this section, he and his policies are seen from Romney's point of view. In section three, the stage is set, the candidates selected. From the Obama side, we see the reconciliation with Clinton and the struggles the candidate has in switching from his preferred professorial lecture mode to the style required of modern presidential debates. Still, the focus remains on the Romney campaign, the struggles they have with introducing their candidate to the country, and some of the innumerable missteps they took along the way. What disappointed me about this book was that, except for things I would classify as gossip (such as who told Harry Reid that Romney went a decade without paying taxes, and several incidents demonstrating why Obama's feelings of betrayal when private stories were leaked to the press), there isn't a lot of new information in this book. I had hoped to read more about the Obama administration's get out the vote operation and their vaunted computer system (and the Romney campaign's disastrous ORCA system), but these went unmentioned; while they've been covered to some extent in other books, I haven't seen one that covers them in the level of detail I would like to see. What I did enjoy was the details of how each of the republican candidates, most of whom I would consider to have zero chance of becoming president, came to sincerely believe at one time or another that he or she would win the nomination and the election. In the end, this is a book not about tactics or policy, but about people - about the choices that Obama and Romney (and, to a lesser extent, the other republican candidates) made about how to present themselves to the voters. Right up to election day, Romney believed that he would be the victor, and this book attempts (largely successfully) to demonstrate how he and the people around him viewed his candidacy. For the most part, this is the story of Mitt Romney. I spent a while debating whether to give this book three stars or four; I was quite engrossed in it but was somewhat disappointed by the content. In the end I rated it 3.4 stars (rounded down to three) because although I enjoyed the book, I didn't feel more informed after reading it, and I felt somewhat that the authors were more interested in demonstrating their access and vocabulary than in offering new insights into the race. Still, for anyone interested in the people rather than the policy, or who did not follow the election closely until the final months, I recommend this book. This review originally appeared at Vulcan Ears Book Reviews (vulcanears.com).

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