

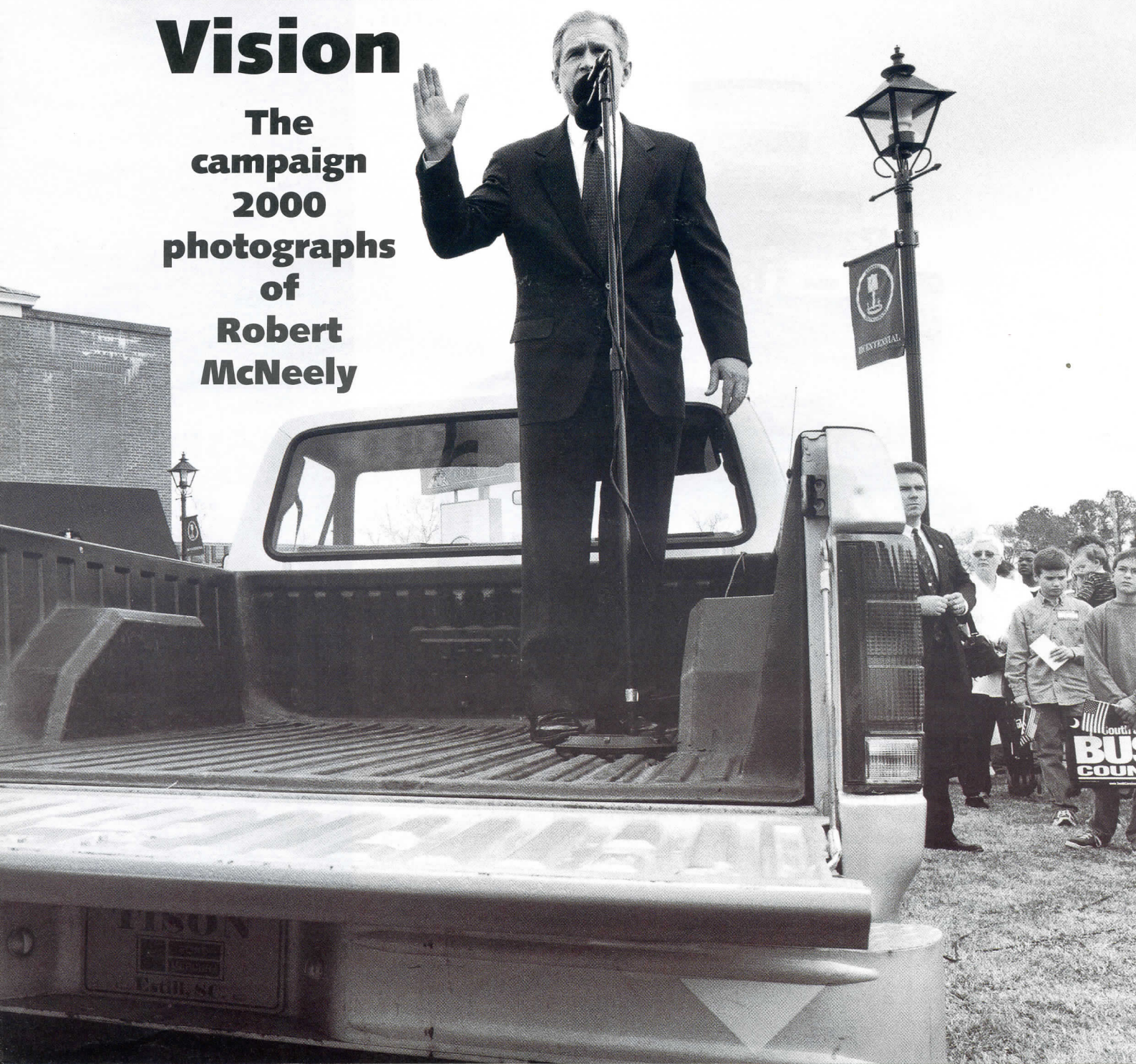
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January
2001

Political Vision

The
campaign
2000
photographs
of
Robert
McNeely





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DAVID FRIEND



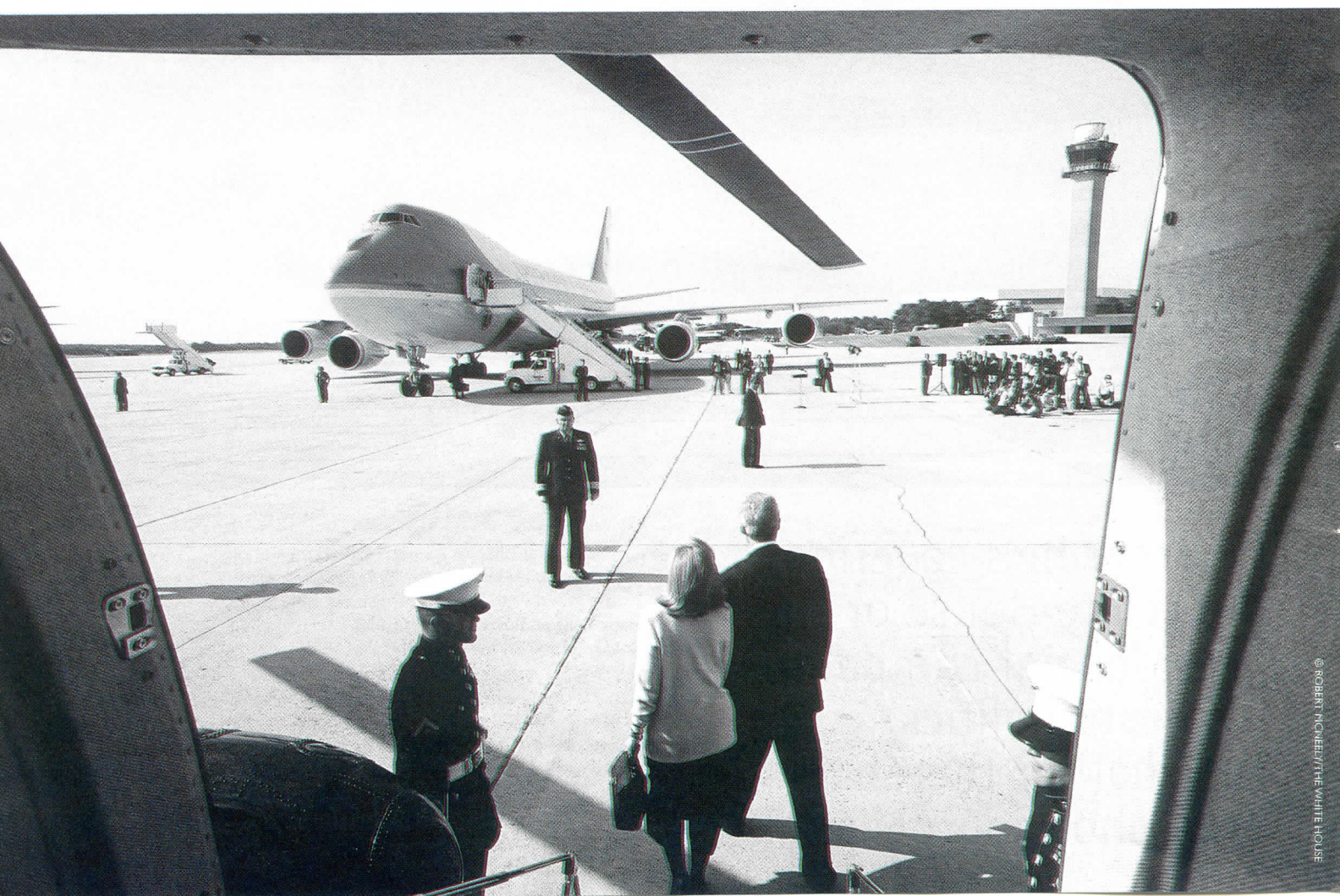
**Robert
McNeely**



Whether he's covering the White House or the presidential campaign, it's never politics as usual for this sharp-eyed photojournalist.

Bob McNeely was photographing a top-secret National Security Council briefing in the inner sanctum of the White House when Anthony Lake, President Bill Clinton's security chief, asked him to leave. Though McNeely had been photographing all the power brokers in the room—the secretary of state, the secretary of defense, the director of the CIA, and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in addition to the president and vice president—he had carefully avoided including sensitive maps, satellite images, or classified documents in his pictures. McNeely

Clockwise from opposite page, top left: The Gore headquarters in New Hampshire; Bush on the stump; McNeely with his photo of the Clintons.



Opposite, top: Clinton preparing for the Democratic presidential debate in 1991. Bottom: President and Mrs. Clinton about to board Air Force One. This page, top: Participants in the Middle East Peace Accords meeting in the Blue Room of the White House. Bottom: The Liebermans and the Gores on a boat trip during the 2000 presidential campaign.

reminded Lake that he had the same security clearance as the secretary of defense. "But you don't have a 'need to know,'" said Lake, using the classic phrase from spy lingo. "I have a need to see," McNeely answered.

Ever since he served as campaign photographer to Senator George McGovern on his 1972 crusade for the presidency, McNeely has been driven by that need. For more than five years, from 1993 to 1998, he roamed the White House—and the world—as Bill Clinton's official photographer, bringing a politically astute eye to some of the most important events of the last decade. "When you're a White House photographer, you can go anywhere," says McNeely. "It gives new meaning to the old idea that a big part of photography is just being there."

Indeed, Bill Clinton bared his personal and political life to McNeely, access that is compellingly clear in *The Clinton Years: The Photographs of Robert McNeely* (Callaway, \$40). McNeely's new book shows Clinton, his staff and family, and national and world leaders acting out the domestic and international dramas of our day. Most of all, it evokes a sense of the 42nd president's commanding personality and complex presence. But the book also shows that there's more to McNeely's work than "being there." Shot mainly by existing light with a Canon EOS-1N, its black-and-white images have a powerful sense of moment, gesture, and point of view. (To win a copy of *The Clinton Years*, see page 11.)

Since leaving the White House in 1998, McNeely has devoted himself to photographing the long run-up to what has become the most controversial presidential election in modern American history. That work appeared in a variety of publications. For *Fortune* magazine, McNeely spent ten days with both presidential nominees around the time of their respective parties' conventions, accompanying Governor George W. Bush on a whistle-stop train tour through the nation's heartland and Vice President Al Gore on a steamboat campaign down the Mississippi River. For *Paris Match*, McNeely covered the final presidential debate in St. Louis, Missouri. For *George* magazine, he shot a photo essay on a much-publicized Kansas City School Board election that pitted biblical creationists against advocates of evolutionary science. And for *Talk* magazine, McNeely made close-ups of the hands of all the original Republican and Democratic presidential contenders, so that a palm reader retained by editor Tina Brown could predict their electoral fortunes in print.

But McNeely didn't just cover the U.S. presidential election. He photographed local contests for mayor and sheriff. He photographed races for state legislatures. He photographed key congressional and gubernatorial battles. And he was in Tallahassee when the Florida vote-counting debacle was in full legal swing. Called *Photo 2000: Democracy at the Millennium*, the project is now complete, and McNeely plans to donate it to the Library



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Below, top: President and Mrs. Clinton with George Stephanopolous on the night of Clinton's State of the Union Address, 1994. Bottom: Clinton speaks to Vice President Gore while on the phone with Boris Yeltsin, 1996. Opposite, top: The first day of the 2000 Republican Convention. Bottom: Republicans show their support for nominee George W. Bush.

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of Congress. (Visit his Website at photo2000.com.) Meanwhile, McNeely's White House work will soon take up permanent residence at Clinton's presidential library in Little Rock, Arkansas. McNeely says that he is thrilled about that dual legacy. "I was lucky to find politics," he says. "It's not just about government and history. It's a window on human nature."

McNeely traces his passion to the day in 1968 when, on army duty in Vietnam, he opened a photography magazine and saw a reproduction of one of Edward Weston's famous pepper studies. "It took my breath away," he remembers. "The picture had an extraordinary feeling of light, texture, and form. The skill and technique amazed me." When he returned from the war, McNeely worked as a short-order cook, a Volkswagen repairman, and a camera store clerk to support his habit of shooting 20 or 30 rolls of film in a weekend. "I'd feel lucky if I got a good frame every four or five rolls," he says. "It took me a very long time to figure out how to create a sense of depth in a photograph. That's not a gift. It's a skill that can be learned by shooting lots of film." And shooting lots of film is a habit that served McNeely well in the White House. "When I go to shoot an official event, I use lots of film," he said in a 1998 issue of *American Photo* that profiled the 100 most important people in photography. (McNeely was number 40 on the list.) "If it's the opening of a cabinet meeting, I might shoot six to eight rolls. I want to cover the event thoroughly, and let the historians decide which events were important later on."

McNeely's only formal photographic education consisted of early-1970s workshops at the Center of the Eye in Aspen, Colorado, with photographers Paul Caponigro and Bruce Davidson, as well as with legendary teacher and Visual Studies Workshop founder Nathan Lyons. "Lyons asked us, 'Do you see what you believe, or do you believe what you see?'" McNeely recalls. "If you're a photojournalist, you can't make the mistake of seeing what you want to believe. As a photographer, I'm an observer. I like to fade back and watch what happens."

McNeely got his first taste of Beltway politics in the late 1970s, when he served as an official photographer in Jimmy Carter's White House. His main assignment was documenting the activities of Vice President Walter Mondale. When Ronald Reagan ousted Carter, McNeely started to shoot on assignment for *Life*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *The New York Times Magazine*.

That editorial experience gave McNeely the credentials, the understanding, and the perspective that he would call on twelve years later, when Bill and Hillary Clinton asked him to be the official photographer for the 1992 Clinton presidential campaign. And, true to McNeely's political instincts, that job ultimately led him to the White House. "I had a real sense that this guy was going somewhere," McNeely says. The rest, as they say, is history. ■

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