

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/review-shangri-la-in-the-woods-1508970171>

BOOKSHELF

Review: Shangri-La in the Woods

President Eisenhower had planned to close Camp David when he first visited, but he soon grew attached. He even had a golf green built. Garrett M. Graff reviews 'Inside Camp David' by Michael Giorgione.



President John F. Kennedy and former president Dwight D. Eisenhower at Camp David in 1961. PHOTO: NATIONAL ARCHIVE/NEWSMAKERS VIA GETTY IMAGES

By *Garrett M. Graff*

Oct. 25, 2017 6:22 p.m. ET

Judging from Rear Adm. Michael Giorgione's new history of Camp David, it's not hard to see why the current occupant of the White House has steered clear of the place. Mr. Giorgione, who was the 17th commanding officer of Camp David, describes the presidential retreat in rural Maryland in starkly rustic terms. As he relates in "Inside Camp David," the 200-acre mountain escape was never meant to be luxurious.

Mr. Giorgione, who served Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, points out that Camp David is a private sanctuary—not a vacation home. Every president "vacations" somewhere else. Camp David, instead, serves as perhaps the one place on earth where the commander-in-chief can pretend he's still an ordinary person, albeit one protected by Marines, served by Navy stewards and followed around by an aide carrying the nuclear codes.

The camp—officially known as Naval Support Facility Thurmont—is kept pristine by a crew of Seabee engineers and maintenance staff. As Mr. Giorgione explains, it's home to more than 20 cabins—including Aspen, the president's lodge—all made of rough-hewn oak and painted a moss green. It also has a gym and a conference facility, as well as a health clinic, its own fire department, a mess hall and a hangar for Marine One, the presidential helicopter. It even has a chapel, which gets its own dedicated chapter in "Inside Camp David," whose broad survey also includes Dwight Eisenhower's three-tee golf green; the cabin where Egyptian president Anwar Sadat stayed during Jimmy Carter's marathon 1978 Middle East peace negotiations; even the roads where Barack Obama taught Malia to drive.

The camp's modern origins date to World War II, when security needs and fuel rations necessitated a new presidential retreat close to D.C. Franklin Roosevelt settled on a mothballed Works Progress Administration site, known as Camp #3, in the Catoctin Mountains. When it became FDR's camp—he christened it "Shangri-La," after the promised land in James Hilton's novel "Lost Horizon"—only the presidential cabin had indoor plumbing. The rest of the staff relied on latrines.

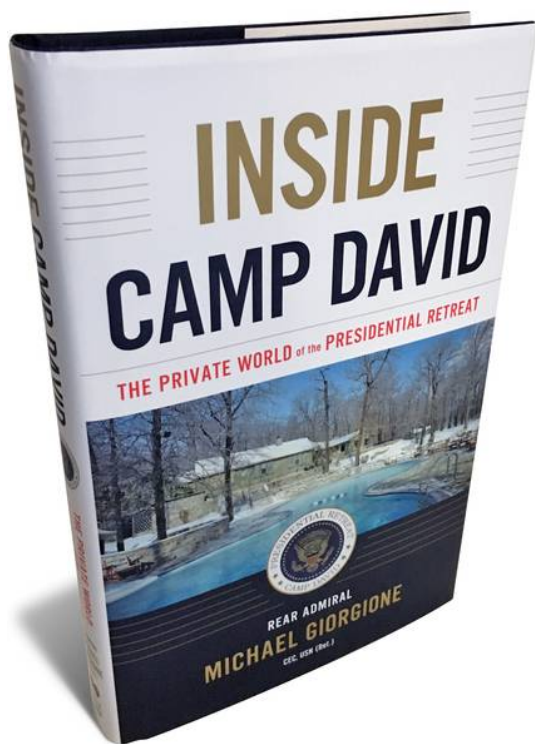


PHOTO: WSJ

 INSIDE CAMP DAVID

By Michael Giorgione
Little, Brown, 307 pages, \$28

Mr. Giorgione relates how interest has waxed and waned with each successive president. Harry Truman, a man of the open plains, hated Shangri-La—complaining of how the trees closed in around him. (He went to Key West instead.) Eisenhower first visited with the intention of closing it down, only to fall hard for the Catoctin Mountains. He renamed it after his grandson, David. When John F. Kennedy became president, he decided to keep the name, partly in gratitude for Ike’s counsel following the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961. It’s stuck ever since.

Working at the camp, as Mr. Giorgione did, affords one an up-close look at the First Family, an intimacy in which the commanding officer can sometimes develop friendships with presidents and observe them at their most human. Occasionally there are fires to put out—real and metaphorical. Mr. Giorgione describes one wintery day when he was called to Aspen to meet with a military aide during a Clinton visit. Standing inside the main living space as the fireplace roared, the president opened a door to the patio as another visitor entered through the front, and a rush of air stoked the fire. “Time stood still,” Mr. Giorgione says, as the room filled with smoke and his eyes locked with Mr. Clinton’s. Luckily, Mr. Giorgione and his staff were able to quickly dissipate the smoke before anything caught ablaze.

Still, life tends to slow down at Camp David, where the chief mode of transportation is the golf cart—the presidential cart, of course, being Golf Cart One. As Mr. Giorgione explains, the banality of daily life often surprises those who work there. “Marines walk the patrol in February at two a.m. and it’s freezing cold, shockingly quiet, and very lonely,” he writes. “The crew replants flowers because the deer got into them. After a while, a natural frustration sets in.” Yet it has also served as a venue for a number of pivotal moments in American history. It’s where FDR and Winston Churchill plotted D-Day and where the younger Bush convened his war council the weekend after September 11 to chart a path forward after the terror attacks.

While the White House and even Air Force One have spawned multiple books, Camp David—isolated and private—has drawn only scant historical attention in recent years, including a slim 1995 volume by reporter W. Dale Nelson, with a foreword by the camp’s namesake, David Eisenhower. Yet even as other recent books—like Kate Andersen Brower’s rollicking romp through the private quarters of the White House “The Residence”—have exposed the dirty laundry of First Families past, the secrets in Mr.

Giorgione's book are of the decidedly PG variety, as when Russian president Vladimir Putin forgot to bring his slippers to a 2003 visit with Mr. Bush, and one of the crew was dispatched to Wal-Mart to purchase a new pair.

Instead of a tell-all, "Inside Camp David" is a biography written by a protective family member. Mr. Giorgione carefully avoids giving away security or operational details. He never mentions the underground bomb shelter, for example—not even to chuckle over the controversy of when Richard Nixon decreed that a swimming pool was to be built right atop the emergency site. In that way, the book seems just the presidential memoir America needs right now. As Mr. Giorgione says, "One of the great gifts of Camp David is the complete absence of politics." At a time of great teeth-gnashing and division, he makes it possible to read a 70-year history of American presidents without once considering their political foibles.

Yet in the end, Mr. Giorgione's examination of the "spirit" of Camp David leaves the reader a bit frustrated. The book makes clear that, to outsiders, there's a certain almost unknowable quality to the place. Even when the retreat is laid bare by one who has worked there, Camp David still remains private and intimate, with its secrets held close.

Mr. Graff is the author, most recently, of "Raven Rock: The Story of the U.S. Government's Secret Plan to Save Itself—While the Rest of Us Die."

Appeared in the October 26, 2017, print edition as 'Shangri-La In the Woods.'

Copyright ©2017 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.