ELL-PLACED former government officials have committed their recollections to books at least since 1934, when a former White House usher, Irwin Hood Hoover, published the memoir "Forty-Two Years in the White House." And journalists have chronicled the offstage dramas of politics at least since Theodore H. White's "The Making of the President 1960."

But seldom, if ever, have as many volumes thick with inside details of an administration appeared as fast as they have during the presidency of George W. Bush.

A shelf-load have become best sellers in the last five months, even before the end of Mr. Bush's first term: an account by Ron Suskind of the service of the former Treasury secretary, Paul O'Neill; a memoir by the former antiterrorism chief Richard A. Clarke; another by the Bush adviser Karen Hughes; an investigation of the administration's ties to the Saudis by Craig Unger; and a detailed account of the cabinet's war planning by Bob Woodward.

Next month, Ambassador Joseph C. Wilson IV - the former administration envoy who contradicted some details of Mr. Bush's case for war in the State of the Union address - is expected to publish a critical memoir of his own. Bill Clinton is trying to publish his memoir over the summer.

Perhaps most sensationally, Doubleday recently scheduled "The Family," a gossipy history of the Bush dynasty by the celebrity biographer Kitty Kelley, for publication in September, on the eve of the election.

The sudden outpouring of inside details in books about the Bush administration is all the more remarkable because of the administration's previous success at controlling the flow of information to the
press about its workings. It is a phenomenon that is creating an unusual reversal in which books - the
musty vessels traditionally used to convey patient reflection into the archives - are superceding
newspapers as the first draft of history, leaving the press corps to cover the books themselves as news.

Sir Harold Evans, former editor of The Sunday Times of London and the former publisher of Random
House, said the White House's efforts to block the flow of information to the press had diverted it to
books. "In my experience, it is quite phenomenal that so many of these books are coming at us with such
force and candor," he said. "Normally there is quite a time gap before such books start to appear, so the
reconstruction of events has lost some of its bite."

Journalists and publishers credit a convergence of factors. Officials like Mr. O'Neill, Mr. Clarke or Mr.
Woodward's anonymous sources are choosing to spill their stories between hardcovers instead of in the
press, perhaps because they think books offer greater prestige or more favorable context, or as Mr.
Clarke's critics say, royalties.

Book publishers, on the other hand, are speeding up the editing, production and distribution of their
volumes to rival the time it takes to produce some long magazine articles. Even so, convention accords
hardbound volumes a greater authority than even the most meticulously prepared newspaper or
magazine articles. And changes in the media landscape - especially the advent of the cable news
networks, which have so much time to fill - enable the contents of a book to reverberate widely and
persistently, even if no one reads it.

Some in the literary world say the trend is debasing serious nonfiction.

"These books are just stupendously enlarged newspaper stories," said Leon Wieseltier, literary editor of
The New Republic, who argued that all of the books lacked the thoughtfulness, interpretative insight or
literary quality that should distinguish books from newspapers or magazines.

"They represent the degradation of political writing to purely journalistic writing," he said. "The author
in these works has been reduced to a transcriber or stenographer. There is no strenuous mental labor
here. It is all technical skill. Books about urgent subjects used to have greater ambitions for themselves,
but not these books. But this genre is something that passes, masquerading as something that lasts.
Present history doesn't have to be quite this fleeting."

Publishers argue that timeliness is no vice. Books produced shortly after the events they discuss can
provide valuable information, whatever their literary merit.

For his part, Mr. Woodward, an assistant managing editor of The Washington Post whose book was
excerpted by the newspaper, said he did not have enough time for extensive analysis. "I could take the
information in this book and work another year or two years and analyze it," he said, "but my feeling and
the opinion of my editor at The Washington Post, Len Downie, was that it was important that this come
out before the election."

"I did this book in a year," he said. "I think there is more new information in this than any book I have
written."

Until recently, former public figures generally held their peace until a discrete time had passed, said
Michael Korda, the author of a history of the best-seller list and an editor at Simon & Schuster.

"The mores have changed," he said. In an era when reporters travel with soldiers and images of warfare
are broadcast live back home, he said, "Who on earth would say people should wait a proper period of
time before writing their memoirs?"

Twenty years ago, former Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig Jr. stunned Washington by publishing
"Caveat," a critical memoir of his 18 months in the first Reagan administration, fast enough to appear
just two years after his resignation and ahead of the 1984 election.

But most other former officials - including a budget director in the Reagan administration, David A. Stockman; Mr. Reagan's chief of staff, Donald T. Regan; and advisers to the Clinton White House, George Stephanopoulos and Dick Morris - did not publish their tell-alls until the end of the first term.

Changes in book production and distribution are perhaps tempting insiders to publish faster. It has become easier - if not routine - to get out even a lengthy and respectable-looking hardcover in four weeks to six weeks, about the time it takes some monthly magazines to go to press.

Part of what makes the current wave of books so notable, however, is the behind-the-scenes dialogue and level of detail that they report for the first time. Traditionally, public officials with something to get off their chests told it in newspapers or magazines. When Mr. Stockman chose to air his harsh views of Mr. Reagan's economic policies, for example, he did it first in the pages of The Atlantic Monthly, in 1981.

Mr. Suskind said his principal subject, Mr. O'Neill, hoped he could build his case more effectively in a full book, making it harder for partisan critics to take his words or actions out of context.

Peter Osnos, the publisher of PublicAffairs and a former Washington Post reporter, offered other explanations. For those like Mr. O'Neill who tell their story to someone else, "talking to an ink-stained wretch is just not as glamorous as talking to the author of a book," he said. And for the writer, he said, "Millions of dollars are being paid for stories of people who sat at the table."

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