

ART

My Life in Politics by Tim Davis

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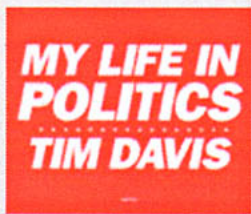
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"If these arresting photographs didn't raise themselves above the fracas, they'd serve as an unbearable dirge to America as we know it."

Review

It takes an articulate cynic to measure the pulse of American politics at the beginning of the 21st century. *My Life in Politics*, by photographer and erstwhile poet Tim Davis, chronicles the dismal state of the union between 2002 and 2004. Destined to be a classic depiction of this decade, Davis' series captures the modern era's three defining characteristics: a deeply mediated relationship to the political system, a rancorous partisanship, and the inefficacy of individual resistance or protest.

As he outlines in his "1500 Word Essay," Davis photographed places that any of his fellow citizens could visit. The book opens with a [cracked](#) reproduction of [Gilbert Stuart's portrait](#) of George Washington, and closes with a map of the United States on a Mac desktop, each state coded in red or blue. In between, Davis captures [aging political activists](#), simulcasts of US Senate proceedings, [protesting anti-abortionists](#), and tourists peeking through construction fencing at the [White House's](#) neoclassical facade. One particular photograph encapsulates the decade with a chilling clarity: in [Nixon Monument, Nixon Birthplace](#), a rainbow-hued gasoline stain on faded tarmac, Davis wraps together America's bellicose oil lust and environmental chauvinism.

Davis' caustic and often poetically oblique [comments](#) annotate the wry photographs. "Sincerity is the new irony. I'm sorry" accompanies a picture of the interior of a [Mexican restaurant](#) with an inspiring mural of Dr. King's achievements, above which a banner of text reads, "ONE PEOPLE ONE NATION ONE TACO ONE DESTINY." Throughout, Davis casts a skeptical eye on baby boomers' nostalgia for the '60s, which still inundates all aspects of our culture, from [artworks](#) in the 2004 Whitney Museum's Biennial ("no comment" writes Davis) to a [bulletin board](#) of retired protest pins.

If these arresting photographs didn't raise themselves above the fracas, they'd serve as an unbearable dirge to America as we know it. As he taps into the vernacular of American photography (think [Evans](#), [Winograd](#), [Shore](#)), one of the country's proudest artistic legacies from the 20th century, Davis resurrects a confidence in America's relentless capacity for self-criticism and self-improvement. *My Life in Politics* mandates broad cynicism toward a broken democracy as the first step to restoring hope.

-H.G. Masters