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Cowboys Full: The Story of Poker

Leslie R. Herbert, LMSW^{aff1}

University of Georgia School of Social Work

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By James McManus. (2009.) Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York, USA. 528 pp. \$30.00 USD, ISBN 978-0-37-429924-8 (hardcover edition).

From the opening paragraphs, James McManus — journalist and poker player — makes it clear that the history of poker is also a history of powerful capitalists, movers and shakers, and world leaders. *Cowboys Full: The Story of Poker* takes us on an informative tour of some of the more important political events in United States' history, highlighting the influence of poker and poker players.

Our tour begins with the transformation of *poque* — a French and Persian parlor diversion — into a bawdy frontier game favoring the most effective cheaters. It then follows through to the gentrification of poker and, finally, its meteoric rise in popularity after the introduction of the “pocket cam,” which evolved poker from a table game into a profitable spectator sport. McManus examines in great detail how this metamorphosis represents the changing face of American culture, from fledgling frontier nation to dominant political and economic force, from outlaws in dirty saloons to average Joes and Janes in spotless, well-lit poker rooms complete with hand sanitizer dispensers.

One of the more interesting, and justifiably controversial, concepts is that of a supposed “immigrant gene” and its potential influence on American history and culture. McManus cites [Peter C. Whybrow \(2005\)](#), a behavioral scientist at UCLA, who asks (as if wondering aloud) why Canadians, South Americans, and other Western colonial cultures do not seem as predisposed to move inexorably from one risk to the next, in search of greater and greater reward, as US culture (unfortunately, he provides no evidence for this observation). Relying heavily on Whybrow's suggestion of a genetic marker that predisposes certain individuals to search for greener pastures during difficult times, McManus indicates that the US's

unique history may have facilitated the concentration of this as-yet unidentified gene in the U.S. population.

Much of the book is concerned with cheating, bluffing, and reading opponents' bluffs — skills that can prove invaluable at the table, as well as in other high-stakes situations. In many cases, effective leadership involves winning decisive victories from positions of weakness. One of the many examples he related was a story about Nathan Bedford Forrest, a confederate general in the Civil War, infamous for his merciless treatment of enemy combatants and civilians (and even more infamous for starting the Ku Klux Klan). Forrest pulled off a monumental bluff, convincing Colonel Abel Streight to surrender, even though Streight had Forrest significantly outnumbered and outgunned. (The humiliated Colonel was later offered the “comforting” line, “Cheer up, Colonel. This is not the first time a bluff has beat a straight.”)

It seems that the main point McManus wants to convey is that poker playing at its most skillful is a manifestation of traits and abilities possessed by many dominant historical figures. Opponents square off, and quite frequently, the random cards do not determine the outcome. Instead, the winners are often the players who correctly guess their opponents' positions and effectively portray themselves as holding the stronger hand.

While this kind of maneuvering can lead to decisive victories, it can also backfire. In McManus' opinion, George W. Bush misread a colossal bluff by Sadaam Hussein with regard to weapons of mass destruction, while also appearing unaware of how his own position was perceived. Obama, still a fledgling senator, correctly read the situation and voted against the invasion of Iraq. Here, the reader is gently reminded that Obama is a poker player, and Bush is not.

Poker skills, then, are separated from the game itself. Chief among these are “shrewdness, psychological acuity, risk management, and the ability to leverage uncertainty.” McManus quotes Andy Bloch, a professional poker player who once said, “you have to put yourself in the shoes of your opponents, get inside their heads and figure out what they're thinking, what their actions mean, what they would think your actions mean.” This recurring theme seems to reflect McManus' fundamental belief that poker represents a neutral or healthy manifestation of these traits. There is very little discussion of the behavioral and societal dysfunction associated with gambling. Though clearly not blind to its downside, McManus has presented a perspective highlighting the challenges of poker as analogs to the challenges of negotiating life, even to the highest levels of international significance.

That said, McManus does include the heartbreaking stories of several poker players whose lives were destroyed by addiction to the game. Most notably, he

recounts the mercurial life of Stu Ungar, the three-time World Series of Poker Main Event winner, who earned \$25 million over 20 years as a gambler. McManus explains, “The anterior cingulates of the frontal cortex [of pathological gamblers] have more vulnerable dopamine systems, ‘psyches’ (as we used to call them) more easily hijacked by rewards like sex, dope, money, or laurels.” He feels this was especially true for Ungar, who died broke, sick, and alone in a motel room. “Poker exemplifies the worst aspects of capitalism that have made our country so great,” as Walter Matthau once observed.

Cowboys Full is a lengthy endeavor, numbering 528 pages (including table of contents, notes, glossary, and index section). It feels as if all but a very small proportion of these pages accentuate the positives of poker. Perhaps McManus’ goal is to indirectly remind therapists, policy makers, and researchers that the vast majority of people (up to 95 percent of gamblers, by some estimates) gamble responsibly for entertainment, social networking, and intellectual challenge. McManus, who has earned \$740,000 as a tournament poker player, would include himself in that category.

McManus maintains that the game and the institution of poker can embody the best attributes of the “American spirit,” which he views as exceptional. It could be argued that at times, he stretches to prove this point (e.g., was Kennedy's handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis really relevant to this topic?). If there is a stylistic hair to be split, it could be argued that after the exhaustive treatment of the history of poker, *Cowboys Full* does not so much end as trail off. Nevertheless, it presents a fresh perspective and a rich store of knowledge — two valuable tools for understanding the language and culture of both the casual and pathological gambler.

Reference

Whybrow, Peter D.. (2005.) *American Mania: When More Isn't Enough*. New York, NY: Norton, p. 57.

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