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Book Review: George McGovern: A Political Life, a Political Legacy

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George McGovern: A Political Life, a Political Legacy. Edited by Robert P. Watson. Pierre: South Dakota State Historical Society Press, 2004. xiv + 209 pp. Photographs, tables, notes, chronology, bibliography, index. \$19.95 paper.

George McGovern, the three-term South Dakota senator, transcends the two great political eras of the last half of the American century. He first succeeded in politics as an advocate of the New Deal order and Great Society liberalism. He was defeated in his 1980 reelection bid as the Reagan revolution undermined the era of Democratic dominance that began with FDR's New Deal.

The tone for this essay collection is set in the preface by former South Dakota Senator Tom Daschle, who held George McGovern's former senate seat for three terms. Daschle expresses his admiration for McGovern and hopes to rescue him from the "caricature created by the Nixon campaign" in 1972, when McGovern's presidential bid only succeeded in winning Massachusetts. Robert Watson, who edits the volume, believes that McGovern "led a lifelong crusade for humanity, justice, and equality" and concludes that "McGovern's contributions to the ongoing American democratic experiment are staggering."

George McGovern was not always a liberal, as Donald Simmons explains early in the volume. McGovern's father was a Wesleyan preacher, and children in the McGovern home were instilled with Christian obligations and duties. While becoming a proficient high school debater, McGovern was also promoting military spending to prepare for possible war in Europe and would even promote the presidential candidacy of Douglas MacArthur. His views changed during World War II, when he flew thirty-five bombing missions over Europe, displaying much heroism. After abandoning plans to attend the seminary, McGovern went to graduate school in history (a stage of his life given short shrift here), where his professors introduced him to the world of radical politics. Having learned to fear the "nuclear monster" during World War II, McGovern shunned the

Cold War policies of Harry Truman and "adamantly supported Progressive party candidate Henry Wallace," who sought warm relations with the Soviet Union.

After resigning his professorship at his alma mater, Dakota Wesleyan University in Mitchell, McGovern took the post of executive secretary of the South Dakota Democratic Party and, by all accounts, built the party from the ground up. When he took his new post, the Democrats in the state legislature were outnumbered 108-2. McGovern won a seat in Congress in 1956 by promoting agricultural interests and as a congressman consistently promoted farm and food programs while criticizing what he considered the nation's high levels of military spending and Cold War foreign policy. Thomas Knock's essay argues that one of McGovern's central legacies is his foreign policy criticism, especially about the Vietnam War.

Steve Ward's essay explains another important McGovern legacy. After Hubert Humphrey's 1968 loss to Richard Nixon, McGovern chaired his party's Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection, which created quotas for women and blacks at the national convention in 1972. The reforms also boosted the number of primaries and in the process significantly enhanced the power of the Democratic rank-and-file and weakened the power of traditional Democratic power brokers and labor unions. While only 18 percent of national convention delegates were chosen by primaries in 1968, in 1972 60 percent would be. This "new politics" helped McGovern win the 1972 Democratic presidential nomination. While Ward agrees with Ronald Radosh's conclusion that the Commission's reforms "gave more power to extremely liberal activists who were unrepresentative of the party's membership at large," he believes the reforms were a reasonable response to the intraparty schisms unleashed in 1968.

Nixon's landslide victory over McGovern in the 1972 race is analyzed in an essay by Jon Schaff. McGovern's candidacy had been damaged in the Democratic primaries by his old friend Hubert Humphrey (also originally from South Dakota), who argued McGovern was

“pro-marijuana, pro-abortion, and pro-amnesty for draft resisters.” Schaff concludes that “too many voters saw McGovern as an extremist” to win. This conclusion might have been dealt with in greater detail by other essays in the volume, most of which are largely laudatory. A glaring omission is an essay explaining McGovern’s loss of his Senate seat in 1980, a historic year of reversals for many of the liberal causes McGovern championed. The volume’s essays, with the exception of Ward’s, would also have benefited from greater use of untapped primary materials and less use of existing secondary literature. Nonetheless, the book is a must-read for political historians of late-twentieth-century America who want to know more about one of the era’s central and iconic figures.

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