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Book Review: *The Liberals' Moment: The McGovern Insurgency and the Identity Crisis of the Democratic Party* By Bruce Miroff

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The Liberals' Moment: The McGovern Insurgency and the Identity Crisis of the Democratic Party. By Bruce Miroff. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas. 2007. xi + 355 pp. Photographs, notes, index. \$29.95 cloth.

Much has been made in the last 40 years of a party realignment in the United States that shifted politics in the Republican Party's favor. That party realignment and the successful presidential campaigns of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. and George W. Bush were engineered by a cadre of conservative activists such as Karl Rove and Lee Atwater who worked and campaigned for Richard Nixon in 1968 and 1972. The 1968 and 1972 elections were formative moments for the modern Republican base.

Bruce Miroff's *The Liberals' Moment* uses rich historical research and a trove of interviews with nearly 50 McGovern campaign staffers and activists to argue similarly that the campaigns of 1968 and particularly 1972 shaped the Republican Party's resurgence in American politics. Miroff's rationale for why this is so is entirely different, however: South Dakota Senator George McGovern's 1972 presidential election defeat exposed an ideologically fractured Democratic Party that, nearly 40 years later, is still struggling to find its identity.

Miroff supports his argument by carefully documenting McGovern's campaign and the efforts of his staff of upstart politicians that included Gary Hart (later to become a senator and presidential candidate himself) and a young Bill Clinton. He finds a campaign that provided an early home for antiwar protestors and displaced liberals such as feminists and gay rights activists. That inclusive confederation drew McGovern away from a party mainstream that had long relied on the support of unions and Southern Democrats. Miroff finds in interviews with campaign staffers that the McGovern campaign's diverse coalition made

agreeing on a unified vision and strategy and crafting a coherent political agenda nearly impossible; so much so, in fact, that Nixon easily won the 1972 election and even defeated McGovern in the senator's home state.

Most striking about Miroff's work is not his explanation of what went wrong with the McGovern candidacy in 1972, but how that candidacy and the resulting atomization of the Democratic Party remains unrepaired even today. As with key players from the Nixon campaign, McGovern's boasted alumni who now play pivotal roles as political advisers and candidates. Unlike the Republicans, however, these Democratic activists-turned-political leaders have been unable to galvanize the loose bundle of interests that still finds a home under the Democratic Party's umbrella. Even when it achieved large-scale political success and had the opportunity to create a strong identity by electing Bill Clinton in 1992, Miroff suggests that the Democratic Party was opportunistic and transpartisan rather than being ideologically consistent and principled in the way it had been prior to the fractious 1968 and 1972 elections.

The Liberals' Moment seems prescient in a 2008 presidential election season where Senator McGovern encouraged Democratic Party unity during a divisive primary season while endorsing Barack Obama, the rival of a former McGovernite, Hillary Rodham Clinton. McGovern's reemergence in 2008 may be indicative of a party loyalist who is trying to prevent others from repeating history and, most importantly, mend a fractured Democratic Party that his own 1972 presidential bid may have helped create. **William D. Anderson**, *Department of Political Science, University of South Dakota*.