

The Liberals' Moment: Book Review

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The Liberals' Moment: The McGovern Insurgency and the Identity Crisis of the Democratic Party by Bruce Miroff critically examines George McGovern's emergence in the American Democratic Party, his influence on the party itself, and contextualizes McGovern's bid for the presidency with that of his opponent Republican President Richard Nixon. Miroff explores McGovern's role and impact in the Democratic Party by utilizing primary sources including pictures from the era and a plethora of interviews with McGovern's former aides that Miroff himself conducted. Miroff explicitly states the intentions of his book in the preface: "...highlight the ambiguities of the McGovern insurgency and its paradoxical implications for our own times."¹ Miroff builds upon this in his introduction broadening the context of McGovern's impact on American politics attempting to clarify his argument: "Liberal politics since 1972 cannot be understood apart from the repercussions of the McGovern campaign. It is a key to enduring the identity crisis of Democratic leaders and activists."² By examining McGovern's impact through this dreamy, futuristic lens, Miroff commits to a lengthy political discourse history in which he often strays away from his main argument.

Despite the book's misgivings, Miroff's work demonstrates a worthy addition to the historiography of McGovern and the modern history of the Democratic Party. Miroff highlights the niche in this particular historiography calling attention to the fact that his book is the first one written about the campaign since the 1970s.³ He also notes that his work lacks a distinguished thesis. He does mention in his preface that his full intention is to look at how McGovern's campaign shaped and continues to shape the Democratic Party and that understanding it is impossible without recognition of his efforts.⁴ The theme of recognizing McGovern's impact and legacy is evident throughout the book but unfortunately, it comes up short in between the wishful thinking of where he went wrong in his campaign and what McGovern could have done for America if he had won the 1972 election.

¹ Bruce Miroff, *The Liberals' Moment: The McGovern Insurgency and the Identity Crisis of the Democratic Party*, ix.

² Miroff, *The Liberals' Moment*, 1.

³ Miroff, *The Liberals' Moment*, 2.

⁴ Miroff, *The Liberals' Moment*, x.

One of the more unfortunate missed opportunities was Miroff's attempt to connect Bill Clinton to the McGovern campaign and the influence that it had over his presidency. Miroff takes time to discuss that Clinton supported McGovern and analyzes what Clinton took from him to apply to his own campaign and presidency. The significance of this and its exact evidence is not clearly executed. Miroff's argument about McGovern's legacy in the Democratic Party suffers because of it. Had he dedicated a chapter or a clearly defined subsection in one of the concluding chapters of the book about Clinton's connections to McGovern he would have solidified his argument, tied it to the modern day, and to the future of Democratic politics.

To argue the impact of McGovern's campaign, Miroff presents secondary source research consistently reinforced with primary source interviews. In one of his most interesting chapters, Chapter Four, he clearly defines the chronology of the campaign and where it started to fail. It began with the appointment of Senator Thomas Eagleton as his Vice-Presidential nominee and running mate. Miroff takes the opportunity to include quotes from McGovern himself in which he expresses feelings of fatigue and the belief that if the campaign staff had a month of leisure time, they would have had a much better outcome in the election.⁵ Miroff sets up the McGovern campaign's slow demise marking its start with the appointment of Eagleton and goes on to provide more reasons throughout his work such as severe campaign disorganization, not keeping any standard of privacy or secrecy from the media, and Nixon's attack politics. These points do not lack scholarly support on Miroff's account but he does develop a tendency to ramble and drag out his argument which ultimately dims the impact of his already lacking thesis.

Miroff's work demonstrates a lesser-known area of modern American history and he does an excellent job of recalling the period and educating his readers. He presents McGovern as a kind, sympathetic, progressive man (at the time) who immersed himself in many different social causes including the Civil Rights movement, feminism, and gay rights through supporting grassroots organizations. Miroff demonstrates the impact of McGovern's campaign through these matters highlighting how McGovern handled them arguing that he set a precedent for the future of the Democratic Party on these issues circling back to them multiple times throughout his work. McGovern's campaign is often overlooked as Miroff points out in the gap of literature about it but

⁵ Miroff, *The Liberals' Moment*, 73.

Miroff successfully makes a case for the importance of McGovern's campaign and pens a fascinating history of McGovern.

Miroff is a political scientist and professor at the University at Albany.⁶ His background in political science and as an educator allows him to critically analyze McGovern's history from a professional political lens. This allowed him to successfully write an educational book that can be used to identify McGovern, his biography, his campaign, and his impact on American politics. Miroff does not remain an unbiased educator in his work. He sympathizes with McGovern and writes his book from that perspective. His work poses the question of what America could have had if McGovern had won the election. This does not necessarily take away from Miroff's argument but it did leave out a lot about Nixon. Having a stronger, more consistent analysis of Nixon throughout the book would have been beneficial to contextualize how the 1972 campaign party ideas differed to push McGovern's progressive ideas and their significance to the time period and also the years to come.

Despite Miroff's thesis being admittedly weak, the argument is present throughout his work and becomes increasingly obvious as the book progresses. Highlighting the progressive issues that McGovern and his campaign began to tackle on behalf of the Democratic Party proves to be a timeless argument. Miroff's book published in 2007 is still applicable to the present day through the analysis of grassroots organizations and the call for social rights that have remained prominent topics in American politics since their emergence during the McGovern campaign. By setting McGovern up as a starting point for real change in Democratic Party ideology, Miroff sets his work up for a timeless argument that goes beyond his publication date and resonates with modern day politics.

Works Cited

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⁶ "Bruce Miroff," University at Albany, accessed October 17, 2020, <https://www.albany.edu/rockefeller/faculty/bruce-miroff>.