

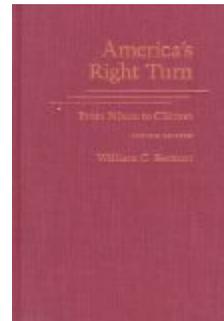
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**William C. Berman.** *America's Right Turn: From Nixon to Clinton (second edition)*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. xii + 192 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8018-5872-7; \$44.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-5871-0.

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## America's Right Turn Revisited

When Bill Clinton first ran for president in 1992, he portrayed himself as a “New Democrat,” a supporter of the death penalty and welfare reform. But he would eventually focus (“like a laser beam” in his own words) on the economic insecurity felt by millions of Americans, promising a tax cut for the middle class and public investment in worker retraining to stimulate economic growth. A slogan coined by advisor James Carville epitomized the campaign’s message: “It’s the economy stupid!”

That slogan could also serve as the subtheme of William C. Berman’s clear and concise survey of national politics since 1964. When it first appeared five years ago, it offered a nuanced account of the rise of the right, which culminated in the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. That triumph, according to Berman, was due to a host of political and cultural factors. During the late 1960s and early 1970s the “politics of race” led many disenchanted whites to associate rampant disorder and high taxes with the social programs of the Democratic Party. The “rights revolution” championed by successful white professionals alienated struggling white workers, who defected in droves to the Republican Party. The rise of conservative thinktanks like the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation challenged the primacy of their liberal counterparts like the Brookings Institution and the Ford Foundation. Meanwhile the Christian Right mobilized religious voters in the South and the Sunbelt with a moral agenda.

These factors were significant. But for Berman

two long-term economic developments, both of which reached critical mass in the 1970s, were most important. One was the emergence of the “politics of inflation,” which eroded the ability of liberals to practice the “politics of growth” and distribute ever-larger slices of the economic pie to their constituents at little cost in terms of higher taxes. Inflation rather than unemployment (the traditional enemy of the Democrats since the New Deal) soon became the chief fear of most middle-class white Americans, the critical voting bloc for both parties. The other major development was the globalization of the American economy, which transformed the political landscape as well. In the face of increasing competition and costs as well as decreasing productivity and profits, American corporations formed powerful PACs, resisted federal regulation, aligned themselves with the right, and repudiated their post-war compact with organized labor, whose influence waned dramatically.

Now Berman has prepared a second edition. It is largely identical to the first save for a new concluding chapter on “The Clinton Center,” which describes his first term as president. Based heavily and unavoidably on journalistic accounts and administration memoirs, it will prove quite familiar to regular readers of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *New York Review of Books*. Events have also, to a certain extent, inevitably overtaken it. Nonetheless, the chapter succinctly describes Clinton’s retreat to the right after the electoral disaster of 1994, when the Republicans, led by then-Speaker Newt Gingrich, took control of the House

of Representatives. By the start of his second term the President had abandoned health reform and spending measures in favor of welfare reform and balanced budgets. The author evidently decries this shift, for he concludes that by 1996 Clinton “was mired in the empty politics of the ‘vital center,’ and only a dynamic economy kept him aloft in the opinion polls (p. 187).”

Because the second edition breaks little new ground, the strengths and weaknesses of the original edition largely remain. Perhaps Berman’s most significant omission is his failure to engage with recent scholarship on the origins of the breakdown of the New Deal order. Like Thomas Edsall and Jim Sleeper (among others), the author identifies the critical moment as the late 1960s and the main cause as the conservative reaction against the Great Society and the excesses of the black power movement, abetted by a national Democratic Party that responded to the grievances and demands of a militant minority but ignored the fears and desires of a “silent majority.” Unlike Edsall and Sleeper, Berman places primary emphasis for the ultimate collapse of the Democratic coalition on the stagflation of the 1970s. But his narrative chronology begins with Goldwater, indicating that Berman essentially accepts the conventional wisdom that the “liberal consensus” remained intact to that point.

It may well have. But Thomas Sugrue has offered an alternative explanation in his important work, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, which Berman apparently never consulted. According to Sugrue, the “liberal consensus” had eroded well before 1964 if indeed it ever truly existed. He docu-

ments persuasively show how urban antiliberalism predated Lyndon Johnson and determined the “politics of race and neighborhood” in the North in the 1940s and 1950s. Thus the white backlash of the 1960s was perhaps less a rejection of the Great Society (as Edsall and Sleeper would contend) and more a culmination of long-standing racial anxieties effectively exploited by conservative individuals and organizations on the local and national level. And therefore the New Deal order was inherently unstable, making the later developments cited by Berman perhaps less significant than he maintains.

That said, his failure to engage with the argument advanced by Sugrue hardly constitutes a fatal flaw. Berman’s book remains, with the possible exception of E.J. Dionne’s *Why Americans Hate Politics*, the most readable analysis of the emergence of the conservative movement in American politics. It also provides an engaging narrative of recent presidential elections and will stimulate rather than end discussion of this important issue. Despite a few minor errors (the otherwise strong bibliographical essay, for example, lists Jonathan Rider rather than Rieder as the author of an important essay on “The Rise of the Silent Majority”) this balanced and breezy account is ideal for undergraduate as well as graduate courses.

This review was commissioned for H-Pol by Lex Renda <renlex@uwm.edu>

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