

**Thomas J. Knock.** *The Rise of a Prairie Statesman: The Life and Times of George McGovern.* Politics and Society in Modern America Series. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. 544 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-14299-9.

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**Commissioned by** Caryn E. Neumann (Miami University of Ohio Regionals)

Thomas J. Knock's reputation as a historian of US foreign relations and of the impact of Woodrow Wilson on that policy is well established. His background in those areas of research shines through in this, his most recent book, which is the first of two volumes focused on the life of George McGovern up to his reelection to the US Senate in 1968. *The Rise of a Prairie Statesman* has already generated significant commentary, including reviews in the *American Historical Review* and the *Journal of American History*, as well as a recent review in *South Dakota History*.

Because much has already been written, it may seem a furtive effort to add to the body of reviews, but I grew up in South Dakota when McGovern inspired many discussions between members of several generations and of different parties. Although I was only seventeen on election night in 1972, I had an interest in the outcome because the war in Vietnam was still being waged, and I would get a lottery number soon. McGovern had my attention.

Knock does a wonderful job addressing McGovern's formative years, reaching back to the experiences of McGovern's great-grandfather and his grandfather to establish the working-class heritage of the family and to his father's conversion from a promising baseball player to a Methodist

minister. Knock's rendition of McGovern's formative years in Mitchell, while sometimes exaggerating the effect of the Depression on the McGovern family, is engaging. So, too, is his description of the impact of Eleanor McGovern on her husband, and of the sobering lessons of war on McGovern, who earned the Distinguished Service Cross as a B-24 Liberator pilot during World War II. Knock addresses the impact of McGovern's graduate program in the History Department at Northwestern, which historians will appreciate, although the lesson in historiography may leave the average reader less than entertained. He takes the reader through the early years of politics and service in the Kennedy administration, and sets the stage in his conclusion for McGovern's theme of "Come Home, America." To accomplish this, Knock draws deeply from the work of historians of South Dakota and other local sources, as well as from multiple and diverse primary sources, including the McGovern Papers, and interviews of McGovern, his close friends and associates, and family members.

The influence of the New Left and revisionist historians on Knock's study clearly shows in his analysis. His citations draw heavily from such historians and their works. Although this can be informative, comments like "the cost of doing noth-

ing—of voting Republican—was too great” in 1932 (p. 23), that it was “mainly Republicans” who failed to see the threat of Nazi Germany (p. 38), his frequent and sweeping attacks on corporate America in the first two chapters (e.g., pp. 2, 20), and his declaration that “most of the opportunities” McGovern’s generation had “derived from three words—the New Deal” indicate an agenda that requires balance (p. 79).

Although several reviewers praise his prose, there are typos and imprecise writing that may mislead or confuse the average reader. Knock writes “cash and carry” came in 1940 “after the fall of France” (p. 38). Robert H. Ferrell notes that “cash and carry” came in November 1939.[1] Knock writes that lend-lease went to the aid of the “beleaguered British and French” (p. 39). This should read “Free French” (p. 39). Articles are missing (e.g., on pp. 4, 19) or incorrect words are used (“This work is grounded” not “The work in grounded” [p. 435]). The author misuses the word “copped” when describing McGovern’s team winning first place in a debate tournament (p. 37). As well, the caption for a picture of McGovern and Joe Foss (plate 40) states that Foss “won” the Congressional Medal of Honor (CMH). Recipients of the CMH generally dislike the word “won” when used in association with that award because “to win” implies a competition or lottery.

There are at least two important issues that Knock does not fully address: McGovern’s vote in favor of the Tonkin Gulf Resolution and the lesson to be drawn from the organization known as Republicans for McGovern. Senators Wayne Morse and Ernest Gruening could have used the same justifications McGovern did to cast their votes for the resolution, but they did not; instead, they stood on principle in their opposition. Knock’s explanation for McGovern’s vote for the resolution does not evoke the image of a sage statesman. As for the group Republicans for McGovern, Knock does not mention Dr. Howard Shreves, the man who formed the group to support McGovern’s re-

election in 1968, nor does he tell the reader whether Shreves suffered any repercussions for putting principle before party (p. 417). This is a “teachable moment” missed in a time of hyper-partisanship.

Other reviewers have noted that Knock would do well to establish more critical distance between himself and his subject in the second volume. This does not mean the first volume is not a good book: it is certainly worth reading. The second volume will afford the author the opportunity to assess the many exciting events from 1968 onward, a period that may better lend itself to his characterization of McGovern as a “Prairie statesman.”

#### Note

[1]. Robert H. Ferrell, *American Diplomacy: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), 190.

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