

**Joe Street.** *Dirty Harry's America: Clint Eastwood, Harry Callahan, and the Conservative Backlash.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2016. xiv + 264 pp. \$74.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8130-6167-2.



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Joe Street's *Dirty Harry's America* has it all: the good, the bad, and the ugly. Street argues that the film series of "Dirty" Harry Callahan reflects conservative backlash against the liberal policies of the 1960s. The film's star detective, Harry Callahan—played, of course, by Clint Eastwood—is an "instinctive crime fighter; scourge of the bureaucrats, liberals, cheats, and punks; defender of truth; dispenser of justice; force for good in a world suffused with evil" who fights criminals in the heart of the counterculture: San Francisco (p. 203). Street details how Callahan represents the type of "law and order" conservatism that defined Richard Nixon's and Ronald Reagan's successful political campaigns. He does not, however, demonstrate that *Dirty Harry* significantly influenced conservative politics in the 1980s and beyond.

Despite the book's central argument revolving around the conservative movement, Street spends the first two chapters tracing Eastwood's background, the development of the film industry, and the clashes of the 1960s that led to the creation of

*Dirty Harry*. The first chapter reads like a biography and the second has been well covered by historians of the 1960s. These sections, however, serve to provide the necessary background for Street's critical reading of the films.

In chapter 3, Street hits his stride with a detailed analysis of *Dirty Harry*. Street describes Callahan's struggle against the city bureaucracy as he attempts to stop the serial killer Scorpio (based on the Zodiac killer). Scorpio is a "prototypical countercultural figure," and the film juxtaposes "his maniacal indulgence in wanton destruction with Callahan's respect for law and order" (p. 77). According to Street, Scorpio was forced out of his home in an effort by liberal lawmakers to socially engineer the city. The fact that Scorpio later becomes a serial killer suggests "that 1960s liberalism caused more problems than it solved" (p. 80). Another example of the liberal bureaucracy ruining people's lives, according to Street, comes when a young African American boy is killed because the San Francisco Police Department decided that helicopters should not patrol the part of the city

in which he lived. The scene suggests that the mayor, and by extension the liberal elite, “is more concerned with *appearing* to be opposed to racism” than with doing anything “tangible to protect the lives of San Francisco’s African American population” (p. 75). In sharp contrast to the spineless bureaucrats is Callahan. Street argues that Callahan’s willingness to break into Scorpio’s residence without a warrant and to later use excessive force to obtain information that could save a girl’s life demonstrates that he understands that the rights of victims are more important than the rights of criminals. From the film’s beginning to the final scene, where Callahan kills Scorpio, the detective is fighting liberals’ “failure to administer prompt and sure justice,” which Reagan credited for the increase of crime in the 1960s and 70s (p. 163). Street effectively illustrates that *Dirty Harry* encapsulates the sentiment of the American conservative movement in regard to crime in the 1960s and 1970s.

Although Street’s analysis of *Dirty Harry* is interesting in and of itself, it is unclear why it is important to the development of modern conservatism. Furthermore, despite trying to speak to historians of American conservatism, Street makes little attempt to differentiate between various types of conservatives and he does little to try and understand conservative thought beyond “law and order” conservatism (which itself is ill-defined). In Street’s defense, historians generally have done a poor job at taking conservative ideas seriously. He cites many of the “first-wave” historians of conservatism who viewed the rise of the conservative movement as simply a “backlash” to the liberal policies of the 1960s and 1970s. Missing from Street’s analysis are the nuanced visions of conservatives that have been offered by Laura Kalman, Lisa McGirr, Matthew D. Lassiter, Kevin Kruse, Earl and Merle Black, Daniel Williams, George Nash, and Daniel T. Rodgers. Street also could have benefited from archival sources pertaining to the conservative movement.

While Street could be excused for not mastering what is indeed a vast historical literature on conservatism, he should not be excused for the anti-conservative sentiment that is present throughout the book. From the introduction to the conclusion, Street treats his subjects, conservatives, with disdain. He associates conservatives with authoritarianism, racism, intolerance, and ultimately ignorance. He takes potshots at Reagan’s economic record without doing the necessary research to justify such remarks and in demeaning fashion concludes that “cognitive dissonance” explains why working-class voters continue to cast ballots for Republicans (p. 170). Street also lambasts Reagan for using racially coded language and ties him to Governor George Wallace despite the fact that Wallace endorsed both Jimmy Carter and Walter Mondale over Reagan (and the fact that both liberals and conservatives have used racially coded language in almost every presidential election in recent memory—Jimmy Carter in 1976, Ronald Reagan in 1980, George H. W. Bush in 1988, Bill Clinton in 1992, Hillary Clinton in 2008, and Donald Trump in 2016). Ultimately, Street is guilty of an ugly habit that historians engage in too frequently: he imposes his twenty-first-century conception of social justice onto the past. Instead of trying to understand conservative ideology and explain it to the reader, he uses history as a tool to pass judgement.

Despite its deficiencies, *Dirty Harry’s America* does offer historians of the modern American conservative movement a medium to reach students. While the book itself is not geared toward a general audience, Street’s use of Callahan could be a useful tool in the classroom to further emphasize conservative frustration with a judicial system that seemingly put the rights of criminals before the rights of victims. Ultimately, Street has written a detailed analysis of Callahan that could pave the way for historians to consider how culture, film, and politics are interwoven.

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