



Nicole Hemmer. *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 336 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8122-4839-5.

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Nicole Hemmer's *Messengers of the Right* demonstrates that a history book can be both timeless and timely. This is a timeless book since it provides invaluable insight for any specialist who studies the 1960s and the post-World War II conservative movement and will likely be referenced and cited by scholars for many years. At the same time, nearly every page of this work is timely because it can be related to contemporary issues. In the Donald Trump era, with the rise of the so-called alt-right (or racist right) and Breitbart News, it is easy to see how "fake news" (or propaganda) websites are a continuation of earlier generations of conservative media. *Messengers* is the story of the first generation of conservative media, with the current crop of propaganda websites serving as the third generation. There are numerous connections between the different generations of conservative media, and many lessons from the past can be applied today.

It is a cliché to point out that there has been a tremendous growth of academic works which have complicated the story of the postwar Right. [1] *Messengers* demonstrates that despite this cliché, there is still more to discover about the birth of modern conservatism. Hemmer's book focuses on "media activists" who produced newspapers, magazines, and television and radio pro-

grams. The individuals who founded these media outlets, such as William F. Buckley, Clarence Manion, and Henry Regnery, had the ultimate goal of laying the groundwork for a political movement that could help reshape American politics. These media activists "provided their audiences—readers, listeners, and viewers—with a different way of weighing evidence: a different network of authorities, a different conception of fact and accuracy, and a different way of evaluating truth-claims" (p. xiii). These activists were able to help shape a conservative identity that took root in the United States during the several decades following World War II.

Messengers focuses on the magazines *Human Events* and *National Review* and the radio program *Manion Forum of Opinion*. All three were founded between 1944 and 1955. Hemmer describes how the founders of these media organizations started their careers as politically active individuals who viewed themselves as outsiders. These individuals, primarily Manion, Regnery, and William Rusher (publisher of *National Review*), were active in GOP politics in the 1950s but eventually broke with President Dwight Eisenhower's moderate Republican administration. By the end of the 1950s, they were engaged in a clear

battle to pull the Republicans from the political center to the right.

Hemmer's analysis shines brightest during her discussions of the hurdles conservative media activists had to jump over in order to make their voices heard. Specifically, she focuses on the "restrictions on speech in midcentury America" (p. 50). These restrictions stemmed from the belief, which was held by most members of the mainstream news media, that they were "objective." Since the mainstream media described themselves as objective news-informers, this had the effect of delegitimizing the voices they deemed beyond the pale of appropriate society. Hemmer explains the challenges encountered by conservatives, both real and imagined, and how these conservative media activists were able to use their outsider status to their advantage—for instance, using it as a tool to raise more funds from companies and right-wing philanthropists (think the Koch brothers, but in the 1950s) who were ideologically and economically aligned with the Right's political philosophy. Hemmer's analysis of the media's perceived objectivity and the power of the mainstream press is clearly applicable to today's society, where alt-right fake news sites (or racist-right propagandists) view themselves as outsiders who are delegitimized by the mainstream media. The analogy to the 1950s is part of what makes this work timely.

By the end of the 1950s, Hemmer's conservative media activists transformed themselves into political activists. Hemmer dates this transition from Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev's tour of the United States in 1959. Conservatives of the era were aghast at the welcome mat that Eisenhower and Vice President Richard Nixon laid out for "the butcher of Budapest" (p. 77). This event helped convince grassroots activists to get more involved in conservative politics. Shortly thereafter, the media activists began founding groups such as Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) and Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI). These activists, Hem-

mer argues, differed from previous generations of conservatives. Because they were "national in aim, avowedly conservative in philosophy, and purportedly grassroots in nature, these organizations attracted thousands of members and through their activism, won conservatism a place on the national stage" (p. 82). They were, in short, more successful in organizing their movement, and they did this by mixing media and politics more effectively than any previous conservative group.

As conservatives gained political clout, the mainstream media began shining a bright spotlight on the Right, which led to a national push-back. Specifically, mainstream media outlets wrote many alarming stories about groups such as the John Birch Society (JBS), which was a right-wing, anticommunist organization that saw conspiracy in many corners of society (most famously, the founder of the group accused Eisenhower of being a communist). This interest in the JBS, and the way the media tainted all conservatives because of their association with it, created problems within the conservative movement. The contemporary media's intense focus on the alt-right in the wake of Trump's electoral success is similar to the focus on the JBS in the early 1960s.

While the mainstream press delegitimized the Right by associating it with the JBS, Hemmer also describes the role of the federal government in opposing the rise of conservatism. This is explained in chapter 6, which is Hemmer's best chapter, titled "The Muzzle." It analyzes how the Fairness Doctrine, which "sprouted from a tangle of legislative and regulatory roots, a labyrinthine history that bedeviled broadcasters, Congress, and the FCC," made it harder for conservative voices to be heard on the air (pp. 113-114). While the practical logistics of implementation of the Fairness Doctrine were a mystery, its purpose was to ensure that broadcasters covered important political and national issues from "multiple perspectives" (p. 114). In 1963, with many Americans

afraid of the rise of the JBS and other right-wing organizations, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) decided to issue a clarification ruling about the Fairness Doctrine. This clarification convinced several radio stations to drop the *Manion Forum* and *Dan Smoot Report* (conservative radio programs) from the air for fear that the stations would be required to give away free airtime to liberal groups to create “fairness.” Hemmer’s chapter is convincing, though it leaves much room for future historical inquiry into how and why President John Kennedy and the federal bureaucracy, including the FCC and Internal Revenue Service, tried to silence the right in the early 1960s.

Despite these problems, the media activists continued to expand their influence and reach. Specifically, they gave Senator Barry Goldwater national recognition and then helped him win the Republican presidential nomination in 1964. Hemmer describes how Goldwater’s campaign was “one in which media activists emerged as powerful political brokers, advisers, sloganeers, strategists, and intermediaries between the candidate and the base” (p. 165). The passionate support for Goldwater translated into a lot more money for the rapidly growing pool of conservative media activists. This was, as Hemmer describes, both a blessing and a curse, as the marketplace of conservative media quickly became saturated, which caused donations from the grassroots to dry up. Hemmer’s research on the fundraising apparatus is top-rate, and her footnotes will be of great use to scholars studying the funds which underwrote postwar conservatism.

The rise of modern conservatism was further complicated with the election of Richard Nixon to the presidency in 1968. The media activists whom Hemmer analyzes were divided about whether to support Nixon; however, Hemmer notes that he was the first major-party nominee to woo them, which helped sway their support. But by 1972, they were enraged by his policies, especially his

decision to visit the People’s Republic of China. Thus, they played a role in convincing Representative John Ashbrook (R-OH) to oppose Nixon in the primary campaign of 1972. Ashbrook was sorely defeated. *Messengers* discusses the opposition to Nixon and Ashbrook’s fascinating campaign in about four pages, leaving future historians room to expand on and analyze the topic more fully.

Finally, *Messengers* has two basic concluding chapters. The first begins with chapter 11, “The Contraction,” where Hemmer describes the decline of the first generation of conservative media activists. She includes several interesting stories about the decline of the Right along with detailed circulation numbers. The problem, as she describes it, is that in the early 1970s the media activists were angry about the political climate in the country and clear about what changes they wanted to see, but they had lost touch with both populist anger and Washington insiders. This idea that the first generation of conservative activists struggled mightily in the early 1970s, despite having a Republican president, requires more historical attention. Hemmer’s analysis is interesting. Despite seeing much evidence of this problem in various primary sources, it is the first time I can recall reading about it within the secondary literature. I look forward to future scholarly debate about the topic.

Messengers’s other concluding chapter is chapter 12, “The Comeback,” which describes the rise of the New Right in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Hemmer identifies Richard Viguerie, Terry Dolan, Howard Phillips, and Jerry Falwell as the leaders of the New Right and she defines this group as being an oppositional, pro-life, pro-guns movement which helped propel Ronald Reagan to the presidency and then began criticizing many of his decisions once in office. This, not surprisingly, drove the first generation of media activists, who are at the heart of Hemmer’s study, crazy, since Reagan was the ideological president they had

long been craving. Unfortunately for them, they no longer had the support or stature to oppose the New Right's leaders.

Hemmer's work does not explore the history of religious conservative broadcasters such as Carl McIntire and Billy James Hargis. She does offer a useful explanation as to why they are absent, specifically, that the media personalities rarely coordinated or worked together. Still, as she declares, they shared many audience members and studying them would have made this a more complete book.[2] Hemmer was able to include a fascinating number of lesser-known conservative activists who are rarely mentioned in the secondary literature. DB Lewis, the National Federation of Conservative Organizations, and Walter Harnischfeger are examples of just two individuals and a group that Hemmer integrates into her book but which few other historians have.

Overall, *Messengers* is an excellent historical account of how the conservative movement grew from a fringe group of former political activists into a mainstream movement that captured the White House. Hemmer's primary source research, which took her to numerous archives and exposed her to large quantities of conservative media content, will propel the field. The study is also important because it is a political work about conservatives, written by a liberal academic, which neither demonizes nor canonizes conservatives and their ideals. Hemmer's analysis and writing is evenhanded throughout the manuscript, which is not always the case for scholars who study modern conservatism.

Additionally, Hemmer's topic is very topical and will help people better understand the changes taking place in the United States today. Since Trump's election in November 2016, many academic groups, including the Organization of American Historians and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* have begun putting together lists of works explaining the rise of "Trump's America."

Hemmer's work is mandatory historical reading for anyone putting together such a syllabus.

Notes

[1]. Geoffrey Kabaservice, *Rule and Ruin: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, From Eisenhower to the Tea Party*, Studies in Postwar American Political Development (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Joyce Mao, *Asia First: China and the Making of Modern American Conservatism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); D. J. Mulloy, *The World of the John Birch Society: Conspiracy, Conservatism, and the Cold War* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2014); Michelle M. Nickerson, *Mothers of Conservatism: Women and the Postwar Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Sandra Scanlon, *The Pro-War Movement: Domestic Support for the Vietnam War and the Making of Modern American Conservatism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2013).

[2]. For more information on the rise of the religious Right, one could read: Ronald Lora and William Henry Longton, eds., *The Conservative Press in Twentieth-Century America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999); Daniel K. Williams, *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Neil J. Young, *We Gather Together: The Religious Right and the Problem of Interfaith Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

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