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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael A. Cohen. *American Maelstrom: The 1968 Election and the Politics of Division.* Pivotal Moments in World History Series. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 448 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-977756-3.

Michael Schumacher. *The Contest: The 1968 Election and the War for America's Soul.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018. Illustrations. xix + 540 pp. $34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8166-9289-7.

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Published on H-1960s (June, 2019)

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Narratives on the 1968 Presidential Election

In graduate school, I once had a professor say that we would read two types of books over the course of our studies: those read for argument(s) and those read for content. The former spent little time with narrative and assumed the reader possessed an existing base of knowledge about the subject matter and therefore sought to explore the historical person, place, thing, or idea from a new or novel perspective. The latter provided the narrative framework—the who, what, where, and when that forms the basis of historical research and allows for greater in-depth studies or theoretical approaches. Both types of books are necessary components of historiography. *American Maelstrom* and *The Contest* fall squarely in this second category of historical texts.

Michael A. Cohen, national political columnist for *The Boston Globe*, and Michael Schumacher, best known for his biography of Allen Ginsberg, have each written large tomes chronicling the 1968 presidential election. Each book provides chapters outlining the various key personalities involved in the presidential race and then moves chronologically through the primaries to the general election. The biggest difference between the two is Cohen's effort to address the aftermath of the election up through the first decades of the twenty-first century. Both authors write in an engaging style meant to captivate a general audience. Furthermore, both provide strong narrative overviews of the election that scholars beginning their research into the period will find useful to help identify the main players of the drama and the course of events. Otherwise, more advanced scholars will find little new or novel in either text.

Cohen's *American Maelstrom* is intentionally a presentist investigation of the 1968 presidential election written for the general reader. Cohen actively wants to draw straight lines between that contest and the 2016 presidential election, thereby placing everything in his narrative into a deterministic paradigm leading to the inevitability of the contemporary political environment. Following his journalist roots, Cohen's emphasis is on process and personalities. Through eighteen chapters (each roughly twenty pages), he describes the challengers, their campaigns, the party conventions, the election, and its effects. All six of the

main effects Cohen identifies of the 1968 election represent current political clichés and tropes mobilized by journalists or serve to rehash old debates about the "good sixties" versus the "bad sixties" that have fallen out of favor among academic historians. Additionally, Cohen argues that the election caused the strains that broke apart Democrats' New Deal coalition. Recently, Jefferson Cowie's ***The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics*** (2016) offers a powerful challenge to existing declensionist frameworks surrounding the New Deal, though in general many scholars see Richard Nixon's election in 1968 as an important step toward the erosion of the New Deal coalition. However, one may hesitate to ascribe a singular causal connection, as Cohen seems to here.

Furthermore, Cohen falls victim to the rampant "both-sidism" that dominates American political journalism today and accuses both Democrats and Republicans of retreating to their extreme wings following the 1968 election. This trope fails to acknowledge the continued strength of conservative and moderate Democrats for most of the last forty years of American politics. If Cohen's thesis is correct, one would expect to find massive expansions in the influence wielded by labor and other left-wing agents within the Democratic Party, which largely have not materialized. Further, the declining influence of city machines and union leaders, which Cohen laments, has as much to do with white flight from urban centers and conservative crackdowns on labor during the early Cold War years as it had to do with any Democratic Party drift to the left as he claims. While one could argue that George McGovern's 1972 platform was decidedly to the left, it seems hard to suggest that the party that put Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton into the White House had traveled to the left fringe.

Michael Schumacher's ***The Contest*** largely avoids the presentism of Cohen's text, if not the determinism. Schumacher argues that to understand the presidential election in 1968, one needs to understand that its participants came into the election with pasts that inevitably drove their actions. The result is a nearly five-hundred-page volume of eighteen chapters, most averaging about twenty-five pages (except chapter 1 on Hubert Humphrey, which comes in at a sprawling fifty-two pages). In his retelling of the 1968 election, Schumacher wants to offer a degree of context and complexity to the existing narrative. However, his biography of an election focuses on a top-down, great-man approach largely eschewed by academic historians. For example, in his effort to break down the "cliché and oversimplification" surrounding understandings of antiwar activism and their impact at the Democratic National Convention, Schumacher relies on biographical sketches of New Left "leaders" including Abbie Hoffman, Jerry Rubin, David Dellinger, and Tom Hayden (p. xvii). The ironies here compound themselves. For one thing, the New Left was notorious for its argument that it was leaderless. Also, since the mid-1990s, scholars of antiwar/student activism have abandoned the declensionist narrative surrounding the New Left as a meaningful structure for understanding the activism of the period. Thus, Schumacher seeks to fight clichés with clichés.

Much like Cohen, Schumacher's work relies on the popular memory surrounding the 1968 election and the sixties in general. Schumacher rehashes a version of the "generational tension" argument, stating that members of the World War II generation and baby boomers were locked in an intense struggle for "the soul of America" (p. xi). He constructs the two generations as monoliths crashing headlong into each other, providing no nuance and ignoring obvious contradictions to this argument. How is it that Eugene McCarthy, a World War II veteran, became the icon of the boomers' argument against the establishment? This monolithic construction of the generations may be excused on some level if Schumacher had not recently written ***Dharma Lion*** (2016), a bio-

graphy on the legendary Beat poet (and member of the World War II generation) Allen Ginsberg. Given his work on this counterculture figure, it seems hard to reconcile Schumacher's acceptance of the monolithic generational categories of this longstanding popular trope of sixties antagonisms.

Cohen and Schumacher both seemingly lament the manifold changes in America's body politic since the 1960s and offer well-written and highly readable narratives of the election they believe set America on the path to its contemporary reality. For Cohen, the connections to the present are clear and direct; his mission is simply to elucidate them for his reader. Schumacher is less presentist, yet he wants his reader to walk away with a full understanding of the men who fought for the presidency in 1968, as this election represented the most pivotal presidential contest of the twentieth century. There is little, if anything, new in these texts. Still, both books are thorough in their presentation and offer compelling narratives that a general audience will enjoy and details that will help provide the foundations for scholars to launch into deeper analyses about the sixties, presidential politics, and a host of other fields of inquiry.