

**Jon K. Lauck, Catherine McNicol Stock, eds.** *The Conservative Heartland: A Political History of the Postwar American Midwest*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2020. 392 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-2930-5.



**Reviewed by** Kevin Mattson (Ohio University)

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Anyone who wants to explain the historic election of Donald Trump to the presidency should get this book. A collected set of essays by historians, political scientists, and journalists, *The Conservative Heartland* is full of helpful case studies that explain the Midwest's shift to the right—and to something that could be called Trumpism—over the last few years. Or as one contributor puts it, it explains how 2016 became “the first presidential election since 1980 in which the Midwest voted less like the Northeast and the West and more like the South” (p. 50). As we know, history moves fast these days and getting historical perspective can be quite a challenge. Fortunate for readers, this book gets us a bit closer.

Consider one of the book's central character studies done by Jeffrey Bloodworth (full disclosure: I sat on Bloodworth's dissertation defense at Ohio University). He focuses on Charles Stenvig, the mayor of Minneapolis during the late 1960s and 1970s. Prior to that Stenvig “was elected president of the Police Officers Federation” (p. 175). Bloodworth documents the growing fears of “urban ri-

ots” and “student protests” and explains how Stenvig had a lock on a “white working class base” (pp. 175, 182). Parroting Richard Nixon at the time, while also foreshadowing Trump, Stenvig's mayoralty made the home of super-liberal Hubert Humphrey's Minnesota turn from “a liberal bastion into a contested territory” (p. 185).

Or consider William Russell Coil's portrait of Governor James Rhodes of Ohio. Rhodes famously sent in the National Guard to crack down on anti-war activists gathering at Kent State University, leading to the death of four people. Coil states, “The Kent State tragedy, however, seemed to help Rhodes” (p. 191). When Rhodes decided to run for governor again in 1974, he faced Jack Gilligan, “a sophisticated, cosmopolitan Democratic incumbent.” Some worried that Rhodes would not do well, since he was a “crude and ethically challenged Republican who was also a wealthy real estate developer.” Coil proceeds, “Voters tended to dismiss Rhodes's shady past dealings but chafed at Gilligan's elitism” (p. 195). Rhodes sought to attract car manufacturers to Ohio and, Coil points out,

“was impulsive” and seemed to “create chaos” (p. 201). Rhodes was “speaking to Ohioans who were either ambivalent or outright angry about foreign corporations in the heartland” (p. 203). Though not known to be a reader, Trump seemed to have plagiarized Rhodes’s playbook.

It is typical for historians to interpret college campuses—say the University of California or University of Wisconsin or Columbia—as hotbeds of radical activists (some members of Students for a Democratic Society [SDS]). This boilerplate treatment of the sixties misses a lot. Here, Daniel Spillman shifts the focus from a place like Berkeley to Indiana University (IU) and finds a steadfast conservative voice distilled in the writing and activism of R. Emmett Tyrrell Jr., who founded a magazine called *The American Spectator* at IU in 1967 (still being published today). Usually conservative students would emulate William F. Buckley, founder of the *National Review*. But Spillman shows how Tyrrell took inspiration from the more acerbic H. L. Mencken. The result was a style of “using satire, mockery, and personal insults.” In one issue, he called for students to “tar and feather” a leader of SDS at IU. In fact, at one point Tyrrell “wrote an editorial calling for” the leader of SDS “to commit suicide” (p. 138). Tyrrell and his comrades played hoaxes on campus—including tossing a pie at a speaker who was supposedly visiting from Columbia University but was really a fake. Playing around with the truth foreshadowed the style now present in Trump’s presidency. And it should be noted that Tyrrell was “the only clear conservative journalistic voice supporting the presidential candidacy of Donald Trump” in 2016 (p. 133).

In addition to these case studies, there are fascinating pieces on Republican pro-choice activists who had a presence in their party up to 1976, the “fall of George McGovern” and the rise of Chuck Grassley, the intricate politics of Indiana governor Mitch Daniels, the remaking of Nebraska due to a fracking explosion and privatization of public ser-

vices, and contests over same-sex marriage. If anything, this book becomes a tad rotund at moments. Nonetheless with all its bulk, it helps us understand the often ignored flyover states and their influence in contemporary politics. And reading this book is like looking at a blurred image of Trump gradually becoming a sharp portrait of the forty-fifth president, with his weird mix of populism, wealth, white working-class resentment, and attack-dog style of politics.

*Kevin Mattson teaches American history at Ohio University and is author most recently of We’re Not Here to Entertain: Punk Rock, Ronald Reagan, and the Real Culture War of 1980s America.*

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-midwest>

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