In this extensive and detailed account of the 1976 presidential election, Daniel K. Williams makes an impressive case that the contest witnessed the last stand of the New Deal coalition and the onset of party polarization along cultural—rather than class—lines. In addition to a wide range of secondary works on the 1970s, which he sets out in a useful bibliographic essay, Williams has mined the papers of not only Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford but also several of their competitors in the primaries, including George Wallace, Ronald Reagan, Sargent Shriver, and Morris Udall.

To demonstrate the beginning of the two parties' growing divergence on what Williams calls cultural issues—such as race, gender, and sexuality—he devotes more than half the book to the primaries. He shows how the dark-horse candidate Carter maneuvered a victory over some ten other candidates on both his left and right, in part by waffling on divisive issues, for example, on abortion to appease the 48 percent of Democrats who favored a Human Life Amendment. This example is part of Williams's larger argument that Carter managed his nomination and ultimate election by assembling a moderately progressive stance on economic issues, such as job creation, which he combined with a slightly conservative position on social and cultural issues (effectively removing them from the Republicans arsenal), exemplified by his personal religious commitments.

Few Republicans challenged their party leader, yet he fought Reagan's challenge all the way to the Republican National Convention. The former California governor promised federal fiscal stringency and attacked détente with the Soviet Union, forcing Ford to move to the right. Except for California, Indiana, Montana, and South Dakota, the states Reagan carried lay in the South and Southwest. These victories and Reagan's appeal to lower-income voters, blue-collar workers, and less-educated voters, Williams argues, laid the groundwork for a realignment of the parties.

Some readers might skim over the abundant details that have little bearing on Williams's overall argument—such as the several pages devoted to
explaining why Ted Kennedy decided not to run—but the razor-thin outcomes of both the primary and general election allow the author to demonstrate an engaging style that can hold the attention of both scholars and general readers. An epilogue exploring the demise of Carter’s coalition and the nearly mirror opposites of the electorate’s presidential votes in 1976 and 2016 offer rich material for discussion of US politics today.

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