

Halpern, Martin

***Unions, Radicals, and Democratic Presidents: Seeking Social Change in the Twentieth Century***

Westport, CT., London: Praeger, 2003. xxii, 261pp

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Martin Halpern's *Unions, Radicals, and Democratic Presidents* is persuasively written; his overriding theme advocates a peaceful caring society with civil rights, fair wages and working conditions, health care, good education, voting rights and equal opportunities for people regardless of race, gender or sexuality. The book covers strengths and weaknesses in presidential candidate campaigns, the labor movement, the formation of various unions, various improvements to society such as the Equal Pay Act, the Civil Rights Act and the Women's Liberation Movement.

Halpern demonstrates how the 'left' in American politics has been associated with the working class who collectively try to improve the lives of the masses to 'shift...power toward the non-elite and relatively powerless sections of society.'(2) The Labor movement was instrumental in campaigning for a higher minimum wage and for health insurance. Halpern demonstrates that strikes, such as that of the 200,000 postal workers in 1970 were successful in gaining increases in pay.

Halpern examines The Ford Rouge complex in 1950s Detroit which employed approximately 12,000 African-American workers and contained the largest union in the world and suggests the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) interrogations 'coincide[d] with strikes and [National Labor Relations Board] NLRB or union elections'(67) in order to disrupt leftist politics. Halpern discusses the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, which made 'strike action by federal workers illegal with immediate dismissal among the penalties.'(82) In the 1980s, management had aggressive tactics against unions that were supported by government, via 'Ronald Reagan's firing of striking air traffic controllers.'(158) Employees who went on strike were simply replaced with other workers.

Halpern shows the fickleness of power-hungry politicians, who simply changed what they had purported to believe, shifting their allegiance from the left. Halpern comments that Jimmy Carter prioritised the Panama Canal over labor law reform and national health insurance, and put much funding into the military. Halpern demonstrates how Governor David Pryor, who had previously been a pro-labor liberal, moved to the right and 'voted against a bill to increase the minimum wage.'(156) Other presidents such as Clinton and Carter, whilst 'adhering to Democratic traditions...mov[ed] away from a stance too close to the liberal wing of the party,'(170) since the public tends not to vote for candidates considered *too* liberal. He also suggests some of the reasons voters turned away from Gore in 2000 were due to his opinions on 'legalizing gay unions, pro-abortion and anti-gun laws,'(214) while more of the public tended to trust Nader, who avoided talking

about these issues.

Towards the end of the book, Halpern looks at the decline in unions and suggests this may partly be due to changes in employment, with a decrease in the manufacturing and mining industries. He shows how the Democrats have gained supporters amongst women and environmentalists and have always had significant support from the African-American Community (90% voted for Gore). Halpern also offers suggestions as to how the electoral system could be made more democratic such as 'immediate run off voting...making election day a holiday and ...mandating the use of public funds instead of private funds for candidates seeking office.'(244)

The main criticism of Halpern's text is that the chapters work best as a series of separate essays, rather than a cohesive whole. When read in its entirety, it is at times repetitive and does not progress in a chronological manner, instead jumping from demonstrating thirties values, anti-communism, left-wing Jewish families, Henry Ford as a virtual puppet of publicist William J. Cameron, to issues of raising children today to have democratic values, and back to 1950s Coleman Young and HUAC. Halpern compares contemporary Presidents with those from years past, switching rapidly between their similarities: Carter and Clinton, then the Nader campaign of 2000 and Wallace of 1948, which can be confusing. Halpern's description of Bill Clinton's empathy with people and 'his ability to form friendships and be comfortable with all sorts of people, including African Americans,'(207) seems an unfortunate and offensive phrasing of words, which is almost certainly unintentional, but somewhat typical of a white liberal stance.

The book is well researched using newspapers, books, statistical abstracts, interviews, correspondence and conveniently referenced at the end of each chapter, as well as containing a comprehensive bibliography. Halpern includes a useful list of thirty acronyms for various unions and groups at the start of the book. There are also black and white photos of presidents signing Acts, presidential campaigns and strike participants. Other than the minor criticisms regarding the cohesiveness of the book, and the rogue phrasing, it is an interesting persuasive book that will be useful to University students and researchers as an overview of unions and Democratic presidents.