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Daniel Marcus. *Happy Days and Wonder Years: The Fifties and the Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics.* New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2004. viii + 264 pp. $22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8135-3391-9.

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The Politics of Nostalgia

Democracy is government by persuasion. Essential to the democratic process is a public debate about domestic and diplomatic policies. Whoever best defines the terms of the debate, of course, will have an advantage. For the last twenty-five years, the Republican Party has shaped the conversation by reducing the debate to a series of simple cultural markers: the fifties were good and the sixties were bad. To the Republicans, the fifties represent a time when America was a global power that used its military strength to defend democracy and contain the spread of communism, while maintaining economic prosperity, personal security, and social harmony at home. The sixties, according to the Republicans, destroyed this utopian calm through self-indulgent personal behavior, misguided federal policies, and acts of cowardice: essentially the behavior of unruly children.

The Republican Party has portrayed all Democratic presidential candidates since 1984 as children of the sixties who should not be allowed to hold public office, since they will only do more harm to the country. Thus, according to conservatives, Walter Mondale was a bleeding-heart liberal, Michael Dukakis a left-leaning lawyer and academic snob, Bill Clinton a dope-smoking draft dodger, and Al Gore an environmental kook. John Kerry not only turned his back on his country; he also was Jane Fonda's friend.

Daniel Marcus, Associate Professor of Communications at Wayne State University, examines the ways in which the Republican Party has used images from popular culture to exploit the sense of economic dislocation and moral confusion that seemed to characterize American society in the immediate aftermath of Watergate, OPEC's oil embargo, and the Iranian hostage crisis. In *Happy Days and Wonder Years*, Marsh argues that the political agents of the conservative movement decided upon a strategy that made use of images and symbols of the fifties in order to justify their criticism of federal policies. These strategists understood that by tapping into the personal memories of the public and then distorting them, the conservative movement could then transform these private memories into a national narrative of the past that would fulfill their political ends.

Marcus argues that this transformation began when the producers of popular culture initiated an examination of the recent past. *Rolling Stone*, for example, highlighted the importance of fifties music in a special issue published in 1969. The film *American Graffiti* (1973) and the television show "Happy Days" (1974-1984) followed shortly thereafter. What the music, movie, and TV show had in common was a narrow view of life in the 1950s. Dating, clothes, and surviving high school seemed to be the important issues facing teenagers in post-World War II America. Segregation, poverty, atomic war, and the blacklist were not subjects for doo-wop singers, or teenage boys and girls.

Meanwhile, the popular-culture images of the sixties produced in the 1970s and early 1980s suggested a country in conflict with itself over race and war. Films

like *MASH* (1970), *Coming Home* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and the *Deer Hunter* (1978), portrayed a country whose foreign policy destroyed democracy both abroad and at home, while movies such as *Mississippi Burning* (1988) and *Long Walk Home* (1990) as well as the television series "I'll Fly Away" (1991-1993) reminded viewers of the complexities of American race relations. During the same period, TV programs like "All in the Family"(1971-1979) and "Maude" (1972-1978) reflected the generational conflict that epitomized many family living rooms. Although these works were intended to be commentaries upon serious issues facing the country, conservatives highlighted these shows as examples of Hollywood's anti-American bias. Conservative critics labeled the shows's producers as people who neither understood nor cared about the country.

Marcus suggests that producers responded to these criticisms by developing programs and movies that reflected a more benign view of America. In the middle of Ronald Reagan's presidency, the supposed Golden Era of the fifties received support from the television series "Family Ties" (the lead character rejects the world view of his parents, former sixties activists, and endorses Reaganomics). The film *The Big Chill* and the television program "Thirtysomething" dealt with the compromised idealism of activists who found themselves responding to the practical needs of family life rather than the moral needs of society. Other films such as *Missing In Action* and *Rambo: First Blood Part Two* consciously portrayed the Americans in Vietnam as courageous soldiers, not paranoid drug users. Finally, conservatives embraced *Forrest Gump* as an example of a decent American who did his best during the dark and difficult days of the 1960s. (In the book, the main character gives an anti-war speech and experiments with drugs, but these events do not appear in the film version.) The decade of the 1990s closed with countless tributes to the veterans of World War II, notably Tom Brokaw's best-selling *The Greatest Generation*, the film *Saving Private Ryan*, and Stephen Ambrose's *Band of Brothers*. At the turn of the twentieth century, Americans were not discussing the future but forming a conservative consensus about the recent past.

This narrative about the way in which popular culture influenced or reflected American politics provides a useful outline for examining the political discourse of the country over the last twenty-five years. Marcus constructs a persuasive argument that the conservative agents of the Republican Party have successfully co-opted the cultural symbols of the past in order to create an historical narrative that justifies their contemporary politics. He notes one exception to this conclusion, namely the 1992 campaign of Bill Clinton.

Marcus argues that Clinton demonstrated his understanding of the Republicans' use of cultural markers by enlisting for his own use two of the most omnipresent pop icons from the recent past: Elvis Presley and John Kennedy. By linking himself to these two figures, Clinton managed to avoid the complexities of the late 1960s (urban riots and anti-war demonstrations) and present himself as a bridge between the golden era of the 1950s and the promise of the early 1960s. But Marcus closes his argument about Clinton's use of cultural images by noting his failure once in office. Clinton's personal self-indulgence destroyed the effectiveness of his presidency and, thus, confirmed the conservative argument that a sixties president is harmful to the country.

Marcus has persuasively documented how important the use of popular culture is to our understanding of the political discourse of the last quarter of a century. But two other factors might better explain the triumph of the Republican Party since 1976: race and demographics. The New Deal political coalition (industrial workers, minorities, women, and immigrants) built by President Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s began to dissolve in the 1970s. The success of the civil rights movement removed the last obstacles designed to prevent the black community from voting and resulted in southern white Democrats abandoning the party to support Reagan. Thus, the emergence of a large suburban middle class as well as the southern white response to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 led to Republican political victories. (Recall that Ronald Reagan opened his 1980 presidential bid with a state's rights speech in Philadelphia, Mississippi where three civil rights workers had been kidnapped and murdered in 1964.)

Marcus's book will provide readers with a useful understanding of one crucial aspect of what now passes for political discourse in the United States. For a more complete view, it should be read in conjunction with other works, such as Todd Gitlin's *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America is Wracked by Culture Wars* (1995) and Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (2004).

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