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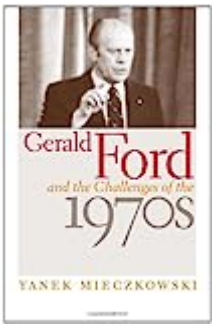

Yanek Mieczkowski. *Gerald Ford and the Challenges of the 1970s.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005. vii + 455 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2349-3.

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Time to Trade in the Old Ford for a New Revision

Stuck between the Nixon and Reagan administrations, and not as prolific as Jimmy Carter at keeping his name in the press, there is a danger that Gerald Ford and his administration will be considered nothing more than a historical footnote by future generations. Yanek Mieczkowski's goal is to salvage the legacy of the Ford administration before that occurs. In this impressive book, he argues that Ford's tenure as president deserves more consideration and even praise than it has often received. After reading it, one is hard pressed to disagree with the author's conclusion.

Mieczkowski contends that Ford faced challenges on a level that few other presidents have had to contend with. These included the crisis of leadership caused by Watergate, massive economic challenges, and foreign policy problems in a post-Vietnam environment. An unelected president who had two years before the next election, Ford also had to deal with strong political challenges from Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter in 1976. His position was not be envied. What Mieczkowski does convincingly is show how Ford not only laid the groundwork for solving these problems, but also how close he came to getting a term of his own to finish what he began. His leadership was steady if not spectacular, and was arguably what the country needed at the time. Ford had a vision for America, but had to continuously fight an uphill battle against the public mood and a Democratic Party that wanted to return to the White House. Indeed, the story of the Ford administration is one of people full of new ideas, who had no time to implement them. Mieczkowski conveys those ideas and sense of trying to beat the clock very well.

Because of the looming 1976 election, Ford knew that he had to address the country's economic and foreign policy problems head on. He discovered, however, that this was easier said than done. The economy's troubles offered no simple solution. They were a proverbial perfect storm of inflation, recession, and stagflation. Ford attempted to use the bully pulpit of the presidency to "Whip Inflation Now" via a grassroots effort, garner support for his plan to cut both government spending and taxes, deregulate industries in order to slash high unemployment, and search for a solution to the 1970s energy crisis. However, his efforts had little time to take

root and were too often poorly implemented by his staff. Perhaps, as Mieczkowski suggests, Ford inherited problems and policies that few had any real hope of dealing with in just two years. The same sorts of odds applied to Ford's foreign policy agenda. Here, he had to contend with the still-smoldering results of America's involvement in Vietnam. Like many of his generation who had served in Word War II, Gerald Ford believed the United States had to play an active role in world affairs. But in the 1970s, this meant he had to fight Congress to keep control of foreign policy, and faced denouncements from many, including fellow Republicans, over keeping Henry Kissinger as Secretary of State. Ford strove to remain true to his own principles and kept the country firmly engaged in world affairs.

Ford faced other obstacles as well. Richard Nixon's poisonous relationship with the press, even before Watergate, required that his successor actively court the fourth estate. Unfortunately for Ford, the press proved more aggressive in its reporting after Watergate. In a foreshadowing of the twenty-four-hour news cycle, Mieczkowski shows that Ford became defined by the press via his stumbles, which it made into news events. Discussing the implications of a Ford fall, according to Mieczkowski, was easier for reporters to do than addressing the nuances of policy. Ford compounded his image problem by not launching any new policy initiatives, making him look like a caretaker and opening him up to charges by his political opponents that he lacked a vision for the country. Mieczkowski, however, shows that Ford did have an agenda, but not one that guaranteed massive headlines or grand government financing. In this regard, he failed to build many bridges with the media.

The new president also worked to repair the executive branch's relations with Congress, which was not an easy task for the former minority leader to accomplish. After all, Democrats dominated the legislative branch, leaders of both parties were having a harder time keeping control of their members after Watergate, and Congress saw an opportunity to reassert itself in its eternal turf war with the executive branch. These were all things that as a congressman, Ford had been well aware of. However, Ford's background in the institution proved a bonus, as he knew how to negotiate from a position of strength and achieved most of his goals in policy debates with Congress. Ford also knew the power of the veto and used it to great affect. To Mieczkowski, this give-and-take provides proof of Ford's genius as the nation's chief executive. In this regard, Ford had more success with Congress than he did with reporters.

Mieczkowski portrays Ford as a conservative, which will challenge many interpretations of his administration. Indeed, while next to Reagan he may have looked or even sounded moderate, his policies reflect an underlying conservatism. Still, Ford underestimated Reagan's political challenge, even though he shared virtually all of the same economic and foreign policy goals as the future president. They differed mainly in how to implement the conservative agenda. Having said that, the reader should know that Mieczkowski spends little time discussing such cultural issues as the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion, which would cast Ford in quite a different light than Reagan when it came to conservatives within the Republican Party. Considering how important such issues were to become, this is something of a flaw in the book.[1]

Ford came very close to winning election in 1976. He was a solid leader, but not all that inspiring. Both of these aspects mattered when voters went to the polls. Ford's campaign focused on the fact that he was the incumbent, and attempted to keep him above the fray. However, he made mistakes and his stubbornness at times exacerbated them. After Ford erred in one of the debates against Carter by saying that Eastern Europe was not being dominated by the Soviet Union, he refused to clarify his remarks. Furthermore, Ford never recovered from what Mieczkowski deems the seriously botched pardoning of Nixon, even though the nation did. The pardon, probably more than any other factor, dashed Ford's hopes in November.

While 1976 was disappointing to Ford, Mieczkowski believes that the year also marked his greatest accomplishment. The Republican Party survived Watergate thanks to Ford's leadership. Though one can wonder exactly how dangerous Watergate was to the continuation of the GOP, Republicans of Ford's generation surely did not want to see another catastrophic event to keep them out of power, as the Great Depression had in the 1930s. Ford is credited with taking a long term view, sticking by his principles, and setting precedents for future presidents of both parties to follow. In that way, he saved the country by detoxifying its political culture at the same time he positioned the GOP for the Reagan Revolution.

This book is a political biography of Ford as president. While Mieczkowski does provide some background, and fleshes out other details as he goes, readers should not expect to find the full story of Ford's life or even of his time in Congress or the Vice Presidency. Some readers will wish Mieczkowski had included a bit more scope. For ex-

ample, the author could have considered more often than he does how Ford's private life influenced his political decisions. An additional criticism is that while the book is well researched, one wonders why the narrative does not include more about Ford's aides, especially since a number of them are serving in the George W. Bush administration. Mieczkowski also neglects to seriously consider Ford's relationship with his vice president Nelson Rockefeller, who was a lighting rod of controversy for many conservatives within the Republican Party. Mieczkowski is not overly critical of Ford but in a way his admiration is refreshing, as it forces readers to rethink Ford, just as many of his former critics have done.

Mieczkowski does a fine job of recapturing the mood and feel of the 1970s, in terms of both pop culture and the political climate. This attention to small detail, such as the birth of *Saturday Night Live* and how it impacted Ford's administration, makes the book invaluable to scholars of American political culture. The attention to detail extends to the pictures found in the book as well, which belay the media crafted image of Ford as a buffoonish character. Furthermore, Ford's time in the White House is placed within a wider presidential context, as Mieczkowski uses nineteenth- and twentieth-century occupants of the Oval Office to demonstrate that, despite the circumstances he faced, Ford himself was rather an average president when all was said and done.

This wonderful book deserves to be read and appreciated, not only for what it does for Gerald Ford, but for what it might signify for the future of the field of political history. Mieczkowski is to be commended for not being discouraged by the fact that so many academics have turned their backs on the traditional avenues of study within the discipline, despite the fact that there is a need for serious studies of the presidency now more than ever. Mieczkowski's work, which grew out of his doctoral dissertation, is a first step in righting not only our perception of Ford's presidency, but also a whole academic field as well. *Gerald Ford and the Challenges of the 1970s* will have a longer shelf life than Ford himself had in the White House.

Note

[1]. For recent takes on the Ford administration that differ with Mieczkowski's interpretation, see Craig Shirley, *Reagan's Revolution: The Untold Story of the Campaign that Started it All* (Nashville: Nelson Current, 2005); and Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

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