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Partisans: the conservative revolutionaries who remade American politics in the 1990s.

By Nicole Hemmer. New York: Basic Books. 2022. 368pp. £25.80. ISBN 978 1 54164 688 9.

Available as an e-book.

At a time when ‘presentism’ has become something of a dirty word among historians, Nicole Hemmer owns its mantle. Tracing her ambition, as a ‘historian of conservatism and commentator on contemporary politics’, Hemmer sets out to explain Donald Trump’s ascendancy in the Republican Party (p. 13). Through this lens, she explains that the outrage that propelled Trump’s election had its roots in the 1990s. This decade, she argues, was less ‘an era of polarization ... [and] actually an era of right-wing radicalization’ during which the optimistic party of Reagan became a conduit for an ideology of protectionism, suspicion and illiberalism (pp. 28).

Hemmer emerged as a leading historian-pundit in the aftermath of the Charlottesville Unite the Right rallies when she hosted a brilliant podcast series that sought to provide historical context to the events that had taken her city hostage. She later co-founded the ‘Made by History’ series in the Washington Post. A sense of grief, as well as a conviction that a historical lens could help make sense of the shocking present, seems to animate her ventures, including this latest book. *Partisans* fits within a growing and exciting body of literature on the tectonic shifts of the 1990s. Hemmer’s focus on the internal dynamics of the conservative movement in the United States shows how, as the Cold War ended, the ideological glue that had held together the Republican Party made way to a period of fluidity. To Hemmer, two individuals were key in terms of where the party went next: the failed presidential candidates Ross Perot and especially Pat Buchanan. According to the author, Buchanan’s openly xenophobic campaigns created a new lexicon and campaign style, which became the template for Trump.

But more than that, the book’s central contention is that the 1990s were a turning-point because the decade produced a media ecosystem that made conservative and angry punditry marketable. While MSNBC and Fox News were not popular when they first launched in 1996, they provided a platform for opportunists who have now become household names, including Ann Coulter, Rush Limbaugh, Roger Ailes, Laura Ingraham and Kellyanne Conway née Fitzpatrick. They understood what social media companies have now embedded into their algorithms: people respond to anger, disgust, resentment and outrage. In other words, the audience reacts to negative emotions. These radical conservatives, who also included congresspeople with uncomfortably close ties to militia movements, played on the currency of

emotion more than the popularity of their policies. Indeed, Hemmer explores the unpopularity of some of their pet policies, which later became 'litmus tests' for Republicans, ranging from policies on guns, lobbying laws, immigration, abortion, as well as their demands for incessant investigations into the Clintons.

The book, however, leaves several questions unanswered. Namely what (or who) might have stopped the movement in its tracks? For instance, it is unclear what the Republican party *might* have done: while the party played host for these partisans, there is a sense that this movement existed outside of the party apparatus. Where men like Newt Gingrich, the Speaker of the House of Representatives in the 1990s, appreciated that his own ethical slips might expose him to charges of hypocrisy, that sense of shame eluded his successors in Congress. And what about the Democratic party? Hemmer observes that it 'lurched to the right' under President Bill Clinton, and efforts to shame more sordid talking points out of the political discourse were unsuccessful (p. 210). However, the book does not explore how the Democratic party could have responded differently. Instead, readers get the sense that context played a bigger role: as Hemmer implies, the radical conservative movement's strength was situational and contingent. Indeed, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, it briefly dampened as 'the range of tolerable opinions narrowed' (p. 259).

Also, while Hemmer adeptly shows how these reactionaries poisoned the political well, she is more circumspect in explaining why. So many of the key individuals showed, to say the least, a degree of flexibility in their political views. Buchanan's trajectory as a political insider in successive Republican administrations to a firebrand, speaks to his opportunism and malleability of opinions. The same could be said of many of his accomplices and indeed the pundits who picked up his talking points as they built media personalities. While these partisans may have become radicalized and emboldened in their views, it seems just as plausible that selfish career rewards (which are clear in Hemmer's account) were just as important, if not more so.

The book's lively style and entertaining vignettes makes it an accessible and engaging read. The origin stories of the people, media structures and ideas that surrounded the Trump administration are also compelling in the current period of whiplash. As a result, it will undoubtedly be popular for more general audiences.

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