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Robert L. Fleegler delivers a clear narrative of the 1988 US presidential election. Critical to his explanation of the significance of 1988 is what it portended for future political contests into the new century. Throughout the book, this focus on the longer-term impact of the election frames Fleegler’s chapters as he offers a variety of recurring themes. Some of these themes, such as the re-emergence of a few politicians as future candidates, can be said to be more commonplace in American political history. Fleegler, however, also pinpoints some specific instances where what occurred in that year had a substantive impact on American politics. This includes his emphasis on the infamous “Willie Horton” dog-whistle Republican PAC television ad, featuring the African American William R. Horton, who committed violent crimes during a weekend furlough from prison in Massachusetts while serving a life sentence. During the 1988 presidential election, US Vice President and Republican nominee George H.W. Bush brought Horton up frequently during his campaign against Massachusetts governor and Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis. It paved the way for unforgiving crime legislation supported by Democrats who were fearful of being tarnished as soft on the issue, as, Bush successfully had done to Dukakis (136-141). The year 1988 also signaled the beginning of what would become the US Democratic Party’s strategy of focusing on states they relied on as a “Blue Wall” (6, 224). Tactics and technology were both central to the election and its significance for the future, as Fleegler charts the impact of changes in the media that were already underway and were evident in the beginnings of polarized radio talk shows and what would become the expectation for politicians to appear on late night television shows. While the title *Brutal Campaign* encapsulates the negative attacks and focus on culture war issues led by the Bush campaign, Fleegler also stresses the lesson learned by Democrats not to be left behind on defense. Nevertheless, he describes the race as an inevitable loss for Dukakis within the context of the sound economy and the rise of President Ronald Reagan’s popularity. Fleegler keeps his analysis succinct when projecting into the twenty-first century, giving rise to multiple avenues of future work in exploring the themes he raises.

The book’s use of primary sources is particularly compelling, with Fleegler including excerpts from Bush’s diary, counterbalanced with his own in-person interview with Dukakis. Fleegler even lays out the controversy over Bush defending one of his diary entries following the publication of historian Herbert Parmet’s work in 1997 (184). The depth of archival research is on full display, with the inclusion of numerous quotations from

both political actors and campaign strategists, as well as journalists. Data and polling contextualize the race as it progressed, bringing into scope Dukakis’s decline following the momentum the Democrats achieved from the convention in the throes of Reagan’s final comeback. Methodologically, Fleegler lays down the gauntlet for future work on the election through his varied use of written and oral history and quantitative and qualitative research.

More implicit is Fleegler’s position within the existing scholarship on this topic. In his final chapter, Fleegler stakes out most clearly his thoughts on the race, but does so within a detailed discussion of the race’s autopsy among those political actors and strategists who were involved, rather than the verdict of other scholars. Although Fleegler’s work was published this year, there is only a footnote mention of John J. Pitney Jr.’s After Reagan: Bush, Dukakis, and the 1988 Election, published in 2019. Pitney Jr.’s work similarly stresses the importance of Bush’s victory, both in scale and in the long term, seemingly suggesting somewhat of a contemporary consensus on the impact of 1988 in American history. Nonetheless, Fleegler attempts to differentiate his work with his emphasis on “the full extent of the new elements that emerged in 1988” (269). This recent interest in the election, as is evident in the production of two such monographs that stress its long-term significance, has contributed to the scholarship on understanding the advent of hyper-partisanship. Indeed, Fleegler cites Alan I. Abramowitz’s work on the subject. Samuel Rosenfeld’s The Polarizers: Postwar Architects of Our Partisan Era and Geoffrey Kabaservice’s Rule and Rain: The Downfall of Moderation and the Destruction of the Republican Party, from Eisenhower to the Tea Party trace the collapse of bipartisanship, just as Fleegler describes the coming collapse of the political center. Both John Geer’s In Defense of Negativity and Kathleen Hall Jamieson’s Dirty Politics similarly examine the rise of partisanship through negative campaigning; a key takeaway of 1988 for Fleegler is the prioritization of staying on offense. This lesson, which was taken particularly to heart by Democrats, is explored by Lily Geismer’s case study of Massachusetts (particularly pertinent to Fleegler’s discussion of the Dukakis campaign) and how the state became representative of the new base of the Democratic Party. There is notably rich scholarship exploring a multitude of facets of the development of the Republican Party following the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and the corresponding establishment of modern conservatism. Some of the most well-known works include Kevin Kruse’s White Flight case study of Atlanta, Matthew Lassiter’s The Silent Majority, and Daniel K. Williams’ God’s Own Party. Fleegler also consulted Matthew Frye Jacobson’s work on the outcry of white ethnicity that could be seen in Dukakis emphasizing his parent’s Greek immigrant background as part of his

American heritage to appeal to both the Greek-American community and Reagan Democrats.9 Not listed but also relevant are Earl and Merle Black’s *The Rise of Southern Republicans*, James M. Glaser’s *The Hand of the Past in Contemporary Southern Politics*, and David Lublin’s *The Republican South*, both of which help explain the southern shift in partisan affiliation in the second half of the twentieth century.10

Fleegler’s work speaks to the existing scholarship on partisanship and the development of the parties as well as scholarly fields that focus respectively on the evolution of elections in the second half of the twentieth century, and the evolution of the media. Many published works speak to every aspect of elections, from primaries to nomination to the final race.11 As Fleegler casts 1988 as occurring during the last gasps of domination by the impact of newspapers and networks, rather than cable news, and at the start of rise in importance of late-night television and radio talk shows, his work clearly fits within examinations of media development. Indeed, his work directly relates to previous analyses of the election, such as Kiku Adatto’s “Sound Bite Democracy: Network Evening News Presidential Campaign Coverage, 1968 and 1988,” as well as Darrell West’s broader investigation into the role of television and social media in elections from 1952–2016.12

There is still further work to be done, for example, in analyzing the impact of candidates like Republican nominee Donald Trump receiving an inordinate amount of free air time in 2016, a comparison Fleegler could have made with the repeated airings and discussions of negative ads against Dukakis in 1988. Having worked as editors for *The Washington Post*’s “Made by History” page, both Brian Rosenwald and Nicole Hemmer possess expertise in understanding the media, as is evident in their respective works on talk radio and conservative media, which Fleegler touches upon, for example by mentioning talk show host Rush Limbaugh’s national syndication in 1988 (193).13 As Fleegler states, 1988 was also a turning point as the first election to be held after the elimination of the Federal Communications Commission fairness doctrine, which opened the door for the polarization of media. He also takes on the task of detailing influential *Saturday Night Live* skits. Images from the skits, had he been able to attain them, would have enhanced his analysis. Fleegler’s connection of the election with contemporary media developments is well placed, however, as evolutions in the media have had an effect on elections throughout the twentieth century and to our current times.

One of the greatest strengths of *Brutal Campaign* is the connections Fleegler makes to recent and contemporary elections and politics. These comparisons effectively serve to support his argument that 1988 helped lead to changes and continuing controversies in American politics. For example, Fleegler contrasts Bush’s unpopular and surprising decision to choose US Senator Dan Quayle as his running mate with the similar reaction that met US Senator John McCain’s choice of Alaska Governor Sarah Palin. While the

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outcomes were diametrically opposed, with McCain’s decision hindering his electability, Fleegler’s point that presidential nominees have, on the whole, remained circumspect in choosing running mates who are more battle-tested is certainly true and is likely to continue.

Fleegler also points to the persistent nativism that was evident in the painting of Dukakis “as an un-American Eastern European ethnic,” compared with the additional racism faced by President Barack Obama with birtherism (237). Donald Trump’s brief and surprising appearance in New Hampshire during the 1988 campaign sparked speculation of an entrance into national politics that would, of course, come to bear decades later. Fleegler presciently notes how “[his] flirtation with a national campaign suggested that the GOP might have an appetite for an economic populism that went beyond the cultural appeals that [Richard] Nixon and Reagan had previously made to blue-collar voters” (95). Indeed, Fleegler stresses evidence of Trump’s ideological consistency in the realm of foreign policy and trade, although it is perhaps arguable whether an “ideology” can be clearly identified and associated with Trump (109). When it comes to describing consistency in “characteristics” Fleegler’s argument is on much safer ground (107). While some of Trump’s rhetoric and affiliations, like embracing the elder Bush and defining politics as “[a] beautiful machine” did change dramatically, his oversized character and appeals to “economic populism” including repudiating America’s trade policies as Fleegler mentions, did not (177 and 95).

On policy, Fleegler effectively explains the evolution of the divide between Democrats and Republicans on the future of the Middle East. Specifically, he describes how Palestinian “self-determination” came up for discussion at the Democratic convention at the behest of presidential candidate Jesse Jackson (147). Fleegler then explains that as evangelism became the backbone of the Republican Party, the “backing of Israel became almost as much of a litmus test for the party’s presidential candidates as opposition to abortion rights” (148). Repeatedly, Fleegler defines the parties in 1988 as “heterogenous” in comparison to how they later developed. The statement that “[a]t one point, centrists were full partners—or even in control of the Republican Party” begs the question as to how the Democrats figure, and how on a presidential level they remained dominated by moderate centrists? (173) Fleegler attempts to demonstrate comprehensively how the 1988 Democratic primary “offered windows into the future with regard to how candidates’ personal behavior, public comments, messages, and race would impact American politics in the 1990s and early twenty-first century” (92). While Fleegler clearly lays out the long-term impact of economic nationalism and how Jackson “helped lay the foundation for Obama’s breakthrough,” there is less evidence in 1988 providing insight into how “candidates’ personal behavior [and] public comments” determined politics (92). If “early twenty-first century” is meant to be taken literally, the effects of President Bill Clinton’s survival of multiple scandals and his impeachment based on his personal behavior and public comments—something former US Senator Gary Hart was unable to do in the 1988 primary—are unaddressed, as the narrative skips ahead to the birtherism conspiracy. Surely Trump’s ability not only to survive but also to thrive in establishing a political base through his series of controversies means that this is an area in which he surpasses the “Teflon President” Ronald Reagan, who continues to receive almost unanimous admiration from Republicans. In demonstrating how 1988 led the way for future American politics, Fleegler teases at connections between the two periods. He raises some good comparisons, but leaves them unsupported. For example, Fleegler


16 Rep. Pat Schroder (D-CO) coined the term in 1983 when she took the House floor to denounce then-President Ronald Reagan. “He has been perfecting the Teflon-coated presidency: He sees to it that nothing sticks to him.”
emphasizes that during the election Republican candidates repeated their past successful strategy of stressing their foreign policy and tax policies, yet does not mention how this has continued to the present day. The connection between Reagan’s controversial administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, Anne Gorsuch Buford, and Secretary of the Interior James Watt and Trump’s representatives, who were equally seen “as trying to undermine the very mission of the agencies they led” (192) is not discussed. Fleegler instead aptly stresses that Bush was an outlier when it came to campaigning on environmentalism and utilizing “the mantle of [President] Teddy Roosevelt” (194).

Mentioning cultural and economic populism, even separately, opens the door to discussion of comparisons to contemporary politics, and while Fleegler notes Trump’s populism, a clear definition of some issues as part and parcel of the changing landscape of culture wars would have supported his argument further. For instance, referring to James Davison Hunter’s Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America, which was published in 1992, and identifying the focus in 1988 on the death penalty as a culture-war topic of the period, would have enabled contrasts with the use by later campaigns of culture war issues.17 Fleegler also mentions the Reagan Revolution and, briefly, the 1994 Republican Revolution that took control of Congress, raising the unanswered question of whether 1994 marked the completion of Reagan’s revolution.

While Fleegler provides many background details to explain 1988, his discussion seems shortens the time span of the embrace by Republicans of evangelicals to the eighties. For example, he writes that “the voters [presidential candidate Reverend Pat] Robertson activated in 1988 paved the way” (120). Yet Robertson was activating a group and a sentiment that was already there, therefore making this emphasis a question of cause versus effect. Furthermore, in stressing “the religious rights emergence in the late 1970s,” Fleegler misses important precedents like Richard Nixon’s long-standing friendship with Reverend Billy Graham, and his appearance at one of his revivals in 1970 (11). Greater engagement with the scholarship on the southern strategy, such as Angie Maxwell and Todd Shield’s The Long Southern Strategy and Edward H. Miller’s Nut Country, both of which are listed in Fleegler’s bibliography, could have made the chronology more nuanced.18 Fleegler’s assertion that “John McCain’s and John Kerry’s military service in Vietnam became central parts of their political biography” in comparison to other baby boomer candidates who faced controversy over their actions, or lack thereof, in relation to the Vietnam War, is rather sweeping (185). There is no mention of the Swift Boat controversy, in which Kerry faced accusations over his war record that questioned his heroism.19

Overall, Fleegler’s book presents a compelling narrative of the 1988 election and its impact. Although he does not explicitly define significance, Fleegler broadly covers a range of issues. Greater categorization could have specified these points in relation to their short and long-term impact, to election tactics, ideology, and culture. Brutal Campaign also raises questions for potential future avenues of research. Specifically, if 1988 is a turning point, the question arises as to how different the legacy of that election’s legacy is from those of others? Fleegler is certainly not scholar the first to stress the importance of a particular election to American political history. Indeed, historians of the nineteenth-century emphasize Andrew Jackson’s election in 1828 as a turning point in the use of “modern” campaigning and media technology specific to its time.20 Perhaps the

question of how significant 1988 is in American political history can only be answered through further historical comparative work.

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