

## Book Review

Ivan W. Morgan: *Beyond the Liberal Consensus. A Political History of the United States Since 1965*. London: Hurst & Co., 1994, 292 pp.

This book by Ivan W. Morgan, reading Politics and Modern History at London Guildhall University, provides both a broad overview as well as an interpretative survey of the recent political history of the United States. His latest work is suitable for everyone with an interest in contemporary America. "Beyond the Liberal Consensus" offers students and other readers an interesting lesson on the contemporary political history of the United States, focusing on what actually happened during the last three decades.

Looking at the administrations of several different presidents – from Lyndon B. Johnson to George Bush and including the first year of the Clinton administration – the work revolves around three principal themes: (1) the changes in party politics and domestic policy, (2) the political debate over foreign affairs, and (3) America's changing economic fortunes. In a nutshell, it is exactly what the title suggests: a political history of the United States since 1965. Moreover, the book is well written; it is logically structured and has a natural flow to it. The reader does not even have to be particularly well informed about the contemporary history of the United States in order to follow the thrust of Morgan's description and analysis of the major events, the implications of which are spelled out along the way.

The general impression is that the book is concrete and detailed enough to be used by university-level students as a reference work for their papers in political history. Although the different chapters are interlinked, one can pick out any part and get an interesting description of the Vietnam War, the politics of the Carter era, "Reaganomics", to mention but a few of the topics covered. The book deals with a subject of great interest to all political scientists. Morgan makes a number of good points and few readers are likely to be disappointed with the book.

Morgan's book is based on the notion that the mid-1960s marked the end of an era – and the beginning of yet another era – in American politics. Morgan himself summarizes the book's main arguments as follows: "(1) a 'liberal consensus' shaped America . . . in the two decades after World War II, but this collapsed in the second half of the 1960s; (2) since the

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mid-1960s American politics has been characterized more by political dispute and conflict than by consensus over the role of government in the economy and society, over values, and over foreign policy; and (3) notwithstanding the electoral success of Ronald Reagan, nothing resembling a conservative consensus came into being in the 1980s.”

According to Morgan, the “liberal consensus” concerning economy, society and US involvement in world affairs that shaped the politics of the United States after World War II collapsed in the mid-1960s. The liberal consensus, based on the country’s political and economic predominance and the politics of the New Deal liberalism promoted by the Democratic Party, was replaced by American politics based on conflict rather than consensus. The Democrats had become vulnerable to charges of representing a high-tax party, squandering the wealth created by “ordinary, hard-working people”. Since about 1965 the American polity had been characterized by division and fragmentation. The final blows to the liberal consensus were dealt by the economic problems of the 1970s. Economic decline more than anything else accounted for a right-wing shift favouring the Republican Party, which blamed the US decline on overtaxation and overspending. The party called for a remedy for the inflationary problems regardless of its impact on the unemployment rate.

Though favoured by the political climate, the New Conservatism was not strong enough to establish a new consensus. The lack of consensus was in several ways reflected in the trend towards divided government; usually by Democratic dominance of the Congress combined with a Republican sitting in the White House. The victory of Ronald Reagan in 1980 marked in any case the biggest triumph for the “new” Republican right wing, with its sympathy for family values, a free-market economy and a global struggle against Communism. Two polarizing political parties, one controlling the presidency and the other the Congress, appeared incapable of effective common action in dealing with worsening economic and social problems. Americans signalled their disappointment in 1992 by restoring single-party control over government for only the second time since 1968. However, building a better tomorrow for everyone is never easy. Clinton’s issues (health and welfare, jobs and education) ran into considerable problems and it will therefore be interesting to see how the author deals with this in, it is hoped, a forthcoming up-dated version of this interesting book.

In all fairness, it must be said that it is an open question whether contemporary American history is indeed as transparent as Morgan wants us to believe. He might be accused of overgeneralizing. But as a reader it is difficult not to be persuaded, perhaps to the point of getting carried away by the thrust of his arguments and always to the point of being inspired by the topic and the many issues it raises.

The brilliant section on the 1968 presidential election is a good case in point. In just six pages, Morgan manages to describe one of the most divisive and traumatic presidential elections of this century without omitting any of the essential details. This is not the most important, nor perhaps the most interesting part of the book. It may underestimate the fact that the Vietnam War generated the first cracks in the facade of post-war consensus by raising questions about the limits of American power and by introducing the possibility of pursuing globalism by cheaper, diplomatic means. But it is in any event a good example of Morgan's skilful way of presenting his case so as to catch the reader's interest and arouse his/her curiosity.

A quick recap of Morgan's account of the events of 1968 might be in order: President Lyndon B. Johnson was expected to be renominated and re-elected – at least until the Communist Tet offensive changed the political landscape by undermining the credibility of Johnson's claims that victory in Vietnam was imminent. In the following New Hampshire primary election, Senator Eugene McCarthy (Minnesota) obtained 42 percent of the primary vote, compared with 49.5 percent for LBJ. The realization that he might have been beaten precipitated Johnson's decision not to seek renomination. Senator Robert Kennedy's conviction that Johnson was invincible had deterred him from mounting a challenge. The two senators, McCarthy and Kennedy, now squared up against each other in the Democratic primaries. McCarthy was generally perceived as a single-issue peace candidate; and the nomination of Robert Kennedy would obviously have given the Democrats their best prospect in retaining the presidency – a possibility thwarted by Kennedy's assassination in Los Angeles on the night of his victory in the California primary. The subsequent Democratic nominating convention was marked by bitter divisions over the Vietnam War, unprecedented for a war-time ruling party. Vice-president Hubert Horatio Humphrey was eventually nominated, although he had not even entered the primaries. By contrast, Richard Nixon, as usual appealing to the "forgotten Americans", easily captured the nomination of the Republicans. In view of the problems faced by the Democrats, Nixon seemed certain to win until a third party candidate, the arch-segregationist and right-wing populist governor George C. Wallace of Alabama, made the race closer than expected by winning four Deep South states which would otherwise have gone to Nixon. In the end Humphrey came close to victory, gaining 42.7 percent of the popular vote as opposed to the 43.4 percent won by Nixon and Wallace's share of 13.5 percent.

Morgan concludes with an examination of the political environment of the early 1990s: the end of the cold war, a new and deep recession with the White House in the hands of a Democrat for the first time since Lyndon B. Johnson. The concluding chapter is surprisingly short, amounting to

only five pages. This falls considerably short of at least this reader's expectations. The many interesting pieces of information presented throughout the book call for much more of an attempt at a concluding in-depth analysis. As it stands, the concluding chapter is cast as an attempt at gauging the new American politics that might be emerging in the 1990s. The landslide victories by many of the most conservative, right-wing candidates of the Republican Party in last year's Congressional elections would at least seem to hold out the prospects for a development well beyond "liberal consensus".

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