

When Republicans Were Progressive

Gregory L. Schneider
Emporia State University

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2019 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Schneider, Gregory L.. "When Republicans Were Progressive." *The Annals of Iowa* 78 (2019), 422-424.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.12631>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

name for himself as a liberal journalist," and by the early 1950s embarked on a political career (28). He thrice received the Democratic gubernatorial nomination—losing badly in 1952 but capturing 48 percent in both 1954 and 1956 (the best showing for a Democrat since 1932). When McCarthy's death triggered a special Senate election, Proxmire ran and easily won. He had only one tough race—in 1964, when LBJ's coattails probably saved him—for the remainder of his career.

In his early Senate career, Proxmire was an outspoken liberal Democrat who distinguished himself supporting civil rights. He criticized Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson as insufficiently aggressive on civil rights and faulted Minority Leader Everett Dirksen's efforts to get around the Supreme Court's one-person/one-vote decisions. Although he initially supported the Vietnam War, this "senator of substance" (189) soon used his chairmanship of the Joint Economic Committee to challenge Pentagon spending.

As the 1970s progressed, however, Proxmire's budget concerns led him to challenge first the foreign aid program and then wasteful domestic spending, often putting him "at odds with his own party" (247). That effort, Kasperek contends, helped to establish Proxmire's legacy, culminating in his famous Golden Fleece awards and his principled willingness to confront pork-barrel projects promoted by either party.

This is an admiring biography. Kasperek acknowledges but downplays the contradiction between Proxmire's budget priorities and his championing of federal dairy supports. The book might have engaged more extensively with the question of what makes an effective senator—a case could be made, for instance, that Gaylord Nelson was the more effective of the longtime Wisconsin duo. But these are quibbles about what will likely remain the definitive study of Proxmire's life and career.

When Republicans Were Progressive, by Dave Durenberger, with Lori Sturdevant. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2018. xx, 279 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$19.95 paperback.

Reviewer Gregory L. Schneider is professor of history at Emporia State University. He has written four books on the history of conservatism.

Where have all the progressive (moderate) Republicans gone? It is a question former U.S. Senator Dave Durenberger attempts to address in his memoir/history of the Minnesota Independent Republican Party from its development in the 1930s to the end of Durenberger's tenure as a senator in 1994. He has produced a very good analysis of Minnesota politics in this era but one that lacks the historical analysis to explain why progressivism is dead within the GOP.

What is a progressive Republican? Durenberger focuses on the centrist Republicans who worked to promote solutions, cooperate with Democrats to legislate for the common good, and solve problems for their constituents. Mostly, progressive Republicans were a product of the postwar era, the age of consensus on the Cold War and on the view of government as a public good. In the Midwest, progressive Republicans included Bob Dole, Robert Ray, Gerald Ford, and many others.

The term *progressive*, rather than *moderate*, comes from a specific Minnesota context. As the Democratic Party in Minnesota is known as the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party (or DFL), the Republican Party was known as the Independent Republican Party. Durenberger sees Harold Stassen's election to the governor's office in 1938, and the model of progressivism he supplied to successors, as the basis for the development of the more activist-oriented Republican Party at the state level. Such progressives favored government action but were fiscally conservative, not socially conservative. They favored spending on public education, expanded higher education in the state, and were moderates on the question of civil rights. Minnesota had a heavy Lutheran population, and its concerns about social justice, as well as the Catholic church's position on those issues (Durenberger is a Catholic), played a role in the more moderate politics of the postwar era.

Durenberger himself was an attorney and political aide and did not seek election until he ran for the U.S. Senate in 1978 (and won). That year, in states like Iowa, New Right political figures won Senate elections, tax cuts were beginning to become fodder for the activists on the conservative side of the aisle, and social issues, such as abortion, were beginning to play significant roles in Republican politics. Durenberger would support Ronald Reagan, whom he correctly sees as a pragmatic conservative, but he did not support the changing climate in Minnesota politics when evangelicals and the religious Right became more active in the GOP.

Durenberger's book is also a memoir of his political accomplishments on health care, on which he became an expert. He served on the Senate Intelligence Committee during the Iran-Contra scandal. He praises the cooperative spirit of the Senate and the goodwill from Democrats like Ted Kennedy, with whom he had a close friendship.

What changed this? The same thing that always changes a political party's focus: issues and constituencies change. Durenberger, however, blames the confrontational politics of Newt Gingrich, the 24-hour news cycle, and the polarization that came with it. He blames the conservative movement within the Republican Party for hardening the discourse and recommends some solutions, including better civic education. Durenberger is a Never Trumper who wound up supporting Hillary Clinton in 2016.

One can lament, as Durenberger does, the decline of civility in politics. But his book does not adequately address the historical reasons for that change. Durenberger has axes to grind against conservatism, it seems, and wants to reclaim the mantle of progressivism for the GOP. But that label is now lost to the Left, and it is unlikely that the politics of consensus and cooperation will be returning anytime soon.

Radicals in the Heartland: The 1960s Student Protest Movement at the University of Illinois, by Michael V. Metz. Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2019. xix, 269 pp. Timeline, map, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$110 hardcover, \$26.95 paperback.

Reviewer Robbie Lieberman is professor of American Studies and chair of the Interdisciplinary Studies Department at Kennesaw State University. She is the author of *Prairie Power: Voices of 1960s Midwestern Student Protest* (2004).

Many Americans still think of the 1960s student movement as something that happened only at elite schools on the coasts and in the upper Midwest: Berkeley, Columbia, Ann Arbor, Madison. Michael Metz's *Radicals in the Heartland* is a welcome addition to the literature, which needs more accounts of activism in the Midwest. Metz tells the important and little-known story of the movement at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), in which he participated, and he tells it well. At the same time, his journalistic approach—"how and why, where and when this unlikely movement happened"—ignores historiographical trends and debates, and he misses opportunities to highlight the book's contributions to the voluminous literature on 1960s protest.

Metz tells a chronological story, 1960–1970, in a number of short chapters. He seems unaware of the concept of "the long sixties" that many scholars now take as their starting point. Instead, we get a rise-and-fall arc, taking us back to the "declension" narrative of 1960s protest. That narrative, like Metz's book, draws heavily on contemporary coverage of events and the accounts of (some) movement veterans to tell a story of how idealism and nonviolence gave way to frustration and senseless violence. Scholars have forcefully challenged this framework, not least because it privileges the perspective of white male leaders, with women and people of color appearing mainly as the movement starts to fragment and turn to more confrontational tactics. Perhaps inadvertently, then, *Radicals in the Heartland* continues the challenge to scholars to develop a more inclusive and integrated narrative of the student movement.

The Cold War context is critical for understanding the roots of sixties activism, and Metz wisely begins with the impact of anticommunism on the university's flagship campus. The University of Illinois had the