

Gerald Ford and the Challenges of the 1970s. By Yanek Mieczkowski. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2005. xi + 455 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, photographs. Cloth, \$39.95. ISBN: 0-813-12349-6.

Reviewed by Edward D. Berkowitz

Gerald Ford had the unique distinction of serving his entire presidency during the seventies. That fact, in and of itself, might have led to his defeat in 1976 and to his subsequent reputation as a nice guy who lacked the *gravitas* to lead the nation in hard times. In a well-researched and carefully written book, Yanek Mieczkowski tries both to rescue Ford's reputation and to portray Ford as a man of integrity and substance who actually ameliorated some of the era's worst problems, such as the rampant inflation that plagued the economy. In a typical passage, Mieczkowski, a Columbia Ph.D. who now teaches at Dowling College, points out that "Ford's achievements were slow and steady, reflecting his leadership style. His successes passed unnoticed, as when the economy quietly slipped past its recession and price increases gradually slowed" (p. 357). His failures and his personal shortcomings, by way of contrast, received a great deal of attention from a press primed by Watergate to get the story within the story. Ford's pardon of Nixon just weeks after Nixon resigned therefore became evidence of further Washington corruption, offering hints of a secret deal and apparently demonstrating presidential ineptitude, rather than representing an act of personal courage and integrity performed by a man with the nation's best interests at heart. It was inevitable that the press portrayed Ford as a man of his times, just another bad president at a time of economic hardship and international decline who was not up to the challenges of the decade. This is a view that does not hold up under the historian's measured archival gaze.

At base, Mieczkowski's book is a political biography of Gerald Ford, an extension of his doctoral dissertation. On this level, it does important narrative work in recreating such moments as Ford's exhortations to America to "whip inflation now" or the attempt by the United States to confront the Soviet Union in Angola. However, the political biography approach has two pitfalls. At times the author seems to be cramming his paragraphs with anecdotes and quotations drawn from note cards piled one on top of the

other, some colorful and enlightening, but others just tedious. As a result, the book does not always move swiftly from one point to another, although the short chapter lengths help smooth the reader's progress through its contents. In addition, in trying to rehabilitate Ford's presidency, Mieczkowski sometimes privileges discussions of reputation—what Hugh Graham used to call “scorecard history”—over more consequential analytical discussions.

At a secondary level, the book is a policy history of the critical years of the mid-seventies, resulting, by necessity, in a long discussion of the logistics of oil pricing and government energy regulation as part of an authoritative look at the energy crisis. The problem is that the sections on policy lack the zip of the more biographical sections, and the reader has to wade through pages containing material of almost insurmountable complexity. Nonetheless, his treatment of the administration's efforts to deregulate energy prices and fight inflation demonstrates Mieczkowski's ability to handle complex themes.

At a tertiary level—in a conscious effort by the author to broaden the coverage beyond Ford and politics—the book is about the challenges of the seventies. As such, it joins a growing list of books on this subject and makes the point that the seventies were indeed different from the eras preceding and following them. The nature of the economy and the political process both changed during these years, making it hard for the president to govern and for the Congress to formulate constructive legislation. Hence, President Ford's 1976 defeat, like Jimmy Carter's failure to achieve reelection in 1980, might have been overdetermined, as the social scientists say.

The three layers do not mesh seamlessly. Still, the reader comes away from reading this fine and impeccably researched book with a new appreciation for Gerald Ford as a sophisticated thinker and a person with a consistent vision for the nation's domestic and international policy. Ford's understanding of economics, for example, was unmatched among postwar presidents, and he fought hard to maintain the international outlook of the postwar era, rather than yielding to neoisolationism. So the book succeeds admirably as a political biography of Ford and, if it is a little less successful as a guide to public policy in the seventies and as a general history of the era, nonetheless it adds a great deal to our understanding of those endeavors as well.

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