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The Rise of Conservatism

It was the decade of disco music, mood rings, and leisure suits. Oil and energy crises took center stage, inflation topped 13 percent, and for the first time in the nation's history, a U.S. president resigned from office in the face of impeachment. It was also the decade that gave rise to the conservative movement currently promoted by figures such as Sarah Palin, Glenn Beck, and a host of tea-party backers, including Richard Viguerie, godfather of the 1970's New Right.

In her new book, "Right Star Rising –– A New Politics, 1974-1980" (W.W. Norton & Co., 2010), Laura Kalman, professor of history at UC Santa Barbara, suggests that this movement is rooted in the 1970's, and is a product not just of the convergence of different varieties of conservatism, but of the ineffectual presidencies of Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter as well. Ford took office in 1974 following Richard Nixon's resignation in the wake of the Watergate scandal. He was subsequently defeated by Carter in the 1976 presidential election. According to Kalman, the weaknesses of both men as commanders-in-chief and party leaders, and the growth of conservatism, led to the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980.

"Many scholars situated explanations for the rise of conservatism in the 1960's and Barry Goldwater," Kalman said. "But it did not seem to me that was quite right. And I was really interested in how the rise of conservatism was related to the sort of problems of presidential leadership –– or lack thereof –– during the 1970's."

Kalman examines how the politics of the mid- to late-1970's led to the ascendancy of Ronald Reagan and conservatism. She refutes the theory that the tide had

already turned toward conservatism in the 1960's and that the election of Reagan was all but inevitable. As she writes, "The story of the growing power and appeal of conservatism and the Republican Party –– two distinct but intertwined forces –– was more interesting than that. It was a story of the seventies."

Though Carter's campaign was rife with problems and gaffes, he managed to eek out the election in 1976, possibly because Ford ran an even worse campaign and was still tainted by the Nixon pardon, noted Kalman. "Ford was also undone by squabbling within the Republican Party. Many members of the GOP considered Ford too moderate or even too liberal to represent the growing ranks of far-right conservatives, embodied by Reagan, who were starting to dominate the party."

While Carter was brought down by his failures of leadership, Kalman also shows how his presidency was cursed by a host of national and international issues. Among them were the economic recession –– the worst the country has seen until today –– the energy crisis, the Iran hostage crisis, and conflicts between Israel and other countries in the Middle East. Still, Carter's failures alone did not account for the Republican revival, she maintains.

"As Carter's presidency sputtered through the late seventies, the so-called ‘New Right' was mobilizing various strands into a powerful coalition," she said. Stirred by the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) and court battles over abortion, evangelical Christians were also becoming more politically active. In addition to the New Right and the religious right, the forces of neoconservatism, market liberalism, and anticommunism were acquiring new power.

"All of these various strands started to coalesce against the Carter administration as the Republicans redefined feminists, the ERA, gays, and Democrats as enemies of the family," she said. "What really surprised me about conservatism, then, was that it was so fragmented and there were so many different strains of it. And they might not have been able to unite around Reagan had stronger leaders been president."

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