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# THE AMERICAN Prospect

LIBERAL INTELLIGENCE

## BOOKS

### A REPUBLIC, IF WE CAN BUILD IT

**POLARIZED AMERICA: THE DANCE OF IDEOLOGY AND UNEQUAL RICHES**  
BY NOLAN McCARTY, KEITH T. POOLE, AND HOWARD ROSENTHAL  
MIT Press, 240 pages, \$35.00

**L.A. STORY: IMMIGRANT WORKERS AND THE FUTURE OF THE U.S. LABOR  
MOVEMENT** BY RUTH MILKMAN Russell Sage Foundation, 264 pages, \$24.95

BY RICHARD N. VALELLY

**I**N THE FACE OF PRONOUNCED INCOME and wealth inequality, how has the Bush administration been able to promote an economic program that deepens inequality? The Republicans have enacted regressive tax cuts, sought to privatize Social Security, given free rein to Wall Street, and showered wasteful subsidies on defense contractors, pharmaceutical manufacturers, and oil and insurance companies. Surely, in a democracy, this all must be bad politics.

Maybe it's because the GOP hasn't played by the rules, extending roll calls far beyond congressional norms, repressing black and student votes in Ohio, and in-

serting the executive into the legislative branch in unprecedented ways. Maybe Thomas Frank is right that social issues have crowded out pocketbook issues and that Karl Rove has succeeded in switching the subject to national security.

But none of this quite explains voter passivity in the face of rising inequality. Why are more voters not disgusted with Bushonomics?

Princeton's Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole of the University of California at San Diego, and Howard Rosenthal of New York University mount a technically advanced and powerful analysis in *Polarized America*. Inequality and political po-

larization, they show, have been steadily building since the mid-1970s, reinforcing each other. The Bush administration's policies are less a break from the past than an intensification of the status quo.

As they demonstrate, income inequality has grown least among regularly participating voters. It has done the most damage at the bottom end of the income scale, where both immigrants and citizens are less likely to vote. A voter backlash, by definition, has to come from voters. Not surprisingly, Republicans have pushed voter-identification legislation to discourage lower-income voting and promoted a policy to make immigrants wait 17 years for the right to vote.

McCarty and colleagues have devised highly reliable ideological scores that document the growing divide between the two parties, mainly due to the GOP's shift to the right. Polarization is not an artifact of congressional districting, nor of legislative despotism, symbolized by the bullwhip that Tom DeLay kept in his majority leader suite. Instead, Republican constituencies have appeared where they never existed, particularly in the South, and all of them have become more ideologically conservative.

What all of that means is that the Bush administration's policies have served the center of the Republican Party and *its* interests, but not the electoral center. Republicans have gotten away with this because those hurt the most tend not to vote or cannot vote.

In a chapter worth the book's price, the authors show that astronomical gains for the very wealthiest have opened up opportunities for the "passionate rich" to invest in the ideological extremes. The "swift-boating" of Kerry was not an aberration; it is the new status quo. Democratic victories and policies, if and when they happen, will certainly activate a right-wing backlash.

Would America be better off with a "centrist" coalition via divided government, as under Clinton? In a sobering conclusion, the authors show that divided government is actually worse. Legislative stalemate paradoxically increases the power of the presidency and hurts the poor, who are left to fend for themselves

as government freezes up. For example, McCarty and colleagues demonstrate that states with Democratic governors and Republican legislatures, other things equal, have the least generous welfare programs.

The time-tested antidote to this sort of stalemate is increased participation of lower-income Americans. A superb, readable study by Ruth Milkman, a sociologist at the University of California, Los Angeles, assesses immigrant mobilization through social-movement unionism. For McCarty and his colleagues, the influx of immigrants sustains overall inequality; in Milkman's account, immigrants become catalysts of civic engagement.

Milkman locates her story in Los Angeles, which offers both hopeful signs and cautionary lessons. Although she isn't the first to call attention to the Latino-labor alliance [See Harold Meyerson, "A Tale of Two Cities," *TAP*, June 2004], she adds historical depth, archival research, dozens of interviews, and a subtle argument about union capacities. Most important, she addresses the conditions under which *durable* organization is most likely.

Milkman's careful comparison among four organizing cases leads her to conclude that "bottom-up" militancy, reminiscent of the great strikes of 1934 and 1937, is, by itself, inadequate. Likewise, "top-down" organizing of employers by aggressive leaders will also fizzle. For instance, a "corporate campaign" to organize Guess, Inc., began well, but management simply outgunned, outmaneuvered, and outspent the garment workers union once the company decided to punch back. There was no alliance with workers on the ground for the union to fall back on.

Rank-and-file heroism is not, however, in short supply. Latino (and for that matter Asian) immigrants quickly display exceptional solidarity because they are already highly organized by (among other things) kinship, language, religious affiliation, and a dense infrastructure of neighborhood associations. And the kinds of labor markets they live in are hellish and Hobbesian. But their demand for decent conditions, Milkman concludes, must be matched to two things: wholehearted commitment from the international, whether it be the Carpenters, the

THE WAR IS ON:  
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Teamsters, or SEIU, and the international's thorough development of a fully budgeted and staffed plan for organization that pragmatically circumvents elections via the National Labor Relations Board. The deck is too stacked against success for anything less. When the combination works, though, a remarkable sense of opportunity opens up for the participants, as when the Carpenters organized immigrant drywallers.

Labor's premature epitaph has been written more than once. But a renewed union movement could be the instrument of mass electoral enfranchisement—and in the process it would help to restore the kind of social contract that we once had. McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal show what one path forward is; Milkman gives us a glimpse of another. **TAP**

*Richard N. Valelly is professor of political science at Swarthmore College and author of The Two Reconstructions: The Struggle for Black Enfranchisement (University of Chicago Press, 2004).*

## BOOKS

# THE IMPERIAL KLUTZ

**OVERTHROW: AMERICA'S CENTURY OF REGIME CHANGE FROM HAWAII TO IRAQ** BY STEPHEN KINZER Times Books, 384 pages, \$27.50

BY LAWRENCE KORB

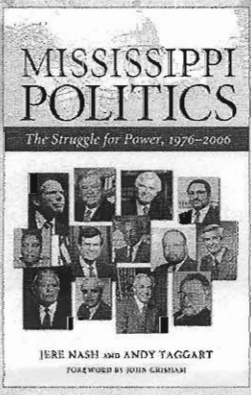
**A** FAMILIARITY WITH THE HISTORY that Stephen Kinzer recounts in his well-written and compelling new book *Overthrow* would go a long way toward introducing some necessary caution in American foreign policy. Beginning with the Philippines just over a century ago and continuing down to the Iraq War, Kinzer's study reminds us of a long line of regime changes gone wrong. The current fiasco in Iraq, he argues, has been the result of two mistaken beliefs on the part of the Bush administration: first, that the U.S. force would be greeted as liberators; and, second, that once the United States removed the artificial bar-

riers imposed by dictatorship, Iraq would readily adopt Western-style democracy. Even a cursory knowledge of the history of past interventions might have raised questions about those assumptions.

"What happened in Iraq," the British historian Niall Ferguson wrote in 2004 in words quoted by Kinzer, "so closely resembles the events of 1920 [when the British tried to subdue Iraq after World War I] that only a historical ignoramus can be surprised."

Well, we may have a few of those in Washington.

Kinzer divides his book into three parts. The first concerns what he calls the "impe-



**MISSISSIPPI POLITICS**  
*The Struggle for Power, 1976-2006*  
By Jere Nash and Andy Taggart  
Foreword by John Grisham

Relying on more than 115 interviews with insiders from both parties, this history of a seismic shift in political control shows the vast gulf Democrats face in regaining what had once been the assured stronghold of the Deep South.


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*The Struggle for Power, 1976-2006*  
By Jere Nash and Andy Taggart  
Foreword by John Grisham

**Where Have All the Flower Children Gone?**  
By Sandra Gervais

"The struggle between good and evil never ceases, so we try to make things better. But when we resolve the Iraqi problem, there will be another, and still another. It's ever thus, and I'm grateful to have been a part of it." —Ossie Davis (1917-2005), actor and activist

**\$28 hardback**



**Where Have All the Flower Children Gone?**  
By Sandra Gervais

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