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Review: A time for choosing: the rise of modern American conservatism

Anthony Ashbolt

University of Wollongong, aashbolt@uow.edu.au

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comments would be received in Australia and Holt was criticized even by members of his own party for appearing so subservient towards the United States.

Frame details the general unravelling of Holt's government during 1967 as he stumbled from one crisis to another and, despite his huge win in 1966, appeared to dread facing the 1969 election against the new Labor leader, Gough Whitlam. Interestingly Frame only briefly touches upon Holt's health in that time even though it is possible he may have suffered a minor heart attack in the middle of the year (it was claimed his collapse was due to 'a vitamin deficiency') and he was often pale and exhausted for the rest of the year with a variety of serious aches and pains. Although rejecting any notion that Holt committed suicide by walking into the treacherous surf at Cheviot Beach, Frame does concede many thought this to be the case at the time. He also examines the other theories on Holt's death that have appeared since 1967 including the claim that he was secretly a Chinese spy and was whisked back to the Asian mainland by a submarine. Although he rightly puts this down as absurd in the end, he spends too much time (fourteen pages) on what is by any stretch of the imagination a load of rubbish. Despite some quibbles, Frame nevertheless has captured the essence of Holt and his achievements that have often been neglected because of his failings.

PETER BASTIAN

Australian Catholic University

A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Modern American Conservatism. By Jonathon M. Schoenwald, Oxford University Press, New York, 2001, pp. 338, \$US24.95 (paper).

The steady rise of the radical Republican right as an electoral force since the mid 1960s is an intriguing, albeit chilling, feature of contemporary politics. What was once considered fringe and unacceptable, to the point where Goldwater was decimated by Johnson in 1964, has now become mainstream. We now have an administration that compels National Parks bookstores to stock a book which argues that the Grand Canyon is only 4500 years old, being the result of the global flood described in Genesis. This reflects both the persistence of fundamentalist beliefs in ordinary Americans and a dramatic transformation in American political culture. The seeds of this transformation were sown in the 1950s but really took root with Reagan's victory in the 1966 Californian gubernatorial race. Schoenwald's impressive, albeit analytically limited, book is a mostly

dispassionate examination of the way both conservatives and the far right were able to gather their forces and wage an all-out war on New Deal liberalism. The book is, in essence, a pre-history of the new right and some of that movement's leading lights, like Phylis Schaffly and Richard Viguerie, play key roles in the pre-history. Perhaps one could quibble and argue that Schoenwald is rather generous in his use of the term conservatism, as the right-wing groups and people he is concerned with are only conservative up to a point. Here, however, we can get into endless terminological distinctions and Schoenwald is well aware of the differences between, for example, traditionalists and libertarians. Indeed, the success story of the modern Republican right has been to blend moral conservatism and economic libertarianism.

A Time for Choosing chronicles the development of a conservative political culture from the 1957 until 1972. He pays particularly close attention to books, organizations and events which have often failed to receive adequate treatment. Thus he sees J. Edgar Hoover's ghost-written *Masters of Deceit* as providing a critical moment in the development of a conservative political culture. So, too, he treats the John Birch Society with great seriousness and its founder Robert Welch, a candy entrepreneur, emerges as a political salesman of considerable skills rather than simply a crackpot fringe-dweller. Nonetheless, the Society's perceived extremism did become a liability for the Republican right and a large part of the right's success story post-Goldwater involves a distancing from supposed extremist elements. Interestingly, this distancing was more strategic than ideological but Schoenwald too readily accepts as mainstream that which could be categorized as extreme.

In one of the most fascinating chapters, Schoenwald deals with the 1965 mayoralty race for New York and the candidacy of William F. Buckley. He sees that race as a critical turning point, precisely because it signalled a resurgence of conservatism in the heartland of liberalism. Even though liberal Republican John Lindsay won and Buckley, standing for the Conservative party, only got 13.5% of the vote, Schoenwald indicates that this was, in a sense, the beginning of the end for John Lindsay's predicted 1968 Presidential bid. Buckley's campaign captured what would be the future Republican sentiments, revolving around concerns about crime, moral disintegration, welfare, taxes and an anti-Communism that was cleverly distanced from the extremism of the Birchers. Buckley had once been close to Welch but had become increasingly critical of his obsessions and his magazine *National Review* carried some fierce attacks on the Society.

The resurgence of the Republican right gathered particular steam in Ronald Reagan's campaign for California Governor. Reagan was able to attract erstwhile Democrats (for California was a supposedly solid Democrat state) alienated by the radical Sixties and fearful of manufactured Communist threats, the excesses of welfare state liberalism, race riots and rising taxes. *A Time for Choosing* is actually the title of a famous speech, broadcast on television, made by Reagan for Goldwater's campaign which laid out the essence of a Republican right agenda. Focussing on the evils of big government, Reagan appealed to the common man and a right-wing common sense. He melded the main elements of conservatism – anticommunism, traditionalism and libertarianism – expertly. Even before his election as Governor, he was spoken of as a potential Presidential candidate for 1968. Time, circumstance and Watergate intervened to delay his ascendancy but firm foundations preparing the way had been laid in the late 1960s.

A Time for Choosing is a thoroughly researched and deftly written book. Its major weakness is that Schoenwald is too uncritical when outlining the ideological positions of the Republican right. He avoids exposing contradictions in those positions and reserves his real criticism for the New Left. The radical turn of the New Left in the late 1960s, he argues, played brilliantly into the hands of the Republican right. This is partly true but it would be more accurate to look at the way the Republican right created mythologies about the Sixties to elicit moral repugnance. The fact that it is still relying on these mythologies today tells us much about contemporary politics.

ANTHONY ASHBOLT
University of Wollongong