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## Book Review: 'The Fight for the Soul of the Democratic Party' by John Nichols

Alex Riggs

In recent years, the American left has experienced significant growth in its prominence on the national political stage. Bernie Sanders has twice finished second in Democratic Party presidential primaries, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has become highly influential and the Democratic Socialists of America have expanded from around 6,000 members in 2015 to 66,000 in 2020.<sup>1</sup> In *The Fight for the Soul of the Democratic Party*, journalist and author John Nichols draws upon original archival research and oral history gathered throughout his journalistic career to argue that rather than an unprecedented phenomenon, the contemporary American left can call upon a significant historical tradition.

Alongside other recent historical works by journalists showcasing aspects of the Democratic Party's left, including Ryan Grim's exploration of the movement's evolution from Jesse Jackson's 1988 Presidential campaign to the present, and Jon Ward's account of the 1980 Presidential Primaries between Jimmy Carter and Ted Kennedy, Nichols pinpoints the pivotal place of Henry Wallace in this history.<sup>2</sup> A Republican farmer turned ardent New Dealer and ally of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Wallace served as FDR's Vice President in his third term.<sup>3</sup> With the President's health ailing as he sought a fourth term in 1944, Southern segregationists and industrialists organised to replace Wallace as the Vice-Presidential nominee, winning a tightly contested vote to install Harry Truman, who would take office upon Roosevelt's death in 1945.<sup>4</sup> For Nichols, this is the decisive moment in altering the Democrats' ideological trajectory, bringing about an intellectual shift away from the politics of the New Deal and towards one which embraced a form of managerialism that precluded transformational change.<sup>5</sup>

The opening chapters focus on Wallace's time as Vice-President, and Nichols effectively situates his politics within the Second World War context. Just as social democrats in Britain, India and Scandinavia looked to build an egalitarian society out of the destruction of the conflict, in an American context Henry Wallace championed similar causes, looking to build on the foundations laid by the Atlantic Charter, 'Four Freedoms', and Economic Bill of Rights to create a peaceful and just international settlement.<sup>6</sup> This context also meant a focus on the reasons for Fascism's ascent in the 1930s, emphasising the need for economic security while simultaneously rooting out racism and xenophobia. Fighting 'American fascism' became a key part of Wallace's speeches in the

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<sup>1</sup> D. Henwood, 'The Socialist Network', *The New Republic*, 250/6 (June 2019), p.15; E. Godfrey, 'Thousands of Americans Have Become Socialists Since March', [https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/05/dsa-growing-during-coronavirus/611599/accessed\\_04/08/2020](https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/05/dsa-growing-during-coronavirus/611599/accessed_04/08/2020).

<sup>2</sup> R. Grim, *We've Got People: From Jesse Jackson to AOC, the End of Big Money and the Rise of a Movement* (Washington D.C., 2019); J. Ward, *Camelot's End: Kennedy vs. Carter and the Fight that Broke the Democratic Party* (New York, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> J. Nichols, *The Fight for the Soul of the Democratic Party* (London, 2020), pp. xi-xii.

<sup>4</sup> Nichols, *The Fight for the Soul*, pp. 83-84

<sup>5</sup> Nichols, *The Fight for the Soul*, pp. xiv-xv.

<sup>6</sup> Nichols, *The Fight for the Soul*, pp. 4, 21-22.

latter part of his Vice Presidency.<sup>7</sup> Nichols also demonstrates the resistance of the status quo to this agenda, including Winston Churchill's anger at Wallace's denunciations of imperialism and segregationists' fury over his steadfast support for civil rights.<sup>8</sup> This leads Nichols to the conclusion that rather than failing on its own merits, it took a deliberate effort of groups whose power would have been diminished by Wallace's agenda to undermine the ascendancy of the New Deal.

Wallace faded into obscurity after his disastrous presidential run in 1948, so the remaining chapters of the book chronicle the Democratic left's trajectory to the present. This begins in the 1950s, highlighting how the Republican administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower outflanked the Democrats in its progressivism on civil rights, economics, and foreign policy, most famously with its denunciation of the 'Military-Industrial Complex'.<sup>9</sup> The analysis of the era's presidents poses questions of Nichols' key thesis, namely that Wallace's removal from the Vice-Presidency constituted the end of the New Deal. If Eisenhower kept a Keynesian economic settlement, gradualist Civil Rights agenda and challenged confrontational foreign policy stances, can the New Deal really have ended in 1944? The book then skips over John F. Kennedy's presidency, before briefly discussing the Johnson administration and its advances in Civil Rights legislation before being bogged down by the Vietnam War.<sup>10</sup> Given the complicated legacies of these Democratic presidents, having enacted important advancements in Civil Rights, the welfare state, and healthcare, but also overseeing the brutality of Vietnam, a discussion of how these figures related to the left and how they should feature in its history remains a significant omission.

The significance of grassroots groups is then highlighted, including Students for a Democratic Society, a key organisation in representing emerging student radicalism, whose alliance with civil rights, anti-war, and feminist groups would give birth to the 'New Politics' that increasingly defined the Democratic left from the late 1960s onwards.<sup>11</sup> Both Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy made use of these sentiments in the 1968 primaries, before George McGovern harnessed their support to gain the 1972 Presidential nomination.<sup>12</sup> One of the most effective parts of the book comes in its reading of the 1970s, showing how this decade, often pinpointed by historians as a battleground for the future of the nation, also affected the Democratic Party.<sup>13</sup> For Nichols, the 1970s represented another missed opportunity for the Party, as they rejected the chance to use this new base to counter increasingly organised right-wing interest groups and instead doubled down on the managerial politics that saw Democrats lose their position as the dominant party in the 1970s.<sup>14</sup> This is also shown through the role of Michael Harrington, a socialist activist who saw in the emergence of the 'New Politics' an opportunity to make the Democrats a vehicle for policies such as full employment and national health insurance. These policies became part of the 1976 Party

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<sup>7</sup> Nichols, *The Fight for the Soul*, pp. 60-61.

<sup>8</sup> Nichols, *The Fight for the Soul*, pp. 68-69.

<sup>9</sup> Nichols, *The Fight for the Soul*, pp. 146, 152-53.

<sup>10</sup> Nichols, *The Fight for the Soul*, pp. 155-56.

<sup>11</sup> Nichols, *The Fight for the Soul*, pp. 170-71.

<sup>12</sup> Nichols, *The Fight for the Soul*, pp. 160-61, 167, 171-73.

<sup>13</sup> E. Berkowitz, *Something Happened: A Political Cultural Overview of the Seventies* (New York, 2006), p.1; T. Borstelmann, *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (Princeton, 2011), p.3.

<sup>14</sup> Nichols, *The Fight for the Soul*, pp. 169-71.

platform, before significantly influencing Ted Kennedy's 1980 bid for the presidential nomination.<sup>15</sup>

These battles over Party direction would continue into the 1980s as the Reagan presidency encouraged centrist Democrats further away from liberalism, whilst organisations like the Democratic Leadership Council emerged to ensure the Party remained orientated to the political centre. In this decade, Jesse Jackson, a civil rights activist and confidant of Martin Luther King, would become the standard bearer of this cause, running for the presidency in 1984 and 1988 on a platform that sought to represent the working-class constituencies most affected by the changes of Reaganism.<sup>16</sup> Though his supposed general election shortcomings were a key reason for his defeats in the primaries, Nichols interestingly highlights the significance of low turnout in urban areas and amongst young voters for the Democratic defeat of 1988, suggesting Jackson's ability to galvanise these groups had potential as an alternative to centrism.<sup>17</sup> Despite this promise, however, the Democrats continued to compromise with right-wing policies on areas including criminal justice and financial deregulation during Bill Clinton's presidency. Despite the initial liberal promise of the Obama campaign, a shift towards a transformational politics was not forthcoming, forcing the party to rely on Presidential charisma for electoral success, a tactic that obliterated its strength at the local level.<sup>18</sup> The book ends, however, on a hopeful note by highlighting the contemporary success of Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez as a sign of the left's strength, with these youth-powered campaigns providing optimism for future fulfilment of Wallace's ideals.<sup>19</sup>

Nichols' work is an important one, highlighting the possibility of alternative directions in post-war American politics and providing a welcome antidote to the histories of the Democrats that portray its left as an inconvenience, contributing nothing other than defeat.<sup>20</sup> However, Nichols' role as an activist as well as an author means there are limits to its uses. As Ilhan Omar writes on the blurb, this is, 'more than a history book- this is an examination of what progressives must do to retake our democracy', showing how Nichols seeks to give today's left a sense of purpose and historical grounding in its common cause with past political actors. Therefore, Nichols places greater emphasis on continuity in charting the history of this movement, highlighting the consistencies in political aims across time, to give a sense of tradition and legitimacy to the cause described. For instance, he describes Tom Hayden's 1978 Senate manifesto as having, 'anticipated the progressive politics of Ro Khanna, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the generation of leaders that would come to the fore in the late 2010s'.<sup>21</sup> Whilst it is correct to point out the continuities across these different contexts, Nichols' approach obscures the variations that also exist across time. In particular, this overestimates the degree of separation between the Democratic left and the wider political environment.

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<sup>15</sup> Nichols, *The Fight for the Soul*, pp.183, 186-87.

<sup>16</sup> Nichols, *The Fight for the Soul*, pp.198-99.

<sup>17</sup> Nichols, *The Fight for the Soul*, p.200.

<sup>18</sup> Nichols, *The Fight for the Soul*, pp.203,2 07-08, 215-16.

<sup>19</sup> Nichols, *The Fight for the Soul*, pp.236-38.

<sup>20</sup> R. Radosh, *Divided they Fell: The Demise of the Democratic Party, 1964-1996* (New York, 1996), pp. x-xi, xiii.

<sup>21</sup> Nichols, *The Fight for the Soul*, p.193.

Therefore, the 'neo-consensus' school of contemporary American political History, which minimises the divides of party, ideology and region in favour of highlighting areas of agreement across the spectrum, including convergence in criminal justice and neoliberalism, has use for building on Nichols' work.<sup>22</sup> Although this school has mostly focused on areas of consensus across partisan lines, its theories could be applied by historians to the study of the Democratic left. This is applicable to the New Deal itself, which faced criticism for being insufficiently bold in its economic reforms from the likes of Huey Long and incorporated ideas that challenge its status as the height of progressivism. This included the facilitation of the conservative goal of repressing 'subversives' through the development of the FBI.<sup>23</sup> With regard to later periods, Geismer highlights how George McGovern played an instrumental role in popularising a political economy based around the high-tech sector, a cause commonly identified as instrumental to the agenda of 'neoliberal' politics in the 1980s.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the Kennedy and Jackson campaigns were not inoculated from these developments. Kennedy was keen to highlight his role as a deregulator of the airline and trucking industries during his campaign, whilst Jackson's campaign included a strong anti-drug message similar to the 'Just Say No' message of the Reagan administration.<sup>25</sup>

*The Fight for the Soul of the Democratic Party*, therefore, represents an important historiographical development by providing a more balanced history of the Democratic left, highlighting the left's important intellectual contribution and exploring alternative directions in post-war American politics. Given that all historical works are influenced by the perspectives of their authors, this book should not be dismissed as that of an ideologue. Its limits, however, should be recognised. More work needs to be done to layout the ideological nuances of this important movement in American political history, to show how it adapted to the myriad of contexts that the post-war United States brought about, but Nichols provides a good starting point.

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<sup>22</sup> B. Schulman, 'Post-1968 U.S. History: Neo-Consensus History for the Age of Polarisation', *Reviews in American History*, 47/3 (2019), pp.482-83.

<sup>23</sup> 'Huey Long's Senate Speeches', <https://www.ssa.gov/history/longsen.html>, accessed 09/09/20; K. O'Reilly, 'A New Deal for the FBI: The Roosevelt Administration, Crime Control and National Security', *Journal of American History*, 69/3 (1982), pp.638-39.

<sup>24</sup> L. Geismer, *Don't Blame Us: Suburban Liberals and the Transformation of the Democratic Party* (Princeton, 2015), pp.164-65.

<sup>25</sup> N. Birnbaum, 'How Much of the Way with E.M.K.?', *The Nation*, December 22, 1979, p.649; 'Jackson Announcement', <https://www.c-span.org/video/?3311-1/jackson-announcement>, accessed 10/07/20

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