An unoriginal hagiography of the Democratic Party: Michael Kazin's *What it Took to Win*

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Michael Kazin, *What it Took To Win: A History of the Democratic Party* . Straus and Giroux, 2022. ISBN 9780374200237

It is not only a poetic coincidence that the Democratic Party was founded when the period known as The Era of Good Feelings came to an end. The circumstances of the party's birth and early years characterize its enduring political mission.

At the time of the party's founding in 1828, the democratic and egalitarian aspirations of the population, which had been unleashed by the power of the Revolution of 1776, were coming face-to-face with the hard reality of northern capitalist production and southern slave-mercantilism. In the teeming cities of the North and on the brutal slave plantations of the South, there was much to life that seemed to contradict the still-popular promise that "all men are created equal." But while explosive economic growth greatly enriched the elites both North and South, it also gave birth to a new social force—the working class, drawing its rank-and-file from the farms of America and the famine-stricken countryside of Europe.

The emergence of the Democratic Party was a historical necessity. What was necessary was a political party that could capture and confuse the democratic sentiment of this growing working population so that no threat to the accumulation of private wealth would arise in either North or South. What was necessary was a party that could exploit the vast American continent, and weaker neighbors such as Mexico, both to enrich financial speculators and to project outward domestic social tensions. What was necessary was a party that could transform the unprecedented racial and ethnic diversity of the American population into a tool of division in the hands of the oppressors.

Much has changed in 200 years, but these essential features of the Democratic Party have remained the same. Then as now, the Democratic Party is built on a lie: that it speaks for working class people.

Michael Kazin's book *What It Took To Win: A History of the Democratic Party* is an effort to disguise the Democratic Party's past in the hope that it might be able to continue to serve its longstanding role by promoting reform from within. This is a harder and harder case to make. The book's publication comes as the Democratic Party has broken with all past social reforms and has become the preferred party of finance capital.

Kazin's selective history of the Democratic Party

The possibility of transforming the Democratic Party into a popular party is shown, Kazin says, by "the party's longtime commitment to promoting 'moral capitalism,' a system that mixes entrepreneurial freedom with the welfare of workers."

But Kazin never explains precisely how Democrats have made capitalism work "morally" for both capitalists and workers, an explanation that would be akin to trying to explain how one might make slavery "right" for both slave and owner, or feudalism equally beneficial to both lord and serf. Instead, he recapitulates the argument Arthur Schlesinger made with greater diligence and more imagination some sixty years ago. The argument goes: Despite the Democratic Party's roots as a party of slavery and for all its contemporary shortcomings, "the people" can once again pressure it to pick up the thread of economic populism that runs from Jefferson and Jackson through William Jennings Bryan and Franklin Roosevelt.

To accomplish this task, Kazin's review of the history of the Democratic Party must be highly selective. He must treat indications of the party's economic progressivism with far greater prominence than the party's long rap sheet of social crimes.

For example, Kazin makes only passing references to the Democrats' forced removal of the Native Americans in the 1820s and to the war to rob Mexico of half its territory, writing that events "hurled the US into war" in 1846 when in reality the Democratic administration of James K. Polk invaded Mexico on a made-up pretext to make way for the expansion of the slave-based cotton plantation system.

Kazin does not ignore the Democrats' role under slavery, nor does he deny the party's visceral racism. But he presents this racism less as an ideology used to dupe workers and poor farmers, both North and South, and more as the reflection of a racism of white workers that seems to exist naturally among them. In one typical passage Kazin writes, "The doctrine of racial supremacy also helped the party win over those white small farmers and wage earners who feared competition from Blacks, and later Chinese immigrants, too." In this upside-down presentation, the Democratic Party is the hapless victim of the ingrained racism of white workers, rather than the vehicle through which racist politics were promoted, North and South.

Kazin's description of the Democratic Party in the Civil War is filled with half-truths. The Democrats faced a "quandary" during this time, Kazin writes—an odd word to describe the political organization that launched secession, triggered the war, ruled the Confederacy as a one-party state, and many of whose partisans in the North opposed the war effort. Of the 1863 anti-draft race riots, Kazin writes that Democrats "could not control the actions of plebian city dwellers" but fails to explain that the riots took place in the context of longstanding

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demagogic agitation by Democratic leaders (including New York City Democratic Congressman Fernando Wood) against the war and "Black Republicanism."

Kazin also offers no explanation for the rotten Compromise of 1877 by which the Democratic Party traded the presidency for ending Reconstruction. In a sin of omission, Kazin acknowledges only that the Democrats "made no protest" against the founding of the Ku Klux Klan. In fact, not only did Democrats make "no protest," the Ku Klux Klan served as the Democratic Party's paramilitary in the South, targeting Republican workers and farmers, black as well as white.

The Democratic Party was also chiefly responsible for the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1883, but Kazin musters only one sentence on this shameful episode.

From "horrible" party to "good" party.

Kazin argues that the "pre-FDR Democratic Party" was "horrible," but asserts that it became more progressive in the early decades of the 20th century. He has in mind the modest social reformism of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal. These reforms were made possible by the wealth of American capitalism, which had been accumulated through technical developments such as the assembly line, and, in no small part, by its exploitation of the semi-colonial masses in Latin America and Asia. This, in turn, hinged on America's emergence as the leading imperialist power— and all the crimes that that entailed.

Kazin would prefer readers not dwell on such things. After noting Woodrow Wilson's betrayal of his promise to "keep us out of war," he apologizes for congressional Democrats who voted for the war declaration: "Most voted aye more to show resolve in the face of renewed German U-boat attacks on American merchant ships" than to signal support for war—cold comfort to the 117,000 US soldiers who would be killed, or the many victims of the xenophobic "100% Americanism" that the war unloosed. As for World War II, the words "Japanese Internment," "Hiroshima," and "Nagasaki," do not appear, though it was Democratic president Franklin Roosevelt who ordered the rounding up of Japanese Americans and the seizure of their property in 1942; and it was Democrat Harry Truman who ordered the incineration of the civilian populations of Japanese cities with no strategic value at the end of WWII, in a coldblooded demonstration that he was ready to use the atomic bomb for strategic ends.

As Kazin approaches the present, his own views more and more blot out historical reality. He acknowledges the right-wing shift carried out under the Clinton administration but, implausibly, presents the 2008 election of Barack Obama as the beginning of a re-birth of Democratic progressivism.

Kazin explains that he organized a group called "Historians for Obama" in 2008 and concludes by claiming that "at the end of the Obama administration," the political left was again resurgent within the Democratic Party: "It was [the progressive left] and not their centrist adversaries who were largely calling the party's ideological tune" such that "by 2020, the combined effort of these movements had nudged the policies of the party further to the left than at any time" in the last half century.

This raises a puzzling question: What does Kazin mean by "left"? In 2009, Obama oversaw the largest transfer of wealth in history from the working class to the rich in the form of the bailout of Wall Street. Social conditions, wages, even life expectancy, stagnated and declined under Obama. Much else must be left out. Kazin fails to include the words "drone," "torture," "Libya," "Somalia," "Syria," "NSA," "Assange," "Snowden," "bailout," "deportation," or "Guantanamo."

Praise for DSA

It will come as no surprise that Kazin crowns Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the Democratic Socialists of America as the modern torchbearers of "progressivism's" long history of leading social opposition back into the Democratic Party. Referring to the DSA, Kazin writes, "The wisest decision these freshly minted socialist politicians made" was "to run as Democrats…Abandoning the quixotic dream of a consequential third party made it possible to achieve something of unprecedented significance: to embed a dynamic social democratic movement inside the heart of one of the two major parties." Kazin's claim that the Democratic Party can lead America back down the yellow brick road of New Deal social reform is just as much a dream as Dorothy's visit to the Land of Oz. That brief period of reform was made possible only by America's now-lost position as global hegemon. And it was motivated by ruling class fear of the Russian Revolution of 1917, which lived in recent memory. Under these very exceptional circumstance, for a brief window lasting from the 1930s through the 1960s, the Democratic Party arranged for certain limited social programs— while tasking its lieutenants in the labor bureaucracy with overseeing the suppression of the class struggle.

In referencing America's rising predominance as a major world superpower, Leon Trotsky wrote in May 1940, "America is fat. This fat from the past permits Roosevelt his experiments, but this is only for a time." In the period of its decline as world hegemon, Trotsky wrote, American imperialism will no longer have room for either restraint in foreign policy or experiments in domestic social reform. In his critique of the draft program of the Sixth Congress of the Communist International, Trotsky explained, "In the period of crisis the hegemony of the United States will operate more completely, more openly, and more ruthlessly than in the period of boom."

In an earlier period, the global position of American imperialism afforded the Democratic Party the space to experiment with social reform. This time has passed. In an earlier period, the Democratic Party also experimented with more serious appraisals of its own role in American history. Kazin's poor book shows that this time has also passed.

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