Nelson Lichtenstein and Judith Stein, *A Fabulous Failure: The Clinton Presidency and the Transformation of American Capitalism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023. Pp. xiii + 525. ISBN 9780691245508. Hardcover $39.95.

A Fabulous Failure: The Clinton Presidency and the Transformation of American Capitalism is a timely book. Well researched and readable, Lichtenstein and Stein offer a thoughtful look back at the economic views and policies of both Clinton administrations. Their economic history provides the reader with many insights that both help explain the twenty-first-century resurgence of populism in the US and the economic battle lines shaping up for the 2024 elections. On their account, "the Clintonites got both the economics and the politics wrong" (p. 437). Economically, the authors argue, low interest rates and deregulation served to prop up speculative bubbles rather than drive investments that would generate widespread prosperity. Appropriate policy may have steered capital in the desired directions, but Lichtenstein and Stein argue convincingly that the political imagination of Clinton and his team was inadequate to the challenges the administration faced. Austerity and surpluses would not create an opportunity to expand the welfare state, as both Presidents Clinton and Obama learned. More than a history, *A Fabulous Failure* provides the reader with a lucid history and a prospective blueprint for a more populist Democratic agenda.

Lichtenstein and Stein do well to remind us that the choices available to political actors, even presidents, can be largely out of their control. The US system of government has powerful centripetal tendencies, and what can be done today often takes priority over what might be possible tomorrow. Clinton's rise to national prominence "was not driven by an ideology that can be securely labeled 'neoliberal'," the authors assert (p. 5). Instead, they argue that Clinton had used policy, not markets, to help develop Arkansas' economic and civic potential during his governorship, and that he and his advisers were eager to launch the same kinds of initiatives during his first term as President. Those initiatives were stymied, though, for two main reasons. First, relentless opposition to Clinton's agenda by his opponents in business and the Republican party. Lichtenstein and Stein chart new ground, however, by focusing more on how the Clinton administration both misread the changing economic terrain and was stymied by some of their own successes. In so doing, they attempt to disentangle the degree to which many of Clinton's choices reflect the president's ideology and which were driven by necessity.

The authors use NAFTA as one excellent example of the perils faced by even popular, successful politicians. Negotiated just before the 1992 presidential election and signed by former President George H. W. Bush just weeks before Clinton took office, the free trade agreement placed the new president in a bind. As governor of Arkansas, Clinton had supported the deal. As a Democratic candidate for president, that support was problematic, especially among labor voters. The fear that NAFTA would devastate manufacturing jobs was ameliorated somewhat by a belief that appropriate policy could blunt the negative effects of the trade deal. Separate agreements between the nations would be required to solve labor and environmental disputes, while domestic policy would be used to steer investment into profitable, productive US industries that could deploy an educated workforce, reducing dependence on the manufacturing sector. These were major components of the "bridge to the 21st century" touted by Clinton in his campaigns. However, few of these proposed remedies worked, in a pattern replicated both in Clinton's other trade agreements and in other policy areas such as financial deregulation.

In *A Fabulous Failure*, the authors conclude that neoliberal ideas were not the main driver of Clinton Administration policy. Lichtenstein and Stein tell us that the Administration's goals were to harness state power to remake the American economy and welfare state along the lines of the New Deal and the Great Society. Reality made these goals unlikely. Hemmed in by a variety of roadblocks—the policies of previous administrations, Republican opposition in Congress, and a determined and powerful Chair of the Federal Reserve Bank—Clinton and his advisors allowed themselves to hope for an unlikely path to success. Austerity, balanced budgets, and cheap credit would spur investment and drive support for the Administration's ambitious policy goals. Instead, the authors tell us, the political winds and the existing status quo favored the protection of capital and intellectual property, while labor, environmental, and other needs fell by the wayside. *A Fabulous Failure: The Clinton Presidency and the Transformation of American Capitalism* effectively blends primary source information with extensive analysis to highlight the internal dynamics and dilemmas faced by Clinton and his administration as they navigated his eight years in office. Recommended.

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