Integrating personal activism with academic historical expertise, Mary Frances Berry, a prominent historian, offers a fine exploration of progressive movements emanated in response to the politics of different American administrations within the US context. Looking at the content page might lead readers of the book to question its significance, especially with the intensive scholarship published on the same subject matter; however, Berry’s expertise as a historian and experience as an activist guide readers towards a deeper appreciation and unique understanding of the history of activism and resistance. For Berry, in order to succeed in defeating present time repressions, people must first scrutinize the history of resistance, learn its valuable lessons, and then build new, creative, and progressive ways of resistance. In this sense, reading history is essential to learn the art of resistance and find inspiration and guidance from challenging times.

In the first chapter, “Franklin D. Roosevelt and the March on Washington Movement”, Berry transcends her readers’ predictions. Instead of centering her chapter on President Roosevelt, she presents an equivalently powerful yet underrepresented man named Philip Randolph whose “values and… ideals have been the guiding spirit of the modern civil rights movement” (qtd. in 8). Yet celebrating and resuscitating Randolph’s activist legacy does not deter Berry from portraying his male-centered attitudes and authoritarian actions towards women activists.

The second chapter entitled “The Movement Against the Vietnam War” covers the protests to impede and terminate the war on Vietnam. This movement, in which Berry herself took part, led eventually to President Johnson’s choice to not run for a second presidency term and President Nixon’s resignation. The chapter focuses mostly on students’ extravagant political involvement in and impact on the political decisions. The discussion roughly covers the years before and after the war on Vietnam, throughout the fifties, sixties, and seventies of the twentieth century.

As implied by its title, the third chapter, “Winning While Losing: Fighting the Reagan Administration” offers an incisive reading of the resistance movements during President Ronald Reagan’s administration. While stressing the activist efforts to resist the corrupt political system, the chapter reveals the persistent continuation of the “systemic, disguised historic discrimination” in the eighties (72), and emphasizes the consistent need for “[v]ictories to be re-won” (86). Along with this chapter, the fourth chapter entitled “The Free South Africa Movement” underlines the discriminatory practices including the apartheid imposed by the South African government against Black people and the USA’s complicity with this regime. Moreover, it reflects the coalitional nature of the fight against political powers in the USA and South Africa with an explicit focus on the efforts and activism of the Free South Africa movement. Berry’s activism is fairly examined in these two chapters.

In “A ‘Kinder and Gentler’ Presidency: George Herbert Walker Bush”, Berry notes the shift in protest movements in the late eighties from “demand[ing] specific policy changes to influenc[ing] the public and public policy” through creative expressions (109). Although Berry starts by accentuating this idea, she unexpectedly does not follow it throughout the chapter. As indicated
by the title, the chapter traces the civil rights movements during the George H. W. Bush administration with a specific focus on movements calling for minorities’ and women’s rights including disability protests demanding implementation of in-place regulations and women’s marches fighting to retain abortion rights.

More marches and protests are featured in “The Adaptable President: William Jefferson Clinton” including the Million Men March, Latino Immigrants March, and anti-globalization and LGBT protests. Serving as a chair of the US Civil Rights Commission assists Berry’s historical and political narratives in this chapter. Being described as a “friendly” and “adaptable president” (132) by the writer does not shield Clinton from Berry’s critique of his foreign policy. This chapter’s juxtaposition with the following chapter on George W. Bush’s administration creates a massive contrast between the two and confirms the former president’s friendliness and political adaptability. Thus, in “Unnatural Disasters: The Presidency of George W. Bush”, Berry shifts readers’ attention to “one of the least popular presidents in the American history” whose infamous domestic and foreign policy elicited “the most numerous protests” (155). Distinguishing Bush’s time with the aftermath of 9/11, Berry narrates the public reactions to his announcement of war on terrorism.

Although the accessibility and readability of the book indicate the writer’s intention to reach a wide readership, its political nature speaks to a specific audience comprised of members who are verily involved or interested in political resistance and social change. This is indicated by the thematic unity and language simplification which do not significantly diminish the ponderous political content. Moreover, the writer’s choice to name the second and fourth chapters after movements while including the names of presidents Franklin Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan, George Herbert Walker Bush, William Jefferson Clinton, and finally George Walker Bush in the titles of the other chapters is bewildering. As a reader, I expected the titles of the chapters to highlight movements rather than political administrations.

The book is evidently an unequivocal invitation for the American nation to learn from history in its pertinacious fight for justice and equality. The strong presence of Berry’s voice and her frequent use of the first-person pronoun in the book might impact some readers’ perception and reception of its content. For others, this first-person narrative could be perceived as added value to the writer’s credibility and readers’ engagement. Overall, Berry fairly succeeds in presenting both the victories and the failures of movements while educating readers about the necessity of learning from the past to surpass present ordeals and future cataclysm.