



# Front Porch Politics: The Forgotten Heyday of American Activism in the 1970s and 1980s

*Michael Stewart Foley*

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"Reading this book revives the spirit of civic action today for those who are unjustifiably forlorn about overcoming injustice."—**Ralph Nader**

**An on-the-ground history of ordinary Americans who took to the streets when political issues became personal**

The 1960s are widely seen as the high tide of political activism in the United States. According to this view, Americans retreated to the private realm after the tumult of the civil rights and antiwar movements, and on the rare occasions when they did take action, it was mainly to express their wish to be left alone by government—as recommended by Ronald Reagan and the ascendant New Right.

In fact, as Michael Stewart Foley shows in *Front Porch Politics*, this understanding of post-1960s politics needs drastic revision. On the community level, the 1970s and 1980s witnessed an unprecedented upsurge of innovative and impassioned grass roots political activity. In Southern California and on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, tenants challenged landlords with sit-ins and referenda; in the upper Midwest, farmers vandalized power lines and mobilized tractors to protect their land; and in the deindustrializing cities of the Rust Belt, laid-off workers boldly claimed the right to own their idled factories. Meanwhile, activists fought to defend the traditional family or to expand the rights of women, while entire towns organized to protest the toxic sludge in their basements. Recalling Love Canal, the tax revolt in California, ACT UP, and other crusades famous or forgotten, Foley shows how Americans were propelled by personal experiences and emotions into the public sphere. Disregarding conventional ideas of left and right, they turned to political action when they perceived, from their actual or figurative front porches, an immediate threat to their families, homes, or dreams.

*Front Porch Politics* is a vivid and authoritative people's history of a time when Americans followed their outrage into the streets. Addressing today's readers, it is also a field guide for effective activism in an era when mass movements may seem impractical or even passé. The distinctively visceral, local, and highly personal politics that Americans practiced in the 1970s and 1980s provide a model of citizenship participation worth emulating if we are to renew our democracy.

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