

H-Net Reviews

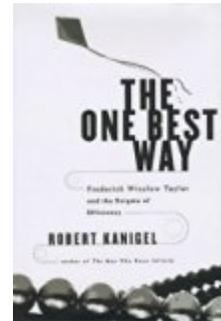
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Robert Kanigel. *The One Best Way: Frederick Winslow Taylor and the Enigma of Efficiency*. New York: Viking, 1997. 676 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-670-86402-7.

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The Controversy Continues

This book is the most important trade biography of Taylor since Frank Copley's 1923 book, *Frederick W. Taylor: Father of Scientific Management*. The volume is a welcome addition to the literature. It offers many vignettes from Taylor's childhood, school life and professional career.

Widely known as the father of scientific management, Frederick Taylor (1856-1915) was a controversial figure in his own time. Old-line business managers and labor leaders castigated his approach to creating a work science. More innovative managers and Progressive political figures embraced his attempts to use experimentation and planning to create more efficient workplaces.

Were Taylor and Taylorism good for workers? The controversy continues in current business and public-administration literatures. Scholars debate whether Taylor was an authoritarian or one who elevated knowledge above hierarchy. They argue whether he fostered the use of money as sole motivator or whether he pioneered the use of non-economic rewards such as feedback. A good discussion of these issues appears in the first essay of Daniel Nelson's collection, *A Mental Revolution: Scientific Management since Taylor*, published by Ohio State

University Press in 1992.

A biography could offer further evidence of where the man stood on these issues—although a person as active and prolific as Taylor left ample evidence to support multiple views. Kanigel, however, offers statements that are inappropriate for readers familiar with the existence of controversy in interpreting Taylor. On page two he speaks of Taylor and says that, "In workplaces run in obedience to his design, authority flowed implacably down from the top." But that is not a point that can be simply asserted! In actuality, scholars argue whether this was so or whether Taylor privileged knowledge over hierarchy.

Kanigel also talks down to his readers. On page 189, he relates how a young Taylor performed a piece with the line, "A warrior bold, with spurs of gold, Sang merrily his lay..." Kanigel then explains that a lay is "just a poem or song." Does he think his audience needs to be told that? He assumes his audience knows less about many things than they actually do.

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