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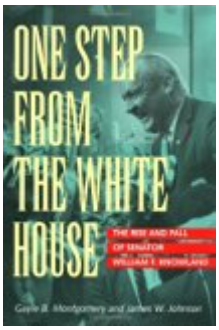

Gayle B. Montgomery, James W. Johnson. *One Step From the White House: The Rise and Fall of Senator William F. Knowland.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998. xiii + 361 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-21194-0.

Reviewed by Steven Wagner

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Gayle B. Montgomery and James W. Johnson, the authors of *One Step From the White House: The Rise and Fall of Senator William F. Knowland*, are professional journalists and former employees of the *Oakland Tribune* who knew William Knowland personally. They make little attempt to hide the hagiographic nature of their study, stating at the outset that since his death they had "envisioned writing a biography of a man who was so influential in our professional lives," but had waited until "time had softened the pain for those close to the senator" before telling his story (p. ix). Knowland, according to the authors, was "one of the finest statesmen of the 1950s," but his self-destructive side led to his "tragic" demise. "Stubbornness, ambition, and self-assurance bordering on feelings of divine right," the authors tell us, caused not only his own professional and personal downfall but the downfall of the California Republican party and his family's business, the *Oakland Tribune*, as well. While it is difficult to dispute the importance of William Knowland in Republican party politics of the 1950s, the authors' desire to salvage his reputation and their reliance on journalistic and secondary evidence leads them to exaggerate his influence and overlook early signs of his eventual self-destruction.

As the title of the book suggests, the life of William Knowland is truly an American tragedy. Knowland was born in 1908, the son of a three-term Congressman from California who later became editor of the *Oakland Tribune*. After graduating from the University of California at Berkeley, Knowland began a promising career in California state government. This career was cut short by World War II, in which Knowland earned his place as an officer after entering the Army as a general enlistee.

In 1945, the thirty-seven year old Knowland was appointed by California Governor Earl Warren to fill a vacancy in the United States Senate caused by the death of Senator Hiram W. Johnson. This fortuitous development was facilitated by the relationship Knowland's father had cultivated with Warren through friendly editorial treatment in the *Oakland Tribune*. Knowland was subsequently elected to a full term in 1946 and reelected in 1952. Knowland served as Senate Majority Leader from 1953-1955, taking over for the ailing

Senator Robert Taft of Ohio, and as Minority Leader from 1955-1959. During his period of Senate leadership, Knowland played an important role in the divisive intra-party politics of the time. He and like-minded conservatives thwarted many of the domestic and foreign policies advocated by the moderate Republican President, Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Knowland decided to forgo a third full term in the Senate and in 1958 made a run for the California governorship. Knowland challenged the state's incumbent governor for the Republican nomination, a move that resulted in the "big switch," where Knowland ran as the party's gubernatorial candidate while Governor Goodwin Knight ran for Knowland's Senate seat. Knowland was soundly defeated in the race for governor, a result widely attributed to his promotion of "right to work" legislation, a stand that was interpreted as anti-union by California's sizable organized labor constituency. After this defeat, Knowland went to work for his father at the ***Oakland Tribune***, where he played an active role in state and local politics.

Knowland's political tragedy, however great, was surpassed by that of his personal life. After a series of extramarital affairs, Knowland divorced Helen (Herrick) Knowland, his wife of forty-five years, in 1972 and married the much younger Ann Dikson. Two tumultuous years followed, as Knowland squandered his personal fortune and went deeply into debt to support his gambling habit and the extravagant tastes of Dikson. In 1974, amid rumors of threats upon his life from organized crime figures to whom he owed money, Knowland took his own life.

The most common accolade the authors give to Knowland in their biography is that he is a man of integrity. The reader is treated to a litany of important figures--Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson, and Earl Warren among them--who attest to Knowland's integrity. Often the distinction is well deserved. For instance, Knowland remained loyal to California Governor Earl Warren's favorite son candidacy at the 1952 Republican convention despite his personal preference for Robert Taft. Since Warren's candidacy contributed to the nomination of Dwight Eisenhower, Knowland deserves credit for putting loyalty above self interest in this case. On other occasions, however, Knowland's actions were more akin to the "stubbornness, ambition, and self-assurance" that the authors refer to than to integrity. Contrary to his professed loyalty to the Republican party and his role as its leader in the Senate, Knowland was constantly at odds with his party's incumbent president. Despite Eisenhower's landslide victories in the general elections of 1952 and 1956, Knowland and other conservative Congressmen refused to cooperate with him on important policy decisions. Because of this, they squandered the Republican party's chance to leave a legislative mark. Knowland also put personal motives ahead of those of his party in 1958 when he passed up an almost guaranteed reelection to the Senate to challenge the incumbent Republican governor of California. This action resulted in the loss of both offices to Democrats. Finally, Knowland's repeated marital infidelity, far from showing integrity, is a testament to his improbity.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of the Senate majority/minority leader to his party, but the authors leave the reader with the impression that, although Knowland and Eisenhower had their differences, that Knowland was an important policy advisor to Eisenhower and his Cabinet. This impression is false. Despite Eisenhower's occasional public professions of Knowland's integrity, Eisenhower had a personal dislike for Knowland and little respect for his opinions on the major issues of their day. Eisenhower's diary entry stating that in the case of Knowland "there seems to be no final answer to the question, "How stupid can you get?" (p. 195), while perhaps overstated, is fairly representative of Eisenhower's private statements regarding Knowland. This general dislike can be extended to most members of

Eisenhower's inner circle, rendering trivial those occasions, given great importance in the book, on which Knowland appears to be advising Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and other important policy makers (pp. 167, 203). Knowland's relationship with Vice President Richard Nixon is also misrepresented. While the position of House majority/minority leader is more important than that of vice president in terms of making policy, it is not necessarily, and was not in this case, more important in terms of political power. The authors correctly portray Knowland's dislike for fellow Californian Nixon, but they leave the impression that Knowland was Nixon's superior in California and national politics, criticizing him for not deferring to Knowland on a number of occasions. Nixon and Knowland both came to Washington in the same year, 1946. Lacking powerful patrons like Warren and Taft, Nixon played the political game as well, if not better, than anybody, earning enough political clout to put him on the national ticket. (Knowland, the authors believe, missed his chance at the vice presidency when Taft failed to win the 1952 Republican nomination. This is apparently the justification for the book's title ***One Step From the White House*** ,since Taft died in 1953). Nixon had no reason to defer to rival Knowland in his home state.

Some of these problems likely come from the authors' choice of source material. Although their bibliography lists archives--including the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley and several presidential libraries--most of their citations refer to secondary sources, published primary sources such as memoirs, and popular print journalism of the time. Contemporary quotations are often taken from secondary sources, even when the original documents are available in archives listed in the bibliography. Exclusive use of these types of sources puts an author in danger of perpetuating myths that have crept into the historiography over the years. One example is the author's statement that Eisenhower often said that appointing Warren to the Supreme Court was the biggest mistake of his presidency (p. 152). This statement carries a great deal of weight in the present study because of Warren's importance in Knowland's career. This statement is misleading at best. While Eisenhower was not altogether pleased by the Court's 1954 decision in ***Brown v. Board*** he did not blame Warren for the unanimous decision; in fact he continued to suggest Warren as a possible presidential candidate should he decide not to run again in 1956. Statements by Eisenhower to the effect that appointing Warren had been a mistake occurred in the 1960s, not immediately following the ***Brown v. Board*** decision.

More troubling than the use of questionable sources are those occasions when no source is cited at all, particularly when potentially important information is given or conclusions are made (pp. 109, 121, 123, 145, 147). Sentences that begin with "It is clear," but do not end with a reference are even more difficult for a historian to accept than those that contain such phrases as "seems more likely" and "probably" which are abundant in this book.

Where the authors' strengths as journalists are most recognizable is in the last third of the book. This portion deals with William Knowland's life after he was defeated in the 1958 California gubernatorial race. Interviews with family members, friends, and business associates paint a vivid picture of Knowland's tumultuous post-Washington years. These events provide a sharp contrast to Knowland's previous years as a staunchly conservative man, very much in control of the events in his life. That Knowland was able to lose control of his life to such a degree is nothing short of remarkable. This portion of the book is an important contribution to our understanding of Senator Knowland. Fans of political biography, particularly those that present American lives as American tragedy, will be satisfied with this book. Serious students of American post-war political history, I believe, will be disappointed.

This review was commissioned for H-Pol by Lex Renda <renlex@uwm.edu>

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