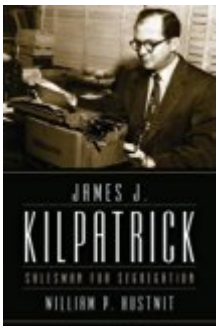
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



William P. Hustwit. *James J. Kilpatrick: Salesman for Segregation.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. ix + 310 pp. $34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-0213-4.

Reviewed by James Aucoin

Published on Jhistory (November, 2013)

Commissioned by Heidi Tworek (University of British Columbia)

James J. Kilpatrick, despite his late-in-life attempt to erase the fact, was a racist. From the time he was a boy in Oklahoma, through his tenure as editorial page editor for the *Richmond-News Leader*, to his popular TV appearances as a national conservative columnist, Kilpatrick never left behind his unfounded belief in white supremacy. Oh, he claimed he had; he even apologized, sort of, for his race-baiting editorials during the civil rights era of the 1960s. But Kilpatrick, ever the arrogant southern gentleman, never admitted that his leadership in the "massive resistance" movement against desegregation and integration had caused any suffering to African Americans or caused any social injustices to continue long after they should have been corrected.

Indeed, his obsession about race-mixing began in 1954, when the Supreme Court issued its *Brown* decision, which ultimately required all southern states to end desegregation in the public school systems. Kilpatrick was an elegant writer. He used his skills to build arguments against desegregation and to urge Virginia legislators to close the public schools rather than allow African American children to attend schools preserved for white children. He also coordinated his attacks on desegregation with editors and public officials in other southern states, and provided a leading, though dead wrong, constitutional argument called interposition to use against the Supreme Court's decisions on civil rights. Interposition, Kilpatrick argued, was a legal position that allowed states to ignore federal court decisions and laws that they disagreed with.

While Kilpatrick gave ammunition to his fellow racists with the idea of interposition, the argument never gained legitimacy. So Kilpatrick changed his tactics, arguing that southern states should use massive resistance, employing every means possible, to stop desegregation. It was a tactic that drove the civil rights movement into the streets, confronted by violent law enforcement officials and white mobs.

Kilpatrick's editorials and books against desegregation gained him somewhat of a national

reputation, earning him assignments from ***National Review, Nation's Business,*** and other conservative publications. His big break into the national limelight as a conservative star was in 1964 when the Long Island paper *Newsday* hired him to produce a weekly column from a conservative viewpoint. His column was then syndicated to more than sixty newspapers. Kilpatrick's ability to finesse his arguments to avoid offending a national audience caught the attention of Harry Elmlark, owner/publisher of the conservative ***Washington Star***.

Elmlark lured Kilpatrick away from *Newsday* in 1965 and provided him with a much larger distribution to 538 newspapers for his syndicated columns, which gave voice to the middle-class whites and conservatives whom President Richard Nixon dubbed the "Moral Majority."

With the success of his column writing, Kilpatrick left the Richmond newspaper and moved to Washington DC, where he became a regular on ***Agronsky & Company***, ***Meet the Pres***s, and ***Inside Washington***--televised political talk shows that put him in a national spotlight next to such journalism stars as George Will, Peter Lisagor, Carl Rowan, and Hugh Sidey. In 1970, Don Hewitt paired him with liberal Nicholas Von Hoffman at first and then with Shana Alexander for short "Point/Counterpoint" debates on ***60 Minutes***. He gained respect among the Washington journalists for his wit, his debating skill, and his pleasant company after hours.

Kilpatrick never really changed when he moved to the national scene; he just adjusted his message to better suit the wider audience. Hustwit says that Kilpatrick came into his element during the 1970s as the spokesman for a newly emerged, less-moderate conservative brand of politics exemplified by Sen. Barry Goldwater. Hustwit persuasively argues that Kilpatrick and President Ronald Reagan, using appearances on television, pioneered a folksy, emotive form of conservative argument that replaced the intellectual high-brow conservatism of William F. Buckley.

Hustwit also argues that Kilpatrick and his collaborator, Louis Decimus Rubin, created the intellectual grounding for a rebirth of the South in the 1970s by popularizing a heroic view of southern culture by focusing on the tradition-bound, states'-rights, agrarian characteristics of the southern states, rather than on its often violent opposition to desegregation and equality among the races. Indeed, according to Hustwit, Kilpatrick embraced agrarianism as a political ideology long after the Vanderbilt Agrarians of ***I'll Take My Stand*** fame gave up on the ideals.

In his later years, Kilpatrick and his wife built a home on thirty-seven acres at the headwaters of the Rappahannock River in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia. There, he isolated himself in an agrarian lifestyle and away from the noisy urban scenes of Baltimore and Washington. He wrote pieces he called his "Scrabble" articles, which contained stories about his life in the country and with his family and neighbors. He smugly created the mythical town of "Scrabble" as a town where tradition mattered and people knew their place and progress wasn't accepted.

Hustwit has provided a well-researched biography of the professional life of Kilpatrick, a journalist who contributed to the national debates of the mid- to late twentieth century and helped to build a viable right-wing conservative political force born of the anti-desegregation movements in the South during the 1950s and 1960s. Hustwit traces how racism, primarily against African Americans, fueled the rise of a radical conservatism that champions opposition to the spread of federal powers. Indeed, many of the ideological arguments made by Kilpatrick and his colleagues in and out of journalism during the South's fight against desegregation are mimicked today by members of the tea party.

Hustwit's Kilpatrick is an ideologist framed by his opposition to racial equality in American soci-

ety. In 1978 Kilpatrick wrote in ***Nation's Business***, the magazine of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, that "conservatives believe that a civilized society demands orders and classes, that men are not inherently equal, that change and reform are not identical, that in a free society men are children of God and not wards of the state."[1] Nevertheless, Kilpatrick was not a religious man: he first adopted the Catholic Church because the woman he married was Catholic, but then led his family into the Episcopal Church when local priests integrated the Catholic schools in Richmond.

This book would be an important source for scholars studying the civil rights movement, southern newspaper history during the mid-twentieth century, or the origins of the radical conservative wing of the twenty-first-century Republican Party. As a biography, though, Hustwit's book falls short because he skims over Kilpatrick's private life as an adult, providing little insight into his family life. Readers learn that he married a woman from a prominent family in Richmond, and there are brief mentions of his children and grandchildren, but for the most part the book focuses on Kilpatrick's professional career. The resulting picture of Kilpatrick, who died in 2010 at the age of eighty-nine, reveals much about his ideology and political and professional strategies and little about Kilpatrick the man.

Note

[1]. Quoted in Richard Goldstein, "James J. Kilpatrick, Conservative Voice in Print and on TV, Dies at 89," ***New York Times***, August 16, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/17/us/17kilpatrick.html?_r=0 (accessed October 23, 2013).

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39526