

# H-Net Reviews

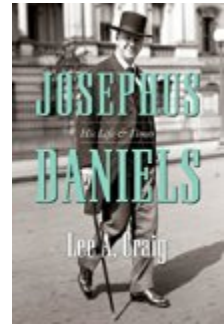
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lee A. Craig. *Josephus Daniels: His Life and Times*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. xvii + 474 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4696-0695-8.

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## His Life and Times: The Many Careers of Josephus Daniels

Lee A. Craig's *Josephus Daniels: His Life and Times* explores the many careers of the leading Progressive Democrat Josephus Daniels. Craig is the consummate biographer, exploring with equal vigor both the various phases of his subject's life and the expansive social, political, and economic backdrop of his times. His presentation of Daniels's life is both nuanced and sympathetic. Craig examines Daniels's boyhood, education, time as a newspaper publisher and entrepreneur, and his role as a defender of white supremacy. He then explores his service as secretary of the navy under Woodrow Wilson, and his post-World War One career, notably as ambassador to Mexico at the height of his former assistant secretary Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "Good Neighbor" policy. It is, however, his successful marriage of the art of the biographer and the science of the economic historian that is most impressive. The practiced ease with which he discusses wider developments and, especially in the early chapters, relates these back to Daniels's life and immediate surroundings in North Carolina, is striking.

For those ignorant of the details of Daniels's life prior to his appointment as secretary of the navy, Craig's presentation of his early years, set out in chapters 1 and 2, is illuminating and raises many wider questions about the enduring national influence of southerners, and an essentially southern worldview, in the Democratic Party of the Progressive Era. Such insights are built on throughout the text, as demonstrated by his repeated sharp commentary on the importance of explicit white supremacy to the southern Progressive platform.

Although a detailed investigation, rather than an extended biographical sketch, Craig's considered treatment of Daniels's early career as a writer and newspaper proprietor is in many ways reminiscent of Richard Polenberg's presentation of the influential newspaper entrepreneur, Frank E. Gannett, founder of the modern publishing giant the Gannett Corporation.[1] Despite the very different scale and depth of analyses, these similarities are most evident in the key themes explored, including the importance of both men's mothers, their formal education, and their (asserted) anti-imperialism. Daniels's experience is also broadly in line with his contemporary Walter Hines Page, the initial proprietor of the Raleigh *State Chronicle*, which proved a key stepping-stone to later success as a publisher. Daniels sought to grow the subscription base of his newspapers in order to achieve editorial independence from party patronage. The importance of this strategy to Daniels's success is reflected in chapters 4 and 5, which focus on his management of the Raleigh *News and Observer*. Daniels transformed the previously rather staid publication into one of the most dynamic newspapers in the American South.

It is in these central chapters that Craig makes what may be seen as his most controversial comments on Daniels. These center on the latter's racialized rhetoric concerning the "Fusion" tickets combining the emerging Populist and opposition Republican Party machines in North Carolina during the late 1890s. As both a Democratic activist and publisher, Daniels worked hard to brand Fusion—a coming together of disparate politi-

cal parties “having no principle in common”—as equivalent to racial miscegenation (p. 161). Indeed, his *News and Observer* went so far as to describe the adoption of an 1895 resolution honoring Frederick Douglass by the North Carolina House as a step toward the active promotion of miscegenation by Fusionist politicians (p. 161).

On Daniels’s crucial role in reshaping the American navy and serving in Woodrow Wilson’s cabinet, Craig offers many telling assessments. These include Daniels’s often publicly fawning but essentially pragmatic backing of Wilson, his view of the navy as an instrument for the promotion of the broader social objectives of the Democratic administration, and his implementation of measures to curtail prostitution in key ports such as Newport, Rhode Island, and to make the navy institutionally “dry.” Daniels’s belief in the need to keep up with British technological innovations (such as the Dreadnought), and his internal struggles with “Dollar Diplomats,” whom he described as “virtually the agents of big business,” and with advocates (both military and civilian) for a vastly expanded peacetime navy also feature prominently in chapter 6 (p. 239).

Chapter 7, “Splendid Little Wars,” focuses on internal struggles within the administration between Woodrow Wilson and his “Good Neighbor imperialism” and the somewhat less imperialistic Daniels (p. 239). It also discusses in some detail the early career of Franklin Roosevelt, the young assistant secretary of the navy, as well as the continuing triumphs and tribulations of the *News and Observer* back in Raleigh. American neutrality and then entry into the Great War are broached in chapter 8. Perhaps Craig’s presentation of a “battle of wits” between Daniels and Alfred von Tirpitz, his German counterpart, is slightly aggrandizing, given the still comparatively limited reach of American naval power on entry into the war (p. 293). However, Craig’s presentation of Daniels’s response to such events as the sinking of the *Lusitania* and his vocal objections to the British policy of economic blockade sheds new light on internal struggles within the administration. In effect, his work places an influential Daniels between the traditionally isolated Democratic titans, Wilson and William Jennings Bryan.

“To the Bitter End,” chapter 9, takes a more personal look at the Great War, focusing on Daniels’s concern for his sons, Josephus Jr. and Worth, and their role in the fighting. The chapter also deals with Daniels’s new belief that the United States must possess a navy at least as large as the Royal Navy, and the growing appreciation of the young FDR for the “hick” superior he had previously underestimated and would for the rest of his life refer to simply as “Chief” (p. 367).

There are similar insights awaiting those whose primary interests lie in the post-Versailles years of Daniels’s life, and especially his time in Mexico as U.S. ambassador. Due to the primary interests of those subscribed to the H-SHGAPE network, and limitations of space, I will not relate these in detail here.

Arguably the greatest accomplishment of Craig’s monograph is the unity and feeling of natural progression he brings to what could, all too easily, have been presented as a series of disjointed “careers” through which the remarkable figure of Daniels transitioned. In short, his monograph is more than simply the sum of its parts. In addition to authoring what is undoubtedly the definitive biography of Daniels, Craig also provides his readers with a series of sharp, sometimes challenging, insights on the nature of the American South, and on U.S. journalism, politics, naval strategy, and diplomacy during his subject’s storied life. Readers may sometimes disagree with Craig’s interpretations of events, such as his treatment of continued U.S. imperialism under the avowedly “anti-imperialist” Daniels. Despite such minor issues I am more than happy to recommend Craig’s thought-provoking and meticulously researched biography to all those interested in the evolution of journalism, the growth of the U.S. Navy, the politics of the “New South,” and the continuing influence of southerners in the national Democratic Party throughout the Progressive Era.

#### Note

[1]. See Richard Polenber, *A Progressive Publisher in Politics* (Rochester, New York: Gannett Foundation, 1987).

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