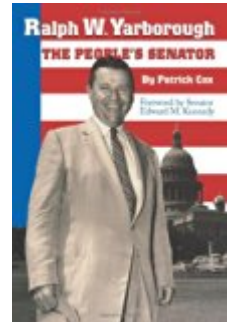


Patrick L. Cox. *Ralph W. Yarborough, The People's Senator.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001. xviii + 348 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-292-71243-0.



Reviewed by Kenneth Wayne Howell

Published on H-South (July, 2002)

Put the Jam on the Bottom Shelf

In the summer of 1958, voters cast their ballots in the Texas Democratic primary to nominate candidates for the general elections that were slated later that year. One of the most important decisions facing the voters was the selection of a candidate for the U.S. Senate. It was a well-known fact among individuals who were familiar with politics in the South, including Texas, that the candidate who won the Democratic Party's nomination in the primary in all likelihood would win the general election in November. In 1958 two men surfaced as the front runners for the senate nomination: the incumbent Ralph W. Yarborough, and William Blakley, a wealthy businessman and rancher from Dallas. While Blakley was a newcomer to Texas politics, Yarborough was a well-known political figure in the state. Between 1952 and 1956, Yarborough gained political notoriety through his unsuccessful attempts to win the Democratic nomination for governor. His political fortunes improved in 1957 when he won a seat in the U. S. Senate in a special election that was held to fill the vacancy resulting from Senator Price

Daniel's election victory in the Texas gubernatorial race the prior year. Yarborough's election to the senate was especially ironic considering he had lost the Democratic nomination for governor to Daniel in the 1956 primary.

Yarborough considered the election of 1958 extremely important to his political future. In 1957, the special election for the senate had been decided by a simple majority of the votes cast, but the 1958 election followed the traditional statutes for elections in Texas which required a candidate to win a plurality of the vote. Yarborough knew that a victory would in essence vindicate his earlier failures to capture the governor's seat, and at the same time, he understood that another loss in a statewide election would end his political career. Like many political races, the 1958 campaign was filled with quirky slogans and cunning tactics. Blakley attempted to portray himself to the public as a plain-spoken western cowboy, rather than an elite Dallas millionaire, and Yarborough positioned himself as the people's candidate by using simple-worded rhetoric such as "put the jam on the lower shelf so the little man can reach

it" (p. 156). In spite of Blakley's efforts and unlimited financial resources, the election results were unquestionable. Yarborough easily won the Democratic nomination and the subsequent general election. His victory in 1958 punctuated his earlier success in 1957 and ensured that one of the country's most liberal-minded senators would remain in office well into the next decade.

While in Washington, Senator Yarborough initiated many legislative measures that still influence American society today. He supported Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society and was instrumental in pushing legislation through the Senate which called for improvements in public education, provided the American people with better public health care, protected the civil rights of African Americans, extended the GI Bill to veterans serving in the armed forces after World War II, and preserved for posterity vast areas of Texas as part of the national park system. During the 1960s, Yarborough's name was commonplace among the people of Texas. Many Texans equated the senator with honesty and fairness which explains in part why Yarborough had little trouble winning reelection in 1964.

Aside from Lyndon Johnson, Yarborough was one of the most influential Texans in Washington during the tumultuous decade of the 1960s. Nevertheless, despite his accomplishments and notoriety, scholars have seemingly overlooked this man who was once touted as the people's senator. Since his retirement from politics in the early 1970s, the story of Yarborough's political career has been overshadowed by numerous studies of other noted Texas politicians such as Lyndon Johnson and Sam Rayburn. Fortunately for contemporary scholars, Patrick Cox's biography of R. W. Yarborough has rescued the senator from history's abyss. Cox has done an admirable job in chronicling Yarborough's public and private life, placing the liberal Texas senator within the context of local, state, and national politics.

While it is impossible to discuss all of the merits of this work in a brief book review, one can point out some of the more significant aspects of the study. Cox makes three important contributions to the historical literature which focuses on twentieth-century politics in the United States. First, the author offers vital clues for understanding the motivations that prompt politicians to be more liberal minded in their thoughts. In looking at Senator Yarborough's private and public life, readers begin to understand how an individual's life experiences shape their views of the world. For example, Yarborough's concern with alleviating poverty and supporting civil rights in the South can be traced back to events occurring early in his life. He was raised by his parents in a small rural community, taught in Texas's poorly-funded public schools, traveled through Europe in the early 1920s where he witnessed first-hand the carnage of the First World War, and served in the U.S. Army during World War II where he once again was reminded of the devastating effects of war. Throughout his life, Yarborough's experiences pushed him to seek ways in which to help the downtrodden people of both his state and country, which explains why he whole-heartedly supported President Johnson's initiatives for the Great Society.

Next, Cox skillfully uses Yarborough's public career to examine the conflict between the conservative and liberal factions of the Democratic Party in the years following the Second World War. In his efforts to examine this political rivalry, the author details various political campaigns in Texas between 1952 and 1972 which pitted Yarborough, a steadfast liberal, against noted conservatives such as Allen Shivers, Price Daniel, and John Connally.

Cox also reveals that Lyndon Johnson and Yarborough endured a strained and distant political association throughout the 1950s when both men served in the U.S. Senate and in the early 1960s when Johnson became vice president in the

Kennedy administration. The origins of Johnson and Yarborough's problematic political relationship are traced to their divergent opinions regarding the best way to deal with the conservative wing of their party. The author presents Johnson as an ambitious office seeker and political realist who understood that his chance for the presidency rested upon his ability to maintain close personal relationships with wealthy conservative Democrats. In Cox's account, Johnson seems to lack the moral guidance of a true liberal: the Texas giant's political actions are defined in terms of one man's quest to become president. Yarborough on the other hand is defined as a liberal purist who was unwilling to compromise with conservative politicians on key issues such as the integration of public schools and illegal use of public lands. The author claims that Yarborough's political actions were not motivated by personal ambitions, rather he acted out of a strong sense of moral correctness and principle.

Johnson and Yarborough could closely coordinate their efforts to push the Great Society through Congress, but their relationship always remained tentative. Following Johnson's presidential victory in the election of 1964 and the administration's subsequent escalation of America's involvement in Vietnam, the relationship between the two Texas politicians grew even more distant. Despite his early support for the war, Yarborough soon realized the futility of America's involvement in Southeast Asia, and he began to actively criticize the United States' involvement in Vietnam during the late 1960s, a move which isolated him from the Johnson administration. Finally, Cox traces the role that Yarborough played in developing and winning approval for Great Society legislation. Yarborough, according to the author, was one of the most important people guiding Great Society programs through the Senate. Indeed Yarborough served as the author of more reform legislation than any of his fellow senators. He was probably most noted in Washington for his tireless efforts to improve public education in the

United States, especially in the southern states. At the end of his career, Yarborough could proudly reflect that he played a major role in landing the final blow to segregation in public schools, promoted higher education by providing more federal funding to college bound students, and provided the underclass with greater educational opportunities by helping to pass federally funded educational programs such as the Adult Basic Education Program, Head Start, Job Corps, and VISTA. In addition, he supported education acts which appropriated federal funding for bilingual education and were designed to help the growing Mexican-American population throughout the American Southwest. Because of his devotion to the improvement of public education, Yarborough's fellow senators gave him the nickname, "Mr. Education of the U.S. Senate."

Yarborough's commitment to the Great Society did not stop with education; he was also the architect behind legislation calling for an extension of the GI Bill of Rights, better known as the Cold War GI Bill, to veterans serving in the armed forces after World War II. Furthermore, Yarborough tirelessly worked to preserve large tracts of land in Texas as part of the national park system including the Padre Island National Seashore, Guadalupe Mountains National Park, and the Big Thicket National Preserve. In conjunction with his efforts to increase the size of the nation's federal parks, the senator sponsored numerous environmental bills such as the Golden Eagle Protection law, the 1966 and 1969 Endangered Species Act, and the Landmark Water Quality Improvement Act. In fact, Cox claims that Yarborough sponsored, or cosponsored, every major water, air, and solid-waste pollution measure passed by Congress from 1961 to 1970.

In all Cox has produced a laudable biography of Ralph W. Yarborough. Nevertheless, there are two general criticisms of this work. First, the author slights the role that LBJ played in national politics both in the U.S. Senate and as president.

For example, Cox writes the following regarding Johnson and Yarborough's refusal to support the "Southern Manifesto" which called on southerners to reject integration of the public schools in the South:

"The only senators representing former Confederate states who refused to support the Manifesto were Albert Gore and Estes Kefauver, both from Tennessee, and Lyndon Johnson [Yarborough also refused to support the Manifesto]. Johnson, as he eyed the national scene, believed that his chances for the presidential nomination depended on his support of some form of civil rights legislation which separated him from the die-hard segregationists."

The author continues by stating that "Yarborough also saw an opportunity to set himself apart from the same southerners but wanted to do so for moral and philosophical reasons instead of political ones" (p. 148). While no one can deny LBJ's political aspirations, Cox places too much emphasis on this facet of Johnson's character and therefore fails to accurately depict his role in the civil rights movement. Likewise, it seems naive to suggest that Yarborough was completely void of personal political motivations.

Second, Cox never fully explains why voters supported Yarborough. Did lower- and middle-class voters merely identify Yarborough as one of them? Perhaps blue collar workers simply favored his positions regarding the labor unions? It seems certain that minority voters would have favored his stance on civil rights. Cox indirectly suggests why certain groups of voters supported the senator, but he does not offer conclusive evidence. However, in fairness to the author, these questions are difficult to ascertain with any degree of certainty and often require the researcher to conduct detailed quantitative analyses of election returns. It should be noted that the above criticisms do not outweigh the merits of this work: Cox's book is a well-written, well-researched, and insightful account of Ralph Yarbor-

ough's private and public life, and professional scholars as well as the general public should find this study useful in their quest to know more about twentieth-century politics.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-south>

Citation: Kenneth Wayne Howell. Review of Cox, Patrick L. *Ralph W. Yarborough, The People's Senator*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. July, 2002.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6498>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.