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Phyllis Komarek de Luna. *Public Versus Private Power During the Truman Administration: A Study of Fair Deal Liberalism.* New York and Bern: Peter Lang, 1997. xii + 253 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8204-3144-4.

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Electrical Storm: A Review of *Public and Private Power During the Truman Administration*

In this study of the politics of electrical power, Phyllis Komarek De Luna has written a complex analysis of a significant economic issue in American history of this century. Although the struggle over whether electricity should be mainly publicly or privately generated long ago ceased to be at the forefront of public policy discourse, this work calls attention to the fact that at mid-century it was a core question and an intensely debated issue of the American political culture. The author's intent in describing the struggle over who, mainly, should generate electricity, is to test the extent of President Harry Truman's "Fair Deal" liberalism in its role as legatee of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. To accomplish this, she fixes on a keystone of the New Deal and for which the power debate was indicative: the quest for economic democracy.

De Luna points out that scholarly analysis of Truman's record has run a gamut from characterizations as successful torch bearer of New Deal liberalism to its pale imitation, or as at best a transitional step between the impassioned liberalism of the Depression and the evolving conservatism of the latter half of the century. She further observes that many of Truman's detractors have based their criticisms on a superficial understanding of his record on public power. Her study is an attempt to give a full account of that record, the better to gauge Truman's actual liberalism.

The author traces the thinking of Truman and his circle on power back through the progressive and New Deal eras. Although most of the progressive and New Deal agenda on power generation had been passed by the time Truman took office, there were hidden traps for Fair Dealers who hoped to extend FDR's legacy, because the existing foundation was shaky. The concept of a public interest in some control over the generation of electric power had been consistently undermined by the courts, which had periodically offered contradictory and unfair decisions on power issues that came before them. Also, the progressive impulse to regulate power companies at the state level had been thwarted early on by the utility companies, which had made themselves elusive targets by creating mammoth holding companies headquartered beyond the reach of local regulators. Another problem was that the ideological poles of the debate had been established in the Twenties when Senator George Norris of Nebraska–who thought the utilities naturally, rapaciously monopolistic and inherently unregulatable–proposed government ownership of the power companies. The utilities resisted mightily, vigorously lobbying the Congress and the public in overheated rhetoric about socialism and communism that matched the vituperation of Norris and his allies, setting a pattern for years to come. Yet another factor was the proposal for partnership between the public and private sectors for the generation of power, an idea that had germinated as early as 1914. The resulting confusion over options and the already long history of enmity over the issue made any kind of settlement nearly impossible.

The battle was temporarily interrupted by the economic crisis of the Thirties. The Depression brought the triumph of New Deal tactics to rescue the economy, such as TVA and the development of the Columbia River for power generation under the Bonnneville Power Administration (BPA). But even the success of these programs failed to trump the efforts of the private utilities to maintain leverage with the public and Congress. There remained in many minds an unaddressed conundrum: should or, for that matter, could, the federal government

constitutionally build plants to generate electricity?

When Truman took office, his inheritance on electricity was mixed, at best. There was no consistency about the role of the federal government in the generation of power. There was an array of governmental units responsible for some fraction of power policy, including the Bureau of Reclamation, and the Corps of Engineers. New Dealers were in powerful positions throughout the bodies that dealt with power issues. The Federal Power Commission was also a hotbed of liberalism, but could be successfully pressured by the interests lobbying it at any given time. Each of the agencies had a variety of constituencies with divergent interests and motives to accommodate, as well as the usual interagency turf issues to tend. In 1946, the Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes, a New Deal true believer, had sent out a memorandum to his staff to press the advantage on behalf of public power, including the mandates that where feasible federal dams were to include generation facilities; preference in power sales were to be given to public bodies and cooperatives; and that "power disposal shall be such as to encourage widespread use and prevent monopolization" (p. 14).

Nevertheless, following the war the private power interests resumed the struggle against government control. They acquiesced in multipurpose programs administered by TVA, BPA, and at Fort Peck Dam on the Missouri River, recognizing their popularity. But they and their equally resolute friends in Congress rabidly opposed the creation of new valley authorities modeled after TVA, a goal high on the priorities list of the New Deal holdovers in the Administration, and the selling of power "at the bus bar" to preferred customers.

In fact, the Congresses with which Truman had to deal were largely uninterested in or hostile to public power–even those, such as the Eightieth, ostensibly in sympathy with the Administration's aims. While the Eightieth Congress was Democratic, it was in fact dominated by Dixiecrats, conservatives who allied themselves with Republicans. Moreover, the committees and subcommittees with oversight over power matters were largely dominated by men to whom public power was anathema, figures such as Republican Senator Guy Cordon of Oregon and Democratic Representative George Dondero of Mississippi "who prided himself on his long battle 'to combat the socialistic trends of the New Deal and Fair Deal Administrations' " (p. 35).

De Luna asserts that from the outset of his administration Truman's policies were doomed to be attacked from partisans on both sides of the issue because his own views on public power were unclear. On one hand, his 1948 State of the Union speech called for an application of the lessons of TVA to other river valleys. On the other, he was consumed by foreign affairs, to the exclusion of key domestic programs like public power. He was in reality, she asserts, a populist uncomfortable with New Deal liberalism and, for that matter, the New Dealers he inherited as he took office. In the circumstances, he was chronically under suspicion by both Democrats and Republicans.

In the end, having chronicled the uniform failure of the river valley schemes and a variety of projects the liberal cores of which were either compromised or eviscerated in the political grinder, De Luna concludes that "the Truman administration unwittingly presided over a crucial transition to a more conservative era in American power policy" (p. 173).

This book is an old fashioned political history in the sense that it is a painstaking reconstruction of the personalities and the mechanics of law and policy making at the federal level, rather than a close analysis of texts. It pays close attention to details of local and regional politics and is solidly based in archival research, copiously and effectively using *The Congressional Record*, federal agency records, correspondence, memoirs, oral histories, dissertations, theses, books, local newspapers, and other relevant materials.

Still, for all its technical competency, this densely packed and workmanlike essay falls short of its stated goal of elucidating the liberalism of Truman's record on power, in that its conclusion circles back to the nebulous reading with which the essay begins, which is, in any case, the only one possible: that Truman's record had both liberal and conservative features. This is because the author, despite her painstaking reconstruction of congressional battles over various projects, slights a key point about the politics of power generation. Her reconstructions of the post-war public power battles amply, if unwittingly, illustrate that the politics of electrical power, when played successfully by presidents, have nearly always been predicated not on clear-cut ideology, but on the chief executive's ability to walk a narrow line between opposing regional constituencies. Although the implication of her work is that Truman's fundamental liberalism was especially compromised by having to do this, it was, in fact, a technique that was successfully and cheerfully employed by his predecessor, FDR, the avatar of liberalism, as well as his successor, the Republican Dwight Eisenhower. TVA, for example, was a hybrid

agency with both public and private features. The creation of BPA, for another, was marked by a series of compromises that entailed losses of cherished goals by both public and private power partisans. Moreover, in order to save Bonneville Dam, Roosevelt undermined his own advisers and, according to Philip Funigiello, the leading historian of the politics of electrical power, turned his back on a chance to create a lasting national power policy.[1] For his part, Eisenhower said in his memoirs that his "administration sided with neither private power nor with politicians who, in their zeal for pet projects, seemed to prefer federal kilowatts in the mind to nonfederal kilowatts on the line."[2] Promulgating an ultimately desultory policy called "partnership," Ike's only concern was to get more power to energy-hungry consumers and avoid the brownouts which plagued some parts of the nation in the early post-war period. Such successes as he had were the result of his indifference to the ideological purity of the schemes employed.

Private power interests could also often be indifferent to ideology if it served their interests. Portland General Electric, for instance, proudly advertised itself for years as the biggest distributor of BPA power. The company was able to participate so heavily with the agency because its president was one of the few who truly heard what Roosevelt said about New Deal power policy in his presidential campaign: that as a rule the development of utilities should remain a function of private enterprise.

Another difficulty with the author's portrayal of events is that she often mistakes inter- and intra-regional clashes over power projects for pure ideological warfare. Although such struggles were routinely cloaked in partisan rhetoric, they were frequently at their core about fear and jealousy over the ability of one region or locale to corner a resource coveted by another and, of course, the potential profits to be made.

These are more than mere quibbles, but they do not detract from the overall achievement of this book. If the author has failed to prove much about the ideological consistency of Truman's record on electrical power, she has still given a detailed and sophisticated analysis of a critical part of Truman's presidency. This work is therefore recommended to anyone interested in the history of power policy in the twentieth century.

Notes

[1]. Philip Funigiello, *Toward A National Power Policy: The New Deal and the Electric Utility Industry, 1933-1941*, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973), 193-194.

[2]. Dwight Eisenhower, *Mandate For Change: The White House Years* (New York: Signet Books, 1965), 456.

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