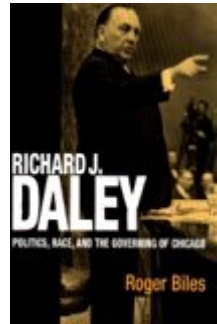


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Roger Biles. *Richard J. Daley: Politics, Race, and the Governing of Chicago.* DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1995. x + 292 pp. \$38.00 (library), ISBN 978-0-87580-199-5; \$18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87580-566-5; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87580-567-2.

Reviewed by David Farber (Barnard College)
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Roger Biles has written a sure-handed, concise biography of Richard J. Daley, mayor of Chicago from 1955 until his death in 1976. Daley is one of only a handful of post-World War II mayors who merit an academic biography of the kind written by Biles. During his twenty-one years as Chicago mayor, Daley ran the most powerful local Democratic Party in the United States. He controlled the politics of his city and county with a well-oiled political machine, exercised significant national political clout, and produced, in a phrase from the times, “the city that works.” Daley’s reign in office is historically significant, too, in that it provides insight into the policies, programs, and behaviors that created rigid racial segregation and discrimination in the North. In addition, Daley’s life and political fortunes reveal the changing political concerns of his two major voting blocs, white ethnics and African Americans. Roger Biles explores all of these subjects in his carefully nuanced and cautious biography of the life and times of “da Mayor,” as many of us in Chicago knew him.

Biles’ biography is not a page turner. Unlike an earlier Daley biography, *Boss* (1971), by the great Chicago newspaperman Mike Royko, which was an over-the-top sledgehammer attack, Biles’ book offers us a dispassionate, on-the-one-hand and on-the-other-hand portrait of the public man. The academic tone is, of course, appropriate, but it also is a partial indicator, I would guess, as to why this book was published by a regional university press.

No real surprises are introduced herein. Through no fault of his own, and in line with those of us who preceded him in trying to write about Daley, Biles was unable to make use of Daley’s personal papers, and he had

little success in persuading Daley’s cronies, political allies, or even his enemies to talk with him. As a result, Biles’ most substantial contribution is in synthesizing the many relevant published sources. Biles, I must emphasize, has done an outstanding job in using those sources to create his fair-minded and calmly critical account of Mayor Daley.

The best sections in the biography relate to Chicago’s postwar racial politics. Building on the outstanding literature on the subject, Biles provides a fine narrative treatment of the multiple public policies and political decisions that produced Chicago’s brand of racial politics during the Daley years. Readers will learn how Daley and his associates used public housing, patronage, and school board officials to keep Chicago segregated while maintaining the support of black voters - who right up until the end were the key to the mayor’s political power. Readers will be able to see the many deliberate steps that Daley and other public officials took to build and maintain Chicago’s black ghettos.

In the book’s penultimate chapter, “The City That Works,” Biles offers judgment on Daley’s other major legacy, his reputation for keeping Chicago fiscally sound while delivering dependable city services. Biles hedges here, recognizing that Daley’s fiscal management seemed to be successful but might also be “a kind of shell game, staying one step ahead of a shortfall by secretly spending money already committed for other uses” (p. 218). Biles also argues that, although Chicago’s public work force, unlike New York City’s, remained strike-free, Chicagoans spent more for their city services than did New Yorkers. Here, I’m not sure if Biles’ dependency on others’ work and his desire to strike a balance where con-

troveries exist always serve him well. For example, on the per capita cost of municipal services in Chicago and New York, a lot of different numbers are floated around by various sources. I find Ester Fuchs' research on this subject (*Mayors and Money: Fiscal Policy in New York and Chicago*, 1992) the most compelling, and she has charts and graphs showing Chicago to have much lower municipal labor costs than New York City. In addition, Biles' balancing anti-Daley critics like the late radical journalist Sidney Lens with academic experts might leave some readers unsure of what they should believe. Despite these concerns, I found this summary chapter to be a very rich treatment of urban fiscal management in the 1960s and 1970s, and urban history anthology editors should give this chapter a close look.

Finally, I do wish Biles had been able to do more with how Daley, his machine workers, and the people of Chicago experienced politics during "da Mayor's" reign. At a time when so many Americans are cynical about the

distant spectacle of government, it is worth reconsidering why Daley's Chicago was a town in which politics was visceral, personal, and important. More on how Daley kept voters involved with his brand of machine politics and more on what Chicagoans felt about Daley and the machine might have allowed readers to understand more about the saliency of public life in Chicago during the Daley Machine years.

Of course, more on that subject would have taken Biles away from the clearly focused work he produced. The definitive portrait of Daley awaits the discovery or release of richer primary source material, but Roger Biles has published the most fair-minded and analytically sophisticated biography of Daley yet written.

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