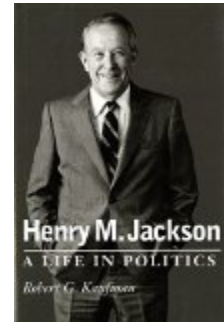


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert G Kaufman. *Henry M Jackson: A Life in Politics*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000. x + 548 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-295-97962-5.

Reviewed by Thomas R. Wellock (Department of History, Central Washington University)  
Published on H-Pol (July, 2001)



## Neoconservative History

### Neoconservative History

Given his death nearly twenty years ago, a comprehensive biography of Henry “Scoop” Jackson has been overdue. Unfortunately, Robert Kaufman’s uneven analysis, *Henry M. Jackson: A Life in Politics*, indicates that it might have been better to wait for more dispassionate times to analyze the legacy of the Democratic Party’s most enthusiastic Cold Warrior. Kaufman, a professor of political science at the University of Vermont, has produced a book that is less a historical analysis of Jackson’s life than a neoconservative claim of responsibility for America’s “victory” in the Cold War. Kaufman’s biography, like much of the “New Cold War History,” suffers from a rush to judgement about who was responsible for the West’s victory over the communist bloc.

Part of the Emil and Kathleen Sick Lecture-Book Series with the University of Washington Press, *Henry M. Jackson* is the first detailed study of one of the Pacific Northwest’s most accomplished senators. Kaufman focuses on two key themes: the transformation of the Democratic Party and American liberalism away from its New Deal roots; and America’s victory in the Cold War. For the Democratic Party, Kaufman argues that Jackson was emblematic of the centrist road not taken. By the 1970s, Jackson was almost alone within his party in advocating a vigorous foreign policy against the Soviets and opposing affirmative action. He served as a “transition figure” for both blue-collar Democrats offended by the New Politics of the McGovernites and the party’s Cold-War neoconservatives who would later align with Ronald

Reagan (p. 6). On the latter theme, Kaufman concludes that Jackson made possible Ronald Reagan’s victory in the Cold War by remaining true to the Truman Doctrine and by refusing to give in to the “utopian idealism” of Adlai Stevenson and the “amoral realpolitik” of the Nixon administration (p. 7).

From the first chapter, Kaufman indulges his own interest in foreign policy and military affairs to the neglect of other aspect of Jackson’s life. The result is a narrow portrait of the Washington senator’s personality and the state he represented. The author dispenses with Jackson’s first 27 years leading up to his entry into politics in just fourteen pages. This neglect of the Everett native’s early life forces Kaufman to fall back repeatedly on Jackson’s Norwegian roots to explain nearly every aspect of his personality. Jackson was particularly proud of his ethnic heritage, but such generalizations do little to explain why it was this Norwegian, in a state filled with them, who rose to political power. Playboy Warren Magnuson, the state’s other powerful senator, was also raised in a Scandinavian family, albeit under very different circumstances. But he could not have been more different than his boy-scout, policy-oriented senatorial colleague. Kaufman’s brief summary of Washington State politics provides little that explains why Jackson, a terminal bore as a public speaker, was so popular with his constituents.

Kaufman is on firmer ground as he explores the influence of the other Washington on Congressman Jackson’s evolution into a committed internationalist and Cold Warrior. Joining the state’s congressional delega-

tion in 1941, Jackson's early inclinations pegged him as an isolationist, despite Nazi control of Norway. Pearl Harbor and America's experience during the war taught Jackson lessons that he never forgot and refused to depart from for the rest of his political career. Those lessons were "the folly of isolationism and appeasement, the importance of democracies remaining militarily strong and standing firm against totalitarianism, and the need for the United States to accept and sustain its pivotal role as a world power" (p. 33). By the late 1940s, Jackson was a staunch ally of Truman's foreign policy and an admirer of Cold War hard-liners in his party such as Paul Nitze. Throughout his career, Jackson continued to view the world through the lens of World War II.

Kaufman lionizes nearly every aspect of Jackson's life, a bias that renders many of the author's assessments of the senator suspect. To be sure, there is much to respect about Jackson. His personal life carried not even the hint of scandal. He became a devoted family man when he married late in life. His humane treatment of his aides allowed him to create an intensely devoted and talented staff. He had no apparent vices. Jackson's aggressive policies against the Soviets did contribute to the Soviet demise. Even among Republicans, he was regarded as a model public servant and among the most effective legislators of the twentieth century. But for Kaufman, even this flattering portrait is not enough. He acknowledges some of Jackson's flaws but feverishly works to put them in the best possible light. For example, Kaufman notes Jackson's enthusiastic support for Japanese internment, but he argues that the Congressman's motives were not guided by racism (like his fellow citizens), but by a "Pearl Buck" romantic attachment to China (pp. 35-36). Kaufman's only evidence for this assessment comes from the Congressman's former staffers, but Jackson himself gave no hint that this was his motive. Never mentioning the Chinese, his public statements read like the racist diatribes of the Native Sons and Daughters of the Gold West. "We first heard much of Japanese infiltration tactics on Bataan and in the Philippines, but the Japanese had for many years practiced a different type of infiltration—infiltration into the vitals of our economic, political, and domestic structure," Jackson warned. He even suggested that it might be best if Japanese-Americans were not returned to their homes after the war where they could "compete economically for jobs and businesses with returning war veterans" (pp. 36-37). Given such comments, it is more likely that Jackson shared rather than transcended his constituents' racial stereotypes of Japanese-Americans.

Kaufman repeats this pattern often, relying on Jackson's records and interviews of close allies and staffers to put the senator's foibles in the best possible light and to make authoritative assessments of events and even Jackson's political enemies. Rarely does Kaufman offer the same gentle treatment to Jackson's opponents, nor does he often consult their records in rendering these judgements. Adlai Stevenson, William Fulbright, and Jimmy Carter appear as caricatures in Kaufman's black-and-white world.

Readers hoping to learn about Jackson's considerable influence on domestic affairs, especially as chair of the Senate Interior Committee will be disappointed by this book. For example, the author appraises Jackson's critical role in passing the National Environmental Policy Act, the most important piece of environmental legislation in history, in just two pages. Kaufman seems more interested in using domestic episodes such as the SST controversy to polish Jackson's image and criticize his opponents than to offer scholarly judgements. The Sierra Club and other environmental organizations fought federal funding for the SST claiming that the plane presented pollution and noise problems. Kaufman notes, "Jackson offered tomes of expert assessments that dismissed these charges as spurious and defended the environmental safety of the program." What Kaufman's account does not tell the reader is that much of what the environmentalists said was true; they had gotten their information from dissident Boeing engineers who knew the project suffered from serious technical problems. The problems were so serious that even Boeing president William Allen had given up on the SST. Worse, Jackson knew all this and fought for the federal funds anyway. Jackson also knew that Boeing would need federal subsidies not just for start-up costs but for each plane Boeing sold. Yet, when Jackson lost the vote on the SST, he publicly blamed "absolutists" in the environmental movement. Given this information, the author's assertion that Jackson would have supported the SST "no matter what company built it or where" rings hollow (pp. 206-207). It is more likely that Jackson's moniker, "the Senator from Boeing," was well earned.[1]

The possibility that Jackson was less than completely honest regarding the SST supports a more critical view of the senator put forward by Lars-Erik Nelson in a review of Kaufman's book. As Nelson documents, Jackson was also probably aware that the famous "missile gap" of the late fifties that he and John F. Kennedy claimed existed with the Soviet Union actually favored the Americans. Why then did he continue to claim that the gap

existed? As Nelson speculates, it is likely that Jackson's sincere mistrust of the Soviets and the military-industrial complexes in his state impelled Jackson to exaggerate the Soviet threat and advocate government spending on unneeded, expensive, but regionally beneficial projects. That Jackson would put his constituency first is hardly surprising. But the image of Jackson as a man who reflected the prejudices, world-view, and needs of his home state is a more mortal one than the paragon of virtue developed by Kaufman.[2]

Despite his biases, Kaufman often excels in detailing Jackson the legislator, campaigner, and foreign policy expert. Kaufman's meticulous use of Jackson's senatorial papers and extensive interviews allows him to provide a superb analysis of the important role that Jackson's staff and advisors played in his success, particularly John Salter, Dorothy Fosdick, Sterling Munro, and Richard Perle. Unlike Magnuson, the consummate insider, Jackson won many of his victories by mastering the details of issues (under the guidance of his aides) far better than his opponents. As Henry Kissinger ruefully admitted, Jackson had "one of the ablest—and most ruthless—staffs that I encountered in Washington" (p. 300). It was a staff that thoroughly prepared the Washington senator for hearings, and as Bill Bradley remembers, "he went out onto the [Senate] floor and crushed his opponents" (p. 342).

Jackson's legislative wizardry, however, worked no magic on the presidential campaign trail in 1976. Kaufman effectively lays out why this presidential front runner self-destructed. Jackson had earned the enmity of the Democratic left for his positions on Vietnam, arms control, and nuclear power, but his real problem stared at him in the mirror every morning. Jackson had none of Jimmy Carter's natural campaign ability and he made little effort to improve. As one television correspondent put it, "as nice a man as Scoop Jackson was, he could put an audience to sleep faster than anybody I have ever seen. He had no public charisma" (p. 309). Kaufman concludes that Jackson suffered from the Bob Dole syndrome: "Both [men] excelled on the Sunday morning news programs where they appeared frequently, but not on the campaign television, where they came across as boring. Both gained their prominence in the Senate, an institution that rewarded skills different from those campaigning required. Confident in their abilities, adamant that old dogs like them could not learn new tricks, both resisted being manipulated.... Both lacked the capacity to mobilize the public through the use of personal or charismatic power" (p. 310). Reelected in Washington State by

huge margins every six years, Jackson never developed the skills of a seasoned campaigner.

The core of this biography centers on Jackson's influence on foreign and military policy in the 1970s. Kaufman is at his best in detailing the decisive influence Jackson played in derailing the foreign policy objectives first of Nixon and Henry Kissinger and then of Jimmy Carter, particularly on arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union. Throughout his career, Jackson never wavered from his belief in the tenets of NSC-68 and a vigorous defense of the Cold War. As a result, he rejected Nixon's détente as too pessimistic about American power, and he viewed Carter's optimism about Soviet intentions as naive. He discouraged negotiation with the Soviets in favor of military and, at times, economic pressure. Jackson succeeded in modifying the SALT I treaty, killing SALT II, and passing the Jackson-Vanik Amendment to encourage Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union. Kaufman argues that Jackson maintained a sunny optimism that the United States could win the Cold War, if only his fellow Americans would remain vigilant.

It is evident, however, that rather than optimism, a "Red-Dawn" paranoia consumed Jackson. He never stopped believing in the domino theory and the lessons of Munich. He had little faith that non-Western nations could be reliable allies without U.S. intervention. "If we lose Vietnam," Jackson warned, "we may well lose Laos, Cambodia, and eventually all of Southeast Asia to Communist domination" (p. 158). Such comments were, of course, typical in the 1960s, but well into the 1970s and 1980s, Jackson saw the Soviet threat and dominoes everywhere. Misreading the Iranian Revolution, Jackson thought the country could fall into the Russian orbit and warned, "In the absence of a countervailing force, the Soviets would step up the process of encircling and intimidating America's allies in the region: Pakistan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia" (p. 373). Of the Palestinians, he predicted, "Immediately after they get independence [from Israel], they could turn around and enter into an alliance with the Russians and [then] the state of Israel comes to an end" (p. 377). Alarmed at the "strategic implications" of the Sandinista Revolution, Jackson speculated, "Think of what the destabilization of the whole Central American isthmus, including Mexico, would do to weaken America's position in the world. Confronting hostile neighbors and the prospect of flooding refugees, any U.S. government would be faced with demands to bring our troops home from Europe and to reduce our commitments in the Pacific.... The military shield is bound to crumble" (p. 426). Jackson, unlike the Reagan admin-

istration, understood the social and economic causes of strife in Central America, but he remained wedded to the belief that all such unrest usually played into the hands of the Soviets. At times, Jackson remarked on the inherent weaknesses of the Soviet system, but most of the time he saw a powerful, grasping, expansionistic enemy poised for conquest. Thus it is more likely that Jackson was an aggressive Cold Warrior out of fear of Soviet success than confidence in an American victory.

Kaufman defends the domino theory, noting that historically dominos did fall in the 1930s in the face of Nazi aggression and in reverse with the fall of the Berlin wall (p. 159). But both of these examples demonstrate the fallacy of the theory. The Nazis and Soviets were regional powers that could only exert economic and military control over neighboring states. In both instances, cultural differences were not nearly as extreme as they were when the Soviets sought allies beyond their borders in Asia, Africa and the Americas, or when the USSR tried to control countries with very different social systems such as Afghanistan. Never understanding this, Jackson repeatedly justified more military spending by conjuring up demon alliances between the Soviets and nations with which they had little in common.

No one doubted the towering influence that Jackson had on foreign policy in the 1970s, but Kaufman makes claims that go well beyond the evidence. The containment policies supported by Jackson obviously played a huge role in the Soviet's collapse, but in Kaufman's world, it seems to be the only factor that mattered. Kaufman argues, "Jackson's and Reagan's strategy of consciously exploiting Soviet vulnerabilities through relentless across-the-board pressure helped convince reluctant Soviet leaders that the USSR could no longer outbuild or bully the United States as it had during the 1970s" (p. 439). He appreciatively notes a comment by Howard Baker: "Jackson made sure we did not lose the Cold War during the 1970s so that Ronald Reagan could win it in the 1980s" (p. 438).

To accept the fantastic notion that one senator saved America, it is necessary to accept Kaufman's premise that the Soviets stood on the verge of Cold-War victory in the 1970s, and only Reagan's military expansion, urged on by Jackson, saved the free world. It is necessary to view power largely in military terms, as Jackson tended to do. America's allies must be discounted as a factor in the correlation of forces between the East and West. Non-Western nations must be incapable of maintaining a non-aligned status on their own. One must also be pes-

simistic about the appeal of American democracy abroad and believe that dominoes do fall. Accept these ideas and it is possible to believe that Jackson's careful counting of American MIRVs, warhead throw-weight, and bombers versus the Russians arsenal was the catalyst to Cold War victory.

Kaufman's politically conservative analysis goes well beyond the popular reformulation of the Cold War by John Lewis Gaddis in his ground breaking work *We Now Know*, and much of Gaddis' subtlety is lost in the process. Whereas Gaddis argued that power in the Cold War was multidimensional, Kaufman (like Jackson) places an inordinate, but not exclusive, emphasis on military power.[3] As Gaddis notes, by the 1960s the Soviet system was doomed for a variety of political, economic, moral, and cultural reasons. Only an obsession with the balance of nuclear weapons prevented the world from seeing that the Soviets, like a sick Triceratops, looked formidable on the outside but was ready to topple over. Given the Soviet's weaknesses, Gaddis asks, "Why was so much time spent worrying about intricate numerical balances in categories of weapons no one could use?"[4] That is a question that needs to be asked of Jackson. Many understood that nuclear weapons counted for little in diplomacy, but he continued to believe that the Soviets might use perceived advantages in nuclear weapons to "blackmail" the West.[5] In arguing against appeasement, Kaufman concludes that détente only brought on a massive Soviet military build up and a relentlessly expansionistic policy. But Kaufman, as did Jackson, exaggerates the Soviet threat and fails to acknowledge that Politburo members were much more reactive to American moves than previously thought. The Soviet build up came much earlier than the Nixon administration in response to American military superiority under the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations, a situation that Jackson himself helped create. Moreover, Soviet military spending did not change between 1976 (it actually declined in the last few years of the Brezhnev regime) and 1984. With the exception of Afghanistan, the Soviets were less expansionistic in the late 1970s and 1980s because its leaders recognized it was overextended.[6]

Kaufman expresses a confidence that the final assessment on the Cold War is in and Reagan and the neo-conservatives were correct. But even Gaddis admits that we still do not know whether such policies were pursued out of "ignorance or craft." As Melvin Leffler noted in a critique of Gaddis that aptly applies to Kaufman, "Master narratives will soon be outdated if they are too influenced by contemporary fashions. Gaddis' *We Now Know* res-

onates with the triumphalism that runs through our contemporary culture.”[7] Kaufman’s triumphalism will no doubt please the neoconservatives in the current debate over the meaning of the Cold War, but those interested in a more definitive and historically-minded assessment of Jackson’s legacy must await another biographer.

Notes:

[1]. Erik M. Conway, “Insider Expertise: Sierra Club ‘Spies’ and the Boeing SST,” at the American Society for Environmental History’s Annual Convention (Durham, North Carolina, March 2001); and Shelby Scates, *Warren G. Magnuson and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 278-81.

[2]. Lars-Erik Nelson, “Military-Industrial Man,” *New York Review of Books*, 21 December 2000, 6.

[3]. A notable exception was Jackson’s opposition to

U.S. grain sales to the Soviets in 1973. He argued that the Soviet economic system was in trouble and grain sales at discounted prices allowed them to spend money on military armaments (p. 250). Jackson also favored attacks on the Soviet’s human rights record as was evident in the fight over the Jackson-Vanik amendment.

[4]. John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1997), 292.

[5]. “‘Scoop’ Jackson’s Dim View of Détente,” *The National Observer*, 10 November 1973, 3, and Kaufman, 385.

[6]. Raymond L. Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1994), 54, 78, 189.

[7]. Melvyn P. Leffler, “The Cold War: What Do ‘We Now Know’?” *American Historical Review* 104 (April 1999): 523.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pol>

**Citation:** Thomas R. Wellock. Review of Kaufman, Robert G, *Henry M Jackson: A Life in Politics*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. July, 2001.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5307>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).