

Wright Patman: Populism, Liberalism, & the American Dream. *By Nancy Beck Young.* Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 2000. xix + 428 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations, photographs. Cloth, \$34.95. ISBN 0-870-74453-4.

Reviewed by Robert H. Ferrell

Impeccably researched, marvelously detailed, well written, this biography of a prominent Texas congressman of recent times displays the critical role played by this crusader and educator. Democrat Wright Patman touched countless economic issues. He did not always convince people to adopt his solutions, and one might contend that he usually lost his legislative battles. An autocrat in control of the Banking Committee, he antagonized even the committee members of his own party and virtually invited them to vote with the Republicans. He gained a reputation as a maverick, which did not assist the measures he sponsored. He exaggerated in his descriptions, thereby attracting the attention he desired but also gaining him a reputation as an extremist. Moreover, his championing of issues connected with the Federal Reserve, most of which were incomprehensible to his fellow congressmen and sometimes went over his own head, alienated him from fellow members of the House of Representatives, who often turned to subjects more within their experience, leaving Patman to direct his long speeches to an empty room.

But he had a public audience that he knew how to cultivate and thus required attention if only for that reason. As chairman of Banking, he commanded notice, even when he was infuriating the chairmen of the Federal Reserve Board.

Perhaps Patman's most notorious fight was with Fed chairman William McChesney Martin, whom he sought to pry out of office on innumerable occasions. It was said that the carpet in Patman's Banking Committee office was red because the color disguised the blood spilt in his fights with Martin.

Patman was a monomaniac on the topics he chose to pursue, keeping on their trail long after futility became evident. Born in 1893, graduating from high school in 1912 in Holly Springs, a little Texas town of 1,700 people, Patman was elected to Congress in 1928, where he remained until his death in 1976. Nancy Young rightly begins her book by describing the town and the congressman's constituents, whose numbers grew as additional counties were added to the First Congressional District. Patman's voters, among the poorest in Texas, gradually left for richer pastures. Among his leading principles was the belief that economic power should be wrested from the East and returned to the people who did the work of the nation in the South and the West. It is easily possible, the author of this fine book shows, to tie every one of Patman's crusades to the poverty of the First District: the Soldiers' bonus issue, the Robinson-Patman Act

of 1934, the fight against the chain stores, the Employment Act of 1946, housing legislation after World War II, the need for low interest rates (which brought the need for legislative control over the Federal Reserve system and its independent, banker-dominated chairmen).

The author is especially convincing in her explanations of how the ins and outs of Congress, the working of seniority and the committee system, and the various ways chosen by House leaders to impress their personalities on their surroundings affected Patman's operations. His successes, such as they were, often stemmed from his shrewdness in manipulating the system in which he worked. His cleverness in attracting public attention rapidly propelled him into a position of power. He was willing to accept some political realities, as when he told a perhaps too-well-educated staffer, "Professor, if you are from the first district of Texas . . . you are for oil depletion or you are dead politically. But for the life of me I don't know how politicians from non-oil states let the oil companies get away with it." He described wealthy opponents from outside his district in homespun ways: "Down in Houston there are some neighborhoods so rich that every flea has its own dog." And yet he had his blind spots, and eventually they combined to remove him, at the end of his life, from the chairmanship of his cherished Banking Committee, the position in Congress that allowed him to become an "outsiders' insider." One critic pointed out, with as much drollery as Patman had summoned to expound on other subjects, that the congressman was fighting against the times, that the chain stores (notably the Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company) were all right: "As far as we are concerned . . . we'll take the grocery chain, the five-and-ten stores, the assembly-line automobiles and the store-bought clothes in preference to the one-horse, two-holer economy for which Patman seems to yearn." Others noted that the congressman turned a blind eye to the racial discrimination within Texarkana and its environs.

He ran his committee like a fiefdom, calling meetings on a whim, consulting committee members about a program he wished to present only when it seemed tactically expedient to do so but just as often presenting bills in their name that committee members had not seen. Gradually he fell behind the times, lost his chairmanship, and died, not embittered (which was not his way) but sadly disappointed, within months of his departure.

This book is one of many sponsored by a recently retired professor of history at the University of Texas, Lewis L. Gould, whose students have illuminated not merely the history of economics and politics in his state but also the workings of government in Washington.

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