

Robert Ball and the Politics of Social Security. *By Edward D. Berkowitz.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003. xvii + 455 pp. Index, notes, photographs. Cloth, \$45.00. ISBN: 0-299-18950-3.

Reviewed by David Stebenne

Edward Berkowitz, a history professor at George Washington University and the director of its Program in History and Public Policy, has written a biography of a leading figure in the history of Social Security named Robert Ball. Berkowitz brings first-rate credentials to this project. He has written extensively on Social Security's history, including an earlier biography of Wilbur Cohen, who served first as Social Security commissioner and then in top jobs in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Berkowitz's two biographies overlap chronologically, but the focus in his accounts of the two men differs somewhat, as their professional lives eventually diverged. Whereas Cohen became a public figure and high-level political appointee, Ball was a career civil servant who remained largely unknown outside Washington's political community.

Berkowitz's study is strengthened by the excellent source material available to him. Robert Ball granted Berkowitz exclusive access to his private papers and dictated a three-hundred-page autobiography for Berkowitz's benefit. Ball also spoke to Berkowitz several times, helping to clear up possible misconceptions. While not an authorized biography in the sense that Ball had control over what Berkowitz wrote, it is the result of a cooperative effort between scholar and subject.

Berkowitz's study is, of course, much more than the tale of one man's life. Through Ball, Berkowitz explores the evolution of Social Security from the late 1930s, when Ball joined the agency, through the early 1980s, when Ball made his last important contribution to Social Security's operation. While Berkowitz clearly sees Ball as the kind of extraordinary individual who made a programmatic and historical difference, even this sympathetic biographer concedes that his subject was not an original thinker. Ball was a disciple of industrial-relations expert J. Douglas Brown, who promoted Social Security as

a social-insurance program that maintained recipients' dignity by giving them benefits that grew out of earned rights.

Ball's temperament, as Berkowitz makes clear, was ideally suited to a career as a bureaucrat. A Methodist minister's son and Wesleyan College graduate, Ball first became interested in social insurance as a young man during the Great Depression. After a brief stint as a journalist with a labor paper in East Orange, New Jersey, this self-styled New Deal Democrat joined the Social Security bureaucracy as a field assistant on January 1, 1939. Like many who served during the agency's early years, Ball fervently believed in the contributory-benefits aspect of social security, and he worked hard to expand its reach and generosity. At the same time, however, his sense of professionalism and capacity for self-restraint won him respect from many conservative rivals. Ball was, above all else, an organization man and a consensus builder, qualities that enabled him to rise to the top of the Social Security Administration (SSA).

As a senior SSA official, Ball's most important accomplishments were helping to develop broad-based support for expanding the old-age pension part of the program during the early 1950s, raising benefit payments and fostering the creation of new programs, most notably a disability insurance system, begun in 1956, and public health insurance for the elderly (Medicare) in 1965.

The most original and interesting section describes the period from the late 1940s through the mid-1950s, when the Social Security system turned decisively away from a public-assistance orientation and moved toward a contributory social insurance arrangement. Until that time, old-age pensions had been a relatively unimportant and politically insecure aspect of Social Security. Ball served as the staff director for a Social Security advisory council that met in 1947 and 1948 to consider the program's present condition and future prospects. Composed of influential representatives from management, labor, and the public, this group discussed the various proposals for Social Security reform then being debated in Congress. Eager to see its members endorse higher Social Security benefits and universal coverage, Ball worked to keep the panel's members focused on the issues, steering them away from more divisive philosophical topics. Critical to achieving this result was the decision to refrain from trying to write one comprehensive report. Instead, the panel issued separate reports on each of the

disputed major issues and then published these reports as a single bound volume early in 1949. By steering the group in this direction, Ball got what he (and many others) wanted from it. The advisory council's endorsement of a nearly universal system of old-age pensions pegged at higher levels helped pave the way for those reforms, which were enacted between 1950 and 1954. Precisely because of the group's nonpartisan composition, its recommendations persuaded Congress and the White House, first when both were under Democratic control from 1949 to 1953 and later when the Republicans took charge from 1953 to 1954.

Berkowitz's recounting of Social Security's history as seen from Ball's perspective does have a few weaknesses. He tends to give Ball too much credit at times for shaping Social Security. Similarly, Berkowitz's emphasis on the positive consequences of Social Security's expansion contributes to a somewhat skewed view of the program's history. What is missing is a clear, comprehensive picture of the underlying economic changes at work in postwar America that made the expansion of Social Security during the 1960s and early 1970s so problematic thereafter. Many business executives and academic economists tended to perceive the danger signals earlier and to grasp their significance more fully than welfare-state bureaucrats like Ball, but their perspectives are not fully treated in Berkowitz's book. Despite those drawbacks, *Robert Ball and the Politics of Social Security* is a fine biography that makes an important contribution to the history of that program and, more broadly, to the history of the American civil service.

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