

John Kenneth Galbraith: His Life, His Politics, His Economics. By *Richard Parker*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005. x + 820 pp. Photographs, index, notes. Cloth, \$35.00. ISBN: 0-374-28168-8.

Reviewed by Warren J. Samuels

John Kenneth Galbraith provokes reactions ranging from gratitude to repugnance among economists, the business community, and politicians. This heavily researched and wide-ranging biography is both critical of, and sympathetic to, its subject's ideas and priorities. Richard Parker refers to Galbraith as "the world's most famous living economist" (p. 4) and "one of the nation's ten leading intellectuals" (p. 588). President Clinton awarded him the Medal of Freedom (p. 648). In contrast, Parker quotes Paul Samuelson's (one of the twentieth century's most eminent economists) description of Galbraith as "America's foremost economist for non-economists" (p. 6) and notes his subject's inclusion on Nixon's "enemies list" (pp. 491–93).

Parker's biography focuses on three aspects of Galbraith's story: his personal life, his politics, and his economics. A tall man (he is six feet, eight inches on page 3, and six feet, seven inches on page 648), he had a remarkable career, which began on a Canadian farm, where he grew up, and ended after many years of university teaching, writing, and distinguished public service. Upon Galbraith's retirement in 1975, Henry Rosovsky, long-term Harvard professor of economics and dean of Arts and Sciences, called him "the most famous professor at Harvard" (p. 518). During the course of his life, he headed the Office of Price Administration and conducted the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey during World War II and later represented the United States as ambassador to India. He was helped along the way by mentors such as John D. Black, Lauchlin Currie, and Leon Henderson, economists active in the Federal government during the Depression and the Second World War.

This biography reveals the extent of Galbraith's activism in Democratic Party politics, beginning shortly before World War II and continuing since his

retirement from Harvard. He served in the highest levels of the Kennedy administration. He promoted his versions of the New Deal and Keynesian economics. He supported policies that would expand the opportunities of the middle class, the poor, and Americans who were unable to work. A number of the programs he supported were established and maintained through deficit spending. He eventually opposed Lyndon Johnson and the Vietnam War, abandoning the position on U.S. intervention in Indochina that he had helped to frame in 1962 at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Over the years, he helped to nominate Democratic presidential candidates. In sum, he is the model of a twentieth-century liberal.

As an economist, Galbraith became widely known for his trenchant opposition to mainstream neoclassical economics, which he felt had little application to the real world, viewing it as largely formulated to serve the interests of the upper classes. He opposes theorizing that fails to specify institutions and that seeks unique determinate results. Instead, Galbraith was concerned with power. He supported government activism, pointing out that government is one among many systems of social control and valuation; that economic and political power are interdependent; and that government is subject to control and use, especially by business and the very rich. His most influential books, *American Capitalism* (1952), *The Affluent Society* (1958), *The New Industrial State* (1967), and *Economics and the Public Purpose* (1973), together with *The Anatomy of Power* (1983) and *The Culture of Contentment* (1992), explored the interactions between power, belief, and psychology. Galbraith promulgated the notions of countervailing power and unequal treatment of private and social goods, the corporate system, the technostucture, and the revised sequence (in which producers influence consumers to buy their goods). As a backdrop to his philosophy, Parker provides a rich account of the political and economic history of the last seventy-plus years that is highly informative, albeit at times a bit technical.

Galbraith's efforts have encountered two major problems. First, although modern liberalism, through the New Deal and other programs, has helped people to advance in life, once landed in the middle class they too often turned conservative. Second, conservative and Republican strategies have evolved from outright but

ineffective opposition to regulation and social programs into successful attacks on regulation as anticompetitive and against Social Security. The attack on Social Security has been conducted through claims that serious problems require the program's transformation, but the goal is to eventually shut it down. Other inroads against the liberal state have been achieved by squeezing welfare programs, causing a drop in the number of enrollees, and by running up huge deficits in order to forestall the creation of new social programs. People believed that Galbraith was no enemy of the corporate system; he accepted the corporate system and its managerialism, in part because they generated technology and production, and only wanted to tame the system.

Because Galbraith was ambitious (a theme of Parker's) and "demonstrated a willingness to choose the harder path, to risk his career, in order to maintain the independence of his own critical judgment . . . [and because he] also refused to be marginalized," (p. 658), he succeeded in bequeathing a modern statement of the political economy of capitalism that rivals any made by Max Weber, Thorstein Veblen, or John R. Commons. Thus Galbraith's career can be considered an intellectual, if not a political, success—and he enjoyed almost every moment of it.

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