

# Insurgent Democracy: The Nonpartisan League in North American Politics

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porary magazines and newspapers may have featured lofty language, but the harsh battles over the highway's route indicate that economic gain also played a role in the creation and routing of the Jefferson Highway. Henry rightly concludes that further research into the Jefferson Highway is needed to trace the efforts to mark and construct the route within the other states through which it passed. Such research should build on the solid foundation laid by Henry and someday lead to a comprehensive history of the Jefferson Highway.

*Insurgent Democracy: The Nonpartisan League in North American Politics*, by Michael J. Lansing. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. xii, 353 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. \$45.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Michael F. Magliari is professor of history at California State University, Chico. His work on rural radicalism includes "Populist Historiography Post Hicks: Current Needs and Future Directions," *Agricultural History* (2008); and "The Populist Vision: Modern or Traditional?" *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* (2009).

The meteoric rise of the North Dakota Nonpartisan League (NPL) is one of the most astounding episodes in the annals of American radicalism. Within two years of its sudden appearance in 1915, the angry wheat farmers who flocked to the NPL seized command of North Dakota's Republican Party and captured control of the state government in Bismarck. Over the next six years, from 1916 to 1921, three-term Governor Lynn J. Frazier and his supporting cast of NPL legislators implemented nearly every plank in their visionary platform, a document that combined the most appealing reforms previously championed by North Dakota's Populist and Socialist parties.

As an economic satellite of Minneapolis and St. Paul, North Dakota had always been subordinate to powerful corporate interests based in Minnesota's Twin Cities. Along with the Northern Pacific, the Great Northern, and two other domineering railroads, Twin Cities banks, flour mills, and grain elevators monopolized the marketing of all wheat grown in the region. Statehood in 1889 had done nothing to change that; neither had the struggles of farmer-owned cooperatives sponsored by the Grange, the Farmers' Alliance, the Farmers' Union, and the American Society of Equity. All fell short, as did the efforts of those who opted for radical third-party politics in the Populist and Socialist movements.

The NPL emerged out of those earlier agrarian crusades. Aiming to liberate North Dakota's wheat growers from the stranglehold of corporate monopolies, the NPL called for the establishment of state-owned banks, flour mills, and grain elevators. It also demanded a state-run sys-

tem of grain grading, publicly funded hail insurance, and tax exemption for farm improvements. All this, and much more, was signed into law by Governor Frazier following the epic legislative sessions of 1917 and 1919.

The amazing spectacle of an ostensibly Republican administration implementing a Populist-Socialist program resulted from the NPL's defining strategy. In 1907 North Dakota adopted the direct primary system, which enabled voters to nominate the candidates that their respective parties fielded for public office. For frustrated Socialists and former Populists who had concluded that third parties were hopeless causes in America's formidable two-party system, direct primaries created opportunities for radical outsiders to move indoors. Nominally "nonpartisan," the North Dakota NPL effectively constituted a new third party that mobilized like-minded Republicans, Democrats, and Socialists to vote as a bloc in the state's GOP primaries. The stunning results triggered a rapid expansion of the NPL among farmers throughout the American West and the Canadian Great Plains.

The dramatic story of the Nonpartisan League has been well told by numerous historians, including Theodore Saloutos, Elwyn Robinson, Edward Blackorby, Larry Remele, and, most notably, Robert Morlan, whose *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915-1922* (1955) remains a classic. Their accounts, however, focus almost exclusively on North Dakota. While understandable given North Dakota's centrality in the NPL saga, there has long been a need for a book-length examination of the NPL as a national, or even international, movement. After all, as Michael Lansing points out in his new work, the NPL at its peak claimed nearly 250,000 members in 13 states plus the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan. Between 1917 and 1923, the NPL maintained a national headquarters in St. Paul from which it launched vigorous recruiting drives that tested the appeal and adaptability of the NPL beyond its home turf. However, despite winning some impressive victories in state legislative races, particularly in Minnesota, Montana, and Idaho, nowhere did the NPL come close to matching its achievements in North Dakota.

The reasons remain unclear. Regrettably, Lansing never delivers on his promise to provide a "North American" coverage of the NPL. His concentration remains squarely centered on North Dakota, and he offers only scattered, uneven, and cursory glimpses of NPL activities in other states and provinces. For no single locale does he conduct the complete and systematic analysis of existing economic and political conditions required for a persuasive explanation of NPL performance.

The shortcomings of his book are well illustrated by his skimpy treatment of Iowa, where the NPL failed to take hold, despite winning

the support of James Pierce, the influential editor of the *Iowa Homestead*, and enrolling 15,000 members in 1918. Why the NPL subsequently faltered in a state that would soon send Smith Brookhart to the U.S. Senate remains a mystery that Lansing cannot convincingly explain in the scant two pages he devotes to the Hawkeye State. In the end, Lansing has disappointingly little new to say about his fascinating topic, either in Iowa or anywhere else in North America.

*The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics*, by Jefferson Cowie. *Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. viii, 273 pp. Illustrations, graph, notes, index. \$27.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Roger Biles is professor of history emeritus at Illinois State University. His books include *The Fate of Cities: Urban America and the Federal Government, 1956–2000* (2011).

Nearly three-quarters of a century after Franklin D. Roosevelt's death historians are still struggling to make sense of the New Deal. Was FDR's reform program more success than failure? Did it possess any coherence at all or was it just a hodgepodge of programs slapped together hurriedly to confront a frightening economic collapse? Did its implementation signal a decisive break with the political economy that had prevailed in the United States since its founding in the eighteenth century? Was it simply a form of corporate liberalism, as New Left revisionists insisted, that substituted modest changes to forestall radical alterations at a time when a thoroughgoing transformation seemed possible? Or, somewhere in between, was it a "halfway revolution" that established a new liberal consensus suitable for an essentially cautious population seeking a modicum of change to preserve an essentially healthy economy temporarily thrown off its game? In *The Great Exception*, Jefferson Cowie presents another possibility and offers a fresh, original look at a perennial historical conundrum.

The Andrew J. Nathanson Professor at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations and the author of several books on twentieth-century U.S. history, Cowie uses a wide lens to examine the meaning of the New Deal. He shows how government policies of the 1930s charted a new course and how those departures differed significantly from what followed after the 1970s. Reflecting the book's title, he posits that the reforms crafted during the Roosevelt administration constituted a singular exception to the manner in which government operated before and after the crises of the Great Depression and World War II. The remarkable expansion of the federal government's role in