

Proxmire: Bulldog of the Senate

Robert David Johnson
Brooklyn College

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2019 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Johnson, Robert David. "Proxmire: Bulldog of the Senate." *The Annals of Iowa* 78 (2019), 421-422.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/annals-of-iowa/vol78/iss4/22>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

She was not at all brainwashed by what Betty Friedan called “the feminine mystique,” which was the puzzle her granddaughter set out to decipher by writing this excellent book.

Proxmire: Bulldog of the Senate, by Jonathan Kasperek. Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2019. 378 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$28.95 hardcover.

Reviewer Robert David Johnson is professor of history at Brooklyn College. His books include “*All the Way with LBJ*”: *The 1964 Presidential Election* (2009) and *The Peace Progressives and American Foreign Relations* (1995).

In the post-civil rights era Senate, Wisconsin’s Gaylord Nelson and then Herb Kohl and Russ Feingold joined such Iowa senators as Dick Clark, John Culver, and Tom Harkin in championing an expanded welfare state and a foreign policy that promoted human rights. They also focused on otherwise ignored social, environmental, and good-government issues.

In Iowa, Harold Hughes previewed the liberalism exhibited by the state’s subsequent Democratic trio of senators. The pioneer of Wisconsin’s postwar Democratic resurgence, however, sports a different legacy. By his career’s conclusion, William Proxmire was best known for his skepticism about government spending—whether on domestic programs or the military. His ideological tradition, all but extinguished in the modern Democratic Party, makes it seem inconceivable that Proxmire could even be nominated today.

Jonathan Kasperek’s fine study is the first comprehensive biography of the Wisconsin senator. Although mostly based on published sources, especially material from the Wisconsin media, the book reconstructs Proxmire’s fascinating career as a senator whose ethical approach to politics ensured that he “made a difference” (7).

Political observers might remember Proxmire for eschewing modern campaigning; in his final re-election bids (1976 and 1982), he had no staff, fundraising apparatus, or campaign ads. Yet the Proxmire of *Bulldog of the Senate* was an indefatigable campaigner who helped create the modern Wisconsin Democratic Party. Although he grew up in a Republican household, he admired FDR and drifted to the left while in graduate school after World War II. Proxmire had scant interest in the academy, however. He applied for jobs in journalism, hoping to use his time as a reporter as a springboard to a political career. Wisconsin provided an appealing opportunity. An opening existed for the moribund Democratic Party, given that the traditional ideological contest within the Republican Party had been extinguished when Joe McCarthy ousted Robert La Follette Jr. in the 1946 primary. Proxmire “quickly made a

name for himself as a liberal journalist," and by the early 1950s embarked on a political career (28). He thrice received the Democratic gubernatorial nomination—losing badly in 1952 but capturing 48 percent in both 1954 and 1956 (the best showing for a Democrat since 1932). When McCarthy's death triggered a special Senate election, Proxmire ran and easily won. He had only one tough race—in 1964, when LBJ's coattails probably saved him—for the remainder of his career.

In his early Senate career, Proxmire was an outspoken liberal Democrat who distinguished himself supporting civil rights. He criticized Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson as insufficiently aggressive on civil rights and faulted Minority Leader Everett Dirksen's efforts to get around the Supreme Court's one-person/one-vote decisions. Although he initially supported the Vietnam War, this "senator of substance" (189) soon used his chairmanship of the Joint Economic Committee to challenge Pentagon spending.

As the 1970s progressed, however, Proxmire's budget concerns led him to challenge first the foreign aid program and then wasteful domestic spending, often putting him "at odds with his own party" (247). That effort, Kasperek contends, helped to establish Proxmire's legacy, culminating in his famous Golden Fleece awards and his principled willingness to confront pork-barrel projects promoted by either party.

This is an admiring biography. Kasperek acknowledges but downplays the contradiction between Proxmire's budget priorities and his championing of federal dairy supports. The book might have engaged more extensively with the question of what makes an effective senator—a case could be made, for instance, that Gaylord Nelson was the more effective of the longtime Wisconsin duo. But these are quibbles about what will likely remain the definitive study of Proxmire's life and career.

When Republicans Were Progressive, by Dave Durenberger, with Lori Sturdevant. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2018. xx, 279 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$19.95 paperback.

Reviewer Gregory L. Schneider is professor of history at Emporia State University. He has written four books on the history of conservatism.

Where have all the progressive (moderate) Republicans gone? It is a question former U.S. Senator Dave Durenberger attempts to address in his memoir/history of the Minnesota Independent Republican Party from its development in the 1930s to the end of Durenberger's tenure as a senator in 1994. He has produced a very good analysis of Minnesota politics in this era but one that lacks the historical analysis to explain why progressivism is dead within the GOP.