

4-1-2006

Rethinking the Red Scare: The Lusk Committee and New York's Crusade Against Radicalism, 1919-1923, by Todd J. Pfannestiel

David W. McFadden

Fairfield University, dmcfadden@fairfield.edu

Peer Reviewed

Repository Citation

McFadden, David W., "Rethinking the Red Scare: The Lusk Committee and New York's Crusade Against Radicalism, 1919-1923, by Todd J. Pfannestiel" (2006). *History Faculty Publications*. Paper 9.
<http://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/history-facultypubs/9>

Published Citation

McFadden, David. "Rethinking the Red Scare: The Lusk Committee and New York's Crusade Against Radicalism, 1919-1923, by Todd J. Pfannestiel." *American Historical Review* 111.2 (Apr 2006): 500-501.

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the History Department at DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@fairfield.edu.

litical entrepreneurs who exploited the space created by interest-group conflict and the balance of economic forces" (p. 9).

The key in all of this is the role of Congress. It was where the new regulatory agencies came into existence and where their form and functions took on character. Harrison utilizes a case study approach in analyzing key legislative measures and relies heavily on roll call analysis-Guttman scaling, calculations of the value of Yules' Q, cluster analysis, and group averaging to gather the characteristics that will define political progressivism. What he finds is a fairly cohesive political grouping led by Republican insurgents from the Midwest and Democrats from the South that began to demonstrate a preference for modern, rational, bureaucratic procedures of decision making over the "vagaries of legislative 'log-rolling,' which was all too susceptible to constituency and partisan pressures" (p. 5). These progressives supported stricter control of railroad rates and practices, a pure food and drug law, federal meat inspection, reform of the banking and currency system, and stronger antitrust laws. The author notes, however, that their intention was not to replace the corporate system but to moderate its influence over government and to check the perceived abuses arising from unregulated corporate power. As spokesmen for their sections, they especially wanted to redress perceived regional imbalances in the economic system.

Harrison's progressives also tended to draw on traditional elements of republican ideology to portray an enduring conflict between the "people" and the "interests." They often described themselves as vigilant protectors of the public interest in opposition to a variety of special interests who looked to exploit government for their own advantage. Their actions were, in part, motivated by public opinion—an awareness of a rising consumer consciousness and a sense that the public was becoming morally outraged as muckraking journalists alerted them to problems. But the concept of the public interest also served as "a rhetorical device for handling social conflicts, and for negotiating the tensions between the democratic principle and the elitist implications of administrative decision-making" (p. 258).

Although the author identifies a distinct progressive movement in Congress, he notes that it did not always embrace everything we have come to accept as "progressive." Issues such as conservation policy, child welfare, and trade union rights continued to show divisions rooted in regionalism, localism, a commitment to state's rights, and a willingness to defer difficult economic decisions to the courts. Harrison also notes that one of the inconsistencies of progressive state-builders is that many of those who contributed to the creation of the regulatory state never totally abandoned a distrust of bureaucracy and reservations about the creation of powerful, autonomous regulatory agencies. As a result, they often allowed reform legislation to be weakened and compromised. The greatest irony in the entire process, however, was that in rebelling against the dictates of party discipline, the progressives dam-

aged the primary source of leadership and direction in congressional policy making. In doing so, they undermined the system of party government without completely displacing it. The result was a hybrid structure in which new forms struggled to coexist with the old system of "courts and parties."

This book complements recent works by historically minded political scientists interested in electoral realignment, congressional "modernization," and regulatory politics. The uninitiated reader will have to trust the methodology and the author's choice of data sets. That caveat aside, the study makes a significant contribution to early twentieth-century American political history and to a sharper definition of political progressivism.

STEVEN L. PIOTT
Clarion University

TODD J. PFANNESTIEL. *Rethinking the Red Scare: The Lusk Committee and New York's Crusade against Radicalism, 1919–1923*. (Studies in American Popular History and Culture.) New York: Routledge. 2003. Pp. xiii, 229. \$79.95.

Todd J. Pfannestiel's book is a well-researched, clearly written contribution both to the increasing literature examining the first American "red scare" and to the debates over civil liberties and academic freedom that emerged in the United States in the context of World War I. While the book concentrates on the State of New York's response to the establishment of the Soviet Russia Bureau (under Ludwig Martens) in New York City and the overall crusade against pro-Soviet radicals in the entire state, the special contribution of Pfannestiel's work lies in its examination of Clayton Lusk's campaign against both the Rand School of Social Science and public education in New York State as a whole. While it adds little new to our understanding of the operations of the Martens Bureau or the campaign against it, we learn much about the struggle for academic freedom in New York's schools in the early 1920s.

Pfannestiel argues that while the operations of the Martens Bureau were part of the broader struggle between the Soviet and American governments, the Lusk Committee soon set its sights on education, and that "The Red Scare's most lasting legacy [was] the harm it did to the hundreds of teachers who were named, investigated, and subsequently tainted under the short-lived Lusk Laws" (p. 133). Unfortunately, while Pfannestiel details the creation and attempted implementation of those laws, and their ultimate demise, he does not fully explore their impact or the ways in which they chilled the climate for full and free exploration of political and social issues in New York's public schools from 1919 to 1923.

Pfannestiel places his examination squarely in the context of the emerging "red scare," first exploring its underlying causes and then proceeding to a discussion of the formation of the Lusk Committee and the operations of the Soviet Bureau and the reactions of the

Lusk Committee to it. Here, his treatment is unremarkable, distinguished only by a perhaps more thorough discussion of the origins of the Lusk Committee, particularly the place of New York politics in its formation. Much of this has been covered elsewhere, however, notably by Lawrence H. Chamberlain's *Loyalty and Legislative Action* (1951) and Julian Jaffe's *Crusade Against Radicalism: New York during the Red Scare, 1914–1924* (1972). In his discussion of the origins of the Martens Bureau, Pfannestiel underplays the important role of Santeri Nuorteva, the Finnish socialist, who perhaps did more than any other person to get the Soviet Information Bureau launched in 1919. Readers would do well to consult Auvo Koistianen, "Santeri Nuorteva and the Origins of Soviet-American Relations" (*American Studies in Scandinavia* 15 [1972]: 1–14.)

The heart of Pfannestiel's study remains his examination of the Lusk Committee's attack on the Rand School of Social Science and academic freedom in public schools in the State of New York. His discussion of the Rand School is clear and helpful, particularly his complete list of courses and lecturers, 1919–1920. He shows both the attacks on the school and the school's rather successful response, which generated publicity and funds to keep itself alive during the controversy. In fact, it can be argued, partly on the basis of Pfannestiel's evidence, that a key source for the mobilization of the liberal community and its formation of the National Civil Liberties Bureau (later the ACLU), was the defense of the Rand School. The discussion of the attack on public schools is less successful. The New York State Senate, at Lusk's urging, did pass five bills (three of which were enacted into law) to tackle radicalism in the state schools: one creating a special secret service to continue the state's investigation into education, one calling for public school teacher certification, and one requiring private school licensing. However, the furor over these bills mobilized a wide variety of opposition, and eventually they were repealed. As Pfannestiel argues, this legislative and political battle "triggered a negative public response" (p. 127). It may well have been this outcry that brought an end to the "red scare" in New York. Pfannestiel's study, however, leaves one wanting more. An exploration of the harm done to hundreds, possibly thousands of teachers who were named and investigated under the Lusk Laws remains to be written.

DAVID MCFADDEN
Fairfield University

DAVID KAHN. *The Reader of Gentlemen's Mail: Herbert O. Yardley and the Birth of American Codebreaking*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 2004. Pp. xxi, 318. \$32.50.

Herbert Osborn Yardley is hardly a household name, yet he is the most famous United States codebreaker thanks to a sensational book—*The American Black Chamber*—he wrote seventy-five years ago. Heretofore he has not had a biographer, but he certainly has one now.

There is a truism, well known to historians, that biographers either love or hate their subjects. David Kahn has written that rarest of commodities: a balanced biography of Yardley, warts and all. In so doing he has reinterpreted Yardley's role and what we know about early American communications intelligence. Kahn undertook an exhaustive search covering virtually every archive in the United States, Canada, Great Britain, France, and Japan that could conceivably hold documents relating to Yardley. Kahn also interviewed virtually everyone still living who knew Yardley and his contemporaries. The result is a tour de force, a definitive biography that will lay to rest most of the controversies swirling around Yardley's career.

Who was Yardley, and why is he important? He was a State Department clerk-telegrapher who had taught himself codebreaking. When the United States declared war in spring 1917, Yardley volunteered to set up a cryptanalysis operation in Military Intelligence. His offer was accepted, and by the end of the war the United States had its first communications intelligence organization (MI-8). Kahn notes Yardley was so successful that, after the armistice, when he proposed to establish a secret United States government "black chamber," his offer was snapped up and jointly funded by the Army and the State Department.

Established in New York, the Black Chamber targeted Japanese codes from the beginning. When the 1921 Naval Conference convened in Washington, Yardley and his colleagues were reading the two principal Japanese diplomatic codes in a timely fashion. As a result, the American cryptanalysts enabled their diplomatic colleagues to know with certainty the negotiating position of the Japanese delegation in regard to naval tonnage. This codebreaking feat was a major coup, and Yardley was personally decorated with the coveted Distinguished Service Medal by the Secretary of War.

Kahn relates that despite this achievement there were substantial budget cuts in successive years that had a significant impact on the number of codebreakers that could be employed. In addition, there were serious problems in obtaining the necessary foreign diplomatic telegrams from the cable companies. Kahn also dissects the accusation made by historian Ladislav Farago that Yardley secretly approached the Japanese Embassy in Washington and for \$7,000 sold information that the Black Chamber had been reading their codes. He concludes that it never happened, and he is probably correct.

The Black Chamber closed its doors in 1929 when a new secretary of state, Henry Stimson, shut off funding, pompously stating that "Gentlemen do not read each other's mail" (p. 98). Yardley and his staff were out of work and the Depression was beginning. Broke and desperate, he decided to write a book about his codebreaking experiences. The result was *The American Black Chamber* (1931), which caused a huge uproar. The Army and the State Department, angry over the book's disclosures, denied that the Black Chamber existed, and the Japanese government was outraged at learning