

Richard Lowitt. *Fred Harris: His Journey from Liberalism to Populism*. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002) pp. 285. \$39.95 ISBN 0742521621

Fred Harris was the keynote speaker at one of the first Oklahoma Political Science Association conferences that I ever attended. He was a great choice because he served in the Oklahoma State Senate, was sent to Washington in 1964 as Oklahoma's U.S. Senator, chaired the Democratic National Committee, was a finalist for the vice-presidential nomination, ran for the American presidency *twice*, and not least—he has become an accomplished political scientist with numerous books to his credit. I was not quite politically aware when Harris was most visibly active in politics. His name is rarely mentioned anymore, even in discussions about politics during the sixties and seventies when he was often in the national spotlight. Reading a well-written biography about his life and political times was therefore a welcome opportunity.

Richard Lowitt's *Fred Harris: His Journey from Liberalism to Populism* is an important contribution toward Oklahoma political scholarship. The book is extremely thorough. It tells a compelling story—admittedly not always in the most compelling way, but Lowitt's work is certainly not a difficult read. The book provides some background about Harris's childhood and briefly updates his life after politics. However, the main emphasis of this book is the time period when Harris at age 33 was elected as the youngest Senator ever from Oklahoma through his failed presidential bid in 1976. Lowitt sympathetically sketches an almost tragic political career. The author tackles this essential question: How could a young man with such incredible political promise—who was mentored and strategically supported by the political giants of his day—fade so quickly into political obscurity?

One of the answers that emerges from Lowitt's perspective is that any time Harris was faced with a choice between political expediency and his own principles, he tended to choose the latter. The author chronicles the fascinating evolution of Harris's political thinking. This perspective provides a valuable view of the myriad complex issues that were at play during this turbulent period of American history. For example, the Johnson administration throughout its early years could reliably count on Harris to support the Vietnam War. By the time he was a senior senator, Harris became a vocal critical of the nation's war policies. Harris's changing views is a metaphor for the nation's own struggle through the Vietnam years.

Lowitt opens up almost every chapter with the percentage of roll call votes Harris answered. Although this statistic is less than dramatic at first, it becomes a useful indicator for tracking Harris's continual diversion to other political activities beyond the Senate floor. As a freshman senator, Harris answered 95 percent of Senate votes but during his last term he would ultimately answer to only 51 percent. At one point, Harris was serving two masters: his own party as director of the Democratic National Committee and his home state as Senator. Both of these were formidable challenges. The DNC at the time was over \$6 million in debt and divided over the war. Oklahoma's electoral base was changing from Democratic dominance to a true two-party system. As time progressed, Harris became increasingly separated from the mainstream of both.

Harris was on the cutting edge of a number of critical issues. He became a champion of civil rights calling racism a mental health disease that did more actual harm to children than mental retardation. His wife was a member of the Choctaw tribe which helped him to become more sensitive to the needs of Native American tribes. He was also one of the early advocates for lowering the voting age to 18. As a good political scientist, Harris used his position to argue forcefully for social scientists to have a seat at the policy table and to have their fair share of federal funds. He helped to civilianize military research and to promote the democratization of federal grants supporting the nation's science and technology policies. He even pushed for a national foundation for the social sciences in particular.

Harris fought at every opportunity to address the needs of the nation's poor. Not satisfied with surface explanations, he would attempt

to delve deep in the subject in order to understand the underlying causes of poverty. He was a vocal critic of predatory lending practices which kept urban minorities down economically. Harris was also particularly concerned about the much neglected rural part of America. He recognized that a different world existed in the rural heartland. The unique needs exhibited there were not recognized by the Washington elites. He became more active in the growing peace movement. These key components of his developing worldview would result in an extremely populist orientation. Harris would use his unique brand of populism to launch his subsequent presidential campaigns. He would often draw large crowds. Unfortunately, Harris's presidential ambitions were tempered by the fact that his natural constituencies were not organized or politically powerful. His final campaign was crippled at the start because federal matching funds were withheld due to pending court decisions on campaign finance. Finally, his support was diluted as his political opponents "began to echo some of his views" (p. 264).

The biggest criticism that can be leveled at this book is the author's intentional strategy not to talk or correspond with Fred Harris directly. Lowitt avoided meeting with Fred Harris in order to come to his own conclusions (p. xiv). Since Harris is very much still alive, this is like Walter Isaacson writing his biography of Benjamin Franklin and turning down the chance to travel back in time to interview Ben in person. Interviewing Harris would serve as an important check on not only facts but interpretation. Political scientist Richard Fenno, the erstwhile "soak and poke" observer of politicians, would not likely approve of Lowitt's research strategy. Even so, Lowitt's book is the definitive biography of an underappreciated politician who had an outsized influence on American politics during a critical period of history.

Brett S. Sharp
University of Central Oklahoma