

Thomas, Elmer. *Forty Years a Legislator*. Richard Lowitt and Carolyn G. Hanneman, ed. (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), pp. 178. \$24.95 ISBN 978-0-8061-3809-1

As a United States Senator during wartime, Elmer Thomas became one of the very few American leaders trusted with the greatest secret of the twentieth century—the development of the atomic bomb. This relatively unsung hero in Oklahoma's political history is given voice anew by the remarkable efforts of Richard Lowitt and Carolyn Hanneman. Together, these two researchers combed the Senator's memoir held in safekeeping under the auspices of the Carl Albert Center at the University of Oklahoma. Thomas's original memoir is described as "a sprawling, unrevised and uncorrected 433-page typed document" covering "his life up to his retirement in 1951" (p. xv). The editors have performed a miraculous job distilling this extensive work down to its essentials.

Thomas began his lifelong association with the Oklahoma territory in unremarkable fashion. Basically, he didn't have enough funds to travel back to his home state of Indiana. So here he opened up a law practice and engaged in a series of highly profitable real estate ventures. Particularly notable was his strategic foresight in leveraging properties with the potential to channel water to the growing population and industries of a thirsty southwestern Oklahoma. These early lucrative efforts here foreshadowed his subsequent and equally successful initiative to provide irrigation in Oklahoma through the mechanisms of the national government. Borrowing from the precedent of the Tennessee

Valley Authority, Thomas would later shepherd legislation to provide flood control and water reservoirs throughout the state.

The early part of the book is an enlightening recount of the numerous efforts to successfully launch a new state against numerous hardships and obstacles. Lack of financial resources was always problematic. With more humor than he probably intended, Thomas observed the irony, "Had we known at that time that there was a vast pool of oil under the land secured [for the capitol], our financial problem would have been solved"(p.19). Various other budgetary measures and the ultimate discovery of the oil reserves under the capitol grounds helped the state with its early fiscal responsibilities.

Throughout, Thomas remains unabashedly proud of his work promoting the interests of the Indian tribes in Oklahoma. He admits that "Indians, for good reasons, are skeptical of the white man"(p. 13). His profound empathy for Indians was not necessarily aimed at preservation of their culture. This dichotomy can be seen in his statement, "Knowing of their history and the treatment accorded them by our government, I was always sympathetic to their efforts to provide educational opportunities for their children to the end that they might better protect themselves in dealing with the white man, and eventually to see their children able to take their place as full citizens of our country"(p. 15). In other words, full assimilation appears to have been Thomas's ultimate goal. Whatever his motivations, his efforts to redirect resources to Oklahoma's tribes is admirable. In one vignette, Thomas describes legislation to direct the royalties from "the Red River oil lands to the Kiowa, Comanche, and Apache Tribes of Indians"(p. 33).

As a former human resources manager, I was surprised to find out that the standard 40-hour workweek was initially intended to apply only to those in service at the American Navy Yards. Thomas notes, "That little provision of law, adopted to the 1934 bill, has become the cornerstone of the entire working movement in the United States, although at that time it was intended, as I thought, to apply only to the Navy"(p. 47). The principle of five eight-hour days gradually extended to the rest of the nation's workforce.

Thomas nonchalantly offers several comments about his political world that contemporary readers may find a bit curious. In this era of term limits at the state level and the diminishing importance of seniority at the national level, Thomas's recurring defense of the virtues of long

service in the legislature seems quaint. Also puzzling to the modern political observer is the method Thomas often uses as evidence of his legislative prowess. At various points he boasts about his verbosity in covering "30 pages of the House hearings"(p.53) or similarly, "My testimony in support of the bill covered some 30 pages of the Congressional Record"(p.34). Now at first blush it might appear that Thomas has an upper limit in his quantity of speech approximating thirty pages in written form. However, he soon reminds us that he firmly established his senatorial reputation by staging a well publicized (if not immediately successful) filibuster. Such was life before the era of sound bite. A final point of curiosity betrays the leftward leanings of Thomas. He is keenly suspicious that information not processed by an official government agency is somehow not "authentic"(pp. 66-67). Therefore, he proceeds on a long legislative quest to create an institutional basis within government to scrutinize the oil industry in order to yield information for policy analysis.

The general dryness of Thomas's memoir is prominently demonstrated when his writing is contrasted with others describing the same events. At those points in *Forty Years a Legislator* where Thomas quotes at length from others, the reader is left to conclude that the best parts of this book were written by journalists and other politicians. In fact, the last three pages of this book is one long quote from Senator Robert S. Kerr.

Notwithstanding the dry tone, the book livens up considerably in its last half. Here, Thomas describes the numerous attempts to get the Hoover administration to deal effectively with the economics of the Great Depression. As war later looms on the horizon, Thomas discovers to his dismay how inadequately prepared the military is to meet the coming challenge. In what is perhaps the single humorous line in the whole book, Thomas observes, "At El Paso, Texas, we inspected one of our cavalry camps, consisting of some five thousand men and five thousand horses, all well trained for parade purposes"(p.113). In the early summer of 1941, with the attack on Pearl Harbor less than a half year away, Thomas finds "one aircraft gun at Los Angeles" with "no one present" who "knew how to use the weapon," Coast Guard guns at San Francisco that no one could ever remember having been fired, and equipment to detect the sound of approaching hostile aircraft in Panama that no one knew how to use (p.113).

The best contribution of *Forty Years a Legislator* is the section on the "Legislative History of the Atomic Bomb." In the modern era after Vietnam and during a time when our government is still apologizing for the lack of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the trust placed by the legislative branch to the executive branch during the prosecution of World War II is extraordinary. Speaking about the Manhattan project, Thomas explains, "The passage by the Congress without any public comment whatever of appropriations so vast for a project, whose success no man could surely promise, was a striking demonstration of the courage and daring of the legislative branch of government . . . and in its final triumph the judgment of the Congress was vindicated" (p. 123). General Leslie Groves would subsequently remark, "I would like to put on the record a statement of my personal appreciation for the support that I got from the Congress, and particularly from this subcommittee on Appropriations, in permitting this work we were engaged to go ahead, taking the chances that each member of this committee took with his future political career on the very scanty information that we had to give you at that time" (p. 135). Thomas describes in great detail how the funds allocated to the Manhattan Project were surreptitiously embedded in legislative appropriations. Even so, Thomas is extremely proud of the legislative oversight that occurred in other areas during the war years. When defending against so-called junkets, Thomas points to several successes including a single item that "saved the government over \$1 million" (p. 138). Thomas closes his discussion of the war years by describing his visit to Germany during the final phases of the Nuremberg trials.

Forty Years a Legislator is a welcome contribution to the political history of Oklahoma. Like most memoirs, Thomas delivers a bit of self-serving prose (oh, and poetry too—see pp. 71-72). But this book does offer a lot in terms of political analysis. Especially worth reading in that context is the numerous legislative strategies that Thomas employs over the years. Hopefully, more of these types of volumes can be produced by this state's researchers using the treasury of information stored within the Carl Albert Center.

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