

Michael J. Hightower. 2021. *At War with Corruption: A Biography of Bill Price, U.S. Attorney for the Western District of Oklahoma*. 2 Cities Press, 466 pages.

Michael Hightower has produced a compelling and richly detailed life of Bill Price that is a very interesting read and for anyone living in the State of Oklahoma during the time that much of this work covers, it will be especially meaningful and riveting. As someone who grew up in Oklahoma City during many of these events, this work especially resonated with me. This work would make a fine addition to an academic course or any individual interested in mid-twentieth century to early twenty-first century Oklahoma politics and the sordid, corrupt political environment of our state during this period of time.

The work is divided in to three sections: *Prologue*, *The Arena* and it concludes with *From Whom Much is Given*. Each of these sections chronicles a particular period of Mr. Price's personal and political/legal life.

In the section "prologue", the author tells of the arrival of the Price family to Oklahoma and the early developing lives of the Price family. Quickly the author explores the formative period of Mr. Price's life, from his early years in Oklahoma City, his involvement with the Teen Age Republicans, his exposure to state and local politics and them a culmination with his first experience with corruption, the Oklahoma State Supreme Court scandal. The author continues to tell the story of Mr. Price's experiences in Washington D.C., his early work as an attorney, and the start of a career that would lead him to becoming a champion fighting against corruption.

In the section "the Arena", the first up-close and direct involvement with state corruption came in the form of a popular Governor,

David Hall. While Mr. Price's involvement in the case was not on the front lines as a litigator, Mr. Price honed his skills by doing the "behind the scenes" work of preparing legal briefs and performing important investigatory work that eventually led to the conviction of a towering figure in Oklahoma politics (I remember this well). "The Arena" also described Mr. Price's rise to become an Assistant U.S. Attorney and the emergence of figures that included Drew Neville, Charlie Waters, Ralph Thompson, and Frank Keating – a sort of young, energetic group of leaders who would make their mark on the law and politics.

Then came what was to become the most wide-spread scandal in Oklahoma political history, the Oklahoma County Commissioners scandal – known as "Okscam." What began as an audit into the practices of bidding and purchases at the county level in the late 1970s, exploded into a nearly state-wide blanket of corruption which quickly made it to the national news and the comic strip "Doodlesbury," a major embarrassment to the state. Mr. Price was a central figure in bringing the commissioners to justice, and restoring the reputation of a state that had been badly damaged on a national scale. And as pointed out by the author, Mr. Price's efforts did not come without a threat of personal harm. In fact, the drug cartels, domestic drug dealers and other white collar criminals that Mr. Price would encounter were much less a threat compared to the friends and family of corrupt county commissioners. Then, as if almost not to be topped, the Penn Square National Bank collapse occurred in the early 1980s. This collapse happened due to in large part to over-speculation and risky investment deals in the oil and gas industry which quite nearly brought down the world banking system (on this I recommend *Belly Up* by Phillip Zweig). The author, through interviews with Mr. Price and many others describe the difficulties associated with the prosecution of these cases. Mr. Price took it upon himself to educate law enforcement and prosecutors on methods to approach these cases.

In the final section of the work, "From Whom Much is Given,

Much is Expected,” the author describes the effort of Mr. Price in creating organizations to combat social problems, most notably the Oklahoma Alliance Against Drugs. Mr. Price’s experience with fighting drug crime, and other problems associated with this area of crime compelled him to go beyond the formal legal setting. Mr. Price went on to serve as the acting director of the Department of Human services. Mr. Price also worked with the U.S. Attorney General in developing law enforcement legislative committees with the goal to improve and modernize law enforcement procedures. Unfortunately, even with Mr. Price’s stellar record regarding the fight against corruption and all the other civic-minded projects he led, these efforts did not transfer to successful electoral politics. The combination of a poor political environment and a very good primary opponent which Price defeated narrowly, resulted in the draining of his resources which left him vulnerable. The formidable general election candidate David Walters exposed the vulnerabilities which ultimately led to Mr. Price’s defeat in 1988. This defeat prompted Tom Cole to comment that Mr. Price was “the best governor Oklahoma never had.” Mr. Price went on to run for a Congressional seat, but lost that contest as well.

As previously indicated, Michael Hightower has produced an excellent work that should be read by anyone interested in this period of Oklahoma’s political history. The work is an exhaustive effort, which thoroughly chronicles Mr. Price’s contributions to the state of Oklahoma. And, in the end, fully humanizes his subject.

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