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Book Review: Reformers to Radicals: The Appalachian Volunteers and the War on Poverty

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Keffmeyer, Thomas. *Reformers to Radicals: The Appalachian Volunteers and the War on Poverty*. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008. ISBN 978-0-8131-2509-1. \$40 (cloth).

Dr. Thomas Kiffmeyer's excellent history tracks the short trajectory of the Appalachian Volunteers (AV) from the organization's founding in 1964 to dissolution in 1970. This well reasoned and meticulously documented work of scholarship should prove useful to southern historians, students of the Great Society era, and anyone interested in the dynamics of social reform movements. The readable style and clearly structured arguments make the book accessible to the educated lay reader. Kiffmeyer does a masterful job of weaving together individuals' memoirs, organizational records, and national events to tell this story. Interesting photographs enhance the vivid narrative.

The author places the AV firmly in the context of organizational history as well as national events. The AV grew out of the Council of the Southern Mountains, a strongly integrationist reform organization. The Council recruited local college students to do volunteer work in the mountains, initially concentrating on physical improvements to rural schools during the Christmas vacation of 1963-1964. The Appalachian Volunteers officially became an independent organization in March 1964. Kiffmeyer notes that the new group's bylaws "reflected the country's assumptions about welfare, dependency, and pluralism." The volunteers wanted to involve the local citizens in "the process of meeting community needs ... in areas such as education, health, recreation, and human welfare"; they hoped to create an organization through which students could assist their "fellow citizens"; and, they hoped to initiate programs leading to "lasting solutions of the region's problems."

Reformer to Radicals traces the AV through a sad decline from youthful enthusiasm to cynicism and despair. Kiffmeyer notes that initially volunteers attempted to coordinate their activities with local political and community leaders. Filled with missionary attitudes, they blamed the poverty of the region on physical isolation, inadequate education, and the culture of the Appalachian poor. In full agreement with the underlying premises of the War on Poverty programs, the AV tended to "blame the victim" for regional problems. Over time, disillusionment set in: the volunteers increasingly came to see abuses of political power and economic exploitation—the perpetuation of a "kind of feudalism" or "colonialism"—as the true causes of regional poverty and deprivation. Rather than improvements to existing systems, bigger changes to the underlying social structure were needed. As one volunteer said, "We're supplying candles when the house needs to be wired for electricity."

Kiffmeyer is careful to point out that change in personnel within the AV over time was an important factor in shaping the organization's history. As the Appalachian Volunteer program grew and gained national attention, there was a heavy influx of student volunteers from outside Appalachia. The presence of these "outsiders," combined with the organization's increasingly political tactics, stimulated strong resistance from local, state, and national leaders and suspicion on the part of conservative residents. By branding the AV as communists, "outside agitators," and subversives, those seeking to maintain the status quo effectively halted the volunteers' operations. Internal conflicts over the new activist focus also split the group.

It would have been helpful if Kiffmeyer had elaborated on the role played by racism in the downfall of the Appalachian Volunteers. He alludes briefly to the integrationist stances of the Council and Appalachian

Volunteers and to resulting hostility from white residents. It is unclear just how racially integrated the volunteers were, or the extent to which their activities were directed towards aiding African Americans.

The author appears to be almost as concerned with the tragic dynamics of reform movements as with the specifics of events in Appalachia, drawing frequent parallels between the trajectories of the Appalachian Volunteers and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, a civil rights organization active during approximately the same time frame. Kiffmeyer tracks rapid changes in the goals, programs, and personnel of the Appalachian Volunteers resulting from a toxic mix of success, publicity, youthful disillusionment, and conflicts with local and national power structures. Readers interested in this aspect of Kiffmeyer's work may also want to consult similar studies: Clayborne Carson's *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*; August Meier, and Elliott M. Rudwick's book concerning the Congress of Racial Equality, *CORE; a Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968*; and Todd Gitlin's memoir of the Students for a Democratic Society, *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*.

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