
In The Politics of Soft Coal James P. Johnson joins the parade of historians enticed by the perceived nexus between government regulation and industries' search for stability. However, unlike Robert Wiebe, Louis Galambos, William Appleman Williams, Gabriel Kolko, and Alfred Chandler, whose studies encompass the entire sphere of business and industry, Johnson has singled out the bituminous coal industry. As an invalid in America's heady industrial economy, the soft coal industry affords, for Johnson, an exceptional insight into the business-government linkage.

Johnson explores the bituminous coal industry's effort to stabilize itself in the years 1917 to 1940. As a framework (or model) for his study, Johnson selects three issues as the foci for his inquiry: first, government regulation, principally the Kolko hypothesis that business co-opted or captured federal regulatory agencies and twisted them to its self-interest; secondly, New Deal stabilization programs as an analogue or reflection of the World War I experiment with industrial control; and finally, the issue of industrial self-government, namely the effectiveness of the War Industries Board, the National Recovery Administration, and the Guffey coal bills in a pluralistic society.

Johnson asserts that the soft coal case impugns Kolko's general thesis concerning industry co-opting government. Plagued by geographic fragmentation — the southern coalfields versus the central — the bituminous industry proved helpless to maneuver government to its advantage. In fact, despite the extraordinary circumstances of World War I, and despite the Great Depression, the NRA, and the Bituminous Coal Labor Board, the soft coal industry between 1917 and 1940 failed to resolve festering problems such as excess capacity, regional wage differentials, and cutthroat competition.

More important, Johnson argues that although the New Deal addressed the short-term social crisis in the coalfields, the Guffey-Snyder and Guffey-Vinson policies were ultimately "short sighted . . . basically conservative," and failed to spur development of the industry (p. 219). According to Johnson, government-business stabilization efforts in wartime and depression ignored the singular truth that rather than monopolistic the bituminous industry was terribly fragmented and brutally competitive. National Coal Administrator Harry
Garfield struggled unstintingly in 1917-1918 to stabilize the industry only to see his labors dissipated by internecine postwar competition. Johnson contends that during the 1920s John L. Lewis and the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA) emerged as the sole hope for centralized direction; however, Lewis in 1924 lost his gamble that the Jacksonville Agreement would drive inefficient mines out of business.

In the face of the disastrous strikes of 1927-1932, and the downwardly spiraling economy of the early depression, the UMWA not the operators possessed the unity to hammer out the NRA coal code. But the codes, like the subsequent Guffey bills, came at the expense of productivity in the mines. Despite his bleak view of the New Deal bituminous legislation, Johnson concedes, quite perceptively, that the Section 7a clause in the National Industrial Recovery Act guaranteeing collective bargaining exercised profound social impact on the coalfields, particularly in rending the cultural isolation and ending the worst company domination of mine-town society.

Johnson casts strong, tightly constructed, and well-articulated arguments. Mainly his work extends and strengthens the earlier structural analyses of Wiebe in Businessmen and Reform and Alfred Chandler in Strategy and Structure; that is, business and industry are not monolithic entities, but as complex as the other segments of a pluralistic society. While strong and united components of the industrial sector utilized government to stabilize and regularize their operations in the New Era of the 1920s, other "sick" elements in the economy such as bituminous coal and textiles floundered, too weak to benefit from the succor of the federal benefactor. Johnson's solidly researched monograph makes extensive use of archival materials such as the Federal Trade Commission hearings, National Recovery Administration records, and union and personal papers. The book should absorb the attention of historians and policymakers alike and well deserved the Organization of American Historians' Louis B. Pelzer Prize.

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