‘YOU’RE WRITING ABOUT WHOM?’

STUDYING POLITICAL AND POLICY HISTORY THROUGH THE LIVES OF SECONDARY FIGURES

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Biography, once a denigrated field among academic historians, is undergoing a revival, at least according to a roundtable discussion in a recent issue of the *American Historical Review*. “Biography,” the historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. has written, “offers an easy education in American history, rendering the past more human, more vivid, more intimate, more accessible, more connected to ourselves”.[1]

Why is that so? The popular historian Barbara W. Tuchman cited two reasons. First, biography attracts readers because “people are interested in other people, in the fortunes of the individual”. Second, because biography “encompasses the universal in the particular”, this genre of literature “allows both the writer to narrow his field to manageable dimensions and the reader to more easily comprehend the subject”.[2] For a long time, it has been fashionable to write life stories of “the greats” – monarchs, presidents, and even dictators. More recently, with the emergence of social and cultural history, “the grunts” – ordinary people who participated in mass-based movements for change – have begun to receive attention. But what about those who lived in between? What about the secondary figures, that is, policymakers and politicians who held office in cabinets, embassies or states/provinces without ascending to the top of “the greasy pole”, to invoke Benjamin Disraeli’s famous phrase? When historians begin to research the lives of these lesser-known public figures, such as those who never became presidents, prime ministers or even foreign ministers, they are apt to receive puzzled looks and hear the question: “You’re writing about whom?”

Historians who write biographies of secondary figures feel compelled to explain *who* they are studying and *why* that person was important. At times biographers go too far and either inflate their subject’s significance or grow infatuated with them. Tuchman became so fond of one of her subjects, the colorful but long-forgotten U.S. Speaker of the House Thomas Reed, that she came to regard him as

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1 Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., “Editor’s Note,” in Roy Jenkins, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, New York: Times Books 2003, p. xiv.

2 Barbara W. Tuchman, *Practicing History: Selected Essays by Barbara Tuchman*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1981, p. 81 (both quotations).

her "personal property" and feared that someone else would publish on him before she had the chance to.[3] Therein lay one possible risk in writing on secondary figures. Although a vast market exists for biographies of well-known national political figures and innumerable angles can be used in writing about such men and women, how many books are needed on someone such as Reed? Nevertheless, such officials often make inviting topics for research, especially if they managed to leave their mark as supporting actors in larger historical dramas.

The rise and development of the welfare state in the United States during the 1930s is one such drama that has been explored through a range of secondary figures. For example, scholars of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal have studied the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), a massive public power project, by examining the life of TVA's chief administrator, David E. Lilienthal. The historian Edward D. Berkowitz enhanced our understanding of Social Security, FDR's program of unemployment and old-age insurance, by writing biographies of two of its most important policymakers, Wilbur J. Cohen and Robert Ball.[4] The architect of Social Security, Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, has been the subject of a study by the journalist Kirsten Downey. Although Perkins, like many secondary figures, is "virtually unknown" today "about 44 million people collect Social Security checks each month" due to her leadership.[5] Through the life of James A. Farley, the manager of FDR's electoral victories in 1932 and 1936, the historian Daniel Scroop has explored yet another aspect of the Roosevelt Era, that is, the eclipse of old-style urban machines, which Farley mobilized to help elect FDR, and the rise of an ideological and issue-driven politics, spawned by FDR's domestic agenda. The Republican response to the New Deal received treatment in David Stebenne's biography of Arthur Larson, a speechwriter to President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Larson's philosophy of Modern Republicanism preached acceptance of the New Deal and provided the Eisenhower administration with a sense of ideological direction.[6] If Farley helped to construct the New Deal's electoral coalition, Larson encouraged the Grand Old Party (GOP) to adjust to FDR's accomplishments and legacy.

Paul V. McNutt was another secondary figure who shaped politics and policy during the era of FDR (and Harry S. Truman). Similar to FDR, McNutt believed

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3 Tuchman, *Practicing History*, p. 83.

4 Steven M. Neuse, *David E. Lilienthal: The Journey of an American Liberal*, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996; Edward D. Berkowitz, *Mr. Social Security: The Life of Wilbur J. Cohen,* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995; Edward D. Berkowitz, *Robert Ball and the Politics of Social Security,* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003.

5 Kirsten Downey, *The Woman Behind the New Deal: The Life and Legacy of Frances Perkins – Social Security, Unemployment Insurance, and the Minimum Wage,* New York: Anchor Books, 2009, p. 397.

6 Daniel Scroop, *Mr. Democrat: Jim Farley, the New Deal, and the Making of Modern American Politics,* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006; David L. Stebenne. *Modern Republican: Arthur Larson and the Eisenhower Years,* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006.

that "government may be a great instrument of human progress".[7] As governor of Indiana (1933-37), McNutt backed FDR's New Deal, revamped his state's government, and emerged as one of America's strongest governors. Most important, he served FDR as High Commissioner to the Philippines (1937-39), Administrator of the Federal Security Agency (1939-45), and Chair of the War Manpower Commission (1942-45). McNutt saw himself as a successor to FDR until the president decided to seek a third term in 1940. Stymied in that direction, he next sought the Democratic nomination for vice president, until FDR made known his preference for Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace. After heading the War Manpower Commission, McNutt ended his public career as America's last High Commissioner and first Ambassador to the Philippines (1945-47), where he helped to prepare the Philippines for independence. His career thus underscores the challenges and changes, domestic and international, that the United States faced during a period of depression, global conflict, Cold War, and de-colonization.[8]

McNutt's life highlights the value of biography, in both its recent and more traditional forms, for studying political history. Like the newer forms of biography, McNutt's life intersects with, and is integrative of, issues related to place, race, gender, class, and internationalization. At the same time, the heart of any biography has been and will remain the individual, particularly how a single life begins, unfolds, develops, and expands outward and across time to encompass external influences and larger trends. McNutt's career illustrates how a holistic concept of security became central to American political thought and practice during the 1930s and 1940s – a theme emphasized in some of the latest scholarship on the New Deal, World War II, and Cold War.[9] Into the old wineskin of political biography, then, it is possible to infuse a variety of new wines such as gender history, international history, and the history of ideas.

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[7] James H. Madison, *The Indiana Way: A State History,* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986, p. 296.

[8] It is possible to see McNutt as a major rather than a secondary figure because he ascended to the highest corridors of American political power. But labeling him a secondary political figure coincides with the definition of such figures used at the end of paragraph one of this essay. McNutt's background was in state-level politics, diplomatic assignments overseas, and lower-echelon cabinet-type positions. He never became president and he was never even nominated for president nor was he a secretary of state or important national legislative leader.

[9] David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945,* New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 365; Alonzo L. Hamby, *Liberalism and Its Challengers: From F.D.R. to Bush,* 2nd Edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. vii; Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision for Human Rights,* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005, p. 280-281; Michael J. Hogan, *A Cross of Iron: Harry S. Truman and the Origins of the National Security State, 1945-1954,* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 8.

THE REVIVAL AND RESHAPING OF BIOGRAPHY

The renaissance of biography has surprised some professional historians. "While most certainly recognize it as a legitimate and venerable mode of historical discourse", wrote Robert Schneider, the editor of *American Historical Review*, in 2009, "many are skeptical of the capacity of biography to convey the kind of analytically sophisticated interpretation of the past that academics have long expected".[10] Biography appeared to lack rigor. "It involves only one life", the historian Lois W. Banner has noted, "derives from a belles-lettres tradition rather than a scientific or sociological one, and is often written by non-academic historians".[11] Moreover, the boundaries of a biography seemed arbitrary. Nick Salvatore, biographer of the American socialist leader Eugene V. Debs, once was told that biography is not history "because the question of periodisation is a given ... framed by the birth and death of the subject".[12] "For years I resisted the notion that an individual life could speak to the larger historical forces", remarked Alice Kessler-Harris, a historian of American women. "The life of an individual might instruct and entertain, I thought, but even at its best, it couldn't tell us as much as ... if we explored the issues with which that individual was involved". Kessler-Harris, who recently completed a biography of the playwright Lillian Hellman, now admits that such thoughts were wrong "perhaps not about the way biographies are written, but about what a historian can bring to biography".[13]

Professional historians bring a number of skills to the craft of biography. The most important of these is grounding in the era in which a person lived, for "one cannot segregate an individual from his surroundings and study him, as ... an unknown chemical in a test tube".[14] Research institutions provide the background through training and granting degrees in "history" rather than in biography. Academic historians thus study larger diplomatic, political, cultural, social, and economic developments before they consider tackling the narrower topic of a single life. Biographies often are frowned upon as dissertation topics, the thought being that the average graduate student has not lived long enough to be able to comprehend their own life let alone that of someone else. Nevertheless, many historians eventually gravitate toward biography in order to gain a different angle – or set of angles – on their field. For example, Kessler-Harris identified a compendium of themes illuminated through her biography of Hellman: "the revolutionary transformation of sexual life and gender roles; the swirling political currents produced

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[10] Quoted in David Nasaw, "Historians and Biography: An Introduction," *American Historical Review*, vol. 114, no. 3, 2009, p. 573.

[11] Lois W. Banner, "Biography as History," *American Historical Review*, vol. 114, no. 3, 2009, p. 580.

[12] Quoted in Nasaw, "Historians and Biography," p. 573.

[13] Alice Kessler-Harris, "Why Biography?" *American Historical Review*, vol. 114, no. 3, 2009, p. 625.

[14] John A. Garraty, *The Nature of Biography* New York: Vintage Books, 1964, p. 4.

by the challenge of socialism and communism and the tensions of the Cold War; the fluctuating and contested nature of identity and its political uses; and the impact of a newly vibrant culture of celebrity".[15] In so doing, her biography addresses issues related to gender, ideology, culture (elite and popular), and politics (domestic and international) as well as individual personality.

The "life-and-times" genre of biography, exemplified by Kessler-Harris's study of Hellman, is hardly new; but, aided by the rise of social and cultural history, it has allowed more recent biographers to write fuller life stories that are conscious of place, race, gender, and class –as well as politics. Such an approach has enabled historians to transcend somewhat the age-old debate over agency, between social determinists and defenders of the so-called Great Man theory of history, as biographers now seek to place individuals within larger political, cultural, and social milieus. "The historian as biographer", writes David Nasaw, who is both a social historian and a biographer, "proceeds from the premise that individuals are situated but not imprisoned in social structures and discursive regimes".[16] As a result of this approach, criticisms of biography, as the historian Barbara Taylor has observed, "are less pronounced today than in the past, or at any rate seem to generate less anxiety. We now possess many historical biographies that do a superb job of integrating their subjects into their historical contexts".[17]

Context is crucial when writing about a person who was the member of any minority group in the United States. Such biographies open a window into the subject's interactions with the dominant majority, experiences with discrimination, and changes in self-identity. The same is true for women. Kirsten Downey's biography showed how Frances Perkins fashioned the New Deal's most important initiatives while she faced sexism in numerous venues. At formal dinners, for example, Perkins ate with the cabinet wives so that male officials in the administration could converse in a traditional, sexually segregated environment. Perkins' cabinet colleagues often disparaged her. And even when Perkins succeeded, she often drew only patronizing praise.[18]

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[15] Kessler-Harris, "Why Biography?" p. 627. See also Alice Kessler-Harris, *A Difficult Woman: The Challenging Life and Times of Lillian Hellman*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2012.

[16] Nasaw, "Historians and Biography," p. 577. Nasaw has written three biographies*: The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst,* New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000; *Andrew Carnegie,* New York: The Penguin Press, 2006, and *The Patriarch: The Remarkable Life and Turbulent Times of Joseph P. Kennedy,* New York: The Penguin Press, 2012.

[17] Barbara Taylor, "Separation of Soul: Solitude, Biography, History," *American Historical Review*, vol. 114, no. 3, 2009, p. 641.

[18] Following one disagreement with Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, Perkins made peace, and Ickes returned the favor by scribbling in his diary: "A woman, a dog and a walnut tree, the more you beat them, the better they'll be". And General Hugh S. Johnson, the head of FDR's National Recovery Administration, once called Perkins the "best man in the Cabinet". Downey, *The Woman Behind the New Deal*, p. 183.

The rise of second-wave feminism and the emergence of women's history, coupled with the reality that women and men almost constantly interact, means that the topic of gender often informs modern biographies. Accordingly, one can see societal conventions about gender roles at work – and change – both in history and historiography. For example, a biography of FDR published by the venerable historian Frank Freidel in 1990 mentions FDR's wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, on 118 pages out of a 600-page book, a respectable amount of coverage albeit relatively little (and somewhat dispersed) considering Eleanor Roosevelt's path-breaking years as first lady. William E. Leuchtenburg's classic study, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (1963), was even worse, devoting seven pages in a 350-page book to Eleanor Roosevelt. But Blanche Wiesen Cook's more recent two-volume biography of Eleanor Roosevelt has helped move the first lady's contribution to the center of New Deal studies.[19] Although not technically a biography, George McJimsey's *The Presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (2000) had an entire chapter on Eleanor Roosevelt. "Franklin Roosevelt's presidency was also Eleanor Roosevelt's presidency", McJimsey has stressed. "She was his complement, acting on issues that he hesitated to take up and pressing to him to follow her initiatives".[20] In that vein, the University Press of Kansas has added to its much regarded series on presidential administrations, which published McJimsey's book, with a companion series on Modern American First Ladies.

The amount of context – or integrative material – required in a biography is difficult to quantify, and many scholars in established, evidence-rich fields like U.S. political history have erred on the side of excess. "Anyone who attempts to write a biography knows that many points in the story require background description", Robert H. Ferrell, a historian and biographer of Harry Truman, has asserted. "Such pages can pile up in a hurry; all too often, they may duplicate information already in other books".[21] Multivolume studies of U.S. presidents by such scholars as Douglas Southall Freeman (George Washington), Dumas Malone (Thomas Jefferson), Arthur S. Link (Woodrow Wilson), and Frank Freidel (FDR) exemplify this problem, for they "are closer akin to history than to biography".[22] The journalistic praise accorded Robert A. Caro's ongoing multivolume biography of Lyndon B. Johnson belies the author's penchants for side-tracking, self-indul-

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[19] See Frank Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Rendezvous with Destiny,* Boston: Back Bay, 1990, p. 696-697; William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940,* New York: Harper, 1963, p. 136, 187-188, 192, 331, 347-348; Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt, vol. 1: 1884-1933*, New York: Viking, 1992, and *Eleanor Roosevelt, vol. 2: 1933-1938*, New York: Viking, 1998.

[20] George McJimsey, *The Presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt,* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000, p. 296.

[21] Robert H. Ferrell, "The Large Book versus the Small: A Presidential Historian's Consideration of Three Recent Biographies," *Indiana Magazine of History*, vol. 100, December 2004, p. 380.

[22] Garraty, *The Nature of Biography*, p. 24.

gent narration, and glacial progress toward completion – at present, after forty years of writing and four tomes, LBJ sits near the start of his presidency (in 1964) while the septuagenarian Caro races against Father Time to finish his project. Moreover, dual biographies have become fashionable as of late; Douglas B. Craig's 2013 study of Woodrow-Wilson-Era officials William G. McAdoo and Newton D. Baker is insightful, comprehensive, and long.[23] To keep books at manageable size, biographers must consider what information is absolutely essential to include.[24] As John Lewis Gaddis, the Pulitzer-Prize-winning biographer of the diplomat George F. Kennan, explained, "Character emerges more clearly from the choices biographers make than from the comprehensiveness they attempt".[25]

Biographers can write modest-sized books by narrowing their focus, either topically or chronologically.[26] Undertaking a full-length study of a recent U.S. president, or any other national or international leader, can pose a problem since such men and women leave behind so much written and oral evidence that the biographer either suffocates or tries to survive by overwriting. The mass of documents generated by the American State in the twentieth century is part of the difficulty.[27] One answer, for scholars of the U.S. presidency, is to examine a specific period or aspect of their subject's life – to write, in other words, partial biography. The historian Irwin Gellman has explored Richard Nixon's career and character by focusing on his six years in Congress while the journalist Jeffrey Frank did something similar in a book on Nixon's years as vice president. The cultural historian Stephen Vaughn has written of Ronald Reagan's career in Hollywood while the environmental historian Hal Rothman has studied Lyndon B. Johnson's ambition and attachment to place by examining LBJ's life on – and political uses of – his Texas ranch. Similarly, William Leuchtenburg, the dean of New Deal historians, has investigated, in a single volume, how three presidents – FDR, Truman, and LBJ – were influenced by and sought to reshape one section of the United States, the South. In so doing, Leuchtenburg was able to produce a three-pronged biographical work that charted the changing politics of race across a specific place.[28]

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[23] Douglas B. Craig, *Progressives at War: William G. McAdoo and Newton D. Baker, 1863-1941,* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013, p. 1-2.

[24] Future biographers might follow the example of Randolph Churchill who, while fashioning the official biography of his father, rejected the inclusion of several "nuggets" gleaned from government archives on grounds that such information was "for thesis writers." Martin Gilbert, *In Search of Churchill: A Historian's Journey,* New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1994, p. 34.

[25] John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life,* New York: Penguin, 2011, p. xi.

[26] For the value of short, character-centered biographies, see Garraty, *The Nature of Biography*, p. 24.

[27] This problem has led Tuchman to label the nineteenth century the "great period" for historical study because it has "ample information of every kind, yet short of the oversupply of today". Tuchman, *Practicing History*, p. 73.

[28] Irwin F. Gellman, *The Contender: Richard Nixon: The Congress Years, 1946 to 1952*, New York: The Free Press, 1999; Jeffrey Frank, *Ike and Dick: Portrait of a Strange Political Marriage*,

Biographies of secondary figures likewise tend to be reasonable in length and can be quite integrative in scope.[29] In one volume, David Stebenne explored Arthur Larson's role in the Eisenhower administration, where his moderate Republican ideas found favor. Stebenne also exuded a superb understanding of place, explaining how populist politics in Larson's native state of South Dakota presaged Larson's embrace of the New Deal, which he defended during his years as a student at Oxford University—another locale portrayed in exquisite detail.[30] As mentioned, Downey's biography of Perkins opened a window into gender politics, domestic policy-making during the 1930s, and FDR himself. The Perkins-Roosevelt relationship involved mutual manipulation. Perkins declined to become Secretary of Labor until FDR agreed to support her agenda for social reform. The president then used Perkins to develop popular policies such as Social Security while at other times shunning her efforts. Perkins became wise to FDR's scheming, although she thought him "too lazy" to acquire power for its own sake.[31] Not every study of a secondary figure sheds so much light on a larger leader. Daniel Scroop's biography of Jim Farley takes readers into the world of urban political machines and chronicles Farley's ambition to be president, an aim which undermined his relationship with FDR. Yet Scroop failed to explore FDR's decision to seek a third term as president, a move that provoked Farley's break with FDR.

The biographies of Larson, Perkins, and Farley all focus on the individual human being. They are chronological, in that they begin and end with the subject's birth and death, as well as linear, in that the phases and episodes of the person's life (and chapters of the book) build upon one another and establish what is to come. The purpose of any biography is to offer a narrative that explains where the subject came from, why they became prominent or influential, and what mark they left for posterity. That means analyzing their background, family, region, class, personal traits, and financial resources – along with the inspiration – that launched them toward renown or even greatness.[32] Digging into unpublished pri-

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New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013; Stephen Vaughn, *Ronald Reagan in Hollywood: Movies and Politics*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994; Hal K. Rothman, *LBJ's Texas White House: "Our Heart's Home"*, College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 1999; William E. Leuchtenburg, *The White House Looks South: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, Lyndon B. Johnson,* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005.

29 With the exception of Sidney Fine's trilogy on Frank Murphy (a New Deal-era governor and member of Franklin Roosevelt's administration) biographers of lesser-known public figures generally keep their books at a single volume of less than three hundred page. Sidney Fine, *Frank Murphy: The Detroit Years,* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975; *Frank Murphy: The New Deal Years,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979; *Frank Murphy: The Washington Years,* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984.

30 Stebenne, *Modern Republican*, p. 7-8, 27-53, 151-174, 221-254.

31 Downey, *The Woman Behind the New Deal*, p. 262.

32 Susan Curtis, "Remarks on Twentieth-Century Biography: Private Lives, Public Culture," Indiana Association of Historians, Bloomington, Indiana, February 24, 2007, draft in the author's possession.

mary sources in order to uncover the subject's private world, inner thoughts, and motivations is a must, and Stebenne, Downey, and Scroop have done their homework. But so is hoisting the subject on to big hooks – or large historical themes – whether it is the ideology of the Republican Party, gender and policymaking during the New Deal or the twilight of urban political machines. Fashioning a biography that is analytically sound and engagingly written is an imperative as well because scholarly readers demand rigor while the general public remains fascinated by human interest – a distinguishing element of this genre. Generally speaking, the studies of Larson, Perkins, and Farley accomplish these ends, and a biography of McNutt may do so as well.

PAUL V. MCNUTT AND THE AGE OF FDR

Writing McNutt's biography has involved tethering old methodologies, such as research in manuscript sources and narrative writing, with newer ones, such as infusing social, cultural, and international history within the framework of political biography. Having a dramatic hook is helpful for writing about secondary figures, and McNutt's career offers several. McNutt became a successful governor during the 1930s, emerged as a possible successor to FDR, saw his ambitions frustrated by FDR's third nomination for president, and went into political eclipse after he accepted the difficult assignment of chairing the War Manpower Commission during World War II. A bust of Governor McNutt at Indiana University features a plaque listing his accomplishments with space for one additional line: "President of the United States".[33] It never happened, and partly as a result, McNutt's career allows one to consider the alternatives (or lack thereof) to national political leadership during the era of FDR and Harry Truman. At the same time, following McNutt's ambition opens a window into the offices he obtained and the issues he addressed, including ones related to race, class, gender, and America's role in the world. Most important, exploring this individual's life illustrates how the concept of "security" became central to U.S. politics and public policy during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s.[34]

The task of researching McNutt's biography has entailed excursions into traditional and non-traditional sources. Like most secondary figures, the bulk of McNutt's papers are located at a university archive (Indiana University's Lilly Library) with smaller collections housed at the Indiana State Archives, the Indiana University School of Law (where he was dean), and the Library of the American Legion, the post-World War I veterans organization headed by McNutt from 1928 to 1929. Yet these collections, alone, are inadequate. They contain no diary or oral

[33] Ross Gregory, "Politics in an Age of Crisis: America, and Indiana, in the Election of 1940," *Indiana Magazine of History*, vol. 86, no. 3, 1990, p. 264.

[34] The only published biography of McNutt is adulatory and non-analytical. It makes little effort to globalize McNutt's ideas, work, and significance. I. George Blake, *Paul V. McNutt: Portrait of a Hoosier Statesman,* Indianapolis: Central Publishing, 1966.

history by McNutt and the correspondence in them betrays little beyond a driving ambition.[35] One response has been to delve deeply and widely into as many textual records as possible. The Library of Congress has scores of papers of politicians, policymakers, diplomats, and journalists from the 1930s and 1940s, many of which include diaries (of Farley and Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, for example) that comment on McNutt.[36] And the National Archives has records that are vital to understand McNutt, since he held four separate federal offices: High Commissioner to the Philippines, Ambassador to the Philippines, Chair of the War Manpower Commission, and Federal Security Administrator. Finally, like many secondary political figures, McNutt interacted with specific presidents – FDR, Truman, and Herbert Hoover – meaning that the collections at the Roosevelt, Truman, and Hoover presidential libraries contained information on his career.

Archival textual sources remain important for understanding the actions of government officials as they discharged their duties and sought higher positions. But historians in fields other than biography use such sources as well. Since biography's reference point is the individual life, an especially wide range of primary sources must be examined if one is to understand a person's origins, experiences, relationships, ascent, decline, and impact. With respect to McNutt's life, county libraries had excellent genealogical material while more personal insights came from surviving relatives who provided access to Paul's correspondence with his wife, Kathleen, and a diary kept by his only child, Louise.[37] Although oral histories were not abundant for the McNutt project, those that exist provided interesting anecdotes. In a commentary on McNutt's polarizing governorship, one man, ac-

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[35] Some biographers boast of the store of documents available to them. "The great body of surviving letters, diaries, private memoranda, and autobiographical sketches written by Harry S. Truman is a treasure beyond compare", the biographer David McCullough has written. "There is really nothing like the Truman manuscript collection at the Harry S. Truman Library". David McCullough, *Truman,* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992, p. 993. Truman was an exceptional case. During the twentieth century, countless public officials transacted business via the telephone usually without transcripts or written notes, meaning that many important discussions are lost to history. Moreover, few politicians possess either the stamina to keep a diary or the willingness to reveal themselves in correspondence.

[36] For example, Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, a leading proponent of a third term for Roosevelt, wrote at the end of 1939 about McNutt's presidential ambitions: "McNutt and his active supporters [are] openly claiming that, at the proper time, the President will announce that he himself will not be a candidate and will designate McNutt as his favorite for the nomination". "This", Ickes fretted, "is creating an exceedingly dangerous and difficult situation" for Roosevelt's supporters. Harold L. Ickes Diary, December 3, 1939, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (LC), Washington, D.C.

[37] Accepting materials from the subject's family is a matter that every biographer must weigh carefully. The benefits of establishing contact with surviving family members are plain. But Barbara Tuchman, biographer of the World War II-era General Joseph W. Stilwell, has conceded that her "friendly relations" with the Stilwell family "exerted a certain unspoken restraint on writing anything nasty". Tuchman, *Practicing History*, p. 88.

cording to an interviewee, slaughtered his chickens because he heard them cackle: "McNutt, McNutt, McNutt".[38] Newspapers also are storehouses for human interest stories – an important dimension to any biography. For example, between 1937 and 1939, the *Philippines Free Press* ran a column entitled "The High Commissioner" that tracked McNutt's activities. One story was priceless. At one ball a young ensign went over to the McNutts and cut in, telling Kathleen: "You didn't want to dance with that old man anyway, did you?" When the ensign learned the identity of his partner, he apologized.[39] Sources originating from twentieth-century technology provided vivid details as well. Radio, for instance, documented McNutt's dramatic withdrawal from consideration for the Democratic nomination for vice president in 1940. In a broadcast preserved at the Library of Congress, one can hear McNutt struggling to address the convention delegates as they exhorted him to remain in the race. A radio commentator described the scene: "McNutt is trying to withdraw his name from nomination but the crowd, the delegates won't let him. This is the first time I've ever seen a candidate cheered down. ... The noise is simply terrific and it is all over the hall".[40]

Other, less traditional forms of research became important to the McNutt biography. For example, field research has been employed by more recent biographers as way to understand the role of place in their subject's life.[41] Accordingly, McNutt's boyhood home in Martinsville, Indiana revealed his comfortable, middle-class background and his social distance from the working-class boys who bullied him during his youth. A visit to the Philippine city of Baguio, where McNutt had holidayed to escape the heat of Manila during his years as High Commissioner and Ambassador, illuminated the privilege and splendor of American imperial officialdom that helped isolate McNutt from the aspirations of average Filipinos. Libraries and museums in the Philippines also proved helpful since multinational, as well as multi-archival, research has become the norm among historians who now write "international", as opposed to "diplomatic", history. "Collec-

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38 Donald Carmony Oral History, July 8, 1985, 6, Center for the Study of History and Memory (CSHM), Indiana University (IU), Bloomington.

39 "Ensign in Dutch," *Philippines Free Press*, November 26, 1938, p. 27.

40 Radio broadcast of Paul V. McNutt's address to the Democratic National Convention, July 18, 1940, Call Number LWO5326—R5B3, Title 18844244, Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Record Sound Division, LC.

41 To understand the geography and domestic space of the White House – where a number of close friends had lived with Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt – Blanche Wiesen Cook obtained a tour of the family quarters from First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton. See Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, *II*, p. xiii. For his biography of the American Revolutionary John Adams, David McCullough took the time to explore sites in Philadelphia. See David McCullough, *John Adams,* New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001, p. 655. And when McCullough, for his biography of Truman, asked if he could duplicate Truman's dash down the corridors of the Senate after Truman had learned of FDR's death, the historian of the United States Senate responded: "Only if I can come too". See McCullough, *Truman*, p. 994.

tions of state and diplomatic papers in Manila", the historian Nick Cullather has observed, "are unique in Southeast Asia for their scope and accessibility".[42] The papers of President Manuel Roxas and the diplomat Carlos P. Romulo showed how both leaders responded to efforts by High Commissioner (and then Ambassador) McNutt to negotiate trade and military arrangements to keep the post-independence Philippines bound to the United States.[43] In addition to textual records, material artifacts – a part of another relatively new field, "material culture" – helped to illuminate aspects of McNutt's character. In the National Museum in Manila, a portrait by Fernando Armosolo captured McNutt's handsome appearance and confident demeanor. The picture showed McNutt seated in a plush armchair, attired in a dark suit, and facing viewers with the hint of a smile. He emerged from Armosolo's rendering as a statesman in the prime of his life.[44] To borrow an expression conferred upon one occupant of the White House – Warren G. Harding – McNutt looked like a president, even if he never became one.

Armosolo's portrait allows one to ponder McNutt as an individual, particularly his political ambition – his most discernible character trait – which led him to enter politics, seek higher offices, pursue the presidency, and become a player in larger historical fields. Here, the role of "place" is worth noting for McNutt began life as a striving Midwesterner. A native of Indiana, he was blessed with a range of talents and reared in a middle class home that valued hard work, education, and success. After graduating from Indiana University in 1913, McNutt, like many ambitious youths from his region, headed east; he enrolled in Harvard Law School and earned his L.L.B. in 1916. He returned to Indiana to become a partner in his father's law firm. But Harvard had left its mark. McNutt liked to visit the office of a lawyer-friend in Indianapolis and survey the skyline of the city. "It seemed to please him to identify some of the buildings in his line of vision with structures on the Harvard campus".[45] After living near Boston, he soon became tired of life in Indiana. The chance to become an instructor of law at IU, in the spring of 1917, and then his enlistment in U.S. Army during World War I, provided means of escape, albeit only temporary ones.[46] Eventually, McNutt entered academic politics, serving as dean of IU's School of Law between 1925 and 1933. Veterans' politics followed as he won election as state and national commander of the American Legion. Elector-

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[42] Nick Cullather, *Illusions of Influence: The Political Economy of United States-Philippine Relations, 1942-1960,* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994, p. vii.

[43] "He is a friend of the Filipinos and commands their confidence", Roxas wrote of McNutt, in an overtly sentimental view. Manuel A. Roxas to Jacob M. Avery, October 26, 1945, box 1, series I, Manuel A. Roxas Papers, Main Library, University of the Philippines (UP) Diliman.

[44] *The National Museum Visual Arts Collection,* Manila: The National Museum of the Philippines, 1991, p. 49.

[45] Jack Alexander magazine article, "Paul McNutt 'It Would Be Kind of Nice to Be President, Wouldn't It?'" box 178, Raymond Clapper Papers, LC.

[46] Blake, *Paul V. McNutt*, p. 1-8; "War Brings Bride and Laurels to M'Nutt," *Indianapolis Times*, May 17, 1933, p. 5.

al politics came next, when McNutt sought and attained the Indiana governorship in 1932. Thereafter he moved into the realms of national and international politics by accepting a succession of posts from FDR and Truman: High Commissioner to the Philippines (two separate stints), Administrator of the Federal Security Agency, Chair of the War Manpower Commission, and Ambassador to the Philippines.

As McNutt ascended in American politics, he had to deal with a greater number of issues, many of them integrative – or reflective – of recent trends in biography. An emphasis on gender is one example. McNutt's marriage proved conventional, with Kathleen playing a domestic and supportive role as Paul advanced in politics – a profession she detested.[47] Kathleen so disliked politics that she resisted the idea of becoming an activist first lady in the mold of Eleanor Roosevelt.[48] If the McNutt marriage exemplified traditional roles, Paul came to back expanded opportunities for women. His daughter, after all, pursued a career by joining the Department of State. And his most trusted lieutenant at the Federal Security Agency was Mary Elizabeth Switzer, a path-breaking female policymaker who moved to the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in 1953 and later served as U.S. Commissioner of Vocational Rehabilitation.[49] Most important, the shortage of workers during World War II led the ever pragmatic McNutt to espouse jobs for women during and after the war. In 1945 McNutt, speaking as Chair of the War Manpower Commission, asserted that "Rosie the Riveter" no less than "Joe the Riveter" had earned the right to employment in the postwar economy.[50]

Issues related to class, race, and religion informed McNutt's career as well. Unlike many New Dealers, McNutt earned a reputation for being anti-labor when he used National Guard troops to quell a pair of strikes during his years as governor of Indiana. Like many New Dealers (such as FDR), he took a minimal approach toward expanding the rights for African Americans. As governor of Indiana, McNutt dispensed patronage jobs to blacks and, during his years at the War Manpower

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47 Kathleen McNutt's dislike of politics was not unique – it mirrored that of First Lady Pat Nixon. See Mary C. Brennan, *Pat Nixon: Embattled First Lady*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011, p. 38, 96.

48 In March 1940, Kathleen McNutt attended an annual event hosted by the National Women's Press Club. Eleanor Roosevelt was there and she spoke, as she had since 1933. Afterward, a reporter asked if Kathleen could imagine addressing these reporters "for eight consecutive years". "Why", she replied, "it never occurred to me to think I might have to". Ruby A. Black to Eleanor Roosevelt, March 13, 1940, folder: 1940, box 2, Ruby A. Black Papers, LC.

49 Edward D. Berkowitz, "Rehabilitation: The Federal Government's Response to Disability, 1935-1954", Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1976, p. 250. At the time of her retirement in 1970, Switzer was "the women executive with the largest responsibility in the Government". "Mary Elizabeth Switzer Dies, Retired Official of H.E.W., p. 71," *New York Times*, October 17, 1971, p. 77.

50 Paul V. McNutt, "Women in War and Peace," no date, 1945, box 5, Speeches, Radio Addresses, Interviews, and Statements of Chairman Paul V. McNutt, Records of the Chairman of the War Manpower Commission, Record Group (RG) 211, National Archives at College Park (NACP), Maryland.

Commission, he backed production-line employment for African Americans, attacking the "color line" in industry as "a line against democracy".[51] But, like FDR, he did not advocate legislation to eradicate bias in employment, voting, and public facilities. Interestingly, McNutt's record regarding refugees extended beyond that of many New Deal-era officials, including FDR. As High Commissioner to the Philippines from 1937 to 1939, McNutt helped 1,300 Jews secure visas to flee Nazi Germany and settle in Manila. McNutt's recently revealed action with respect to refugees has revived interest in him, provoking questions about why he extended help to Jews during a time of rampant Anti-Semitism.[52] To decipher the reasons behind McNutt's humanitarianism, his somewhat routine correspondence with Jewish leaders and occasional references to Jews (and religious tolerance) in speeches now carry added weight.

McNutt's speeches proved valuable for understanding his political philosophy, which rested on the idea of security – a theme emphasized in the latest scholarship on the New Deal, World War II, and Cold War.[53] McNutt defined security as government-sponsored protection "against major hazards and vicissitudes of life", a phrase also invoked by FDR.[54] To promote economic security, McNutt, as governor, supported old-age pensions, unemployment relief, and Social Security. In so doing, he emerged as a quintessential New Dealer. Late in 1936, FDR summarized the aim of his first term as providing "security for people so that they would not individually worry, security for their families, security for their homes, a greater security for their jobs".[55] As the historian David M. Kennedy has stressed: "Job security, life-cycle security, financial security, market security, however it might be defined, achieving security was the leitmotif of virtually everything the New Deal attempted".[56] A biography of McNutt reinforces the argument that security was the conceptual thread running through the New Deal and subsequent federal policies, foreign and domestic, during the years immediately following the Great Depression. As war loomed in Asia and Europe, national security moved to the forefront of FDR's agenda and into McNutt's speeches. In 1939, McNutt envisioned a world in which the individual was protected not only from

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51 George Q. Flynn, *The Mess in Washington: Manpower Mobilization in World War II,* Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979, p. 154.

52 Dean J. Kotlowski, "Breaching the Paper Walls: Paul V. McNutt and Jewish Refugees to the Philippines, 1938-1939," *Diplomatic History*, vol. 33, no. 5, 2009, p. 865-896.

53 McNutt's speeches, more than his letters, proved revealing; since he wrote these addresses, they conveyed his thoughts on literature, philosophy, and human nature as well as foreign affairs and domestic politics.

54 "Address of Paul V. McNutt, Governor of Indiana, at the Banquet Honoring Thomas Jefferson", Martinsville, Indiana, April 24, 1935, box 15, Paul V. McNutt Papers, Lilly Library (LL), Indiana University, Bloomington.

55 William E. Leuchtenburg, *The New Deal and Global War*, New York: Time/Life Books, 1964, p. 37.

56 Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear*, p. 365.

"poverty and want" but from international aggression and "the violent disruption of the ethical ideals incorporated in his cultural heritage".[57]

World War II expanded the concept of security, for the federal government and for McNutt. As the war approached, McNutt pegged the Federal Security Agency's health, welfare, and job-training programs to efforts to bolster the nation's defenses.[58] The activities of the FSA embody what the historian Elizabeth Borgwardt has called the "core idea" to emerge during World War II: an "integrated vision of 'security.'" According to Borgwardt, "Roosevelt's Four Freedoms elegantly expressed the assumption that economic security supported political stability, in an international projection of the ideology and values that underpinned the domestic New Deal". Americans, after securing a more "decent" society at home, fought to protect and extend that society abroad.[59] McNutt's thoughts on security encompassed foreign as well as domestic policy. Earlier than most Americans, he sensed the threat posed by dictatorships and urged greater expenditures on arms.[60] Throughout his career, he held a realistic perspective on international relations. Stemming from his leadership of the American Legion, McNutt regarded disarmament treaties and efforts to promote peace by outlawing war as misguided for they underestimated the determination of nations to pursue their own self-interest. Faced with such realities, America had to be engaged in international politics. As the high commissioner in Manila during the 1930s, McNutt urged the U.S. government to retain the Philippines as an outpost of American power rather than grant the colony independence and leave it vulnerable to Japanese imperialism.[61] The seemingly aggressive designs of the Soviet Union during the 1940s and 1950s, along with earlier aggression by Germany, Italy, and Japan, confirmed in McNutt's mind the need for the United States to maintain its defenses and check the ambitions of dictators.[62] McNutt's thoughts on – and connection to – foreign policy allows one to internationalize his life and legacy.

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57 "Address by the Honorable Paul V. McNutt, Federal Security Administrator, City and County Teacher's Association, Louisville, Kentucky", November 24, 1939, box 17, McNutt Papers, LL.

58 McNutt and his staff believed that healthy people made better workers and soldiers and that "social and economic security … is related to national defense". Mary E. Switzer speech at Howard University on "The Work of the Federal Security Agency in National Defense," March 10, 1941, folder 177, box 14, Mary E. Switzer Papers, Schlesinger Library (SL), Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

59 Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World*, p. 280-281 (all quotations).

60 McNutt to W.J. Patterson, November 17, 1928, box 4, McNutt Papers, LL.

61 In 1937 McNutt proclaimed that "America cannot leave the Orient today without serious loss of prestige and without further endangering world peace". See Paul V. McNutt to Roy W. Howard, December 11, 1937, folder: 1937 Philippines, box 133, Roy W. Howard Papers, LC.

62 "One cannot quarantine a land against tyranny and persecution", he wrote in 1942. "The world is one. If aggression stalks the people of the earth, no land, no person is immune". McNutt to Abba Hillel Silver, January 14, 1942, box 11, Records of the Federal Security Administrator: General Classified Files, 1939-1944, Alphabetical Series, RG 235, NACP.

McNutt's cynicism about human nature and idealism about the capacities of a well-led democratic state underlay his approach to security. He understood that the avarice, aggression, and dishonesty exhibited by governments originated with individuals and filtered upward. To use his own words, McNutt lived through such "violent disruptions" as two world wars, the Russian Revolution, and the Holocaust, in addition to the reemergence of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, the trauma of the Great Depression, and the beginning of the Cold War. On a more personal (or biographical) level, he had endured harassment by bullies during his boyhood, attacks from Republican opponents, and jealousy from FDR's intimates. McNutt thus recognized that humans were prone to act irrationally, irresponsibly, maliciously, and violently. But he, like FDR, also knew that a democratic government that was attuned to the needs of average people could dampen the appeal of radicalism, revolution, and war.[63] Put another way, a benevolent State would make human existence, rather than humans themselves, less harsh.[64]

Emphasis on the concept of security leads one back to McNutt the individual, especially his failed ambitions and unfulfilled promise. Under a different set of circumstances, he might have become a major leader of postwar liberalism. With his anti-communism, support for the New Deal, realistic approach to international affairs, advocacy of military preparedness and a strong national defense, and grasp of the underside of human nature, McNutt was an archetypical Cold War liberal. He believed that the so-called Welfare/Warfare State was the means to provide economic security for Americans at home and national security for America abroad. Following World War II, he backed President Truman's policy of containment, the idea behind which was to safeguard the U.S. homeland by befriending and protecting nations on the periphery of the Soviet Bloc.[65] McNutt's contribu-

[63] McNutt looked at a world struggling through a "long crisis" that included the Great War, the rise of dictatorships, and the Depression. To him, the "heart of the crisis" lay neither in "laws" nor "institutions of government" but in "the will and the purpose of men". People in Russia, Italy, and Germany, McNutt said, had become insecure – "frightened", "hysterical" and "demoralized" – and such fear had overturned the existing "social order" in those lands. Under Roosevelt, however, America had taken a different path, under which the government engaged in a "bold experiment" to marshal the nation's "untold resources". McNutt asserted that the "scope", "spirit," and "vitality" of the New Deal had made Americans "confident of our power to provide for own security." Untitled speech by Paul V. McNutt in Noblesville, Indiana, no date, folder: Speeches 1935, September 18, box 15, McNutt Papers, LL.

[64] The men and women of Roosevelt's administration differed from Progressive-Era reformers in that they exuded less optimism about the perfectibility of man (Prohibition, a cause of many Progressives, was an early casualty of the New Deal) and greater faith in the ability of the state to manage the economy and to check human impulses. See Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940*, 339 and Michael E. McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920*, New York: The Free Press, 2003, p. 317-318.

[65] See Dean J. Kotlowski, "The First Cold War Liberal? Paul V. McNutt and the Idea of Security from the 1920s to the 1940s," *Journal of Policy History*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2011, p. 540-585.

tion to America's Cold-War defense perimeter in the Pacific occurred during his stint as Ambassador to the Philippines, when he negotiated a treaty under which the United States gained access to military bases in its former Asian colony. Yet, for all his ability and accomplishments, McNutt never became president. FDR's pursuit of a third term removed McNutt's chance for the presidential nomination in 1940, and FDR's choice of Wallace for vice president effectively killed McNutt's hopes for national office. In subsequent years, McNutt's job at the War Manpower Commission proved immensely complex, as both the military and civilian sectors of society competed for precious human resources. As chair of the commission, he faltered, and his political star descended.[66]

REFLECTIONS

Without doubt, writing a biography of a secondary figure such as Paul McNutt entails difficulties. Biography still has detractors who see it as straight-jacketed by narrative imperatives and a rigid chronological structure. Nevertheless, the genre seems to be back in fashion. It has been defended anew by scholars who appreciate its unique contribution to political and policy history. "The human equation does matter", the diplomatic historian Theodore A. Wilson insists. "The views espoused and the actions taken by individuals remain central to understanding how and why policies are enunciated and implemented (or not)".[67] Biography also has regained respectability among professional historians who have used gender, race, class, place, and internationalization to enrich history in general and biography in particular. And studying secondary figures can force a historian to shift focus, reconsider the parameters of chronology, and either reconfigure or confirm important political and ideological paradigms such as "security" which became salient in McNutt's life, career, and speeches as well as in American statecraft during the middle decades of the twentieth century. Finally, the allure of biography remains strong, perhaps more than many academics realize. A while back, a friend of mine dismissed the research topic of a job candidate on grounds that the person was "writing just a biography". Yet, what genre of book was this colleague then working on? A biography.

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66 Cullather, *Illusions of Influence*, p. 52-59; Susan Dunn, *1940: FDR, Willkie, Lindbergh, Hitler—The Election Amid the Storm*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013, p. 12, 123-124, 135, 142, 146-147; Flynn, *The Mess in Washington*, p. 9.

67 Theodore A. Wilson, "Introduction: Individuals, Narratives, and Diplomatic History," in *Presidents, Diplomats, and Other Mortals: Essays Honoring Robert H. Ferrell,* Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007, p. 1. Wilson understands the role of individuals in shaping history, for he wrote the standard account of the meeting between Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston S. Churchill that led to the Atlantic Charter. See *The First Summit: Roosevelt and Churchill at Placentia Bay, 1941*, rev. ed., Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991.

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ABSTRACT

'You're Writing About Who?':
Studying Political and Policy History through Secondary Figures

Biography, once a denigrated field among academic historians, is undergoing a revival, at least according to a recent issue of the *American Historical Review*. For a long time, it has been enticing to write life stories of "the greats" – monarchs, presidents, and even dictators. More recently, with the emergence of social and cultural history, "the grunts" – ordinary people who made possible mass-based movements for change – have begun to receive their due. But what about those in-between the greats and grunts, particularly leaders in the contemporary era who never made to the top of "the greasy pole," to invoke Disraeli's famous phrase.

Drawing examples from my forthcoming biography of Paul V. McNutt, an American politician who helped shape events during the era of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry S. Truman, this article explores the merits and demerits of writing about secondary figures, that is, supporting actors in larger political dramas. Studies of such men and women make inviting topics – and a natural fit at university presses, especially state and regional ones – partly because their lives and impact have been overlooked by earlier scholars. Usually, secondary figures have left behind a cache of papers from which the historian can begin to reconstruct their stories. Biography as methodology remains inherently integrative; it allows one to combine traditional political history with more recent trends in historiography, such as emphases on the importance of gender, "place," and the "internationalization" of history. At the same time, however, the anonymity of many secondary figures can prove frustrating as biographers struggle to explain, justify, and secure funding for their research topics. Tracking down sources also can be difficult, involving considerable time and expense in traveling to local, state, national and overseas archives.