



PROJECT MUSE®

LBJ's American Promise: The Voting Rights Address (review)

Mary C. Brennan

Southwestern Historical Quarterly, Volume 111, Number 4, April 2008, pp. 465-466 (Review)

Published by Texas State Historical Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/swh.2008.0066>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/408451/summary>

them. She provides a great service by helping the rest of us begin to understand the motivations and goals of the men and women who join the movement.

Despite all of this intriguing information, however, the book is ultimately frustrating. Schlatter's assertions are logical, supported by some evidence, and make sense. The problem is that she does not always use the evidence to its full potential. She has a habit of going back and forth in time, of mentioning individuals as if the reader recognizes their roles, and of relying too heavily on secondary sources. Most importantly, she raises questions which she does not fully address. She promises in the introduction that she will connect "masculinity" with the western ideal and that she will show how this played an essential role in the relationship between the West and the extremists. Although she mentions this briefly, she never fully develops that connection.

Texas State University—San Marcos

MARY C. BRENNAN

LBJ's American Promise: The Voting Rights Address. By Garth E. Pauley. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007. Pp. 190. Illustration, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 1-58544-574-6. \$29.95, cloth; ISBN 1-58544-581-9. \$16.95, paper.)

According to Garth Pauley, Lyndon Johnson's Voting Rights Address, commonly referred to as the "We Shall Overcome" speech, has been heralded by many scholars as one of the great speeches of the twentieth century. In the speech, Pauley explains, LBJ "made the principle of equal voting rights meaningful and compelling through a public vocabulary of shared interests, motives, and aspirations in order to secure passage of the" voting rights act (p. 18). Although Johnson had been planning and working on a voting rights bill for at least six months, Pauley contends that the president used the public's outraged reaction to Alabama State Troopers' violent assault on peaceful civil rights demonstrators in Selma to build support for the bill. The overwhelmingly positive response to Johnson's address as well as the relatively quick passage of the Voting Rights Act indicated that his message had been received by both the American public and congress.

Pauley is at his best when he is analyzing the speech. His explanations of word usage and phrasing, of mythic connections and images, and of the problem-cause-solution formula open the eyes of readers ignorant of rhetorical theory to the deeper meanings of the text. By detailing the importance of the symbols in the text, Pauley argues that the speech appealed to the American public's subconscious civic values. In other words, the images turned the speech into something more than a partisan call for legislative support. Rather, Pauley contends, Johnson's address was a timeless challenge for Americans to rededicate themselves to their essential beliefs about their country.

Pauley also made a good effort to try to set the speech into its larger context. He has a chapter chronicling the history of disfranchisement and the complexity of the constitutional issues involved. Recognizing the important part the Selma demonstrations played in preparing the general public to absorb Johnson's message about the need for voting rights legislation, Pauley tells the story of the Selma campaign in almost a day-by-day fashion. He does not overlook the political situation

and so includes a chapter explaining the background from the perspective of the Johnson administration. Utilizing extensive research in the LBJ Presidential Library files, Pauley also traces the authorship of the text. He revises the administration's contention that LBJ played a major role in shaping the speech by convincingly arguing that Richard Goodwin and other aides crafted the speech without presidential guidance.

There are a few problems with the book, however. Pauley worked so hard proving that LBJ had little to do with the actual writing of the speech that it becomes problematic in a later chapter when he constantly refers to LBJ as the author. Perhaps this is a common technique in rhetorical analysis, but I found it confusing and contradictory. More importantly, the main argument of the book seems vague. Was his point to reiterate the significance of the speech? To prove it was a great speech? To put it into its broader context? If the latter, then to what end? To a certain extent, Pauley attempts all of these goals, but does not sufficiently emphasize any one of them. He did, however, make me think about the speech in a different way than I had before. In that sense, Pauley accomplished what he set out to do.

Texas State University-San Marcos

MARY C. BRENNAN

The Offshore Imperative: Shell Oil's Search for Petroleum in Postwar America. By Tyler Priest. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007. Pp. 332. Illustrations, map. Graph, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 978-1-58544-568-4. \$39.95, cloth.)

Tyler Priest boldly states that "Shell Oil was the undisputed leader in moving oil and gas exploration and production operations into deep waters" (p. xi). This unqualified statement shapes *The Offshore Imperative*. Using extensive interviews, internal publications, newsletters, technical papers, and publications such as the *Oil and Gas Journal*, Priest weaves a well-documented story about the evolution and growth of Shell Oil, the American subsidiary of Royal Dutch/Shell. Priest sketches the early history of Royal Dutch/Shell, bringing the reader up to the end of World War II with abbreviated stories about such issues as the Tidelands dispute and the anti-trust legislation that threatened Shell's ability to operate in the U.S. Finally, he leads the reader to understand that Shell Oil was caught in a power squeeze as its onshore production declined and the parent company, Royal Dutch/Shell, enforced a gentleman's agreement preventing Shell Oil from exploring in Asia or Europe. This agreement left Shell with only one place to search: the Gulf of Mexico.

Priest begins his argument by describing how Shell built research laboratories in Houston and New Orleans. In these secret laboratories, Shell invented the technology to find and produce oil—especially oil in ever-deeper locations around the Gulf. First, Shell's researchers improved their seismic technology. Next with the help of marine engineers, Shell built experimental floating platforms to house drilling rigs capable of drilling in deeper waters. Finally, Shell geologists improved the chances of hitting oil by pinpointing hydrocarbon "bright spots" in geologic formations (p. 130). Using these revolutionary technologies, Shell surged ahead of other companies and made Shell the leader in deep water exploration and pro-