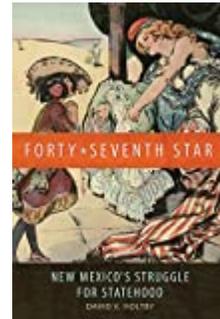




**David V. Holtby.** *Forty-Seventh Star: New Mexico's Struggle for Statehood.* University of Oklahoma Press, 2012. xix + 362 pages. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-4282-1.



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## Our New Mexico—The 47th Star

Many of us may view the prospect of reading a history about the coming of New Mexico statehood to be as exciting as reading a book on the New Mexico tax code. It appears not the sort of book that flies off the table into the hands of the tourist or, even, of the average citizen. Happily, all such expectations are confounded in David V. Holtby's account *Forty-Seventh Star: New Mexico's Struggle for Statehood*.

The book is a minutely detailed account of how New Mexico won its statehood over seemingly impossible odds. Some of the odds are well known. They include a poor and undeveloped economy, unstable and often corrupt politics, and the ethnic and religious bigotry of the day. Less known are the machinations in Washington DC that had to do with the balance of power between Republicans and Democrats, Gilded Age laissez-faire capitalists versus reforming Progressives, and two competing theories of government that went back to our founding—that is, Jeffersonian versus Hamiltonian government. All of these elements make the story rich, even fascinating.

That all this could play out in the story of little old New Mexico is captivating; the characters are vivid and many. Holtby tells the events leading up to statehood in such a way that its playing-out never becomes an exercise in minutiae, but the resolution seems always to remain in doubt and suspense, even while we know how the story ends.

The story begins with one of New Mexico's favorite characters, the colorful and forceful Colonel Thomas Benton Catron. Catron had, in concert with the Santa Fe Ring, made himself not merely wealthy but the largest landowner in the United States. The Ring and Catron controlled New Mexico politics for years when he went to Washington DC as territorial delegate. Having controlled New Mexico with unquestioned authority, Catron overestimated his influence and charm in Washington, a city that enjoys frustrating desires. Nor did it help that he predicted openly in the newspapers his ability to bring statehood to New Mexico. Further, his brash, *à free-wheeling* style did not sit well with the congressmen he dealt with, nor was it of help that he had backed President

William McKinley's rival in the Republican convention of 1896, even while the territory voted Democratic. In short, what Holtby describes as Delegate Catron's "boorish behavior," made him ineffective as the pleader for New Mexico, thereby rendering our most powerful citizen incapable of realizing the one truly important item on his agenda.

This episode is a fascinating beginning of a portrait of the United States Congress and how it operated at the time. First, one can see how a man such as Catron might not have been able to translate his heft and influence from a territory, where he had direct control, land, and money, to a distant capital where his sway came up against men of much greater influence, wealth, and experience. Second, one comes to know the characters of the congressmen in Washington, both good and ill. These were men who had power, loved power, knew how to use power, and knew how to misuse power. They were big and visionary. They were small and mean-spirited. They were decent and honorable. They were devious and grasping. That they accomplished anything of worth is, in the end, remarkable and heartening.

The case against admission stood on two legs. The first leg was the purely political question of whether the state would vote Democratic or Republican, thus, whether the state would stand, for instance, behind the gold or silver standard. The second leg was the question of whether the people of New Mexico were worthy of statehood. Today it is this second leg that remains the most interesting.

The most powerful man in the U.S. Senate, Nelson W. Aldrich of Rhode Island, used Senator Albert J. Beveridge of Indiana to block and frustrate New Mexico's admission to the Union. Aldrich's opposition was based primarily in that New Mexico was likely to vote Democratic, and Democratic power had frustrated and infuriated Aldrich when Grover Cleveland had been president. Beveridge's objection was more visceral: he thought New Mexico unfit, and that, like the Philippines and Arizona, it ought to remain a dependency until it proved otherwise. As Senator Knute Nelson of Minnesota put it, "[i]n respect to language, in respect to education, in respect to intelligence, and all that goes to make up the leading and prominent characteristics of a self-governing American citizen, the people of that Territory were to a large extent deficient" (p. 60).

The next episode began with the emergence of Progressivism, both in Washington and in New Mexico. Progressivism is the name given to the movement to clean

up politics after the excesses of the Gilded Age, when raw money and power acted as they saw fit without regard for either seemliness or outcome. The most famous name in Progressivism is, of course, Theodore Roosevelt. His counterpart in New Mexico—though not always his friend—was Miguel A. Otero, who had been appointed territorial governor in 1897 by President McKinley.

The story, thus far, has been fairly straightforward. The Santa Fe Ring, and other inside and outside parties, had wanted New Mexico to become a state because it would further their capital interests and raise the value of their landholdings. Spanish Americans, the people Holtby calls "Nuevomexicanos," and the rest of the population, wanted New Mexico to become a state as a matter of dignity and honor. The Old Guard Republicans in Washington had kept these hopes at bay because of politics and because of the prejudices of the times.

Here, the story becomes more complicated. Roosevelt had a fondness for New Mexico because Otero had recruited a significant number of Rough Riders for Roosevelt during the Spanish-American War. New Mexicans had made up three of the eight Rough Rider companies that fought in Cuba. Roosevelt and Otero both believed in cleaning up politics. Progressivism, if anything, was idealistic. This mutual belief in Progressivism sent Otero, New Mexico, and Roosevelt into unexpected opposition.

Roosevelt, as had McKinley, saw public service as an absolute moral enterprise, that corruption of any sort was not to be tolerated. To Progressives, public service was a sacred trust. In this, Otero concurred. However, Roosevelt believed that the future—and the West and, thereby, statehood—lay with "authentic men," men who showed forth, "right living, personal responsibility, character, obligation, fortitude" (p. 69). The fruits of vigorous manhood would be to prove New Mexico worthy of sovereignty. As Holtby, puts it, statehood was a test.

Because of New Mexico's reputation for chaotic and obscure politics, Roosevelt did not believe this test had yet been passed. This placed him in the odd position of facing off with the reformist Otero, yet agreeing with Beveridge. Beveridge, whose view was more political, harsher, and oriented toward eastern capital interests, saw Nuevomexicanos as, simply, unfit.

New Mexico's fitness, was, in fact, open to question. The territory was huge, sparsely populated, and economically dependent upon a few wavering industries—farming, lumber, railroad, and the extraction of coal and metals. Roosevelt hoped to encourage eastern farmers

to move to the territory to exploit its soil, but even with government-sponsored water projects, little ever came of it. Dry farming, which was pushed, was successful only during wet periods and inevitably came to a bad end. Beyond the economy, men such as Beveridge could point to the chaotic factionalism of New Mexican politics, to corruption, and to violence (Arizona and New Mexico had the highest homicide rates in the United States, and four attempts were made either to kill Governor Otero or to kidnap his son).

The next stage in the adventure was played out over the question of jointure: would New Mexico and Arizona enter the Union as one state or as two? This question revolved around two points. The first was political—would the state(s) be Democratic or Republican and, would all the patronage devolve to one capital, Santa Fe? The second was racial—would Arizonans accept being Siamesed with Hispanic New Mexico? They would not. Arizona voted down jointure overwhelmingly in 1906, but not before it gave the forces of intolerance another high-profile swipe at Spanish Americans and their culture.

The larger question of the time was the question of federalism. Until the forces of Progressivism arose, government was seen as a small and abstract entity that took little part in most people's lives. If the federal government had any role to play at all, it was to encourage capital and business and to build infrastructure, although to a limited degree. Certainly, the government was not intended to interfere with people's lives nor to be an active force. In contradistinction, federalism expected government to be active, to grow, to take charge, to develop the nation and its people, and to contribute to the nation's well-being, not merely to watch benignly while others worked.

In New Mexico, federalism took the form of such water-works projects as Elephant Butte Dam and numerous other irrigation projects. One might also argue that aspects of this kind of intervention had begun earlier, in 1887 for instance, when the government undertook the Americanization of Indians and to bring them to full citizenship as farmers.

The federalism argument fascinates especially because the argument goes on—perhaps even rages—today. On one side of the argument stood the Jeffersonians, advocates of personal independence, the yeoman entrepreneur, states' rights, and the right to do with one's possessions as one sees fit. On the other side stood the Hamiltonians, advocates of a collective public interest

overseen, protected, and advanced by government and government regulation.

In New Mexico, as nationally, federalism/Progressivism also meant a reforming attitude of absolute rectitude and intolerance for graft or special dealing or, as Governor George Curry said in 1907, "fair treatment for all and special favors for none" (p. 209). Among other targets, this was intended as a rebuke to Albert Bacon Fall, who was later convicted in 1929 in the Teapot Dome scandal. Fall was an advocate of developmental capitalism, within which government fostered opportunities for businesses and corporations to enter markets and to use natural resources, while using public money for such large-scale projects as irrigation and railroads. In other words, Fall supported the use of public money for private development, not unlike President Porfirio Diaz in Mexico, where Fall had interests. On the other side of the equation stood officials like Ormsby McHarg, the federal investigator, who saw corrupt dealing and fraud in land-grabs and in mine and timber leases. The irony of the situation was that the forces that stood against New Mexico becoming a state used the reforming zeal of McHarg to paint New Mexico as hopelessly corrupt, or, as a stenographer on an investigatory mission put it, "uncouth, illiterate, unclean ... morally, mentally, and physically the very lowest type of humanity" (p. 222). After Roosevelt's failure to create a state of New Mexico, President William Howard Taft, who had broken with his former mentor, took up the cause. Taft had been governor of the Philippines and had a fondness for the people and for the Spanish language. Beveridge (and the damning report he had issued) alienated the president as, ironically, had Catron and Fall by insulting Taft on his visit to New Mexico. Taft, by the time of his election in 1909, was dismayed that, despite the many and serious accusations made, no trials had taken place, let alone convictions.

In 1910, when the U.S. Senate took up railroad rate relief, Republican senators supported statehood for New Mexico and Arizona in return for Democratic support of regulation of railroads, telephones, and telegraphs. Naturally, there was much in the way of negotiations and problems to be resolved, including what their constitutions ought to say, but in the end it was Senator Beveridge who led the Enabling Act legislation to success, at the explicit instructions of President Taft.

New Mexico's constitution, as had many western states' constitutions before, curbed the power of the government and protected the rights of Hispanics in poli-

tics, language, voting, and education. The constitution did not include segregation of schools along ethnic or racial lines. It is notable that after Taft signed the proclamation of New Mexico's statehood on January 6, 1912, our first governor was William C. McDonald, a Democrat who had been backed by a coalition of reform Republicans and clean-government Democrats.

The State of New Mexico is a state born of the triumph of the Progressive Era over the Gilded Age, the triumph of conservation over exploitation by private interests, and the triumph of public interest over closed politics and closed systems. As noted, the ironies are many. New Mexico's statehood was promoted by Theodore Roosevelt but also by William H. Taft; opposed by the astand patâ Republicans, yet passed by them; fought by Progressive forces, such as prohibitionists, and passed over their objections; promoted by Thomas B. Catron and Albert Fall, but passed despite them. The era of our coming of age encapsulated the two great political forces

that have always dominated the American discourse—Jeffersonianism and Hamiltonianism—forces that are still in contention, with no signs of resolution.

The story of New Mexico's becoming a state is the story of the era. It is not the story merely of Arizona and New Mexico; it is the story of all the greatness and all the faults of the time, statewide and nationwide. Thus it is that the story is so much more interesting than one would expect. David Holtby has produced a first-rate history, minutely and extensively researched and footnoted. This history, *Forty-Seventh Star*, is not a popular history, it is an academic history, but as with all really good academic works, it may be appreciated by anyone who has an interest in the subject, for it is neither obscure nor pedantic. Rather, it is lively, remarkably free from the contamination of politics, and filled with both fascinating men and interesting events. It is both objective and personal, cool yet involved, and is well worth the reader's time.

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