



**Bob Short.** *Everything is Pickrick: The Life of Lester Maddox.* Macon, Ga: Mercer University Press, 1999. xvi + 400 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-86554-662-2.



**Reviewed by** Gordon E. Harvey (Department of History & Government, The University of Louisiana at Monroe)

**Published on** H-South (August, 2000)

## The Caring Segregationist

To those unfamiliar with southern history the name Lester Maddox means little. Within the topic of southern segregationist, presidential candidate governors, we mostly think about George Wallace. But Wallace's segregationist colleague, Lester Maddox, deserves equal attention. The flamboyant and controversial Georgia governor, constantly overwhelmed by the odds and the political establishment in his state, amazed everyone by becoming an unlikely governor. Bob Short, a marketing consultant and former Maddox aide, presents us with his view of his close friend.

It has been a terrible oversight of southern history to neglect Maddox for so long. He has always been remembered for one thing –chasing civil rights demonstrators away from his Pickrick restaurant in Atlanta with a pistol and a band of supporters wielding pick handles. Maddox is also an important piece of the region's struggle to cope with the end of segregation in the late 1960s and early 1970s. But Maddox was not just a segregationist reactionary. Once in office, he passed a slew of reforms that brought Georgia government, especially state prisons, into the twentieth century.

Short is clearly enamored with his subject, perhaps too much so. But he still gives us an entertaining portrait of this tenth grade dropout ne'er do well and successful restaurateur. Maddox had no education, no government experience, and little support from the Georgia Democratic party. But he had determination and diligence, enough to win the governor's office in 1966 and the Lt. Governor's chair in 1970. It was an amazing feat.

But Short wants the reader to not make conclusions about Maddox based on the pick handle experience alone. Maddox was not a racist, he argues, merely a segregationist. This is a fine line to walk for someone with so close a connection to Maddox. Short argues unconvincingly that Maddox did not hate blacks, he merely defended the rights of property owners against the federal government. Maddox believed that if he did not want to serve blacks in the Pickrick, he did not have to because the Pickrick was his property. Such a weak argument failed to fly in 1954, 1964 and 1965, and it does not leave the ground in 2000. Short writes, "I believe that the real Lester Maddox lies within the man, not the politician." Short laments the pickhandle albatross that still hangs

around Maddox's neck. Yet all Maddox did or became was based on his public views and actions, not his private beliefs. Furthermore, Short's recollections seemed framed around the public pick-handle Maddox. And public figures are judged on their words and actions in office and not on their private unspoken beliefs.

Whether Short likes it or not, Maddox became what he was because of one thing and one thing only the Pickrick pick handle incident. It gave Maddox instant, and free, popularity and name recognition that helped him when he ran for Governor. Without the pick handle incident, Maddox is not elected governor. Albatross or not, Maddox benefited from the incident. The title of the book says it all: *Everything is Pickrick*.

The 1966 gubernatorial election in Georgia was one for the books. The election pitted the surprising Democratic nominee Maddox against Republican Howard "Bo" Callaway the sitting congressman for Georgia's third district and a states' righter in his own right. Callaway had voted against the Civil Rights Act of 1964 but, says Short, spoke softer language about race, using a "vocabulary of couched euphemisms and respectable synonyms" (85). This thinking man's segregationist seemed too much for Maddox to defeat. But not all Georgians supported the two candidates. A write in campaign to draft former Governor Ellis Arnall threw the election into the Georgia State Assembly, where after a highly publicized legal battle, Maddox was elected governor by the overwhelmingly Democratic legislature.

What makes Maddox an enigma is what he did while in office. Short's book is strong in highlighting Maddox's positive reforms, if ignoring some of his negative actions. The new governor declared that all Georgians should be able to talk with their Governor, so he instituted "People's Day." Once a month, any Georgia citizen could visit the governor's office and make their views known. Amazingly, People's Day led to significant prison reform, as four black teenagers escaped from prison to visit the governor. Impressed that they escaped to talk with their governor, Maddox reformed state prisons in Georgia in grand fashion, and implemented a highly successful early release program for teen offenders. Maddox also instituted the Committee of 1000, which encouraged state employees to blow the whistle on their department heads if they saw any violation of state ethics or the law.

Short's book tries hard to portray Maddox as a peo-

ple's man and reformer who did not hate blacks, but just did not want races to mix; a kind of benevolent segregationist, who only stood up for the rights of property owners to bar blacks from their property. But one glaring omission from Short's book proves that Maddox's segregationist views extended into the public realm as well. Short says nothing about Maddox's role in trying to prevent public school integration. This is odd, as Short was the governor's press secretary and administrative aide for fifteen months, and a long time friend. It was Maddox himself who called for two highly publicized summits of southern governors to address school desegregation in 1969. Meeting in Mobile and Atlanta several southern governors opposed to school integration met and condemned the federal government for tinkering with public education with integration orders.

Perhaps even more disturbing is Short's lack of archival sources. He only cites a collected volume of Maddox's speeches for primary sources, although there are some very interesting interviews with former Georgia politicians. Save for the interviews, Short cites no archival source. For this to be the "warts and all" portrayal of Maddox that Short promises, the book disappoints.

Southern historiography has been lacking a balanced, scholarly examination of Lester Maddox, and I am afraid it still is. But Short's book partially fills the void in the Maddox story. The case of Lester Maddox reveals a complexity in this period of southern history that needs further exploration. The late 1960s and early 1970s served as a turning point in southern politics. Southern politicians were forced to finally cope with the tremendous growth in black voter registration. Those that failed to adapt saw political careers shortened. Maddox gained office twice on his segregationist ideology, but was a capable reformer. His reforms reveal that segregationists of the late 1960s could enact progressive measures, while remaining true to segregation. Although Lester Maddox enacted progressive reforms, his racial ideology doomed any future political success. As the electorate changed, Maddox failed to change with it. His political career went the way of his beloved Pickrick.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-south>

**Citation:** Gordon E. Harvey. Review of Short, Bob, *Everything is Pickrick: The Life of Lester Maddox*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. August, 2000.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4391>

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).