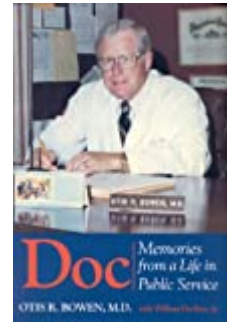


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Otis R. Bowen, William Du Bois Jr.** *Doc: Memories from a Life in Public Service.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000. x + 232. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33767-2.



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**Published on** H-Indiana (February, 2001)

## Preserving Doc's Image

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Otis R. Bowen ranks among the most powerful and admired politicians in modern Indiana history. The power was gained through winning twenty of twenty-one primary and general elections between 1952 and 1976. During that period Bowen won election to the Indiana House of Representatives in 1956 and worked there for fourteen years, capped by a six-year reign as speaker of that chamber. He became governor in 1972 and was subsequently the first in that office to serve consecutive four-year terms since the adoption of the state's 1851 constitution. He concluded his public career as President Ronald Reagan's Secretary of Health and Human Services between 1985 and 1989. The admiration came from Bowen's careful and consistent cultivation of an old-fashioned, commonsensical family practitioner persona who tried to treat his statewide constituents and the elderly nationwide as if he was still working out of his doctor's office in the small northern Indiana town of Bremen. Now more than eighty years old, Bowen seeks to record his personal and political life, and the memoir is valuable to that extent. Yet it sheds little light on In-

diana's history during a time when Bowen wielded considerable influence over the state's public affairs.

Indeed, what is most striking about this account of a life in public service is its general lack of thoroughness about that career. Instead, Bowen devotes an extensive amount of space to his personal history. At least one-third of the entire book is consumed by it; widowed twice, Bowen's longest chapter extols the three women who have been married to him. In these passages Bowen provides a cliched, anecdotal account of his poor-but-proud upbringing, when family members and schoolteachers taught him to work hard and be honest, thrifty, and persistent. He remembers the grades he received in high school, college, and medical school (most of them A's). After an internship in South Bend, Bowen joined the U.S. Army in 1943 and served in the 1945 Okinawa campaign; he literally quotes from his discharge papers and itemizes the immunization shots he received.

When Bowen finally begins to recount his public career, he asserts that he went to the Indiana General Assembly with "no personal agenda" (p. 72), leaving unanswered the question of why he sought office in the first

place. As he notes the exact voting tallies in each of his elections to the Indiana House of Representatives and the governor's office, Bowen offers what amounts to a partisan legislator's brief on a wide range of decisions, ranging from the passage of a right-to-work law in the late 1950s to the enactment of a bill creating a partially unified city-county government for Indianapolis in the late 1960s, the freezing of property taxes in the early 1970s, the upgrading of Indiana's parks and recreation system, and the establishment of a medical malpractice law in the mid-1970s that limited monetary damage awards. During this narrative Bowen drops hundreds of names, including an apparently obligatory mention of his encounters with former Indiana University men's basketball coach Bob Knight. Bowen is generous in his praise of virtually all of them, pointedly criticizing only two figures: the longtime Republican Party kingmaker of Indianapolis, L. Keith Bulen, who temporarily frustrated Bowen's bid for governor, and former attorney general Theodore Sendak, who Bowen describes as "an ultra-right-winger" (p. 137). The *Indianapolis Star* also receives some criticism, despite the newspaper's largely sympathetic coverage of his administration.

After a post-gubernatorial stint as a faculty member at the Indiana University School of Medicine, Bowen became Secretary of Health and Human Services in 1985. He describes his confirmation and lists every one of his

predecessors as well as every member of Reagan's Cabinet, but he says little about policy decisions save his admittedly flawed and ultimately failed campaign for catastrophic health care insurance for Medicare recipients. Bowen clearly did not enjoy his Washington experience.

Predictably, Bowen concludes that he has "absolutely no regrets" (p. 219) about his public life. Left unexamined, however, are issues that the author could have reflected upon much further, such as the impact of school consolidation and desegregation, the scandals afflicting state government in the mid-1950s and late 1970s, the long-running battle over legislative reapportionment during the 1960s and early 1970s, the powers behind and the consequent impact of property tax and medical malpractice reform, Bowen's momentous push for a greater state share of the national GOP's "New Federalism" spending program, and the battle over Indiana's ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment. *Doc*, in sum, would have benefited from a firmer, more insistent editorial hand, one that would have directed Bowen toward political battles, differing perspectives, and policy analyses. Indiana's recent history would have been that much further enriched as a result.

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**Citation:** John M. Glen. Review of Bowen, Otis R.; Jr., William Du Bois, *Doc: Memories from a Life in Public Service*. H-Indiana, H-Net Reviews. February, 2001.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4888>

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