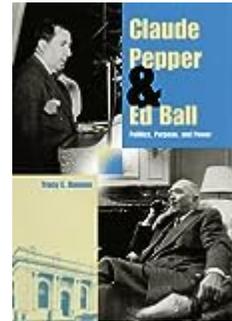




Tracy E. Danese. *Claude Pepper and Ed Ball: Politics, Purpose, and Power.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000. xiii + 320 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-1744-0.



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An Earlier Florida Clash

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Few people paid close attention to Florida politics until the ill-fated 2000 presidential election. And over the past nine months or so it has been hard to escape mention of the state and its election woes, or measures to reform them, by news anchors, disgruntled voters, and political pundits. It seems as if a large microscope has been placed over Florida's politics and government to expose the state's ill-working voting machinery, as if no other state in the union has had voter problems. But such has not always been the case. Indeed, Florida politics and history have received relatively little attention from political scientists and historians. Ridiculed more than researched, and eschewed more than examined, Florida politics in the twentieth century is finally getting its due.

In this solid volume, Tracy Danese, a practicing attorney and lobbyist, has provided an illuminating study of the shaping of modern Florida political history through the conflict between two of the state's most powerful men: Ed Ball and Claude Pepper. No two names illustrate the course of modern Florida political history more than Ball and Pepper. Pepper, a son of poverty from Alabama,

worked himself into law school and later into a political legend. Ball by marriage and fortune came to control the Alfred I. duPont empire. Their divergent political interests not only provide us a glimpse of twentieth-century Florida history, but a microcosm of twentieth-century American history as well.

For all practical purposes, 1920s Florida was the nation's last frontier. As the West quickly populated after 1900, leaving the nation with no obvious outlet for the last strains of Manifest Destiny, Florida beckoned. Relatively barren in terms of population and construction, the state loomed as a haven and lure for land speculators who really did wish to sell swampland. With large tracts of unused and affordable land a frenzy of real estate speculation, known simply as the "Florida Boom," began in the state by the early 1920s. This boom, writes Danese, shaped and molded the Florida in which Ball and Pepper began their respective paths to power as well as what ultimately would become their clash over the political direction of both the state and the nation.

Born in 1900 in Dudleyville, Alabama, and raised in poverty, Pepper grew to adulthood through several so-

cial and political reform movements: the agrarian movement, the progressive movement, and ultimately the New Deal culmination of these reform impulses. Pepper's rural Alabama populist roots and his experience with the harshness of single-crop agriculture led him to become an avid supporter of the Great Depression recovery programs of Franklin D. Roosevelt. A dedicated New Dealer, Pepper made his way to Florida by way of a boom-time land company that brought him to Perry in the western portion of the state. His rise to prominence in Florida began soon after his arrival.

Ed Ball's path to influence came by way of marriage to Jesse Ball duPont, the sister of the wealthy magnate, Alfred I. duPont. When duPont died in 1935, Ball became the trustee of the massive duPont estate, which comprised the largest conglomeration of businesses in Florida. Why Florida? Thanks to Florida's prohibition of its personal state income tax in 1924 (a ban still in effect, by the way), the state became an attractive place, a "Taxpayer's Paradise," for the nation's wealthy to base their operations and avoid state income taxes in other states. In duPont's case, he fled New Jersey for warm, sunny, tax-free Florida. Ball inherited duPont's hatred of taxes and later led a losing battle against the institution of the Florida corporate income tax in 1971. He also despised FDR, his New Deal programs (which Ball saw as nothing short of socialist in nature), and FDR's most visible Florida advocate, Claude Pepper.

Ball and Pepper made their way to power through the same medium: politics. Ball worked behind the scenes, controlling politicians, while Pepper sought and won public office himself. Their divergent paths crossed frequently as the dedicated liberalism of Pepper clashed with the conservatism of Ball. The grand showdown between the two came in 1950. That year, Pepper ran for the US Senate against Miami Republican Congressman George Smathers, who was strongly supported and funded by Ball. By 1950, the New Deal coalition was coming under attack. Truman had won a close re-election bid in 1948 and, as the social tensions surrounding the Cold War intensified, die-hard liberals like Pepper came under increasing fire from conservative opponents such as Ball and Smathers.

Pepper had supported many of Truman's more liberal programs, including national healthcare. He also had been apologetic about America's foreign policy toward the Soviets, particularly in his opposition to the Truman Doctrine. Such positions left him open for attack from the right. Danese attempts unconvincingly to

split hairs in defense of Smathers' McCarthy-like attacks on Pepper, explaining that McCarthyism was built on the premise that most of the accusations handed down by McCarthy and his minions were not grounded in fact. With this caveat in mind, Danese argues that Smathers could not be McCarthy-like in his tactics since his accusations about Pepper's "pinkness" and liberalism were indeed true. Danese seems to assert that Ball and Smathers did not realize that McCarthy-like attacks on Pepper, whether true or not, would elicit the same response as false accusations. Yet Danese contradicts his own argument on page 212, where he writes that Smathers' attacks on Pepper "evoked the full array of fears and emotions spawned by" the Cold War and the Red Scare.

Danese is at his best when explaining the perilous line Pepper tried to walk between his national ambitions and his need to remain grounded in Florida to keep his constituents happy. "Red Pepper," as his opponents called him, saw himself as "the new Henry Wallace" and charted a course to gain a positive national image and reputation for liberalism. But to be the national leader of the left, Pepper had to maintain a platform from which to hold forth. Florida's Senate seat was such a platform. Achieving both tasks became impossible, however, as Pepper lost his seat to Smathers by more than 60,000 votes.

Danese also excels at dissecting the machinery of the Florida land boom, the period in which Ball and Pepper rose to prominence. The workings of the boom mirrored those of the New York Stock Exchange and provide a glimpse as to why each collapsed in the 1920s. To speed the sale of land, land speculators used binders, or written promises to convey. Something short of an official deed, binders allowed for the quick trading of land titles without having to wait for the legal deed machinery to work. Like buying on the margin did for the stock market, so binders contributed to the land boom. In 1925 alone, more than 174,000 conveyances were recorded. Investors could buy land on margin with no more than 15-20 percent down for ninety days. In the interim the investor tried to sell his land at a higher price before his margin was called. One indication of the boom, and an excellent example of the depth to which Danese researched this book, was that one edition of the *Miami Daily News* (Miami was the center of the boom) in 1925 ran 504 pages, and was mostly real estate ads. The state had more than 25,000 real estate men in 2,000 offices. The land boom led to the growth of auto usage and a corresponding increase in highway and railroad construction. By the 1920s highway construction, writes Danese, was the principal function of Florida's state government. Ed Ball was deeply in-

volved in the finance side of the boom, building the powerful Florida National Bank chain.

Tracy Danese has given us a scintillating story of two Florida power brokers in the first half of the twentieth-century. They shaped the course of Florida's economy and political development while waging war against each

other. Claude Pepper and Ed Ball serve as a microcosm of the larger national debate over the course of the nation from the 1920s to the 1970s. Writing the story of Ed Ball and Claude Pepper through the lense of twentieth-century US history, Danese shows us how one southern state could affect, and be affected by, the larger course of national political, economic, and social development.

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