rather limited view of regional politics taken from a narrow perspective.

Despite its limitations, this is an important book written in an engaging style that makes its subject accessible to a much broader audience than most scholarly monographs. Walker’s careful mining of an array of personal political papers, court proceedings, and newspaper accounts underscores the need for additional studies of the region’s moderate politicians.

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Chicago’s high-rise public housing projects are almost gone. Once seen as visionary solutions to deteriorating slums, they quickly became monuments to the failed federal housing policies of the mid-twentieth century. The buildings were torn down over the past fifteen years amid a heavy bout of recriminations and renewed concerns about where and how to find permanent shelter for impoverished Americans. D. Bradford Hunt’s book holds policy makers accountable; it was, as its title states, the “blueprint,” or the federal housing legislation written by progressive reformers and liberal New Dealers, which created the communities that by the 1960s were derided as “warehouses” for the city’s African American poor. Hunt pinpoints where housing policy went wrong while sketching the broad social forces that shaped the policy and undergirded the half-century of unethical management of Chicago’s public housing. In many ways, what he has written is less historical evocation than a heartfelt analysis of policy gone wrong.

This is a deeply researched study of the making of urban public housing policies from the New Deal to the close of the twentieth century. Hunt is the first scholar to gain full access to the Chicago Housing Authority’s (CHA) official records. The book does not, he acknowledges, explore the experiences of public housing residents. Rather, he demonstrates with tragic precision that tenant experiences had little or no impact on the public officials who managed the city’s housing developments. Even the well-organized tenant associations of the late 1960s and 1970s could not influence Chicago officials. It was policy makers in Washington and public officials in Chicago who determined living conditions in high-rise public housing; they are the deserved focus of this study.

The U.S. Housing Act of 1937 was, in Hunt’s terms, the “blueprint” for public housing. The legislation resulted from a compromise between progressive reformers and modern housing planners. (Here the author deviates from studies that suggest real estate interests also influenced the legislation.) Slum reformers had long fought to improve living conditions in Chicago’s impoverished neighborhoods. For them, the solution lay in tearing down overcrowded tenements and dilapidated frame houses. Modern housing planners, influenced by modernist architecture movements in 1920s Europe, sought to build new communities on undeveloped land similar to the state-sponsored projects in Germany and Great Britain. The compromise led to tearing down much of the city’s older poor communities, particularly a once-vibrant African American neighborhood. The final bill included a complex subsidy system, rent ceilings, and, in a nod to slum reformers and the private real estate market, “equivalent elimination,” requiring clearance of one slum unit for each newly built public housing unit. Each of these amendments would play a part in the failure of high-rise public housing in Chicago.

Ultimately, however, poor management of high-rise developments combined with racial politics in Chicago contributed mightily to the tragedy. For example, longtime CHA secretary Elizabeth Wood fought for integrated public housing in the 1940s and 1950s, only to be ignored and finally dismissed by public officials bowing to the racist demands of white homeowners. Racial segregation left black Chicagoans with few housing options and filled the public high-rises with impoverished black families. The book’s starkest portrait is of Charles Swibel, the infamous CHA board chairman (appointed to the board in 1956 and its leader for nineteen years) known for his “appalling stewardship” (p. 227). By 1975, one among many studies found “numerous code violations, including exposed wiring, garbage in public areas, pervasive rodent and vermin infestation, defective incinerators, missing banisters, and damaged walls” (p. 220). The 1937 Housing Act placed too much faith in local control of public housing. Hunt argues, but there is a difference between the reformers’ misguided faith and the rank racism and corrupt management that pervaded the CHA in the 1960s and 1970s.

The construction of high-rise public housing was not “a conspiracy to ‘warehouse’ the low-income poor in unattractive ‘vertical ghettos,’ though this was certainly the end result,” (p. 142) Hunt writes. He wants to move away from simplistic explanations that blame impoverished tenants or, at the other extreme, label inept policymakers “racist.” Yet blaming New Deal housing activists for unanticipated changes in housing markets, for the loss of industrial jobs that pushed many among the black working class into poverty, or for the crime wave linked to the 1990s crack epidemic seems a bit unfair. Hunt recognizes this. But in emphasizing policy, he downplays the impact of corrupt management, race politics, deindustrialization, and a host of other mid-twentieth-century social forces. Moreover, the market failure argument promoted by Edith Elmer Wood was, perhaps, more prescient that Hunt believes. Wood, a housing reformer and Columbia Ph.D. in economics, contended that the private market could not provide decent, affordable housing for all Americans. A force behind the 1937 Housing Act, she called for government construction of housing for the urban poor—a call that remains urgent today.
The history of high-rise public housing in Chicago is a history of government policy gone tragically wrong. The lesson here is not that government intervention in the housing market was inappropriate. Rather, unprincipled local officials, budget-conscious bureaucrats, and racist neighborhood organizations turned well-intentioned policy into scandalous public housing. Government should and could better serve urban residents.

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Of the four federal land management agencies, the Bureau of Land Management has probably received the least scholarly study. In his book, James R. Skillen provides an insightful, comprehensive history of this somewhat unknown agency, one that oversees more land than the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, or U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Well into the twentieth century, the federal government’s land management policy consisted of disposal to prospective miners, ranchers, or farmers unless the land was reserved in the country’s national parks, forests, wildlife refuges, or military reservations. After World War II, however, it became obvious that disposal or reservation would not work for all areas, particularly the arid lands of the West. Consequently, in 1946 Congress combined the General Land Office and the U.S. Grazing Service into the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). In chartering the new agency, though, Congress did not provide direction on how to combine the functions of its antecedents. This lack of direction led to an ambiguity that, according to Skillen, has pervaded the agency’s entire history. This ambiguity has been manifest in a constant internal tension between decentralized control that empowers local district rangers (who usually safeguarded mining and ranching interests) and centralized control that empowers Washington bureaucrats (who pushed the agency toward their political parties’ ends). Since the Reagan administration, those parties have emphasized the differing interpretations of “conservation” that permeate their entire approach to land management: for Republicans that has meant local control with continued grazing and expedited mining and energy production; for Democrats, centralized control with new nature preserves.

Skillen divides the agency’s history into three periods, discussing them over seven chapters. The first one extended from agency creation through 1970. This period saw the agency earn a nickname as the “Bureau of Livestock and Mining.” Defending the grazing permits they had long held, western ranchers and their elected representatives combined forces with mining companies (themselves defending the ready access to federal lands that the 1872 Mining Law provided them) to dominate the new bureau’s agenda.

The influence of these two industries was tempered somewhat in the second era, which extended from January 1, 1970, to Ronald Reagan’s inauguration in 1981. With passage of the country’s environmental laws, federal agencies now had to consider the impact of their actions on the environment, and citizens were empowered to influence government decision making. Initially resistant to the new laws, the BLM lost a series of lawsuits regarding its compliance with them. Eventually, however, BLM leaders saw that these laws could provide the professionalized workforce they had increasingly sought. Resolving another legal defeat, the agency hired hundreds of range scientists, ecologists, archaeologists, and other specialists to help it comply with the new laws. Using their skills, the new staff substantially improved agency legal compliance, and in so doing, they tempered—somewhat—the pervasive industry influence over agency policies. Congress itself pushed the agency to include more nature protection and recreation in its management when it passed the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, the BLM’s organic act. However, those new management considerations were, at best, weak partners with grazing and mining, which the new law did little to restrain.

Since 1980, the agency has been dominated by pendulum politics, with the ambiguity in its mission providing the fulcrum from which differing presidents have promoted their agendas. For example, Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt pushed the agency toward ecosystem management—giving it a new nickname, the “Bureau of Landscapes and Monuments”—while President George W. Bush succeeded like no previous chief executive in pushing the agency toward energy extraction—the largest boom in BLM’s history.

Skillen concludes that “[a]t the beginning of the twenty-first century . . . the BLM is still an agency in search of a mission” (p. 193). He goes on to recommend that Congress should establish an advisory commission to address the BLM’s changing policy landscape. Past reviews have prodded the agency toward adopting more contemporary understandings of how its lands should be managed. Skillen warns, though, that a new commission, while it could help the agency update its management, will not singlehandedly enable the agency to escape its ambiguity. In other words, the past haunts the present.

Overall, Skillen’s book is a masterful critique and historical summary of an agency that is usually overlooked by the academy. This study would make an excellent contribution to any course on federal land policy, in part because it illustrates that the debates permeating BLM history mirror in many ways the issues affecting the histories of other land management agencies. All of these debates are generally about more or less land use, and all are usually carried out in the venue of politics.

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