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“THE AMBITIONS OF HAROLD STASSEN”

(book review)

Lawrence S. Kaplan’s *Harold Stassen: Eisenhower, the Cold War, and the Pursuit of Nuclear Disarmament* (2018) is a highly informative monograph describing the usually forgotten, yet extraordinarily influential career of the book’s namesake, Harold Stassen. With this book the author, Lawrence S. Kaplan, professor emeritus at Kent State University, ensures that the legacy of the former Minnesota Governor, Naval Captain, and National Security Council member will no longer be lost in the shadows of other more prominent and powerful politicians of his time, such as President Dwight Eisenhower. Stassen lost the 1952 Republican Primary to Eisenhower in one of his fifteen attempts of seeking election to the office of President of the United States. Kaplan rightly feels that in the majority of the historical accounts on the early Cold War Stassen’s role and influence in American foreign policy has been largely overlooked.

Kaplan provides a thorough description of Harold Stassen’s remarkable political career which spanned more than two decades. In 1938 Harold Stassen was elected

Republican Governor of Minnesota at the young age of 31, a feat that Kaplan attributes to Stassen's intelligence, ambitions, good looks, and good luck. As Minnesota's "Boy Governor" Stassen rose to national fame after successfully navigating the issues of labor strikes, budget fallacies, and the introduction of Minnesota's first civil service law. This rapid emergence onto the national political scene, Kaplan writes, is what sparked Stassen's unrelenting drive to pursue higher political offices. In particular, he wanted to expand his political reach towards the realm that truly interested him the most: international relations.

It was specifically the pursuit of a Woodrow Wilson-inspired international peace and disarmament policy that captivated him. Kaplan argues that Stassen's dedication to political moderation and his ambition to pursue Republican liberalism with regard to international relations was uppermost in his mind. His foremost objective was to attain international disarmament and thus de-escalate the Cold War.

Stassen's ambition caught President Eisenhower's attention and it made the President appoint him successively as Director of the U.S. Foreign Operations Administration, the Mutual Security Agency and member of the National Security Council. While holding each of these positions, Stassen played significant roles in helping shape the United States' foreign policies in the early Cold War years. During this time Governor Stassen's career above all was characterized by his dedication to the pursuit of international disarmament, specifically nuclear disarmament. This is especially evident during his time serving as President Eisenhower's Special Assistant for Disarmament. Stassen worked closely with President Eisenhower to develop his Open Skies proposal which was to be presented at the 1955 Geneva Summit to break

the Cold War stalemate in a shift towards disarmament. Stassen's dedication to the pursuit of achieving total nuclear disarmament made Secretary of State John Foster Dulles give him the nickname "Secretary of Peace."

After eventually resigning from his government position in 1958, Stassen pursued the offices of Pennsylvania governor, various Congressional seats, and even President of the United States. Despite failing to achieve election to any of these positions, Kaplan still regards Stassen's political career aspirations, including his many failures, as indicative of Stassen's never-ending ambition and drive to influence the political agenda of the U.S.

Overall, Kaplan provides a detailed and thorough exposition of Stassen's mostly forgotten, yet important political career and his involvement in U.S. politics during the Cold War. While other authors may briefly discuss Stassen's influence on the national stage, Kaplan provides the depth that has been missing from many historical accounts. Kaplan also includes details about Stassen's career outside of his national security roles.

Kaplan does a tremendous job in providing far more information about almost all aspects of Stassen's career than have been available hitherto but he is clearly biased in Stassen's favor. Throughout the monograph when referring to a number of controversial issues, especially those during the Cold War, Kaplan always comes down on the side that supported Stassen. For example, when discussing Stassen's proposed Disarmament Policy of 1957, the author considers only the positive aspects and does so with praise and admiration, despite the policy's failure.

In terms of providing the most detailed narrative about Harold Stassen and his various roles in American politics during the Cold War, there is no better book to go to. Kaplan has written an outstanding historical account of a man whose influence no longer remains hidden in the shadow of more prominent American political figures of his time.

Lawrence S. Kaplan, *Harold Stassen: Eisenhower, the Cold War, and the Pursuit of Nuclear Disarmament* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2018).

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