

*Salmon P. Chase: A Life in Politics.* By Frederick J. Blue. (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1987. Pp. xiii, 420. Illustrations, notes, bibliographical essay, index. \$28.00.)

Salmon P. Chase, Free Soil senator, Ohio governor, secretary of the treasury under Lincoln, and chief justice of the Supreme Court during Reconstruction, never doubted his own importance to history. Yet despite leaving innumerable letters and diaries to document his career and encouraging two contemporaries, Jacob Schuckers and John Trowbridge, to write his biography, Chase has, until now, attracted only one scholarly biographer, Albert B. Hart in 1899. Twentieth century scholars of the Chase-era Supreme Court and the Civil War financial system have offered important new judgments of Chase's role; and with the recent appearance of a microfilm edition of Chase papers from University Publications of America, which should widen access to Chase's ideas still further, it has become more essential to have a modern biography of the man. Frederick J. Blue, who dealt extensively with Chase in his earlier book, *The Free Soilers*, has now answered this need.

Blue sees Chase as a man whose political ambition, while undeniable, has been exaggerated. Chase's real commitment, Blue believes, was to his ideals, especially antislavery, and his ambition was a means to achieving that important end. As a politician Chase was unusually honest and sufficiently naive that he could never organize the kind of national campaign necessary to win what he desired most, a presidential nomination. In the end Chase had to be content to be remembered as a hardworking administrator during a period of acute national crisis.

The strength of Blue's biography lies in its careful mining of the Chase papers. In other respects, however, it is surprisingly weak. The psychology of the man remains unexplored. Nor, despite the book's subtitle, is Chase's life placed in a broader political context. There is no discussion of the political values and culture that made it so difficult for Chase to realize his personal ambitions. Like John C. Calhoun in the South, Chase was a man whose beliefs did not accord well with any of the political parties of his day. While his independence repelled politicians for whom party loyalty and regularity were sacred, it also made him attractive as a candidate who might swing malcontents to the side of a weaker party. Chase, however, rarely won the loyalty accorded to more conventional partisans, men often far inferior to him in talents and character. It is this larger reason for the rejection of Chase that Blue fails to develop in what is otherwise a solid, political biography.

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