

*James A. Rhodes: Ohio Colossus*

By Tom Diemer, Lee Leonard, and Richard G. Zimmerman

(Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2014. Pp. 256. Notes, selected bibliography, index. \$34.95.)

In a curtain call after serving four terms as Ohio governor, James Allen Rhodes described to reporters his flamboyant sixteen-year presence as chief executive, the longest tenure in the state's history: "You're just gonna have to say in there Jim Rhodes is different. You only get that from experience. I'm not gonna change, no way."

Rhodes remained the coal miner's son who beguiled the state's wealthiest corporate contributors, its newspaper editors, and its voters, all of whom happily went along with his perfectly timed down-home cracker-barrel humor, his mercurial defiance of nuanced political ideology, his profanities, and his whip-cracking thrusts at opponents.

Rhodes could afford to be different, empowered as he was not only by his own wits but by border-to-border media seduced by his promises to give their cities whatever they desired in bond-underwritten bricks and mortar—a medical school in Toledo, a basketball stadium in Akron that was named the James A. Rhodes Arena, and numerous other handouts to urban leaders who figured it was a fair trade for their support.

With Rhodes, it was all about jobs in an economy that wasn't doing that badly anyway. "Profit," he declared to reporters who followed him around the state, "is not a dirty word in Ohio." But new taxes were

taboo. After all, he was the governor who promoted the idea of building a bridge across Lake Erie to shorten commercial travel time from northern Ohio to points in Canada—the Canadians turned it down, I was told at the time by a Canadian official, because Rhodes had wanted their country to pay for it.

On the surface (which served him so well), he found ways to ridicule his nay-sayers as opponents of progress. His favorite talking point was that if somebody built a barn a hundred feet from a planned expressway it would quickly be named a sacred historical site.

Quixotic, blustering, unreliable party activist and Ohio tomato juice hustler, Rhodes sneered at national conventions as useless pageantry. He went to them anyway to toy with national reporters thirsting for some lighter fare. "Conventions," he boomed in metallic tones, "are a waste of time and money. They should give everybody a postcard and mail in their votes." Underneath it all, Rhodes disliked reporters, but at daybreak he would call a newspaper editor to swell an ego or two.

The book's three authors—veteran Ohio political reporters Richard G. Zimmerman (deceased), Lee Leonard, and Tom Diemer—cover much of his history in straightforward journalistic fashion that makes the Rhodes saga

a political oddity to behold. They tell how he became wealthy through real estate profits, a ton of Wendy's hamburger stock, and other business ventures. They also relate how Rhodes fell from grace with late GOP national chairman Ray Bliss when he reneged on a promise to Bliss to hold back the Ohio delegation on the first ballot at the 1964 Goldwater convention. Rhodes released the delegation when he arrived at the airport; Bliss, a respected political straight-shooter, never trusted Rhodes again.

There was also a darker side to the Mr. Nice Guy governor, exposed by his decision to send the Ohio National Guard onto the Kent State University campus in May 1970, despite appeals by law enforcement officials who stood against the idea. He ignored them in the heat of a Republican senate primary against Robert Taft and called the student protestors "brown shirts." The rest is history—four fatally shot students and a dark day that was choreographed by Rhodes. I believe that side of Rhodes should have been treated more harshly in the book.

The authors do accept the challenge to reveal this strange happy warrior's jack-in-the-box career, which ended with his self-destructing bid for a fifth term as governor after his sec-

ond four-year interregnum between two back-to-back terms. At 77, he was haggard, spent, and failing. Even his closest advisors conceded that he had gone one campaign too many to satisfy his ego.

Curiously, Kent State University Press chose two of Rhodes's devoted political enemies—former governors Richard Celeste, a Democrat, and Robert Taft, a Republican—to write two forwards. Both men offer much-too-charitable views of Rhodes: In his bid for a fifth term, Rhodes assailed Celeste and his Austrian wife as "Nazi sympathizers," referred to the Celeste administration as the "most corrupt" in the state's history, and sizzled that Celeste had homosexuals in his administration.

Rhodes was as different as night and day. As he often responded to reporters: "I don't usually say yes or no." But he did breezily assure all doubters that "I'm for everything."

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