

ing proponent of Lech Walesa's Solidarity movement in Poland in the early 1980s, when scarcely anyone thought it would triumph, and when the foreign-policy establishment worried that open support of Walesa would provoke a Soviet invasion.

Kirkland and President Ronald Reagan agreed on Poland, but not on many other issues. Kirkland believed in the importance of organized labor at home, as a counterweight to corporate interests and as a voice for average Americans. He denounced as overkill Reagan's firings of the striking air traffic controllers in 1981, and fought the administration's anti-government strategy of tax cuts for the upper brackets and budget cuts for the lower. In a speech, Kirkland recalled the days when farmhouses lacked electricity, hookworm was widespread, and the elderly were destitute, "before government got on our backs" with the Rural Electrification Administration, the Public Health Service, and Social Security.

Puddington, vice president for research at the nonprofit organization Freedom House, takes us from South Carolina, where Kirkland grew up, to Georgetown University, where he studied foreign affairs, to his presidency of the AFL-CIO, where he sought to help unify the ranks of labor, to his battles with the Clinton administration over the North American Free Trade Agreement. The book closes with what Puddington calls the "coup" against Kirkland by labor dissidents who accused him of devoting too little time to organizing and too much to foreign affairs. Puddington notes dryly that while Sweeney has sharply curtailed the AFL-CIO's once-heroic involvement in foreign policy, he has had no more success than Kirkland in stemming the loss of union members.

This otherwise excellent book could have been improved in a couple of ways. For one thing, a reader will search long and hard to find any criticism of Kirkland. The rap on presidential candidate Walter Mondale 20 years ago—that he couldn't name a single issue on which he disagreed with organized labor—applies equally to Puddington's treatment of Kirkland. In addition, it would be nice to know more about the personal side of Lane Kirkland, including his family life. For

instance, five daughters are mentioned fleetingly in the early chapters, never to reappear.

But overall, at a time when organized labor is written off as a slowly dying special interest, Puddington does an admirable job of reminding us of labor's proud heritage, at home and abroad, as "the only mass constituency" within the Democratic Party "committed to mainstream American values, broad-based reform that transcended racial and gender lines, and a diplomatically engaged and militarily prepared America."

—RICHARD D. KAHLENBERG

TO DIE IN CUBA:

Suicide and Society.

By Louis A. Pérez Jr. Univ. of North Carolina Press. 463 pp. \$39.95

Cubans kill themselves roughly three times as often as Venezuelans, four times as often as Brazilians, and five times as often as Mexicans, according to the most recent statistics available from the World Health Organization. But that's nothing new. For most of its history, Cuba has had the highest suicide rate in Latin America, and one of the highest in the world. Why?

Ten years in the making, this fascinating illustrated cultural history answers that question by drawing on sources both scholarly and popular: official statistics, academic works, literature, suicide notes, newspaper clippings, even cartoons. Louis Pérez, a historian at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, maintains that most Cuban suicides aren't the product of mental illness. Rather, Cubans view self-destruction as a practical, rational way of exerting control over their lives—even if that control ends their lives.

"The recorded history of Cuba begins with suicide," writes Pérez. The legend of Yumurí—the tale of indigenous people leaping en masse over a precipice instead of surrendering to Spanish subjugation—became a founding narrative. In the 19th century, African slaves and Chinese contract workers on sugar plantations saw suicide as both a means of relief from brutal conditions and a form of resistance against their oppressors.

Resistance can also be more active.

Cubans have so romanticized death in battle, Pérez suggests, that it has become a form of suicide. Later in the 19th century, the nearly 30-year struggle for independence from Spain gave rise to a patriotic duty to sacrifice oneself. In “a vastly unequal struggle of civilians against soldiers, of machetes against Mausers,” Pérez writes, “the only advantage possessed by Cubans was the will to win and the willingness to die.” The prototypical figure is José Martí, whose fatal charge into battle atop a white horse Pérez calls a quest for martyrdom.

Six decades later, Fidel Castro urged Cubans to follow Martí’s example and accept the idea enshrined in the national anthem that “to die for the *Patria* is to live.” Che Guevara’s “suicide platoon” was so popular that soldiers not chosen for it would weep. Many urban revolutionaries carried cyanide pills in case of capture.

With the success of the Cuban Revolution, a new sense of optimism and collective purpose drove down the rate of suicides. But the suicide rate jumped back up in the 1990s, when the Soviet Union’s collapse sent Cuba’s economy into a condition rivaling the Great Depression. Some young people intentionally infected themselves with HIV, hoping to spend their last years in the relative comfort of the sanitariums where AIDS patients were quarantined. Even the Cuban exiles in Miami have a higher-than-average suicide rate, perhaps the product of despair over lives spent in eternal waiting.

Although the particulars vary, the basic story remains the same: Faced with unbearable circumstances, and urged on by a cultural discourse that presents self-destruction as socially acceptable, even desirable, Cubans kill themselves. To do so, they use whatever’s available. “Progress came to Cuba in the form of gas stoves, skyscrapers and bridges, trolley cars and passenger trains, all of which facilitated the act of suicide,” writes Pérez. After the revolution, guns, medicines, and household poisons became scarce, so Cubans turned to hanging and self-immolation. Pérez also sees a suicidal element in the *balseiros*, or rafters, who die trying to cross the Florida Straits. To throw oneself in

the sea is “to assert control over one’s life, an act of agency, even if . . . also a deed of self-destruction.”

Despite the occasional lapse into academic jargon, Pérez offers a highly readable, evenhanded look at Cuba’s tumultuous history through an unusual lens. And for a book about suicide, *To Die in Cuba* is surprisingly undreary. “Suicide was not necessarily a deed of hopelessness,” Pérez stresses. “On the contrary, under certain circumstances, it was undertaken as an affirmation of hope.”

—REBECCA A. CLAY

BECOMING JUSTICE

BLACKMUN:

Harry Blackmun’s

Supreme Court Journey.

By Linda Greenhouse. Times Books.

268 pp. \$25

Washington Post publisher Philip Graham once called journalism the “first rough draft of history.” In her book on Justice Harry Blackmun (1908–99), Linda Greenhouse of *The New York Times*—who has provided the best journalism out of the Supreme Court for more than 25 years—has given us, for both better and worse, a second draft.

Better: Greenhouse had early access to Blackmun’s voluminous papers, which include childhood diaries as well as Court documents. After a year immersed in the papers and in Blackmun’s 38-hour oral history, she has culled the newsworthy nuggets. There is a good bit of important history here, and Greenhouse thus achieves the goal she sets out in her prologue: “to extract from this immense collection . . . a coherent narrative of a consequential life.”

Worse: Readers expecting the insight and context that are the marks of strong biography will be disappointed. Greenhouse acknowledges that she ventured little outside the Blackmun papers. Justice Blackmun, who served on the Court from 1970 to 1994, remains enigmatic, while his contemporaries are undeveloped as characters. The lack of any notes is a shortcoming. In all, the “draft” is still rough.

Two stories lie at the heart of this book. The first is that of *Roe v. Wade* (1973)—in