

Britain. The leading contenders for the GOP nomination were all different flavors of isolationist: Senators Robert Taft and Arthur Vandenberg, of Ohio and Michigan, respectively, and Thomas Dewey, the famed prosecutor from New York State (shades of Eliot Spitzer!). It's astonishing to be reminded that former president Herbert Hoover—perhaps the strictest isolationist of them all—still entertained hopes of securing the nomination and retaking the White House.

Had any of these men captured the nomination, Peters argues, the Republicans would have made a major campaign issue out of any effort by FDR to aid Britain and set up a peacetime draft, perhaps thwarting the president. Willkie, by contrast, was a liberal internationalist, strongly committed to fighting Hitler.

The Indiana-born head of a Wall Street utility holding company, Willkie was a virtual unknown who had never held office and, in fact, had been a registered Democrat only the year before. The Washington wit Alice Roosevelt Longworth was on the mark when she quipped that his candidacy sprang “from the grass roots of a thousand country clubs,” and a small but influential band of media magnates openly promoted his cause, including Henry Luce of Time-Life. It's another unrecognizable characteristic of 1940 America that most of the news media were controlled by Republicans. Yet Willkie was anything but a polished Wall Streeter. A shambling bear of a man in a rumpled suit and “country” haircut, he possessed enough brute magnetism on the podium to convert prominent political figures to his cause in an instant.

In 1940, Peters was a 13-year-old boy from West Virginia whose lawyer father took him along to the Democratic convention in Chicago, and he has the perfect politics-in-his-bones pitch for narrating these events and capturing the texture of the times. Those were the days when the national political conventions, soaked in sweat and booze, really mattered, so much so that fist-fights could break out on the convention floor—and that was at the *Republican* conclave, held in Philadelphia.

After Willkie's triumph, on the sixth bal-

lot, the campaign itself was something of an anticlimax. The candidate came out in favor of the draft, which Congress approved on September 14, and kept quiet about FDR's hugely controversial plan to send Britain 50 aging but desperately needed U.S. destroyers, though he sharply criticized the president for using his executive authority to carry out the deal without congressional authorization. As FDR's lead widened in the polls, Willkie did resort to playing an isolationist card by warning that the president would lead the country into war, but the draft and destroyer deals were already done.

Peters is persuasive in arguing that any other GOP nominee would have made it very hard for FDR to help the British and win approval of conscription, with consequences that are unknowable. This is marvelous history—speculative, vividly written, engrossing—of a kind, sad to say, that few professional historians dare to attempt.

—STEVEN LAGERFELD

LANE KIRKLAND:

Champion of American Labor.

By Arch Puddington. Wiley.

342 pp. \$30

In the 2004 election, the Democrats were once again seen as more likely to favor the economic prospects of the average American, while the Republicans were seen as doing a better job of defending national security. But in the past, as Arch Puddington reminds us, one didn't have to choose. Lane Kirkland was both “a New Dealer and a Cold Warrior,” and one of the last of the Cold War liberals.

Although Kirkland (1922–99) is often remembered for presiding over a decline in the ranks of organized labor, he also stood for principles that American liberalism might do well to remember. As the president of the AFL-CIO from George Meany's retirement in 1979 to John Sweeney's challenge in 1995, Kirkland valiantly fought the transformation of liberalism from, as Puddington puts it, a philosophy of “economic growth, equal opportunity, and an informed patriotism” into “a corrosive combination of cultural radicalism, identity politics, and Cold War neutralism.” Kirkland was a lead-

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. KAHLBERG

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.