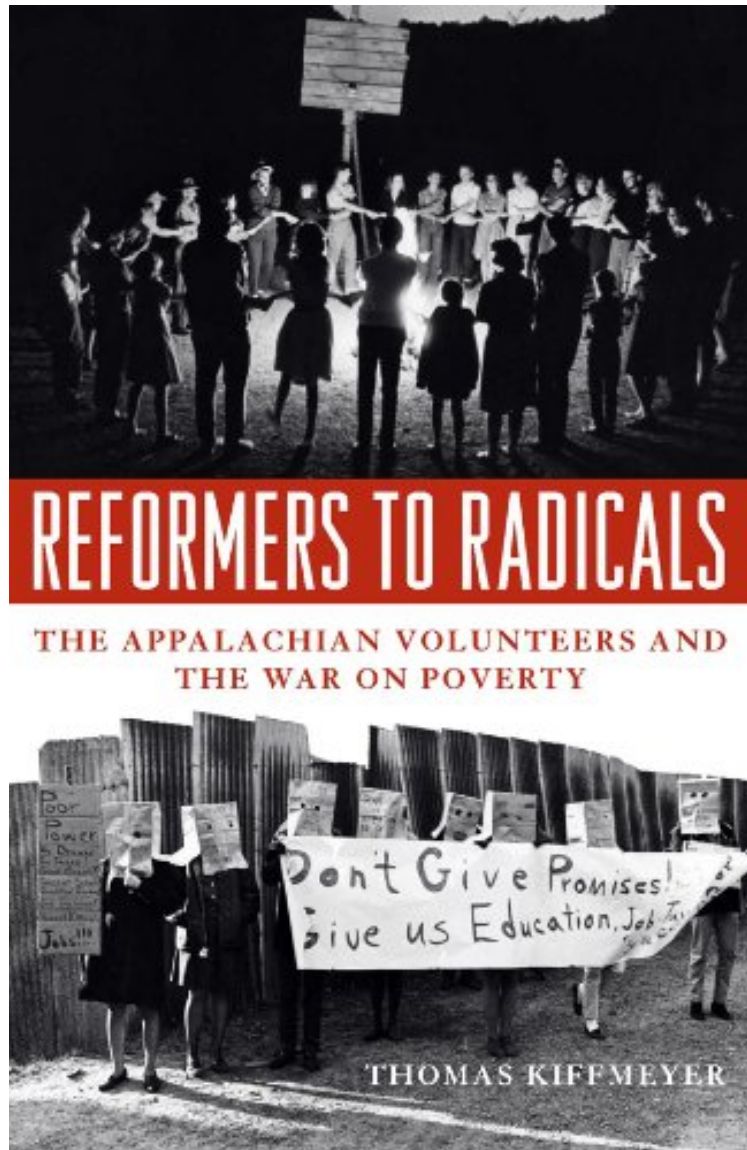


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Reformers to Radicals: The Appalachian Volunteers and the War on Poverty

Thomas Kiffmeyer

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Thomas Kiffmeyer : Reformers to Radicals: The Appalachian Volunteers and the War on Poverty before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Reformers to Radicals: The Appalachian Volunteers and the War on Poverty:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A very worthwhile history...By Brandon KirkIn Reformers to Radicals: The Appalachian Volunteers and the War on Poverty, Thomas Kiffmeyer offers an incredibly detailed

history of the Appalachian Volunteers (AV), an uplift program that operated during the late 1960s as part of President Johnson's War on Poverty. Initially, between 1964 and 1966, the AV, indoctrinated with notions of Appalachian "otherness" laid down by earlier visitors to the region and heavily influenced by the idea that Appalachian culture determined its problems, sought to alleviate poverty in Appalachia by tackling its dysfunctional culture, its inadequate educational system, and its geographic isolation. Later, between 1966 and 1970, the AV, having decided that Appalachian poverty was not caused by its culture but instead by political powerlessness on the part of its residents, attempted to integrate mountain people into the nation's political economy (as opposed to its culture) by challenging the status quo and confronting local elites and county power structures. While early efforts by the AV were moderately successful, later ventures were more controversial. The AV ultimately collapsed in 1970 when it abandoned its focus on local people, asserted its own agenda, and attempted a frontal assault on powerful adversaries.

Reformers to Radicals is for the most part a chronological account of a significant anti-poverty organization active in Appalachia during the 1960s. The bulk of Kiffmeyer's work is devoted to the early history of the AV group. Actually, he begins with its parent organization, the traditional and rather conservative Council of the Southern Mountains (CSM), founded by John C. Campbell in 1913 and headquartered in Berea, Kentucky. During the early 1960s, the CSM tried to alleviate poverty in the mountains by holding book drives, distributing food, renovating homes, winterizing schools (insulation, paint), and tutoring children and adults. At this juncture, poverty warriors thought that by changing the culture of Appalachia (particularly its fatalistic beliefs, poor education, and lack of community spirit), they could effectively solve the poverty problem. The AVs, established as an arm of the CSM in 1964, maintained a similar approach toward mountain people and culture. They correlated what they perceived as a lack of interest in education on the part of mountain people to poverty; as a result, AVs focused on education, particularly school renovation and tutorial programs, during their early years. Kiffmeyer provides countless examples of school improvements: adult education, preschool, kindergarten, drama programs, summer schools, curriculum enhancement projects, school refurbishing, field trips, book drives... Of note, "community development" efforts such as the one at Mill Creek, Kentucky, largely failed because of unclear notions of and disagreements as to what exactly constituted such development. Throughout this early phase of the AV, most of its volunteers were Appalachian natives; later, however, during the summer of 1965, the organization became less Appalachian in its membership. It was during this second phase that the AV began to encounter more resistance, primarily from school superintendents, welfare departments, and county officials. The changing nature of the AV ultimately led to its separation from its parent organization, the CSM, in 1966. Thereafter, AVs shifted their focus away from Appalachian culture and toward its political structures to explain and remedy poverty among mountain residents. One of the more interesting parts of *Reformers to Radicals* comes in Kiffmeyer's excellent summary of the historiography regarding the reasons for Appalachian poverty. The two primary schools of thought—those employing the culture of poverty model and those employing the colonialism model—are central to his story. The culture of poverty model, largely fashioned by the local color writers of the 1890s, proposes that Appalachian poverty is firmly rooted in its generally deficient culture. The colonialism model, first hinted at by Harry Caudill in the 1960s, suggests that Appalachian poverty, while perhaps related to native culture, is primarily caused by industrialists who monopolize extractive industries, exploit natives, and control local politics. According to Kiffmeyer, the former model heavily influenced the AVs during their initial uplift efforts between 1964 and 1966, while the latter model influenced them in the final years of the decade. Yet *Reformers to Radicals* goes beyond these two models; Kiffmeyer offers the views of more recent historians and writers: Gaventa, Eller, Waller, Shifflett, Whisnant. While acknowledging the merits of all, he insists their accounts are insufficient (too "dichotomic") to adequately explain the causes of Appalachian poverty. Kiffmeyer's portrayal of the AV's descent from optimistic, passionate (although naive) poverty warriors to radical confrontational outcasts is quite striking. The organization, once separated from the CSM, turned its attention away from such projects as school renovation and toward school system reform, welfare rights, and anti-strip-mining legislation. Discarding earlier notions of an inferior Appalachian culture, AVs (now acting as a professional political organizing institution) targeted internationalists, coal operators, and their local political allies, who they viewed as the source of mountain poverty. They maintained community involvement as well, instigating community libraries, Head Start like programs, and school repairs. AVs also created welfare rights organizations, started local newspapers, and became involved in elections (backing candidates). Their efforts were ultimately stymied by such conservative forces as Governor Nunn of Kentucky, the Kentucky Un-American Activities Committee (KUAC), coal operators, and local politicians. The whole story of the CSM and AV, of course, plays out within the context of such national historical topics as the War on Poverty, which Kiffmeyer views as a "Second Reconstruction of Appalachia" (the first having occurred earlier in the century with the arrival of local color writers, settlement school workers, benevolent organizations, missionaries, and Northern industrialists). To be sure, it is difficult to separate Kiffmeyer's "Appalachian tale" from mainstream U.S. history. Actually, in *Reformers to Radicals*, he meshes two histories: on one hand, as he admits, the book is about the 1960s; on the other hand, it is Appalachian history. Kiffmeyer's treatment of civil rights, red scares, and conservative backlashes wrapped within the context of an Appalachian tale adds great depth to his study. A review of his source

material is likewise quite impressive: a small but significant number of primary sources flooded with nearly two hundred secondary sources offering literally a "whorl" and "what's" of Appalachian scholarship. *Reformers to Radicals* is an articulate history of an important organization in Appalachian studies. While clearly social history, it is primarily a narrative. Unfortunately, it is relatively short on ideas. Aside from Kiffmeyer's notion that the AV organization acted in four distinct phases (which he thoroughly proves), there is little new in the book idea-wise. Additionally, Kiffmeyer possesses the remarkable ability to simply overwhelm with information; his use of agencies, directors and secretaries of the agencies, a plethora of minor dates, and so forth (all of which may be necessary), serve as points of confusion. In one sense, he writes a lot about very little; his tale could have (and perhaps should have) been told without so much volume. And yet his writing style is so direct, so deliberate, that it comes across as nearly flawless in form.

In his inaugural address, President John F. Kennedy challenged Americans to do something for their country. Thousands of young people answered his call, launching an era of flourishing social activism that eclipsed any in U.S. history. Citizens rallied behind an endless variety of social justice organizations to change the country's social and political landscape. As these social movements gained momentum, the severe poverty of the Appalachian region attracted the attention of many spirited young Americans. In 1964, a group of them formed the Appalachian Volunteers, an organization intent on eradicating poverty in eastern Kentucky and the rest of the Southern mountains. In *Reformers to Radicals: The Appalachian Volunteers and the War on Poverty*, Thomas Kiffmeyer documents the history of this organization as their youthful enthusiasm led to radicalism and controversy. Known informally as the AVs, these reformers sought to improve the everyday lives of the Appalachian poor while also making strides toward lasting economic change in the region. Considering themselves "poverty warriors," the AVs helped residents by refurbishing schools and homes and by offering much-needed educational opportunities, including job training and remedial academic instruction. Their efforts brought temporary relief to the Appalachian poor, but controversy was soon to follow. Within two years of the group's formation, they faced nationwide accusations that they were "seditious" and "un-American." Kiffmeyer explains how these activists, who worked for a worthy cause, ignited a firestorm of public criticism that ultimately caused their mission to fail. Before the decade was over, the Volunteers had lost the support of the federal and state governments and of many Appalachian people -- an irreversible setback that caused the group to disband in 1970. The Appalachian Volunteers' failure was caused by multiple factors. They were overtly political, attracting divisive reactions from local and state governments. They were indecisive in defining the true nature of their cause, creating dissension within the group's ranks. They were engaged in a struggle to "integrate" the poor into mainstream American culture, which alienated the AVs from many of the very people they sought to help. They were also caught up in the unrest of the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, which distracted them from their core mission. *Reformers to Radicals* chronicles a critical era in Appalachian history while also investigating the impact the 1960s' reform attitude had on one part of a broader movement in the United States. Kiffmeyer revisits an era in which idealistic young Americans, spurred on by President Kennedy's call to action, set out to remake America.

"Winner of the 201 Kentucky Archives Month Certificate of Merit for Writing or Other Production." "This work will do much to fill what I believe is a real vacuum in twentieth-century Appalachian historiography. Tom Kiffmeyer tells a gripping, human story." Chad Berry, author of *Southern Migrants, Northern Exiles* "Thoroughly researched, well-written, and judicious in tone, the enduring contribution of *Reformers to Radicals* is in delineating the limits of liberal reformism in a region like Central Appalachia where inequality is so entrenched that only a thorough political restructuring will bring about democratic change." Ronald L. Lewis, Robbins Chair and Professor Emeritus, West Virginia University "Kiffmeyer deepens our understanding of Appalachia's history during the 1960s, when the region was on the front line of the War on Poverty. His succinct, dynamic account of the Appalachian Volunteers highlights the multilayered, powerful challenges facing antipoverty warriors both within and outside the mountains and reveals yet another dimension of the unanticipated consequences of liberal reform during a tumultuous era in American history." John Mathew Glenn, Author of *Highlander: No Ordinary School* "Reformers to Radicals provides a compelling case study of the political and social tensions that enveloped the United States in the 1960s. Kiffmeyer places AVs' story into the national narrative of a radical, oppositional consciousness emerging out of the idealism of the civil rights movement and the Great Society." Rob Weise, Associate Professor of History, Eastern Kentucky University "This work will do much to fill what I believe is a real vacuum in twentieth-century Appalachian historiography. Kiffmeyer tells a gripping, human story." Chad Berry, *Appalachian Heritage* "His succinct, dynamic account of the Appalachian Volunteers highlights the multilayered, powerful challenges facing antipoverty warriors, both within and outside the mountains, and reveals yet another dimension of the unanticipated consequences of liberal reform during a tumultuous era in American history." John Matthew Glenn, *Appalachian Heritage* "As a detailed overview of a critically important but under-examined chapter in Appalachian history, *Reformers to Radicals* is a welcome contribution to the scholarship" Chad Montrie, *North Carolina Historical* "The treatment of the clash of

cultures the War on Poverty brought to the mountains is the strongest aspect of the book Kiffmeyer does a nice job fitting the story into the context of the sixties." William Clayson, Register of the Kentucky Historical Society ""Kiffmeyer blames [the failure of the Appalachian Volunteers] on its paternalistic outsider mentality, which alienated every group the AV worked with, and the power of local elites. Recommended." Choice ""Reformers to Radicals provides a valuable contribution to Appalachian and American historiography. It is necessary reading for anyone interested in understanding modern Appalachia's struggle with indigence or the War on Poverty's inability to provide solid and lasting solutions for such a persistent and pervasive problem." Jinny Turman-Deal, West Virginia History ""Reading this book, one is gripped by a sense of tragedy... Well researched and vigorously written, this book provides great insights into why the War on Poverty failed." Journal of American History ""Both timely and long overdue... Reformers to Radicals is an impressive accomplishment documenting the history of the Appalachian Volunteers." Appalachian Journal ""Ashmore and Kiffmeyer offer a powerful indictment of the operation of the War on Poverty on the ground, contribute to an understanding of public policy issues, and, in Ashmore's case, add to our knowledge of the civil rights movement after its glory years." American Historical ""[Kiffmeyer] places the federally funded Appalachian Volunteers, drawn from the ranks of college students, at the center of his story. . . . [he] offers a powerful indictment of the operation of the War on Poverty on the ground." American Historical ""Reformers to Radicals address the many factors that led to the demise of the Appalachian Volunteers in 1970, the most important being the massive repression by local, state, and national political leaders." Journal of Southern History ""This well reasoned and meticulously documented work of scholarship should prove useful to southern historians, students of the Great Society era, and anyone interested in the dynamics of social reform movements." The Southeastern Librarian "About the Author Thomas J. Kiffmeyer is associate professor of history at Morehead State University. He is the author of numerous reviews and articles.