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Good, bad, ugly -- and all ours

Rob Christensen's "**The Paradox of Tar Heel Politics**" is a remarkable disclosure of the disconcerting reality that power must be seized and that there is no nice way to seize it ... even if you are a North Carolinian! It is the story of the paradox of strong, effective leaders who were Sunday school-teaching womanizers dedicated to the Machiavellian principle that the greater good justifies the unbridled ruthlessness of political machines that do whatever it takes to maintain power.

"The Paradox of Tar Heel Politics" is the well-told story of North Carolina's 20th century political dynasties forged by patronage, cronyism, kickbacks, fraud, character assassination and the high art of stealing elections honorably. It's the story of political life along the dusty roads of rural North Carolina, where three out of four of our forebears lived in the country and were among the last people in the United States to get electricity, washing machines, running water, indoor toilets and telephones.

Christensen succeeds where most political historians fail; he makes the story interesting. He achieves the quality of human interest by way of raw candor about race, greed, lust and the abuses of power. He keeps the story of our state's political leaders interesting by way of hilarious tales like the wealthy candidate who wore raggedy suits and shoes and drained the radiator on purpose in his tin lizzie automobile so it would overheat when he pulled into town, thereby enhancing his passionate plea for gas money so he could keep fighting the fat cats on their behalf. Christensen tells the story of Depression-era towns and counties going bankrupt, parades of mules pulling cars because no one could afford gas. He tells of the rise of labor unions and strikes put down by force; the right to organize crushed by the political power of the business community.

Christensen, who has covered politics for The News & Observer for 35 years, tells the whole truth about the paper's former owners, the Daniels family: The paper's owner took the lead in spreading racial propaganda in the 1890s that led to the disenfranchisement of African-Americans for most of the 20th century, then descendants of the same family took the courageous stand to end racial discrimination during the civil rights era of the 1960s. "The News and Observer

was the militant voice of white supremacy," wrote Josephus Daniels in his memoirs in 1941.

Christensen's book is also the story of North Carolina Democrats who not only disenfranchised blacks and women, but also succeeded in suppressing Republicans, "... the party of Negro domination." It would take 75 years for Republicans to elect a governor in North Carolina following the defeat in 1898 of GOP Gov. Daniel Russell. Russell lamented what many Southern Republicans felt for nearly a century: "The irritations incident to being a Republican and living in the South are getting too rank to be borne."

"The Paradox of Tar Heel Politics" is filled with astute observations about the great paradox of such leaders as Terry Sanford -- governor, U.S. senator and president of Duke University -- held in the highest esteem today by the most progressive leaders and liberal citizens despite his politically expedient public stand against integration. And the most revered liberal reformer of them all, Frank Porter Graham, the son of a Confederate veteran, kept busts of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson in his office on the campus of UNC-Chapel Hill.

Christensen profiles the three ideological groups who held sway during the past 100 years in Raleigh: the conservatives, the populists and the business progressives. Ultimately, through the telling of political war stories of each of the groups, we learn that it is the business progressives that set North Carolina apart from the rest of the South during the 20th century. It was the business progressives who led the efforts to fund public education, to consolidate the university system, to build roads, to end white supremacy and to take risks on unpopular ideas that would become dynamic engines of economic expansion like Research Triangle Park and our internationally acclaimed university and community college system.

Among all of the revelations in Christensen's book, the most stunning is the fact that such modern-day leaders as Jim Hunt, Jesse Helms, Elizabeth Dole, Dan Blue and Erskine Bowles are inextricably linked to the political dynasties of the 20th century. Reading this book reminded me of Chapter 1 of The Gospel of St. Matthew, where Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judah and so on and so on to King David and King Solomon and beyond. Forty-two generations of leaders linked to one another -- good and bad, adulterers and murderers and idolaters, the weak and the strong -- all nonetheless linked from Abraham to Jesus.

Christensen's political savvy nurtured over his years as a reporter adds a profound sensitivity to the story of our state's leadership, making "The Paradox of Tar Heel Politics" a must-read for all who value insight into the realities of winning campaigns and governing in a democracy. There will never be a messiah to end the family line of North Carolina leaders, because there is no finish line in the world of politics and public policy. And although competing factions will always argue that their candidate is the most pure and offers the best hope, in truth all winners are well-intentioned mortals who know that you can't govern if you don't win, and that the greater good inevitably comes from both the best and the worst in American politics.