limited government in the service of natural rights? The thrust of the authors’ argument suggests the former, but they might have spelled out their view in great detail.

By linking presidential greatness to the two-party system invented by Jefferson, perfected by Jackson, and then realigned by Lincoln and Franklin D. Roosevelt to meet the moral and political crises of their day, Landy and Milkis reveal why only a few of our presidents have achieved lasting glory. Not least of the many important questions that this book raises is whether real greatness is still possible when leaders bypass their own parties and appeal directly to the people in pursuit of momentary popularity. For candidates and citizens alike, Presidential Greatness should be required reading in any election season.

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During his campaign for the presidency, Vice President Al Gore said, “I may not be the most exciting politician, but you can be sure that I’m going to work very hard for you.” Billings and Blee’s The Road to Poverty is a long, quiet, fact-filled book that sends a similar message. To be sure, James Agee proved that one can write an exciting (and moral) book about deep and persistent poverty. He turned his data on tenant farmers into a Blake-like world of poems and visions (Let Us Now Praise Famous Men [New York, 1939]). But poetic elevation, as Agee discovered, comes with tradeoffs and, in the end, the readers of this journal will be grateful for the hard-working empiricism of Blee and Billings.

Appalachia is geographically diverse. It spans 406 counties and 13 contiguous states, from New York to Alabama (4). Some of the counties of Appalachia—such as those of Northern Georgia—are now experiencing high rates of economic growth. Most counties are terribly poor, and always have been. Central Appalachia—the eastern counties of Kentucky—had in 1990 a poverty rate nearly double that of the United States, 25 percent. The Road to Poverty is a longitudinal study of “Beech Creek” in Clay County, Kentucky, central Appalachia, one of the poorest counties in the nation. In 1970, 65 percent of the county residents lived below the official poverty line. In 1990, about half the population lived in poverty. Forty-four percent had less than a ninth-grade education. Their median income was $8,700 per year. More than one-fourth received a form of public assistance (17–18). With census manuscripts, court records, probate records, popular literature, and ethnographical field notes, Billings and Blee set out to discover how Beech Creek arrived at, and then remained upon, its “road to poverty.”
The authors dismiss the two reigning explanations—“culture of poverty” and “internal colonialism.” Culture of poverty theories have dominated nineteenth- and twentieth-century historiography, and not only in the “low culture” media. The cartoons of Snuffy Smith and the television episodes of The Beverly Hillbillies—each with their variations on the theme of blame the victim or gentrify the victim—have roots in the “high culture” of the nineteenth century (The Berea [College] Quarterly) and the twentieth century (Henry Caudill, Night Comes to the Cumberland [Boston, 1963]) (9, 12). Blee and Billings do the tedious archival work necessary to discover that feuds were “wars” between local elites fighting for political patronage and control, notably when the business cycle did not favor their profits in mining or timber or speculation in land (24, 281–315). Despite caricatures in culture of poverty scholarship, Blee and Billings make it plain that poverty and feuds were not borne of the toothless moonshiner in an isolated wood fighting over roadkill or his daughter-in-law (though they do dig up a Barney Google or two).

Likewise, the internal colonial model is found to be defective. Blee and Billings argue that the Wallerstein-type colonial model ignores the role of local agency and state coercion in economic development and in the reproduction of patriarchy, and that it ignores the historical importance of subsistence agriculture to the region’s social capital (Immanuel Wallerstein, The Essential Wallerstein [New York, 2000]; Michael Hector, Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536–1966 [Berkeley, 1975]) (30–31, 35). Mr. Peabody’s coal typifies in the colonial model the exploitative industry that connects the mountains with markets but then proceeds to colonize and run the mountains and the mountaineers (12–13, 157–207). Culture and colonialism are not mutually exclusive. But Billings and Blee suggest a third model. Inspired by Thompson and Folbre, they believe that central Appalachia is best seen as a “patriarchal moral economy” (Edward P. Thompson, “The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century,” Past & Present, 50 [1972], 79; Nancy Folbre, “The Logic of Patriarchal Capitalism: Some Preliminary Propositions,” paper presented to the Social Science History Association Annual Meetings 1987) (165).

Use of sociologist James Brown’s notebooks on the genealogy of Beech Creek families allowed Billings and Blee to construct economic indicators of well-being back to 1850. The view afforded to intergenerational wealth and poverty is invaluable to social historians (21). But economic historians will be puzzled by the authors’ belief that they are examining a “natural experiment” (18), and many readers will be confused by the style of the book—a toggling between empiricist monologue and postmodern deconstruction. This is a problem not of the authors but of our times; stylistic inconsistency is probably a badge of honor in an age when economists hide behind regression while sociologists mingle with phenomenologists. Billings and Blee are courageous in their mixing of genres, and the payoffs are this careful empirical study of
Appalachia, which will appeal to social theorists, and a social theory of Appalachia that will not alleviate historical sociologists.

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*The Final Frontiers* explores the settlement history of the lower Mississippi Valley’s river bottoms during a fifty year period when “swamplands were largely transformed into plantations, farms, and towns.” Otto describes his work as the first interdisciplinary study of the region employing the methodologies of history, geography, sociology, agronomy, and ecology. Its spatial boundaries are defined as “the alluvial bottomlands” of northwestern Mississippi, northeastern Louisiana, eastern Arkansas, and southeastern Missouri, from which the author selected a sample of forty counties for purposes of statistical comparisons.

*The Final Frontiers* treats the settling of the bottomlands in five chapters, the first examining settlement before 1880. The settlement history that follows is largely a treatment of black and white migration. Otto does not discuss prior Native American, French, and Spanish settlement or land-use patterns, nor how late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century occupation compared to these earlier settlement phases. The antebellum history that emerges is one peopled by white farmers, planters, and slaves who faced barriers both natural (disease, floods, and swamps) and man-made (the Civil War and emancipation) that “disrupted” the settlement process. The federal government played an important role during the pre-1880 era, both as distributor of national lands to the states through the Swampland Act of 1849/50 and as the emancipator of slaves, but its efforts had little overall impact on the natural landscape before 1880.

Between 1880 and 1900, the best agricultural lands—the “frontlands” formed by natural levees of sandy loam and the lower clay-loam “backlands”—were taken up by settlers who fenced the best acreage for crops and turned livestock loose on the remainder. High transportation costs in more remote areas and shortages of capital and labor made settlement beyond the naturally favored lands more difficult until a railroad construction boom—followed by timber depletion, small-town growth, and agricutural expansion—opened up once isolated places to newcomers. During the first twenty years of the new century, the settlement process became more systematic because of improved flood protection and the creation of drainage districts, but continuing floods and the arrival of the boll weevil were disastrous for the cotton crop, which accounted for two-thirds of the bottomland’s cultivated acreage. Indeed, the tenacity of cotton, a familiar story throughout the deep South, is retold in this book. Despite the boll weevil and the agricultural recession