

Call Me Mike: A Political Biography of Michael V. DiSalle. By Richard G. Zimmerman. (Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 2003.xi, 322 pp. \$34.00, ISBN 0-87338-755-4.)

In the years since his death in 1981, Michael V. DiSalle, the Ohio city mayor and state governor, and director of the Office of Price Stabilization under President Harry Truman, has received little extensive examination. He deserves more. Born in 1908 to Italian immigrants living in a New York tenement, Michael's father soon moved the family to the Midwestern industrial city of Toledo. There young Michael worked at many short-lived jobs before rapidly moving up the political ranks to city, state, and national office. After graduating from Georgetown University, he passed the Ohio bar exam and practiced law in Toledo. Meanwhile, local politics proved attractive in the suffering environment of the Great Depression, suggesting to him, as to New Dealers, that a compassionate government could lighten life's burdens for people. In 1936 he carried that liberal passion into his successful campaign to become a Democratic member of the Ohio House of Representatives.

The following twelve years brought positions as Toledo's assistant law director, five terms as a city councilman, two terms as vice-mayor, and one term as mayor of the city that many still called the "glass capital of the world." Students of city government will find a Toledo councilman and mayor who was effective in calming industrial relations in a city noted for labor strife and, later, in bringing it financial stability. Reelected as mayor in 1950, DiSalle resigned shortly thereafter to become the United States' "price czar," a highly visible and difficult job that earned him good marks and in early 1951 placed him on the cover of Time magazine. Defeated in a run for the Ohio U.S. Senate seat held by Republican Old Guard conservative John W. Bricker during the Eisenhower landslide in 1952, he returned to the practice of law in Toledo, was defeated again in a state election, this time for governor, but won on his second try, in 1958, and became Ohio's sixtieth governor. Decisively defeating incumbent William O'Neill, the country-wide economic recession and heavy labor support in opposition to O'Neill's backing of a right-to-work referendum were key factors contributing to the Democratic landslide. DiSalle was the first to serve as governor for a four-year term, before meeting defeat at the hands of Republican James A. Rhodes, who branded his opponent "Tax Hike Mike" and went on to become Ohio's longest serving governor.

In fifteen chapters Richard Zimmerman takes us through DiSalle's battles and accomplishments in these various positions before concluding with three others on his life in Washington, D.C., that included a brief, unhappy stint as chief administrator of the planned city project of Reston, Virginia (a suburb of Washington, D.C.), and establishing a private law practice in the nation's capital, where his work habits may be described as relaxed. Son of an Ohio Supreme Court Justice, a reporter for the Dayton Journal Herald in the 1960s, and later, a national correspondent and Washington bureau chief for the Cleveland Plain Dealer, Zimmerman is well positioned to make this study. He knew DiSalle up close and over the years came to respect the rotund politician (5' 5" and upwards of 230 pounds) as a public servant, writing in his book, *Plain Dealing: Ohio Politics and Journalism Viewed from the Press Gallery*, that DiSalle "most influenced my concept of what government should and could accomplish to better the lives of citizens. He also taught me that politicians need not always be self-serving, loutish boobs but could be capable of genuine, selfless friendship" (p. 15). This appreciative attitude does not prevent Zimmerman from chronicling "Mike" in an even-handed way. Many others, too, saw the Ohio governor as a likeable and caring man, who they admired for his generosity and loyalty.

For decades Ohio has not been counted among the nation's more progressive states. A lengthy list of governors, including Democrats like Martin Davey and Frank Lausche, and Republicans such as John Bricker, Thomas Herbert, and C. William O'Neill had buckled with unnecessary enthusiasm to the low-tax, low-spending and pro-business sentiments of rural Ohioans and corporate interests. DiSalle came in near the end of Ohio's post-World War II economic prosperity before losses in its industrial base wreaked havoc on worker income and urban development. Population growth and new plant investment stagnated. Underfunding of state services for children, the mentally handicapped, and aged had long been chronic. It is to Governor DiSalle's credit that he attempted to reverse the penurious policies of his predecessors, beginning with a modest tax increase that he pushed through the legislature in hopes of improving the state's welfare system. The policies of this innovative, moderately liberal politician, together with his combative relationship with legislators and newspaper chieftains, and his vocal opposition to the death penalty, were key factors in his failed bid for reelection.

Coverage of DiSalle's pursuit and conduct of the governor's office constitutes half – the most important half – of this biography. Its biggest drawback is the author's over reliance on newspapers for material. Though excellent primary

sources, they are frequently inadequate. For example, the full story of how the Kennedys in 1959-1960 badgered DiSalle into becoming the first major state governor to endorse John F. Kennedy's presidential ambitions remains to be told. Zimmerman gives the matter a fair hearing, acknowledging that the Ohio governor "may have been all but blackmailed" (p. 192). Yet I suspect there is more to learn about the heavy pressures put on him to endorse Kennedy early in the presidential campaign. Oral interviews with living insiders would have been helpful.

Elsewhere, too, the author is reduced to using words such as "it may be presumed" and "no doubt," when additional research might have supplied answers. One example is the yet unwritten story of DiSalle's troubled and (literally) distant marriage. Even though a "political" biography, Zimmerman offers tantalizing information on this unhappy matter, as well as his relationship with his secretary and his subsequent liberated lifestyle. Readers will want to know more. The same holds for DiSalle's death in a hotel on the Adriatic coast of Italy, about which the author appears content with what he acknowledges is "a primly sanitized version" supplied by "a discreet hotel official" (p. 278). If this is not a definitive study of Michael V. DiSalle, it is one readers will enjoy and all future scholars will need to consult.

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