

hwan, who seven years earlier had brutally suppressed a political uprising. Lurking beneath the fiscal and political successes, though, was a level of violence that became part of the Korean power game. In this regard, the Korean War continued long after the conventional fighting ended in 1953. General Park Chung-hee, who orchestrated a military coup and took over the nation in 1961, was delivering a speech in 1974 when his wife, sitting on stage, was fatally shot by a North Korean agent—yet Park proceeded to complete the speech. (In 1979, Park himself was assassinated by the chief of his intelligence agency.) Amid preparations for the 1988 Seoul Olympics, North Korea blew up a South Korean airliner, but the Olympics proceeded as planned, becoming South Korea's great coming-out party. The North Korean saboteur, who was captured and who confessed, is now a born-again Christian. It is, as the author observes, "a land of surprises."

Oberdorfer, a former *Washington Post* reporter and the author of *Tet!*, provides a useful overview of Korean history since World War II. He describes the frustrations and strains as the two Koreas have tried to get together—the many promising moves that have ended in failure. He offers unforgettable accounts of events that he witnessed, including the assassination of Park's wife. And, in a cloak-and-dagger story reminiscent of John le Carré, he recounts the defection in 1996 of Hwang Jang Yop, the highest-level North Korean to change sides. I wish I could have read this book before going to South Korea as American ambassador in 1986. It's a fascinating account for anyone who cares about Korea, who worries about the United States in Asia, or who just likes a good read.

—James Lilley

**SHIFTING FORTUNES:**  
*The Rise and Decline of American Labor, from the 1820s to the Present.*

By Daniel Nelson. Ivan R. Dee.

181 pp. \$22.50

Why have American labor unions grown strong in some periods and withered in others? For answers, both friends and foes of organized labor usually point to dramatic events and personalities: state militias stamping out strikes in the Gilded Age, class-conscious workers surging into John L. Lewis's CIO during the Great Depression, leaders of the Teamsters getting married to the Mob in

the 1950s.

Nelson, the author of several fine books on labor and business history, discounts any explanation that relies so much on headlines. To him, working people are rational men and women whose reasons for joining or not joining unions have changed little over time. Three intersecting factors, he argues, account for the ebb and flow of union membership: the leverage of workers who enjoy some autonomy on the job, the fear of reprisals by employers, and the larger economic and political environment. As that list suggests, labor organizers have had to make the best of a situation shaped by more powerful forces. Their fortunes have shifted over time, but the structures that govern those outcomes persist.

Nelson's approach enables him to resolve some of the nagging anomalies of U.S. labor history. He describes, for example, how coal miners were able to build the United Mine Workers, the only durable industrial union in the nation until the mid-20th century. Mining was dangerous work but difficult for bosses to supervise, and the camaraderie miners forged both underground and in their isolated communities sustained the UMW against employer attacks.

Factory labor was much harder to organize. At giant companies such as Ford and U.S. Steel, workers toiled for decades under the constant eye and thumb of management. Everyone knew a troublemaker could easily be replaced. It took the political earthquake of the New Deal—which established the pro-union National Labor Relations Board—to alter that condition. In recent years, as federal support for organizing has eroded, manufacturing unions have again become vulnerable. As Nelson notes, "By the late 1980s the NLRB did not even give lip service to the goal of encouraging collective bargaining. Instead it provided a veneer of legality for traditional open-shop policies."

Nelson's pithy survey is full of such sensible judgments. Writing in a crisp if bloodless



style, he provides what amounts to a balance sheet of union history. In outlining which paths led to organizational victory and which to failure, his approach has more in common with the models that economists construct than with the empathetic “history from the bottom up” that has dominated the study of American workers since the 1960s. His sober book helps dispel the illusion that labor’s power has ever been great or secure in this most capitalist of nations.

But Nelson’s stern antiromanticism also neglects the spirit of solidarity that at times has enabled American unions to generate a social movement. There is no place in his account for the 19th-century vision of a producer’s commonwealth, for the collective

rage that followed the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist fire, or for the mix of piety and ethnic pride that coursed through the California grape strike and boycott of the 1960s. Organized labor has a moral claim as well as an economic one, and the former has galvanized people inside and outside union ranks as much as the demand for higher wages and shorter hours. San Francisco organizer Frank Roney warned nearly a century ago, “A movement, however laudable and externally worthy, is bound to fail if it has no soul.” He would find an ally in current AFL-CIO president John Sweeney, a long-time apostle of Catholic teachings on social justice.

—Michael Kazin

## Contemporary Affairs

### *THE APPEARANCE OF IMPROPRIETY:*

#### *How the Ethics Wars Have Undermined American Government, Business, and Society.*

By Peter W. Morgan and Glenn H. Reynolds. Free Press. 272 pp. \$25

Between 1975 and 1995, the number of prosecutions of federal officials on corruption charges increased by an astonishing 1500 percent. Yet most informed observers would say that authentic corruption (graft, slush funds, and the like) *decreased* during those two decades, as potential wrongdoers heeded the cautionary example of Watergate. So what’s the explanation? Following the Gulf of Tonkin, the Credibility Gap, and the Nixon scandals, American culture changed. Legislators passed a slew of ethics laws, resulting in more violations, leading to still more laws and still more violations. Americans created in the process an Ethics Establishment—an army of lawyers, journalists, and consultants who make money and reputations on ethics scandals, and who further fuel our obsession.

Behavior that was once commonplace now is deemed unethical. In the political sphere at least, we have defined deviancy up. The resulting culture of scandal might be welcome if it increased public confidence in American institutions and decision makers. But the opposite is true: the more we focus on scandal, and the more ethics rules we enact, the worse voters seem to feel about leaders and institutions.

While there are few signs that scandal politics is abating—look at the Paula Jones embarrassment, the frenzy over campaign fund-raising, the myriad independent counsel probes and the pressures for more—a few authors have begun to raise questions about it. In their excellent scholarly study, *The Pursuit of Absolute Integrity* (1996), Frank Anichiarico and James B. Jacobs showed how anticorruption efforts in New York have led to ineffective governance.

Now add to the list *The Appearance of Impropriety*. In this lively book, Morgan, a lawyer in Washington, and Reynolds, a law professor at the University of Tennessee, describe our ethics obsession while railing against it. They particularly target the frequent alarms over improper appearances, a concern they trace from Henry Fielding’s novel *Tom Jones* (1749) through Watergate and Whitewater. The appearance standard, they argue, has destroyed careers when evidence later suggested no wrongdoing at all. Along with convicting the innocent, the focus on appearance sometimes helps true miscreants slip away: those who dilute their shame by arguing that their only violation was a trivial one of appearance, and those who artfully hide their misbehavior beneath a façade of propriety.

The authors conclude that “ethics is in danger of becoming an elaborate legalistic ritual,” one that stresses multifactor tests instead of old-fashioned moral values. “For government employees who must negotiate this ritual, the