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## Book Review: Transforming the South: Federal Development in the Tennessee Valley, 1915-1960

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***Transforming the South: Federal Development in the Tennessee Valley, 1915-1960.* By Matthew L. Downs (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014). Pp. 331. \$47.50 cloth.**

Review by George Humphreys

Matthew Downs' *Transforming the South: Federal Development in the Tennessee Valley, 1915-1960* appears in "The Making the Modern South" series published by LSU Press. The title promises much more than the author delivers as his focus is on the role of the Tennessee Valley Authority in the economic development of Decatur, Huntsville, and Florence in Northern Alabama from the despair of the Great Depression to their revitalization as part of the Sunbelt. He suggests that this approach is valid as these communities are a "near-perfect microcosm of southern economic modernization in the twentieth century." In fact, one can easily question the approach as large portions of the Tennessee River Valley, notably the Jackson Purchase, lie outside the Sunbelt and did not experience the vibrant economic development of Downs' Northern Alabama cities.

Nevertheless, Downs gives us a valuable history of early efforts by private energy companies to harness the hydroelectric power of the Tennessee River with a great deal of focus on the Muscle Shoals in Alabama where the river dropped approximately one hundred forty feet in thirty miles and was a major reason that the river's navigational use was so limited before TVA. Much of the discussion

regarding the history of the TVA is found in most histories of the agency, but Downs does a good job of contrasting the utopian visions of its first chairman, A. E. Morgan, with the more pragmatic David Lilienthal. With his ultimate triumph over this rival, the TVA would channel its efforts into the production of energy and economic development even though Morgan's community development concerns would never be entirely set aside.

The real contribution to this story is Down's efforts to insert into his story the work of local business leaders and economic development agencies. Early frustrations with federal and private initiatives to develop Muscle Shoals taught locals not to trust on outside forces for the future of their communities. This should be kept in mind when historians consider the development of the Jackson Purchase where, for example, local leaders clashed with federal agencies on the location and size of what was to become Kentucky Dam.

Developments in the Jackson Purchase and West Tennessee do come into play in Downs' story as events in the 1950s led to TVA self-financing congressional legislation. President Eisenhower's political philosophy caused him to distrust the role of public power and TVA as "socialistic." Private power interests in the Tennessee Valley sought to gain some advantage from that after Tennessee Governor Frank Clement approached the president in 1953 about the construction of a plant at Fulton, Tennessee in Lauderdale County near the Mississippi to provide electricity to the massive uranium enrichment plant at Paducah. Eisenhower

avored the concept as it evolved into the private "Dixon-Yates" project proposed across the Mississippi River in Arkansas. Ultimately, the project was scuttled by opponents who uncovered irregularities in the proposal, but Eisenhower could take credit at the end by imposing limits on the territorial ambitions of the TVA which also benefitted from the self-financing legislation that ended the Congress' insertion of itself into the agency's financial operations.

**About the Reviewer:**

Dr. Humphreys earned his BA and MA in History from Murray State University. He lives in Muhlenberg County KY where he retired recently as the campus director of Madisonville Community College. Dr. Humphreys is currently writing a book on the political history of Western Kentucky since the New Deal for the University Press of Kentucky.