

Whig History: Antebellum Politics And The Collapse Of Compromise

Wesley Allen Riddle

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Review

WHIG HISTORY

Antebellum politics and the collapse of compromise

Riddle, Wesley Allen

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Holt, Michael F. *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War.* Oxford University Press, ISBN 195055446

If collapse of the Whig party caused the Civil War, were Whigs themselves to blame? Michael Holt, Langbourne M. Williams Professor of American History and chairman of the history department at the University of Virginia, has written a monumental and superb study. The tome is richly detailed and written in lucid prose, supplemented by tables showing key vote returns. Holt's chronological narrative consists of some 1,000 pages, plus another 250 or so containing source notes and bibliography. The result of 20 years' work, **The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party** is by far the most comprehensive account of the Whig party ever written and is perhaps the single most essential reference today for research into American antebellum politics.

The dialectical relationship between American political parties was arguably never so important to any political party as it was to Whigs during the second party system, circa 1834-54. Indeed, a central argument that runs through Holt's book is that Democrats profoundly influenced the fortunes of the Whig party. The Whig party took root when it carved out distinctive positions vis-a-vis the Democrats and later foundered when substantive differences -- real and perceived -- diminished after 1848. Whigs' common determination to oppose the Democrats (to defeat them in elections and to oppose their governance) held them together. Hence conflict with the Democrats was the chief centripetal force against which manifold centrifugal forces were arrayed: personal ambitions, fierce factional rivalries, and struggles over patronage.

Ideas have consequences

Tension was always there. Without balance applied by strong negative reference to Democrats, the Whig party would (and ultimately did) pull apart. Moreover, Whig and non-Whig leaders -- not voters or "society" or other impersonal forces -- made critical decisions that proved catastrophic, notwithstanding the strained, dynamic political environment born of sectional controversy. Whigs conceivably suffered from a problem endemic to conservative parties. They wind up holding the caboose, trying to slow down the train, as liberal parties take the initiative. In point of fact, Whigs had a well-defined conservative program, as well as articulate spokesmen to plead their case, including Henry Clay of Kentucky and Daniel Webster of Massachusetts.

The ideational basis for Whiggery was a nationalistic Jeffersonian economic agenda, codified into the so-called American System: high protective tariffs to nourish domestic manufacturing; a national bank to promote credit and sound currency; and internal improvements launched and financed by the federal government to improve infrastructure and to enhance the movement of people and goods. Whigs also railed against executive tyranny and preferred leadership by congressional consensus or compromise to that of chief executives and direct populist appeal. Whigs prided themselves on being constitutional unionists in the Madisonian tradition, who sought to preserve the Revolutionary generation's experiment in republican self-government through clean, honest (albeit activist) government and non-interventionist foreign policy.

Holt acknowledges the distinctive ideology of the Whig party but does not emphasize it overall. Whereas the Whigs viewed their ideology as timeless and permanent, however, Holt's central argument maintains that Whigs adapted ideology readily to changing times, in order to survive by striking a counterpoise to Democrats.

Party politics along a parabola

The Panic of 1837 and its aftermath and the annexation of Texas and subsequent war with Mexico (1846-48) -- gave salience to the Whigs' ideology and economic program. The prosperity after 1848 based on California gold strikes and foreign investment changed that appeal; moreover, land acquired from Mexico engendered domestic political conflict over the extension of slavery, the Compromise of 1850 notwithstanding. Mass immigration posed another challenge by the 1850sto Whigs in particular, since immigrants usually

supported Democrats. Hypothesized Slave Power and Papal conspiracies mobilized huge and sometimes overlapping constituencies which threatened to rend or displace established political parties.

In the presidential race of 1844, Whigs were never more unified, and differences with Democrats were never sharper. Holt considers that year to have been a relative apogee for the Whig party in terms of optimal measure between cohesive and divisive forces. Indeed, the parabolic path of the Whig party from 1834-54 (with fluctuations between) attests to cyclic political fortune. Reasons for the party's birth, heyday, and death actually inhere in the same dynamics. The difference between 1834 and 1854, however, prevents the Whig phoenix from rising after 1854. To wit, the Know Nothing and Republican parties were positioned by then to siphon voters, and the new parties found compelling ways to usurp the Whig party's original ideological mission of saving republican liberty.

Practical success of the Whig party, as well as the legitimacy of policies based on any real consensus or compromise, depended on statehouses and state legislatures, in addition to Congress, administrations, and relations between national and state level parties and governments. These aspects interest Holt far more than ideology per se. Since state elections ran throughout the year almost every year, instead of in November of even-numbered years as they do today, Whig leaders read election results like polls to help them gauge public opinion and assess their political capital. They did not always do it very well.

Whigs certainly made their share of mistakes, which encouraged the dissolution of the Whig party. Desiring to ride new coalitions to victory in later elections, Whig presidents and vice presidents made wanton overtures to factions. Tyler courted Democrats and Southerners to sideline Clay. Taylor squandered significant opportunity by attempting to build an ill-conceived Taylor Republican vehicle. Fillmore obsessed over New York rival William H. Seward, but he was also jealous of fellow conservative Webster. Fillmore also misread political events and failed to move Whigs into a viable, bisectional Union party after Winfield Scott bungled his campaign in 1852. Then again, subsequent events hampered Whig recovery from that election debacle.

And there's the rub. Democrats made decisions too, and their decisions made effective counterpoise difficult. Democrats may have been better politicians. They certainly seemed to outflank Whigs on issues most of the time. Democrats

also ran effective political machines, especially in immigrant communities.

There was one Democratic miscalculation, however, that made counterpoise next to impossible for the Whig party. Stephen Douglas introduced the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854. Its passage "repealed" the Missouri Compromise and opened land to slavery that had been set aside for free soil. The resulting row led to "Bleeding Kansas" and "Bleeding Sumner" (and splintered the Know Nothing party). Had Southern Whigs resisted the temptation to support the Nebraska Act, the Whig party might still have been saved and sectional realignment forestalled.

Like old soldiers, however, Whigs seemed to "just fade away" after 1852. Notwithstanding the death throes of state parties and delusional schemes by a few leaders, Whigs lacked the necessary temperament for a "Come-Back Kid" scenario. In many ways, the classic Whig temperament was averse to hurly-burly politics and to grassroots enthusiasms. In terms of political adroitness, moreover, Holt says Whigs lacked hard-headed realism and were frequently inept or inflexible -- never able to seize decisive moments. Whigs were temperamentally overcautious, slow to respond, and disdainful. Such habits of mind applied to wealthier Whigs with a privileged social background. Less intuitively, they also applied to self-consciously sober, church-going, middle-class folk, who formed the party's base. This temperament may have made Whig constituencies more vulnerable than Democratic constituencies to incursions by competing parties, whose members had few reservations.

Wesley Allen Riddle is fellow at the National Humanities Institute and author of recent essays on the Whig party in Humanitas.