

### A Perfect War of Politics: Parties, Politicians, and Democracy in Louisiana, 1824-1861

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#### Recommended Citation

Cheatham, Mark R. (2003) "A Perfect War of Politics: Parties, Politicians, and Democracy in Louisiana, 1824-1861," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 4 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol5/iss4/20>

## Review

**Cheatham, Mark R.**

**Fall 2003**

**Sacher, John M.** *A Perfect War of Politics: Parties, Politicians, and Democracy in Louisiana, 1824-1861*. Louisiana State University Press, \$39.95 ISBN 807128481

Preserving white liberty

Regional politics overshadowed state interests in secession crisis

Studies of southern states in the antebellum period have flourished in the past twenty-five years. The works of J. Mills Thornton, Mark W. Kruman, Lacy K. Ford, Jonathan M. Atkins, and Anthony G. Carey have served to help us better understand how southerners arrived at secession and why they considered it a legitimate alternative to maintaining the Union. A common theme that emerges from each of these works is the importance that white southerners placed on preserving their liberty through African-American slavery. John M. Sacher's new examination of antebellum Louisiana follows this premise. Sacher, who is an assistant professor of history at Emporia State University, concludes in his preface that his study of the state's antebellum political parties reveals a common theme: an obsession with the protection of liberty. Their interest in preserving white liberty, according to Sacher, explains the choice that Louisianans made in January 1861. The existence of a white man's democracy [that] rested on a racial caste system and dependence on staple crop agriculture made Louisiana similar to other southern states that also chose secession over union. At the same time, because of its ethnic and foreign population, large Catholic presence, global contact through the port city of New Orleans, and reliance on both cotton and sugarcane, Louisiana differed from other southern states. The influence of national party organizations, however, eventually forced Louisiana politicians to overlook their state's distinctive traits and to engage in debates that followed national political trends, particularly those involving slavery.

With one exception, Sacher follows a chronological examination of Louisiana's political party development from 1824 to 1861. Sacher's analysis of the Jacksonian period is superior to Joseph Tregle's analysis in his *Louisiana in the Age of Jackson* (1999), although both do an excellent job of highlighting the ethnic foundation of party divisiveness. By the 1840s, Louisiana's political parties were starting to resemble their national counterparts more, a transition that completed itself in the 1850s. Sacher deftly shows the reader how these changes occurred and clearly displays the prominent role played by politicians such as John Slidell and Pierre Soulé. Chapter five, intended to show the specific impact of white man's democracy on the state, is crucial to Sacher's argument, but its placement between chapters on Whig resurgence in the early 1850s and the Know-Nothing appearance in the mid-1850s interrupts the flow of the text.

I do have some criticisms of this fine book. One is Sacher's failure to mention Atkins' *Parties, Politics, and the Sectional Conflict in Tennessee, 1832-1861* among the works of Carey, Kruman, and Thornton as a major influence on his own study. Atkins' analysis of Tennessee politics contains similar themes and arguments to those of Sacher and seems an odd omission to make, although Sacher does acknowledge Atkins' book as important in understanding antebellum republicanism. Another minor quibble I have is with Sacher's claim that the Civil War was [t]he most important historical event in United States history. Some, perhaps many, antebellum and Civil War historians might consider me a heretic for disagreeing with that statement, but one could argue that the writing of the Declaration of Independence, the framing of the Constitution, the use of the atomic bomb on Japan, and a number of other events were equally as important in shaping and changing American society.

A more important question arises from Sacher's argument that [t]hroughout the period . . . politicians gave more and more power to the people. When their constituents demanded the state secede from the Union, politicians followed their dictum. Sacher believes that the people gradually came to hold the power in Louisiana, to the point that [t]hose bold politicians who challenged their constituents' will frequently found themselves out of office. Therefore, he concludes, the people, not their leaders, decided the question of secession. Sacher's evidence is unconvincing on this point. Before and during the secession crisis, the Louisiana elite clearly shaped the opinions of the state's residents. Through political speeches, newspaper editorials, and sermons, politicians, editors, and ministers worked to achieve consensus on how to react to Lincoln's

election. From what Sacher presents, Louisiana's advocacy of secession was not a spontaneous groundswell of popular outrage or even the inevitable progress of white democracy. Instead, it seems that, by using official and unofficial propaganda, the elite led the way. That is not to say that Louisianans were duped into supporting secession — the majority of voters obviously agreed with what they were being told — but Sacher does not convince me that they, not the elite, were the agents of change.

Despite my own discomfort with this aspect of Sacher's argument, his well-written study of antebellum Louisiana is an important and necessary read for historians of the era. It will almost certainly become the standard interpretation of that state during the antebellum period, a status that it well deserves.

*A graduate of Mississippi State University, Mark R. Cheatham specializes in the Jacksonian and Civil War eras. He is currently revising his biography of antebellum politician Andrew Jackson Donelson for publication.*