

Patriot Fires: Forging a New American Nationalism in the Civil War North

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Review

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Lawson, Melinda *Patriot Fires: Forging a New American Nationalism in the Civil War North*. University of Kansas Press, \$29.95 ISBN 7006112076

From contract to devotion

New study analyzes contributing factors in development of nationalism

The back of a book's dust jacket routinely carries laudatory comments from important historians, high praise from high places. Often boilerplate, in this case the comments are entirely true. Melinda Lawson's **Patriot Fires** is an important study engagingly written that examines several aspects of American national feeling and attitudes as these emerged during and from the exigencies of war. Lawson treats six discrete actors in the development of American nationalism, including the separate yet interrelated categories of United States Sanitary Commission, the Sanitary Fairs, marketing of Union war bonds, the identification of the Republican Party with patriotism, the abolitionist vision of a more just Union, and the work of the Union Leagues. Finally, in the works and words of Abraham Lincoln Lawson finds these six aspects of nationalism and patriotism brought together into a new and more extended conception of the American nation and the role of its federal government. This book, therefore, examines changes in attitude amongst citizens of the northern states toward country and government, and the impact this had on the home front.

On the eve of the war, Americans tended to view the national compact as a close treaty between sovereign states, and much of the loyalty given to communities larger than the family, town or church went to the states or political party. In the antebellum union Americans in substantial numbers had contractual notions of national government that guaranteed rights to the citizens and defined American ideals. But the federal government remained, for most Americans, distant and abstract, and even the appeal of manifest destiny and providential nationalism failed to generate the emotional national attachment seen in contemporary Europe. Consequently, many in the north accepted the logic of

secession, of ending the contract when ideals diverged, and were willing to let the slave states go to avoid war.

The elements of national appeal chosen by Lawson began with the popular success of the Sanitary Fairs. These nationalist appeals for patriotic sacrifice and support for the troops in the field were designed to inculcate an emotional connection to the soldiers and the nation, to turn northern Americans from a calculation of contract to a feeling of loyalty and belonging. Organized by women, the Sanitary Fairs displayed things to buy and see, with wounded soldiers in attendance. Millions attended these events, they cheered at the parades, wept at the wounds, and participated immediately though transiently in solidarity with the sacrifices made by Union boys for the cause. The Sanitary Fairs did not define the cause; they simply presented a heartfelt occasion of support.

Other efforts to encourage American nationalism, from bond sales to patriotic literature distributed by the urban elite in the Union Leagues, aimed at profit and reason as the basis for an enhanced American nationalism, a marketing direction that looked to the long term rather than the affective moment. Politicians capitalizing on war to label Democrats as real or potential traitors singled a political, even partisan--based national patriotism that would, incidentally, safeguard national war bonds. These general efforts sought a structural change in American national life, notably a stronger federal government, to follow changes in American nationalist attitudes.

The abolitionist movement also played a prominent role in the emerging American nationalism of the war years, combining something of the emotional content of the Sanitary Fairs and the structural reconstruction of the war bond drives. Abolition was an intense ideological movement, indifferent to the Union as such, regarding the Constitution as a contract with the devil and not opposed to northern secession before 1861. Abolitionist commitment to the war grew as it became ever clearer that preserving the Union also meant freeing the slaves. But abolitionists were far from converting the North to the anti-slavery crusade, and the fervor they brought to the moral dimension of the war put off more people than were converted.

All of the groups seeking to enhance a sense of national unity and loyalty in America contributed something different in the effort to change the attitudes of Americans toward the organic nationalism that the emergency seemed to

demand. But this was, as Lawson, notes, only half the loaf. Slavery ended, but effectual equality for black Americans did not follow. Race with formal freedom remained almost as deep and invidious a social and political divide as race with slavery. Wendell Philips, the abolitionist orator had stated in 1861: If I am to love my country, it/ Must be loveable; if I am to honor/ It, it must be worthy of respect. He did not think that the mere emancipation of slaves made American genuinely worthy of respect.

In similar ways, other elements of the northern nationalist and patriotic movement also achieved only part of their goals. The ladies and gentlemen creating the Sanitary Fairs and supporting Union League publications saw their efforts rewarded with expanding patriotic fervor, devotion to the army, and a growing multi-level national sentiment. Those who pushed to expand the political reach of the Republican Party achieved a normative Republican majority from 1864 to 1930. The bond houses and salesmen persuaded hundreds of thousands to invest millions in Union victory and prosperity and tied property to the nation. But all of those so dedicated did not achieve a strong, moral, and confident federal government. Immensely powerful in 1865, the federal government was significantly weaker a decade later and its decline continued until Theodore Roosevelt.

Lawson's book effectively describes the processes and the actors who contributed in changing American attitudes toward the nation from contract to devotion, a devotion made specific by sacrifice and enhanced in memory. Without burdening the reader with repetitive detail (and there are millions and millions of details), Lawson keeps the main themes and contributors in mind, presenting a clear description of a crucial period in the changing American self-image.

James D. Hardy, Jr. is associate dean of the Honors College at Louisiana State University and has published several books on both history and literature, including one on baseball.