

Urban Emancipation: Popular Politics in Reconstruction Mobile, 1860-1890

Aaron Sheehan-Dean

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Sheehan-Dean, Aaron (2003) "Urban Emancipation: Popular Politics in Reconstruction Mobile, 1860-1890," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 5 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol5/iss2/17>

Review

Sheehan-Dean, Aaron

Spring 2003

Fitzgerald, Michael W. *Urban Emancipation: Popular Politics in Reconstruction Mobile, 1860-1890*. Louisiana State University Press, \$67.50
ISBN 807128074

Why did Reconstruction fail?

Perspectives on post-war African-American politics

Over the past several decades, revisionist scholars of Reconstruction have focused on the possibilities of social change embodied in the interracial cooperation of the Republican party after the Civil War. The failure of this new coalition to enact lasting change, or even to survive in any meaningful form, is represented as a tragic, but inevitable defeat. Michael Fitzgerald's **Urban Emancipation: Popular Politics in Reconstruction Mobile, 1860-1890** offers a new perspective on the patterns and consequences of post-war political activity in the Lower South. Moving beyond the framework developed by the revisionists, Fitzgerald advances a sophisticated model of African American political participation that produced surprising difficulties during the heyday of Reconstruction and unlikely benefits after Redemption. Fitzgerald's most important finding rests in his reinterpretation of Mobile's African American community as intensely factionalized. He delineates a small and conservative Afro-Creole population that possessed the support of some local whites and a competing faction that espoused a more radical line and based its support on the large body of rural freedmen who had come to the city after the war. The deep rifts within the African American community, founded on distinctions of color, class, and religion that dated to the antebellum era, were healed only after the Democrats took control of the city and state in the mid-1870s.

Fitzgerald follows the issues around which voters and activists mobilized, from the formation of the city's first black newspaper to the dispensation of federal patronage to the financial support given by the city to railroads and other improvement projects. In doing this, he shows the relevance of local issues,

especially economic policy and development, to the course of Reconstruction. He complements a thorough evaluation of the city and regional contexts with a deft consideration of the relevant national issues and conflicts. Although Fitzgerald includes no statistical analysis of election returns and does take some liberties in assuming the motivations of voters behind the visible shifts of the electorate, his interpretations are always judicious. The result is a subtle and persuasive conceptualization of political motivation, one that incorporates economic and social interests alongside more traditional incentives like party unity and electoral success.

One of Fitzgerald's important contributions is demonstrating that emancipation, as overwhelming a process as it was, did not happen in isolation. Instead, he shows that emancipation was a social process mediated by existing social institutions such as parties, cliques, and castes. Like Thomas Holt's seminal work on African American political leadership in South Carolina, Fitzgerald shows how important autonomous black politics are to understanding the course of post-war Southern history. Unlike South Carolina, however, where Redemption brought a harsh white domination, Mobile's African Americans actually achieved a measure of stable influence in the period between Redemption and the years of Jim Crow. Fitzgerald is careful not to express nostalgia for a past that did not happen, but he does identify how power can be wielded in unlikely contexts. When African Americans brought their factions together after the Democratic takeover, they secured bedrock civil rights and avoided the violence that plagued other communities.

Fitzgerald explains that his study provides a new and compelling explanation for the old question of why did Reconstruction fail? He is quite correct here, for his argument is a convincing and important addition to how historians understand this central issue in America history. Nonetheless, Fitzgerald understates the power of his story to reshape the very questions that historians ask about this period. His detailed and rich exploration of African American politics reveals clearly that the people who experienced emancipation pursued their own interests in their own ways and the consequences came in both predictable and unpredictable fashion. They did not envision a coherent era of Reconstruction and they did not segregate political, or economic, or social concerns from one another. Instead, they pursued their goals of equity and community stability in truly human fashion, with more earnestness and determination than foresight.

*Aaron Sheehan-Dean is a doctoral student at the University of Virginia, where he is writing a dissertation on Virginia soldiers in the Civil War. He is the author of *Similarity and Difference in the Antebellum North and South, in Past Time, Past Place: GIS in History*. He can be reached via email at acsj2@virginia.edu.*