

Feature Essay

Ian Crowe

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

Recommended Citation

Crowe, Ian (2004) "Feature Essay," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 4 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol6/iss4/4>

Feature Essay

Crowe, Ian

Fall 2004

Summers, Mark Wahlgren *PERSPECTIVES FROM AFIELD AND AFAR: Party Games: Getting, Keeping, and Using Power in Gilded Age Politics*. University of North Carolina Press, \$22.50 ISBN 807855375

Democracy in action

Fraud, corruption, and late 19th century power politics

Earlier this year, voters in the United Kingdom, one of the oldest and least corrupt of modern democracies, went to the polls to elect local councilors and European parliamentary representatives. Asked to pass judgment on a list of crucial issues from the Iraq war to European integration, they had the option (and plenty of unwelcome assistance) to stay at home and vote by post. They also had an abundance of choices to represent their opinions, since the vast majority were presented with longer list of fringe groups than ever before, covering the whole range from the Respect Party (Respect Equality, Socialism, Peace, Environment, Community, Trade Unionism) to the far-Right British National Party. All the same, voter turnout failed to reach 40%. What can one make of such popular disengagement from politics?

The usual explanation for this growing phenomenon in Western social democracies is voter apathy induced by endemic political corruption, and vested interests that, by bankrolling the dominant party machines, constantly thwart the popular will. In America, the Gilded Age has traditionally served either as a stark warning of these maladies, or (with turnout in that period sometimes approaching 80%) a nostalgic reminder of a time when parties at least engaged the passions of the grassroots. Mark Wahlgren Summers's most recent study of this period, **Party Games**, does not attempt to dismiss either of these perspectives (there is plenty of evidence to support each one), but to modify them by offering a more sophisticated explanation of the entrenchment of a two-party system encumbered with all the dark political arts of maintaining power at all costs. The result is a vivid and nuanced study that is all the more

effective for the discrete and tempered presentation of its arguments. Readers of Summers's earlier works will not be surprised to hear that those arguments are also written with wit and an engaging turn of phrase. (It will be a while before one comes across a smarter chapter title than *The Treason of the Ineffectuals*.) But the greatest strength of this work is the way in which an orthodox analytical eye works along familiar perspectives to tease out commonsense points and shades of interpretation that have largely been overlooked until now. It is, in many respects, the familiar made unfamiliar.

To take one central theme: Why did the evident corruption of Gilded Age politics not lead to the development of a powerful, lasting third party with an ideal based on social justice? Summers's acknowledges the enduring attraction of this question, but it is hard to read this book without concluding that it is also an ill-formulated question, built upon a number of misleading assumptions. While direct voter representation evidently had little place within the two-party system that emerged out of Reconstruction, to consider expanding the ballot sheet and banishing corruption within the political process as the only path to social justice was to indulge in simplistic assumptions about how people become committed to, and express their public will through, the formal mechanisms of civic engagement. Instead, in **Party Games**, we are driven to acknowledge a much more complex, symbiotic relationship between systems of popular representation and prevailing patterns of social relationship.

The first half of the book is a detailed and lively examination of the varieties of methods by which the political process was skewed by those in or with access to power. There is nothing unexpected in this, although Summers attempts to trace some pattern in the mix by highlighting the partisan temperament, or culture of partisanship that drove everything from newspaper reporting to intimidation of voters. We are then shown how this systematized partisanship prevented the growth of third party movements — Greenbackers, the Labor parties, the Populists — into serious electoral challenges, and established instead what Summers terms the Two and a Half Party System. Again, the mechanisms of exclusion discussed here will hardly surprise the reader, but Summers attempts to reach beyond the standard responses of cynicism or moral indignation by showing how many reformist organizations, by painting their challenge as a stark contrast between entrenched corruption and enlightened moral progressivism, did not exactly commit suicide, but did themselves damage by underestimating the depth of their members' partisan commitment, and how far many issues, not just one, made them choose their political friends.

Implicit here is an instructive lesson for those historians who appear today so anxious to condemn the gilded sheen that they become entrapped by it.

While he never plays down the sheer venality and violence of the politics of the age, Summers explains that reform movements could still advance their causes even when [a]ll roads, in the end, either went nowhere or ran back to the major parties. Unlike betting, two-party politics has never been an all or nothing game. The Knights of Labor and the Farmers Alliance were able to secure advances for their causes by working with the very dynamics of the two-party rivalry between an increasingly solid South and a largely Republican North. The fact that fusionists — those who chose to pursue their cause by working with the grain of the established party system — were considered traitors by the purists of their movements only reveals how dangerously and self-defeatingly ideological the reformist mindset could become. Similarly, his brief but vivid portrayal of Samuel Tilden's politics and a lengthier section on the influence of the railway powers present a complex of compromises and adjustments that remind us that two-party politics may provide more sophisticated opportunities for flexible public policy than long lists of competing electoral parties. These are points that might have gained further resonance by some comparison with European systems at the same time — such as the Third Republic in France.

While Summers's emphasis upon a system of partisanship valuably complicates our perception of Gilded Age politics, it should be added that it raises one or two problems of its own. The most obvious is the temptation to treat this system as a thing in itself. Politicians appear at points in the story both to control and be controlled by it: Nobody could own it, Summers writes rather confusingly in the Preface, not the railroad monopolists or the sugar kings or the 'goo-goo' reformers. In the last analysis, it was the politicians [a bunch of nobodies?] who owned it, shaped it to serve their own party needs, and did what they could to keep trespassers off. Part of the confusion here may be that Summers uses the same term partisanship in two somewhat divergent ways throughout the book. There is, of course, the sinister and cynical loyalty of the career official who depends upon the success of one party or other for his preferment. But there is also a more socially benign partisanship: an impulse to act collectively that is, for many, the only route to true civic involvement and that approaches party involvement as a necessary compromise between practicality and personal principle. None of this is designed to produce the tidy answers or efficient procedures that some reformers, and impatient voters, desire; but one of the most important lessons of this book is how many reformers

were rendered incapable by their virtues of understanding this natural partisan impulse among their intended beneficiaries. Thus, perhaps, the frustrated outcry of Ohio radical Donn Piatt: While I have a kind feeling for the laborer, I do not respect him. He is as stupid, ignorant and vicious as the rest of us.

The success of **Party Games** lies ultimately and paradoxically in its ability to normalize Gilded Age politics by accentuating and repositioning its distinctive features. Summers thereby muddies the waters for us, and discourages us from following along with glib assumptions about representative democracy based upon statistics of turnout or party choices. These are assumptions that lead with a chilling simplicity to the kind of sentiment uttered by one Farmers' Alliance activist, who explained that politics should be made a science of government rather than a means of securing offices and patronage. Science, of course, can never be partisan.

Ian Crowe is director of the Edmund Burke Society of America and editor of The Enduring Edmund Burke (ISI Books, 1997). He lives in Chapel Hill.