

### The Fate of Their Country: Politicians, Slavery Extension, and the Coming of the Civil War

Joel Olson

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

---

#### Recommended Citation

Olson, Joel (2004) "The Fate of Their Country: Politicians, Slavery Extension, and the Coming of the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 6 : Iss. 4 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol6/iss4/19>

## Review

Olson, Joel

Fall 2004

**Quigley, David** *Second Founding: New York City, Reconstruction, and the Making of American Democracy*. Hill and Wang, \$24.00 ISBN 809085143

Reconstructing the Big Apple

Piecing together the new nation

David Quigley's book rests on three initially counterintuitive yet ultimately persuasive claims: a) Reconstruction was a Northern affair as well as a Southern ordeal, b) the North needed a reconstruction of its political system as much as the South did, and c) Reconstruction realized its fullest dimensions in New York City rather than New Orleans or Richmond. Thus, in order to understand the national impact of Reconstruction, one needs to know how it played out in the nation's greatest metropolis. In this way, Quigley cleverly nationalizes Reconstruction by focusing on the particular events, constituencies, and personalities of Manhattan from 1863 to 1880.

Quigley, a history professor at Boston College, contends that the 1787 Constitution established a framework for the American republic but left the crucial problems of slavery and the definition of citizenship for subsequent generations. The Civil War settled the question of slavery's place in the Republic but it took a second founding to define the membership and powers of American citizenship, particularly in regards to the vote. Reconstruction for Quigley, then, is largely a story of the struggle over the franchise.

It would be momentous. More than any other event in American history, Quigley asserts, Reconstruction determined just what kind of politics Americans would have. In New York, black leaders, bourgeois reformers, socialist agitators, women suffragists, and Tammany Democrats all agreed that the postbellum years offered a rare opportunity to resolve the nation's enduring dilemmas. Yet perhaps because of his focus on suffrage (or perhaps it's the tenor of our times), the revolutionary potential of Reconstruction is more chastened in **Second**

**Founding** than in W.E.B. Du Bois's classic *Black Reconstruction*. Du Bois foresaw industrial democracy emerging from the war before it was crushed by the racial chauvinism of the white working class. Quigley, meanwhile, presents universal suffrage rather than a socialist republic as the zenith of Reconstruction. Both Du Bois and Quigley present Reconstruction as tragedy, but for the latter the tragic consequences burden liberalism rather than socialism.

Cleverly beginning on July 17, 1863—the day after the Draft Riots—part one of the book (1863-1866) examines the riots' aftermath and the reactions of key figures and constituencies of Manhattan at the time, including the Irish, African Americans, bourgeois elites, and the rising Tammany wing of the Democratic Party. The nation's second founding, Quigley argues, begins here. Recovering from the devastation of the riots, New York African Americans begin the struggle over the meaning and content of post-slavery citizenship, demanding equal manhood suffrage regardless of race.

They received tenuous, often opportunistic, and ultimately fleeting support from white Republicans. Part two (1866-1874) covers the battle for citizenship and suffrage rights in New York. At the state constitutional convention of 1867, Republicans sought to remove property restrictions on Black suffrage (such restrictions on whites had been removed in 1821). Democrats opposed this plan with a campaign to restrict full citizenship to whites only and fought federal Reconstruction as a violation of the principle of local self-control. White citizenship was central to Democrats' strategy to wrest control of the city and state governments from Republicans. It finally took the 15th Amendment to grant the vote to the Black men of the Empire state. Quigley's analysis of this episode in New York politics parallels Alexander Saxton's account of how California Democrats similarly won power after the war in his ignored but groundbreaking *The Indispensable Enemy* (Berkeley 1971). The main difference is that in California the Democrats articulated a white citizenship against Chinese immigrants rather than African Americans.

In part three (1874-1880) Quigley examines efforts by elites to deny the suffrage to the city's working class as the country entered the Gilded Age. Elite New Yorkers such as *Nation* editor E.L. Godkin, a Republican, advocated intelligent suffrage, which would limit the vote not by race but by intelligence and wealth, leaving full citizenship rights to the Best Men of Manhattan. Democrat Samuel Tilden's politics of reform and retrenchment, meanwhile, aimed to fight corruption, reduce the size of government, cut taxes, and restrict

suffrage to men of property. These efforts would culminate in the Tilden Commission, which proposed to reintroduce property requirements for voting in New York City. Although the proposal was quashed by working class mobilization in the elections of 1877, it signaled a shift in elite thinking on democracy, even among Republicans, in which the cause of freed people's rights was forgotten and in its place was a deepening suspicion of popular government both in theory and practice. Quigley argues that the politics of reform and retrenchment, while unable to disfranchise the urban working class, ultimately contributed to the dismantling of Reconstruction.

Quigley makes at least three important contributions to our understanding of Reconstruction and its impact on American democracy. The first lies in his argument that black New Yorkers were the framers of the second founding. As early as 1864, they formulated what would become the key elements of the national Radical Reconstruction program: universal manhood suffrage, free public education, national citizenship, and federal protection of civil rights. In so doing, the black founders of New York forever transformed race relations across America.

Second, Quigley explains how opponents of the black program for Reconstruction did so through a rearticulation of the concept of liberty. The three principal elite white institutions of New York—*The Nation* magazine, representing the intellectual elite; the Citizens Association, representing the economic elite; and Tilden's wing of the Democratic Party, representing a large part of the political elite—fashioned a laissez-faire conception of liberty as freedom from the many dangers of modern urban life: mob rule, centralism, economic regulation. This enabled them to rail against federal Reconstruction for being costly, bureaucratic, and unnecessary. It also provided them with an ideological apparatus to justify the disfranchisement of the New York working class. In elite discourse liberty came to mean local control, opposition to a strong federal government, elite distrust of working-class suffrage, and overt white racism.

The third contribution is Quigley's account of the rise of the taxpayer identity that accompanied laissez-faire liberalism. The taxpayer identity was a protest against what elites saw as excessive taxation, caused in large part by the ballooning size of the federal government under Reconstruction. Railing against taxation without representation, Tilden sought to cut taxes in half as governor of New York, while the bipartisan Tilden Commission argued that only those who

pay taxes and thereby support the government should vote. Horace Greeley, meanwhile, decried black dependency, in which African Americans supposedly had come to rely more on federal aid than their own bootstraps. The comparison between 19th century taxpayers and 21st century critics of welfare, big government, and the culture of poverty, while not made explicitly by Quigley, is obvious.

My main criticism of the book is that the story of the black founders, which Quigley convinced me was so crucial to New York's Reconstruction in parts one and two, drops out by part three, which contains only sparse accounts of black New Yorkers' political activities from 1874-1880. The central drama in part three becomes class, as would-be disfranchising elites face off against would-be disfranchised white (native and immigrant) workers, who mobilize to protect their vote. Nothing is said, however, about the disfranchising actions of white workers against the black community. Quigley suggests that many working New Yorkers slowly moved beyond the white workingmen's democracy' of the late sixties and advanced a new democratic politics, one founded on a positive sense of liberty, now defined as freedom to hold a job, participate in politics, and make claims on the government. Yet we know from the work of Saxton, Herbert Hill, David Roediger, and others that white chauvinism thrived within the white working class after Reconstruction. I'm convinced by Quigley's account that working-class whites did develop a positive sense of liberty, but I'm not convinced they abandoned white citizenship to do so. Du Bois's presence, so strong in parts one and two, fades by part three.

Regardless, *Second Founding* is a significant contribution toward our understanding of the pivotal roles played by Reconstruction, New York City, class struggle, and white supremacy in the drama of modern American democracy. In clear prose and a quick narrative, Quigley convincingly argues that New York has long been central to the making and remaking of democracy in America, and that struggles for citizenship, particularly by African Americans, are central to the making and remaking of New York and the nation.

*Joel Olson is an assistant professor of political science at Northern Arizona University. His book, The Abolition of White Democracy, has just been published by the University of Minnesota Press. He can be reached at joel.olson@nau.edu.*