

A Political Nation: New Directions in Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Political History

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Review

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Gallagher, Gary W. (ed.) and Shelden, Rachel A. (ed.). *A Political Nation: New Directions in Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Political History.* University of Virginia Press, \$40.00 ISBN 978-0-8139-3282-8

Demonstrating the Importance of Political History

This is a volume of essays treating American politics during the Civil War Era broadly defined, the 1840s to 1870s. The collection was assembled by two editors. One is a prolific senior scholar at the University of Virginia, Gary W. Gallagher, probably the leading historian of the Civil War at the present time. His numerous works include *The Confederate War* (1997) and *The Union War* (2011). Gallagher's collaborator is a promising young historian at Georgia College and State University, Rachel A. Shelden, who was trained at the University of Virginia. The editors present the book as a tribute to the eminent historian of nineteenth-century American politics, Michael F. Holt, also of the University of Virginia. Professor Holt has exemplified throughout his career the highest standards in American political history, his most famous work being his monumental study of *The Rise and Fall of the Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War*. Gallagher's and Shelden's Festschrift is both a serious contribution to its field and an appropriate honor for their deserving colleague and mentor.

Once upon a time, history was commonly described as "past politics." In recent decades, however, the scope of historical research and writing has broadened greatly, particularly in the direction of social and cultural history. Historians of all countries have been eager to recover the history of people excluded from political power, such as peasants, women, and members of oppressed minorities. Their efforts contributed a sense of balance to historical accounts that had previously ignored the large portions of the population that did not participate in the political process. Eventually, however, some historians began to complain that the pendulum had swung too far. Surely an understanding

of the past required some sense of past politics, of the political leaders and their decisions. Michael Holt not only practiced political history, he defended its relevance and importance. "Among my fellow academic historians," he protested in 2004, "American political history has become an object of scorn" (*The Fate of Their Country*, p. xii). Yet ordinary people's lives were deeply influenced by the decisions of political leaders, in the past as in our own time, Holt insisted, and it makes no sense to leave politics out of history. The editors of *A Political Nation* share Holt's commitment to, and passion for, political history, but they express it here in a generally more upbeat way. They take encouragement from the fact that the general reading public has retained a strong taste for the history of past politics and political decision-makers, even when academic historians have been pursuing other visions. Still more, they take encouragement from showing how innovative political history can be, and how it can be enriched, rather than preempted, by the newer kinds of history. The editors have assembled a truly impressive cast of contributors to their commendable enterprise.

A Political Nation is divided into three sections. The first consists of three articles on "Political Culture in Antebellum America." Rachel Sheldon leads off with an article showing that Congressional opposition to Texas annexation was much more determined by party than section; Democrats supported it and Whigs opposed it. Living arrangements reinforced partisan rather than sectional loyalties. Few Congressmen brought their families to Washington; while in the capital they lived in boarding houses, typically with other Congressmen of their own party, by no means necessarily from their own section. Mark Neely sustains his stellar reputation with an original story illustrating the prevalence of violence in antebellum partisan politics. Jean Baker describes the several ways some women found to influence the course of antebellum politics even before the time of female suffrage.

The second section, entitled "The Politics of the Secession Crisis," presents three outstanding essays by three outstanding historians. Daniel Crofts, building on his book *Reluctant Confederates*, relates the fascinating story of the Upper South opponents to the Democratic Party, from their successful opposition to admitting Kansas as a slave state to their strong but ultimately unsuccessful opposition to secession. William W. Freehling presents a subtle argument for "Reviving State Rights" as a cause of the Civil War. Yes, he grants, the prevailing interpretation that black slavery caused the war correctly identifies a *necessary* cause, but by itself black slavery was not a *sufficient* cause of the Civil War as actually experienced. True, the Deep South seceded to protect slavery

from the likely future long-range threat represented by the election of a Republican President. But the "Middle" South (as he calls Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas) only seceded to help protect the principle of state secession against the coercion of the Union—in other words, those Confederates fought for state rights rather than black slavery per se. While I agree with Freehling's argument thus far, I would point out that it was already clear that there was going to be a war before the Middle South seceded—the question posed for those and the Border States was "Which side in the war will you be on?" In the third article of this section, William J. Cooper summarizes the reasons why Abraham Lincoln did not pursue a comprehensive compromise such as Henry Clay famously did in 1820-21, 1833, and 1850 and such as Clay's successor John J. Crittenden proposed in 1861. Cooper correctly identifies three reasons, but does not mention that Lincoln had not been unreservedly devoted to Henry Clay; as early as 1847 he had backed Zachary Taylor against Clay for the Whig presidential nomination.

The third section of *A Political Nation* deals with issues of reunion. Sean Nalty, a graduate student at UVA working with Professor Holt, leads off with an argument that the Union Party of 1864 was not merely a transparent short-term strategem to win Lincoln re-election, but represented (as Holt has earlier argued) a serious long-term ambition to redefine the Republican Party as a nationwide, rather than a sectional, party. J. Mills Thornton, in a fascinating quantitative analysis, shows how the Alabama state legislature elected under President Johnson's Reconstruction program shifted political power away from the planter elite toward the small farmers of the hill country. Erik B. Alexander of the *Andrew Jackson Papers* project, another former Holt student, describes the moderate faction within the Democratic Party during the presidential campaign of 1868. The moderates lost in their effort to make Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase the Democratic nominee that year, but came back to lead the party into its "New Departure" for the election of 1872. In the concluding essay, Brooks D. Simpson argues that moralizing historians have been too harsh on the Grant Administration for failing to secure the civil rights of the freedpeople on a more secure basis. In the context of the time, any imaginable alternatives to Grant's policies would probably have been worse. Simpson, a leading expert on Grant, finds it "unclear that anyone could have done a better job than Grant, at least anyone who was electable" (p. 227). Simpson's assessment of Republican Reconstruction provides a fitting conclusion to a volume dedicated to a frank, unblushing recognition of political realities.

“Closing the gap between popular and academic history could further revitalize public interest in our discipline,” Gallagher and Sheldon write in their introduction (p. 2). Amen! A constructive step in this direction, as well as intrinsically valuable, would be more historical writing that includes both traditional subject matter—political, diplomatic, and military history—and the newer kinds of history that have excited so many recent academic historians—social, cultural, and economic. *A Political Nation* seems to herald a time when political history can resume its rightful place within a diverse and balanced conception of historical studies.

My admiration for *A Political Nation* should be clear. But no book is perfect. The list of works by Michael Holt on p. 231 omits *The Fate of Their Country: Politicians, Slavery Extension, and the Coming of the Civil War* (Hill & Wang, 2004).

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