The Southern Political Tradition

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Review

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Perman, Michael *The Southern Political Tradition*. Louisiana State University Press, \$48.00 ISBN 978-0-8071-4468-8

A Journey through Southern Politics

This gem of a book consists of the Fleming Lectures Michael Perman gave at LSU in the spring of 2007 and two additional chapters. In it he manages to pack a number of keen insights into a small space, although it is fair to say that readers of his *Pursuit of Unity: A Political History of the American South* (University of North Carolina Press, 2009) will be familiar with some of them. He was, after all, drafting that very book when he gave his lectures.

Perman traces what he calls the southern political tradition from 1800 to the 1990s, a very long period indeed, and he sees it as consisting of three primary characteristics. "The first," he tells us on page 3, "is the region's penchant for one-party politics." The second he designates as the South's "Frontier and Filibuster Defense" of its internal race-relations, whether under slavery or the subsequent system of segregation and black disfranchisement, from outside interference, whether by northern abolitionists in the antebellum period or northern civil rights advocates in the twentieth century and most especially by the federal government (25). He calls the third distinctive characteristic "the overrepresentation mechanism," by which he means the acutely disproportionate power the South exercised in national politics, the national government, and the Democratic Party which, for decades, was little more than the South's fiefdom. In the nineteenth century, he points out, resentful and hostile northerners referred to this inflated political influence as the Slave Power whereas in the twentieth century southerners themselves proudly boasted of the Solid South's defense of white supremacy. Four of the book's chapters flesh out these contentions by stressing the continuity from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. The short final chapter discusses the unraveling of the southern political tradition after 1970 caused by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965,

by the Supreme Court's one-man-one-vote decisions that sharply reduced the power of rural areas that had been the backbone of Democratic strength in the South, and by the reform of Congress' committee system that lessened the clout of southern committee chairmen.

The South's tradition of one-party politics, Perman contends, went through three different phases: one-party dominance from 1800 to 1860 when Democrats won most elections in the region; one-party hegemony from 1868 to 1908 when Democrats used fraud and intimidation to neutralize Republicans' votes from blacks and the demand for white supremacy to mobilize whites; and then a true one-party system from 1908 through the 1960s when massive disfranchisement of blacks and the Democrats' whites-only primaries rendered it impossible for any opposition party to exist. There were only two exceptions to this pattern before the 1970s, he insists. From the mid-1830s to 1852 a legitimate system of two-party competition between Democrats and Whigs characterized southern politics. Then during the Civil War "no-party politics" characterized the Confederacy. What about competition between Republicans and Democrats from 1868 to 1876 that Perman wrote about so brilliantly in his *Road to Redemption: Southern Politics 1869-1879* (University of North Carolina Press, 1984)? In that book, my personal favorite among his many books, he contends, correctly I think, that Reconstruction politics in the South is best understood as normal two-party conflict, not as some freakish political outlier. But here, he recants and declares that two-party politics did not exist between 1868 and 1876 because Democrats never recognized the legitimacy of the Republican party and aimed at destroying it, not simply defeating it in the electoral arena. To quote him on page 17, "This was not a normal electoral competition between two political parties, but an all-out contest for control by the party that considered itself alone to be legitimate and qualified to govern." On this point, again, I find the Perman of 1984 more persuasive than the Perman of 2012.

I also find Perman's compelling analysis of what he calls the frontier defense of southern race relations as the freshest part of the book. Here he compares John C. Calhoun's insistence in 1836 and thereafter that no abolitionist petitions even be accepted by Congress (rather than accepted and then automatically tabled as the Gag Rule directed) with southern senators' resistance to a bill outlawing lynching in the 1920s and to one outlawing the poll tax in the 1940s. Both were similar examples of southerners defending their racial system aggressively at the first hint of any criticism of it, lest any breach of the external walls the South had erected lead inevitably to destruction of the central core of

the South's system of white supremacy and racial oppression. "This," he cleverly writes, "was not a 'last ditch' stand, but its very opposite—unyielding resistance at the 'first ditch'" (34-35). Or as the notorious Senator Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi put it when justifying southerners' filibuster of a bill to outlaw the poll tax in the 1940s: "If the poll tax bill passes, the next step will be an effort to remove the registration qualifications, the educational qualification of negroes. If that is done, we will have no way of preventing the negroes from voting" (46).

After what white southerners regarded as the horror of Reconstruction, they had first used fraud and physical intimidation and then legal disfranchisement to prevent blacks from voting which they deemed a mortal threat to white supremacy. Thus Congress' passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 was one of the key steps toward the dismantling of the southern political tradition. But, as Perman smartly points out, even though black enfranchisement made a competitive Republican party possible by driving white Democratic defectors to it and thus once again introducing two-party politics into Dixie, Democrats' dominance of offices below the presidential level did not end until the 1990s. The roots of the Democratic Party that had usually controlled southern politics since the 1790s had furrowed deep indeed.

For anyone seeking a keenly incisive and brief overview of the entire history of politics in the American South, Michael Perman's *The Southern Political Tradition* is simply the best place to start.

Michael F. Holt, a former Fleming lecturer himself, retired from the History Department of the University of Virginia, where he was the Langbourne M. Williams Professor of American History, in May 2012. The most recent of his eight books was a short biography of President Franklin Pierce.