Washington Brotherhood: Politics, Social Life, and the Coming of the Civil War

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Review

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Shelden, Rachel A. *Washington Brotherhood: Politics, Social Life, and the Coming of the Civil War*. University of North Carolina Press, \$34.95 ISBN 978-1-4696-1085-6

Reevaluating Washington's "Blundering Generation"

One glance at opinion polls registering Congressional approval ratings in the single digits makes it plain that Americans today are both widely and deeply disgusted with the way politics and politicians operate in the nation's capital. Across the political spectrum there exists a shared sense that elected officials live in a bubble, disconnected from their constituents, where the wealthy and other insiders hold sway at an endless series of cocktail parties and dinners and where public speechifying made in empty chambers and committee rooms has almost no bearing on actual policymaking. The miasma of apathy, distrust, and frustration spread among the citizenry derives in no small measure from its suspicion that the posturing we see on television and in social media has little to do with what the posturers really believe or with the actual maneuverings of power in which they are engaged. Washington might make a fine place for politicians to carouse, glad-hand, and lay the groundwork for a lifetime of lobbying and consulting, but such a clubby environment is hardly conducive to getting anything truly significant accomplished for the national interest.

One can read Rachel Shelden's depiction of the community of Washington politicians in the years leading up to the Civil War with either horror or resignation, then, for it seems that the capital has always been like this. Retelling the familiar story of sectional conflict with an eye toward understanding how the fraternal sociability of the capital structured the choices and actions of those responsible for federal policy, Shelden never loses sight of the importance of contingency, and she shies away from placing herself among those who would attribute the coming of the war to the failures of a "blundering generation" of politicians. Still, Shelden's portrayal of the unofficial politics of the 1840s and

1850s cannot but leave one struck by the sheer cluelessness of those who were so sure of their own friendships that secession genuinely took many of them by surprise.

Shelden describes the floor of Congress before the Civil War as a place where almost nothing of real substance actually happened. Sessions were interminable, congressmen routinely skipped debates and votes, and they often passed what time they did spend at their desks drunk, asleep, gossiping, or catching up on letter writing rather than paying attention to the parliamentary proceedings. Men of all parties and sections understood the rhetorical flourishes of floor speeches to be largely for show and designed more for the consumption of audiences back home than for having a real impact on policy, so much so that congressmen referred to such oratory simply as “buncombe.” All of it was theater, and it meant that most considered even highly provocative language to be palaver, that barely a quorum existed for voting on things like the Wilmot Proviso, and that no matter how important those things might eventually become, they elicited a collective shrug among congressmen when they initially passed.

The real political action in Washington, Shelden argues, took place not in formal legislative spaces but in fraternal organizations and churches and professional society meetings, in hotels and boardinghouses, and at dinners and balls. In these settings, away from the Capitol, even congressmen who publicly seemed to detest each other and who appeared to share little to nothing politically might be perfectly civil and even friendly. It was here, in more relaxed environments and amidst the associational culture so characteristic of antebellum America, that congressmen made personal connections and found the psychological and political space to discover common ground, negotiate legislative deals, and amplify their agendas. So when fresh-faced representative Abraham Lincoln discovered that speeches and resolutions blasting the Mexican War failed to make a splash, he joined a bisectional faction of Whigs known as the “Young Indian Club” that worked behind the scenes to advance Zachary Taylor’s presidential nomination and that helped Lincoln achieve a more prominent position in his caucus. When passage of the proposed Compromise of 1850 seemed questionable, Henry Clay’s famous speech in the Senate was far less significant than the numerous dinner parties convened for politicians at the mansion of Washington banker William Corcoran, who had a lot riding on whether the debts of the Republic of Texas got paid and who let food, drink, and conviviality among men who might work for compromise accomplish whatever

his financial leverage and his agents scouring the floor of Congress for votes failed to do. When a few powerful Democratic senators tried to hash out some sticky details of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, they accomplished far more in the rooms of the "F Street Mess" boardinghouse in which they all lived than they did anywhere else.

If a political culture rooted in sociability and personal interactions enabled men of vastly different backgrounds and far-flung parts of the country to work together across lines of party and section, however, dangerous and unforeseeable consequences attended to it as well. For one thing, the strangely insular environment of the Washington scene prevented most national politicians from having a clear sense of how their actions played in the rest of the country and even in their own districts and states. When it came to events as plainly polarizing, dramatic, and vicious as the caning of Charles Sumner by Preston Brooks, for example, tensions in Washington simply escalated a bit and then things just returned to normal. Newspaper editors and voters outside of Washington railed ever louder about abolitionists and the "Slave Power," but politicians in the district mostly brushed Sumner's beating aside in light of how prevalent and routine licentiousness and violence already was. The fact that what happened in Washington stayed in Washington may have enabled members of Congress to see the pummeling of a senator in the Capitol building in context and with more nuance than most Americans did. But it blinded them to the deepening polarization of their country, and left them poorly equipped to respond to it when southern states began withdrawing from the Union. Getting together for dinner and drinks was not going to fix this problem.

A second, related, and somewhat more significant byproduct of the way Washington worked in the years before the Civil War was that it created a profound disconnect between personal affinity and ideological beliefs, but because Sheldon deals sparingly with the role of ideology in the political struggles of the age she leaves the reader at a bit of a loss about how to assess the importance of that gulf. Sheldon's work offers valuable insight into a male-dominated culture that was almost purposefully concealed from the public, adds a vital ingredient to our understanding of why politicians seemed peculiarly unable to grasp the likely repercussions of their actions in the late antebellum era, and provides the reader with an engaging and not infrequently entertaining read. Who knew that Joseph Story drank a bottle of brandy every night? For all the genuine rewards that come from reading *Washington Brotherhood*, however, we are left wondering what exactly to make of the significance of the ideological

conflict underpinning the issues, such as slavery expansion, over which the war erupted. Certainly men who held radically different ideological positions on fundamental concerns could argue with one another and yet still remain on friendly terms, as Shelden amply demonstrates. But are we to conclude that ideological battles at the federal level were trivial because the energy for secession ultimately came from the states? Should we not take ideology, at least as expressed at the national level, seriously at all, considering that we know politicians of diametrically opposed viewpoints might go gambling together in the evenings? The effective compartmentalization of ideas and friendship that Shelden describes ended in absolute disaster, after all, and while we might avoid labeling that disaster as elemental blundering, we ought nonetheless to think deeply about what it meant.

At the very least, we might make the case that friendship is overrated. If in the end the deepest friendships could not prevent Americans from murdering one another on a massive scale, then perhaps wisdom would have dictated ideological moderation and public displays of genuine bipartisanship. Maybe we ought to be more generous considering that we have the benefit of hindsight, but there is something unseemly about men who shared a friendship across party lines but who determined to hide that friendship from the feuding public lest their constituents discover it, as Delaware Whig John Clayton and Missouri Democrat Thomas Hart Benton did in the 1850s. It is hard to be sympathetic to the emotional turmoil of Jefferson Davis, who wept as he departed the Senate, when he simply turned around and had no qualms about leading the Confederacy in open rebellion. And while it helps explain the coming failures of Reconstruction to know that some northern politicians helped former colleagues from the South avoid prison sentences and gain pardons immediately after the war ended, it is no less obscene. Ultimately, a politics in which friendships trump ideas and their consequences is a fundamentally unserious politics. There is value in working well with others, but when matters of real import are on the line, leadership matters more.

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