

### Gold and Freedom: The Political Economy of Reconstruction

Gavin Wright

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

---

#### Recommended Citation

Wright, Gavin (2016) "Gold and Freedom: The Political Economy of Reconstruction," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 18 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.18.3.13

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol18/iss3/12>

## Review

Wright, Gavin

Summer 2016

**Barreyre, Nicolas** *Gold and Freedom: The Political Economy of Reconstruction*. University of Virginia Press, \$39.50 ISBN 9780813937496

Rethinking the Politics of Reconstruction: The Republican Party Finds Unity in the Politics of Sectionalism

Nicolas Barreyre, who teaches American history at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales in Paris, has published a new interpretation of the politics of Reconstruction, emphasizing the role of intersectional conflict over economic issues within the Republican Party. Although the English version of the book appears in translation, Barreyre has studied at the University of Virginia and is clearly comfortable working in American archives. *Gold and Freedom* reflects an intimate knowledge of American party politics during a turbulent historical period.

Part I presents the book's distinctive theme, the emergence of political-economic antagonism between the Northeast and Midwest in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. The terminology poses something of a problem, in that the designation "Midwest" did not come into common usage until the end of the century, most speakers referring instead to The West as a somewhat open-ended geographical category. But Barreyre uses Midwest throughout, meaning what today is called the North Central census region: the old Northwest territory plus the newly-settled farm states of Minnesota, Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska (Colorado became a state only in 1876, and Missouri occupied an ambiguous position straddling Midwest and South.) Setting aside Reconstruction itself, the two great economic issues of the day were gold – whether and at what pace the country should return to a metallic monetary standard – and the tariff – whether high wartime import duties should be reduced, and if so, with what consequences for revenue and government spending. The Northeast and Midwest were by no means internally unified on these issues, but Barreyre argues that positions tended to settle into binary

geographic camps: the Midwest, being agricultural and indebted, favored “soft” money and free trade; the Northeast, being the nation’s financial center and highly industrial, favored “hard” money and high tariffs.

To an economic historian, this framework is not entirely satisfactory. There were many indebted northeastern farmers even in 1870, and a number of emerging Midwestern industries were eager to retain protection. Barreyre fully acknowledges this intra-sectional heterogeneity, but he argues that both popular perceptions and roll-call voting clustered into regional blocs. Displaying on p. 98 a map of roll-call voting on tariff votes from 1865 to 1877, the author points to the “almost perfect” dividing line between Ohio and Pennsylvania. The sectional separation in that particular map is indeed visually striking, but the next two maps on individual tariff bills are much less clear-cut, and the summary table on p. 97 shows considerable dispersion within both regions and parties. It would be interesting to know the extent to which “special interests” were able to buck regional and partisan pressures to achieve their goals by lobbying Congressional committees as well as through electoral activity.

But that would be a very different book. Barreyre’s interests are not directed primarily towards specific policy outcomes, but at the implications of Northeast-Midwest conflict for Reconstruction policies. Here, the geopolitical approach yields surprising insights. In briefest summary, the argument is that the Republican Party, beset by intersectional economic differences on which it was unable to achieve a durable compromise, was driven to emphasize the one issue that could unify the Party: completing the postwar project of ending slavery and protecting the rights of the freedmen. The party unity imperative helps to explain the resurgence of Reconstruction energy during the Grant administration, most notably passage of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1870 and a series of Enforcement Acts to protect black voters in the South. The new priority for enfranchisement – which the party had not previously been willing to support -- also reflected the hope that a coalition of black voters and southern Unionists would invigorate the Republican Party in the South.

These partisan calculations were undone, however, by backlash from Liberal Republicans in 1872, by Democratic tactics to foment division with Republican ranks, by the financial crash of 1873 and subsequent depression, and by a barrage of scandals within the Grant administration. As Barreyre writes on p. 197: “Each new scandal lent plausibility to Democratic charges against Republican governments in the South.” Well before the official demise of

Reconstruction in 1877, the weakened party was in no position to enforce anyone's rights effectively. The Republican retreat to the North was well displayed in the lame-duck session after the midterm elections of 1874, when the House of Representatives passed the Civil Rights Act of 1875 but declined to approve a sixth enforcement act that might have given the new law a fighting chance for success.

This reviewer remains skeptical with respect to the value added by the spatial framework favored by the author. The centrifugal forces splintering the postwar Republican Party were multidimensional, sectionalism being undoubtedly important but only one factor among many. But these methodological doubts do not undermine the quality of Barreyre's contribution to Reconstruction history. His account is nuanced and well-informed, drawing attention to intricate connections all too easily overlooked. As he argues: "...the study of Reconstruction, when viewed in a national context, must take into account political dynamics that might seem irrelevant to it if one were to focus solely on the racial question." *Gold and Freedom* amply confirms the truth of this statement.

*Gavin Wright is the William Robertson Coe Professor of American Economic History emeritus, Stanford University. Professor Wright is the author of Sharing the Prize: The Economics of the Civil Rights Revolution in the American South.*