

Pursuit of Unity: A Political History of the American South

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Review

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Perman, Michael *Pursuit of Unity: A Political History of the American South*.
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A Synthetic Look at Southern Political History

Michael Perman is a distinguished political historian of the nineteenth-century South. His earlier work focused on the postbellum period, with major monographs on southern politics during Presidential Reconstruction, Congressional Reconstruction, and the disfranchisement era. The present volume is a broad synthesis that expands Perman's range across two centuries of southern political history and provides a valuable overview for the novice and specialist alike.

Pursuit of Unity has a straightforward thesis, succinctly conveyed by its title. "There is one distinctive characteristic of party politics in the South," Perman declares in the Introduction, "the lack of competition between contending parties for almost the entirety of the past two hundred years" (4). And Perman gives an equally succinct explanation for the South's traditional aversion to political division: to protect "the region's system of racial control" from "organized opposition... both inside the region and at the national level" (5). While southern politicians created a united front to preserve white supremacy for two centuries, he concludes, the end of legalized Jim Crow ended the need for strict unity and allowed a southern two-party system to function for longer than any other period in the region's history. Though structuring his story around this clear analytical framework, Perman does not linger over theoretical issues or analytical details, but maintains a brisk narrative pace throughout.

The South's political unity arguably began at the Federal Convention of 1787, when a solid phalanx of southern delegates obtained the famous "three-fifths compromise" by threatening a walkout if their demands were not met. Perman begins in 1800, however, when the victory of Thomas Jefferson's

Democratic-Republic Party launched a period of one-party dominance within the South that lasted for a generation. Even after the Whigs mounted a viable opposition in the 1830s, southern prominence in the Democratic Party underpinned southern control of the presidency in most elections down to 1860.

The periods of the first and second party systems appear to be partial exceptions to Perman's overall thesis, for he does not attribute Jeffersonian unity to a concern for slavery, or the Whig-Democratic split to a temporary unconcern with racial matters. Instead, he blames the death of southern Federalism on aristocratic fecklessness and the South's agrarian values, and explains Jacksonian party differences as disagreements among the southern elite over economic development and democratization for white men. Though South Carolina's John C. Calhoun pressed tirelessly for southern unity in the face of the second party system, he utterly failed to achieve it.

Perman's analytical model becomes stronger as antebellum sectionalism intensified after the Mexican War. In his *Road to Secession* (1990, 2007), William Freehling has argued that proslavery extremism emerged as a device to silence the persistent doubts over slavery harbored by key figures in the Upper South. While admitting that regional politicians did worry about nonslaveholders, Perman rejects this view, and insists that "the South's political leaders did not... question the institution of slavery itself or its continued existence and preservation (72)." More sympathetic to the views of William Cooper, Perman insists that "slavery was at the center of southern politics by 1850, if not several decades before (73)," though Democrats and Whigs did differ over the best means to protect the Peculiar Institution. These differences vanished, of course, when Lincoln's election and his response to the Fort Sumter attack persuaded all but the most stubborn unionists that slavery could only be safe in an independent Confederacy. Though its politics were notoriously discordant, Perman stresses the Confederacy's equally well-known aversion to organized party competition. He replies to the contention of Eric McKittrick that the absence of party politics undermined the Confederacy by arguing that southern elites felt threatened by mass-based party politics and did not face the kind of dissent that a party system might have managed or contained.

With the coming of Reconstruction, Perman returns to the period of his earlier work. He takes pains to show that Reconstruction party division was not a case of normal disagreement between rival organizations that conceded each other's legitimacy. Still led by its entrenched ruling class, most of the white

South utterly rejected the political rights of blacks, northern whites, or southern white dissidents and supported violent measures to crush them. Initially hesitant to provoke federal intervention, the “Redeemer” Democrats tolerated black suffrage so long as Republicans had no chance of displacing them, but embraced both violent and legalized disfranchisement when white dissidents showed the potential power of cross-racial “fusion” in the 1890s.

By 1900, the Solid South seemed securely in place. There it remained until the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Perman lights up his account of the intervening years with insightful accounts of how the Democratic establishment dealt with the charade attacks of infamous demagogues like Vardaman and Bilbo, and very different challenges by New Deal reformers.

Perman’s final chapters deal with the disintegration of the system he has painstakingly described. From his perspective, southern unity did not crumble from within but was overthrown from beneath and from without, and he explains the rise of the South’s modern Republican party by the unchanging power of white racism. As late as the 1950s, southern conservative power did seem substantially unshaken and invincible, warning off challenges with measures like the Dixiecrat revolt, steadfast opposition to labor reform, and obsessive anti-Communism.

Perhaps unintentionally, however, Perman leaves an impression of the Solid South’s inexorable decline. Year by year the hostile court decisions accumulated. The regional bloc that once extracted the *Dred Scott* decision and the Civil Rights Cases of 1883 could not control the outcome of *Brown v. Board*. The worst efforts of mobs and police dogs never equaled the scale and ferocity of post-Reconstruction violence—to say nothing of the Civil War itself—and could not prevent the steady rise in black voting. In the new medium of television, the defenders of “white civilization” could not match the moral power of nonviolent demonstrations. By the mid-1960s, the once-almighty Congressional commanders of the Solid South were reduced to bargaining for marginal concessions in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of the next year. While activists rightly dispute any interpretation of the Civil Rights Movement as a completed triumph of moral progress, from the perspective of Perman’s two centuries, its changes were nothing short of epochal.

Lyndon Johnson presciently remarked that the passage of the Civil Rights Act would deliver the South to the Republicans for the next generation. Perman

agrees, but adds that the rise of a southern Republican majority did not represent a shift from one form of Solid South politics to another, but the creation of a genuinely competitive two-party system. If the end of segregation did not bring the dependable cross-racial working class alliance that Populists and New Dealers had longed for, it did enable other black-white coalitions that could challenge—and sometimes defeat—Republican hegemony in every southern state. The result has not been a “post-racial” utopia, but the creation of a new system in which black voters wield undeniable strength and white authority depends more on economic power than outright violence and legally-established discrimination.

Perman’s work raises a number of questions that he does not try to answer. For him, significant political conflict takes place between organized political parties, for example, and he does not examine other kinds of civic contention. Nor does he try to parse the difference between true parties and mere factions or other political groupings, or weigh the role of parties in southern state formation. Perman mentions the southern elite’s distaste for mass democracy, but does not test Edmund Morgan’s hypothesis that white democracy might have emerged as a calculated prop for their privileges. And while he mentions the post-World War II decline in southern farmers’ need for captive black labor, he does not link this development to their ultimate willingness to abandon a racial structure they once sacrificed 600,000 lives to preserve.

Leaving these complex interpretive issues to another author, Perman has produced a clear, sound synthesis of a crucial subject, supported by a cogent analytical framework, and with just enough detail to make a coherent and informative narrative. His placement of southern politics in the context of two centuries of development will be critical to understanding the particulars of any specific period, so readers at every level should applaud his invaluable contribution.

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