

Tennessee's Radical Army: The State Guard and Its Role in Reconstruction, 1867-1869

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Recommended Citation

Phillips, Christopher (2006) "Tennessee's Radical Army: The State Guard and Its Role in Reconstruction, 1867-1869," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol8/iss1/20>

Review

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Winter 2006

Severance, Ben H. *Tennessee's Radical Army: The State Guard and Its Role in Reconstruction, 1867-1869*. University of Tennessee Press, \$35.00 hardcover ISBN 1572333626

Political Partisans

Ordering a Conquered ProvinceThe scene is all too familiar. In the aftermath of a war of invasion, one that divided local residents just as it did the society of the invading armies, a violent, homegrown insurgency quickly emerged to displace the provisional authority that the conquering government had set up after the army had defeated regular opposition forces. Focusing especially upon local loyalists, these insurgents, loyal to the ousted government and led or sanctioned by many of its former leaders, effectively used terrorism—assassinations, intimidations, and paramilitary raids—to eliminate dissent, to suppress the elections that the provisional government held as it attempted to reconstitute the local government, and to undermine all efforts to reconstruct its society. Often under cover of night and using to their advantage the labyrinthine task of discerning loyalty in a deeply divided state, the insurgents soon gained sway in many of the local provinces, especially the rural regions outside the reach of the occupying host, one that might soon be withdrawn because of mounting political pressures to bring them home. To combat the increasing insurgent violence, the provisional government enlisted local loyalists into a home guard force, one that sought (generally ineffectively) to combat the extremists bent on preserving home rule. The result was a civil war of sorts that raged for several years, one that ended only after the local populace elected former insurgents as their leaders, heading a government that conformed in theory to the provisions required by the conquering government but which unraveled all social reforms that undergirded the invasion. In effect, the victors might have won the war; the insurgency even more rapidly won the peace.

However much his historical narrative parallels the current war in Iraq, Ben Severance's solid book, **Tennessee's Radical Army**, focuses on one state's experience with a war for peace in the aftermath of its and the country's Civil War. With the outcome of our most recent war yet to be seen, Severance's book might offer clues to it and certainly offers insights that challenge traditional wisdom about the failure of Reconstruction. Tennessee, a Confederate state whose residents' loyalties were deeply divided during and after the war, endured a more limited Reconstruction than most of the other defeated states. His thesis, stated clearly (perhaps a bit too clearly) at the outset, is that the Tennessee State Guard was largely effective in its effort to suppress the state's anti-Radical insurgency, that despite its partisan nature it was no punitive instrument of tyranny . . . used to avenge the suffering of Unionists during the war, as he writes on page *xvii*, and that its inconsistent employment, especially after 1868, contributed to the demise of the Radical social agenda and the failure of the Reconstruction, however defined, in Tennessee. Thus, he concludes on the same page, Reconstruction failed in Tennessee, in large part because the Radicals were too cautious in their use of force.

Similarly, by focusing squarely upon the State Guard, Severance seeks to rehabilitate the prevailing historical interpretation of Tennessee's Unionist postwar governor, William G. Parson Brownlow, by way of deemphasizing his role in the state's postwar nightmare. A Knoxville editor who opposed Tennessee's secession and continued to oppose the existence of the Confederate government, led an unsuccessful effort in East Tennessee to secede from the seceded state before fleeing under threat of indictment for treason. He was arrested by Confederate authorities after returning to his home in 1862 and was then exiled to the North for the remainder of the war, where he lectured and published anti-Confederate discourses. Generally judged by historians at best as intemperate and at worst as tyrannical, Brownlow, elected governor in 1865, oversaw his state's ratifications of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, by which Tennessee became in 1869 the first seceded state to be readmitted fully to the Union. Clearly, Severance believes that the depth and ferocity of anti-Radicals (conservative Unionists and ex-Confederates, acting variously as politicians, guerrillas, and the Klan and various Klan-styled night riders and subversives) forced the Fighting Parson's heavy hand, known derisively as Brownlow's Wars, in order to protect Tennessee loyalists and maintain his readmitted state within the Union.

The State Guard, white and black in its ranks, found itself hard pressed to stay the disorder that the anti-Radicals wrought in all parts of the state, but especially in Western and Middle Tennessee. Yet it bravely fought the insurgents who targeted Freedmen's Bureau agents, scalawags, and freed people attempting to exercise their rights of citizenship, maintaining the critical election in 1867 before being disbanded in January of the following year. Its very nature was a paradox: when the militia was in arms, the state's citizens quickly decried its use of force (the presence of black militiamen contributed greatly to this aversion) and leveraged for its disarmament, hoping that the peace it seemed to have secured precluded its further need. When the militia was withdrawn, violence resumed which only the militia could restore. When counter-Reconstruction forces gained sway again in 1868, the Radical army was again called up, and Severance finds that they performed competently one more time. After 1869, with Brownlow in the U.S. Senate, the anti-Radical campaign outlasted the state government's willingness to resist it through armed force. Already by 1870, Tennessee was redeemed. Severance's book, his revised dissertation, is impressively researched and clearly written. He has mined deeply both primary and secondary sources on his subject. One could, and this writer does, question the author's fundamental premise that Reconstruction could have succeeded if stronger measures and more troops had been employed, a premise that sounds much like the jaded conservative rationales for the failed victory in Vietnam and, quite possibly, in present-day Iraq. If any criticism can be leveled of this book, it is that by focusing so closely on the State Guard, the author has limited the potential importance of his book in Reconstruction literature. However impressive the dissertation, with a bit more time and work the book could have been a definitive study of Reconstruction in Tennessee, a subject with surprisingly few books devoted to it and none for more than a half century. As it is, the book offers perhaps too much information on the legislative enactments that created and shaped the State Guard, minutiae on the leaders of the Guard in various parts of the state, and details of their various engagements with the paramilitary anti-Radicals. This criticism is, in truth, a wishful one and is not reflective of what Severance has offered, but rather of the possibilities of what he could have achieved in our understanding of the successes and limitations of Reconstruction in the South, in this case by carving into the complexities of the postwar in the non-Reconstruction Upper South.

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