

The Boundaries of American Political Culture in the Civil War Era

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Review

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Neely, Jr., Mark E. *The Boundaries of American Political Culture in the Civil War Era*. University of North Carolina Press, \$29.95 ISBN 807829862

Redefining limits

Political Culture of the Civil War

Mark E. Neely, Jr., rises to the challenge posed by historians who emphasize social history at the expense of any other approach to the past, including political involvement. In a series of lectures delivered at Pennsylvania State University, he catalogs several indicators that Americans possessed passionate interests beyond those of family, work, and religion, concerns that he does not belittle. Historians who point to high voter turnout and the omnipresent political drumbeat of newspapers can also find additional evidence of the political awareness in the citizenry.

Building on earlier research into political iconography, Neely can supplement familiar indicators of political awareness with evidence from material culture. In 1864, he reports, Walt Whitman, visiting a saloon in New York City, reported that "a poor blear-eyed" barmaid wore a McClellan medal on her breast and announced that all twenty barmaids were ardent supporters of the Democratic presidential candidate. Despite lack of suffrage, women took an ardent interest in political matters. Women joined men in torchlight parades and other demonstrations of political passion. In an 1864 charity offering of a lavishly bejeweled Tiffany sword to a favorite general, both men and women purchased dollar "votes" for McClellan or for Ulysses S. Grant amid much newspaper speculation about the eventual winner, accompanied by reports that women took most interest in the balloting. Mrs. Grant voted for McClellan as an act of generosity, an act widely applauded by everyone except her husband who thought she should have avoided the publicity.

Political enthusiasts bought prints and lithographs backing favored candidates for office, and the popularity and affordability of the carte-de-visite photograph brought electioneering images into family albums of the middle class. Few candidates for major office concerned themselves with campaign finance. The honor of the office elevated them beyond such practical concerns and, besides, campaigns were not as expensive as they became before the end of the century. Neely carefully counted letters received by Lincoln during the 1860 campaign to determine how few mentioned money. For the most part, political action depended upon voluntary participation rather than campaign fundraising.

The Civil War gave rise to the Union League Clubs of the major cities of the North, groups that mobilized influence and wealth for the triumph of the Republicans. Neely challenges the assumption that the clubs arose as the response of old money to the national crisis, finding instead its origins among urban professionals seeking to employ new techniques of "diffusing knowledge." Union League Clubs flooded the electorate with posters, broadsides, and pamphlets countering Democratic threats wherever they arose. These clubs later became bastions of wealth and privilege but Neely emphasizes their patriotic origins as further evidence of broad involvement in politics.

Neely even investigates the minstrel songsters of the era. Despite the virulent racism endemic in blackface minstrelsy, he uncovers *The Liberty Minstrel* of 1844, an anthology with no songs in dialect and a clear abolitionist message. In 1860, Lincoln received a letter from an agent of the renown Christy Minstrels declaring that his company "are all Lincoln men," who delighted in advocating Lincoln's election from the stage. Despite the weight of comic performance in reinforcing ideas and images favorable to Democrats, Neely has assembled evidence that political awareness and diversity spread to even this unlikely venue.

He concludes that popular culture and political culture intersected. Great issues of the day may have influenced the extent of political consciousness in the period, but to no overwhelming degree. Despite the implied message of the title that the author intends to find boundaries, his conclusion is that they rarely existed. Trinkets and ephemera that others might overlook furnish material that an ingenious historian employs to shift attention from the forum to the home. The result is a fresh and idiosyncratic view of political culture that can serve as a model for other investigations.

John Y. Simon is the editor of The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, with 28 volumes published, and also professor of history at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.