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PERSPECTIVES FROM AFAR:War, Politics, and Reconstruction: Stormy Days in Louisiana

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Feature Essay

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Warmoth, Henry Clay and Rodrigue, John C., introduction by. *PERSPECTIVES FROM AFAR:War, Politics, and Reconstruction: Stormy Days in Louisiana.* University of South Carolina Press, $14.95 softcover ISBN 9781570036439

The Politics of Reconstruction: Henry Clay Warmoth and Louisiana

There is no more colorful and derogatory term in the lexicon of American politics than carpetbagger. Conjured up by cartoonish stereotypes from popular books and films like *Birth of A Nation* and *Gone With the Wind*, the idea that corrupt Yankee politicians went south to prey on a prostrate people by cynically appealing to the ignorance and credulity of newly emancipated slaves after the Civil War is a persistent myth in our popular culture that stubbornly refuses to die and receive a proper burial. Even today, it hardly seems to matter that a generation of excellent academic scholarship has flatly contradicted much of the mythology. Historians know from many fine state and local studies as well as several collective portraits that virtually all of the prominent northern-born southern Republicans already resided in the South *before* Congress passed the Reconstruction Acts of 1867, which means they could not have been motivated solely by a thirst for political office. Most of them, whatever one makes of their subsequent behavior, came to office with plenty of idealism and connections to new sources of capitalùboth of which were in short supply after the ruin and demoralization of southern society that attended military defeat, destruction, and occupation on a vast scale. Indeed, like many other trends in recent American history, what was once a peculiarly southern phenomenon has now reversed direction and headed north. Among the more interesting if predictable charges leveled against a certain ambitious former first lady of Arkansas when she ran for U.S. senator of a large northern state a few years ago was that she was merely a modern day carpetbagger, seeking wealth and power in a state about which she knew little and resided in only because it was politically useful for her to do so.

Elected Louisiana's first Republican governor on the strength of black votes in 1868 when he was just twenty-six, Henry Clay Warmoth had the epithet of carpetbaggerùand worseùhurled at him in person and in print for the rest of his life. Outliving all of his enemies to the ripe old age of 89 in 1931 and staunchly refusing to leave New Orleans or Louisiana despite a string of death threats and a local press unswervingly devoted to the folklore of Redemption, he spent the last decade of his life gathering his recollections and personal papers for his fascinating memoirs, published in 1930. In 2006, the University of South Carolina Press republished Warmoth's memoirs in its Southern Classics series edited by Mark M. Smith and John G. Sproat with a new introduction by John C. Rodrigue. Whether Warmoth's account is a classic is debatable, but for students of Louisiana history and the history of the South during Reconstruction, his memoirs are certainly an indispensable first person account of one of the greatest upheavals in all of American history and his role in it.

Born in Illinois before the Civil War, Warmoth grew to adulthood in Missouri, a border state that experienced its own internal civil war in local disputes over slavery and irregular violence between border ruffians and jayhawkers even before secession and the Fort Sumter crisis ignited the formal phase of the big conventional war in 1861. Typical of some of his later antics, the nineteen-year old Warmoth was admitted to the Missouri state bar after he lied to a judge about his age. Something about his personality must have caused his elders to overlook his youth, however, just as it frequently would later. When war broke out his troops elected him lieutenant colonel of the 32nd Regiment, Missouri Infantry (Union), which he led into battle from Wilson's Creek in 1861 to Vicksburg and Missionary Ridge in 1863. His charismatic leadership was already apparent in his early twenties. Contemporary photographs reveal a tall, dark and handsome man. His ability to insinuate himself with some of the most powerful political generals in the Union Army strongly suggests that he was already a keen student of the intricacies of patronage that made American democracy so dynamic in the nineteenth century.

Warmoth used his connections to Major General John McClernand to arrange a transfer to New Orleans in 1864, which was then headquarters to an occupying Union army. Major General Nathaniel Banks quickly appointed him judge in the military provost court, a position that gave him special insights into the problems and lucrative possibilities of adjudicating disputes over the vital trade in Confederate cotton seized by Union military forces. By the time the war ended in 1865, the young man on the make was already enriching himself as a

private attorney specializing in these cotton cases while simultaneously engaging in the byzantine struggles that would lead to the creation of the Louisiana Republican Party. Even before his nomination as governor in 1868 to his last days suspended from office and under the threat of impeachment in 1872, he remained a figure of enormous controversy, generating fierce friends and foes alike from the state capital in New Orleans all the way to the White House in Washington. Neither his contemporary foes nor historians who have followed ever definitely proved he was guilty of bribery or official corruption, but that hardly seemed to matter to his outraged accusers. This author's own study of Warmoth's personal papers in the Southern Historical Papers in Chapel Hill, North Carolina left a definite impression that he was far too smooth an operator to have retained a paper trail of any official malfeasance. At the same time, Warmoth left behind plenty of evidence of his sharp eye for investments in chartered public works like railroads and slaughterhouses. He invested liberally in those he believed might turn a quick profit based on knowledge derived from his official duties, which would today be universally recognized as a colossal conflict of interest between public good and private gain. Today's good government laws, however, did not exist in mid-nineteenth century America, for Warmoth or any other politician for that matter. Among his admirers in his later years was none other Huey Long, another Louisiana governor whose career also generated enormous controversy about both the means he employed and the ends that he claimed to serve. Long's biographer, T. Harry Williams (who was himself something of a carpetbagger amongst Southern historians) claimed that the Kingfish regarded Warmoth as a true power artist and desperately wanted to meet the old carpetbagger in his last years but feared that doing so would be tantamount to touching the third rail of Southern politics of Long's day: black suffrage.

In his introduction, Professor Rodrigue, author of *Reconstruction in the Cane Fields: From Slavery to Freedom in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes, 1862-1880*, former professor of Reconstruction and Louisiana history at Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge and now the holder of an endowed chair in history at Stonehill College in Easton, Massachusetts, finds much to be dissatisfied with in Warmoth's career, though certainly for different reasons than many of his political enemies during Reconstruction. Although he concedes that Warmoth was what he called a protorevisionist on race relations, he argues that Warmoth's gubernatorial record on race and racial equality was disappointing, even by the standards of his day. He faults him both for his lackluster support of

black civil rights as well as his efforts to attract political support from Louisiana's white business elites (xv). He also charges that Warmoth helped bring down Reconstruction in Louisiana by his chicanery in the 1872 elections, which fostered a serious crisis in legitimacy for the Republican Party (xxiv û xxvi).

One does not need to be an admirer of Warmoth, or even take some of his more outrageous statements in his memoirs at face value, in order to form a different appraisal of his accomplishments as governor than Professor Rodrigue. To begin with, while Warmoth's memoirs are invaluable to the historian, they must be read with great care, especially with respect to issues of race. Warmoth published his recollections as a carpetbagger governor in 1930 nearly *sixty years* after he left office, which must constitute some kind of record for an American political autobiography. At the time of his death just a year later, race relations in America had fallen into a deep nadir and racist attitudes had hardened to the point where black enfranchisement after the Civil War seemed even to most American historians to have been some sort of tragic mistake. It is hardly surprising that along with the rest of the country Warmoth's views on race followed a similar trajectory, however regrettable that might appear from the standpoint of the early twenty first century. More importantly, as Richard Nelson Current observed in his excellent study *Those Terrible Carpetbaggers*, Warmoth's contemporary diary (also found in his personal papers at the Southern Historical Collection) reveals that he was far more personally committed to racial equality in the 1860s than he was willing to admit, perhaps even to himself, in the 1930s.

Rather than debating the relative purity of his racial idealism, though, a more profitable way to assess Warmoth's leadership on issues touching on race in post-emancipation Louisiana might be to compare his actual performance in office with that of his successor as governor, William Pitt Kellogg, who was also a northern-born Republican. It is true that Warmoth vetoed a state civil rights bill mandating equal access to public accommodations and schools, another version of which Kellogg later signed. The problem with the bill, according to Warmoth, was that signing such a provision might have been an act of racial justice, but trying to enforce it in Louisiana after white supremacist vigilantes had killed nearly 1,800 blacks for trying to vote in the fall elections of 1868 would have been hazardous, if not downright lethal to those it was intended to aid. Warmoth told local black politicians upset with his veto that he had managed to keep the New Orleans streetcar lines desegregated and he also supported an incrementalist

school-by-school desegregation effort, the only city in the entire South where this occurred in the nineteenth century. As long as he was governor, black Republicans could count on his appointment power to fill a growing number of local and state positions, including P.B.S. Pinchback, who he appointed as lieutenant governor when his predecessor, Oscar J. Dunn, died in office. The number of black representatives in the State House of Representatives grew to a total of 38 out of 110 total members by the time his term of office expired.

Warmoth's successor signed a civil rights bill with a flourish after taking office in 1873, but as Joe Gray Taylor noted in his detailed narrative, *Louisiana Reconstructed*, the bill was pointedly ignored outside of New Orleans. Governor Kellogg made no attempt either in the courts or through his command of the state police to enforce any of its provisions. After the mass uprising of the armed White Leagues overthrew Kellogg's government in September of 1874, young toughs descended on the integrated New Orleans schools *en masse* and forcibly resegregated every one of them by ejecting all the students who did not appear to be white, including both of Pinchback's sons. Governor Kellogg, who had hidden from the White League's murderous rampage in the sanctuary of federal territory in the U.S. Custom House on Canal Street while black and white militiamen fought and in some cases died for his government, refused to respond to the school resegregation campaign that was publicly egged on by the openly white supremacist editors of the *New Orleans Bulletin*. After White League leaders again tried to oust Kellogg in a parliamentary coup at the State House in January of 1875, Kellogg agreed to the terms of the so-called Wheeler Compromise, which kept him in office for the remainder of his term in exchange for agreeing to hand over control of the House to white supremacist Democrats. As a result of this compromise, which Kellogg personally endorsed at a public meeting of a Congressional committee sent to investigate the turmoil in Louisiana, the number of black representatives in the Louisiana House fell to just 20, a fifty percent decline since Warmoth left office. Whose actual record on race issues in Reconstruction was better, and more importantly, why?

In the end, Warmoth was bold in his pragmatic political offensive to shift the calculus of power in order to create a Louisiana where African Americans could not be denied the vote because of their race. He failed, but not for lack of tryingùas was certainly the case with Kellogg, who passively observed the dismantling of Reconstruction within Louisiana while he was governor and declined to live in the state after he left office. Warmoth did try to court white southern support for his government, a compromise he insisted on because he

did not believe that the gains of Reconstruction could ever be permanently secured by black votes alone. He made a former Confederate general, James Longstreet, head of the Louisiana State Militia in an attempt to build a biracial force that could defend his government from the sort of violence that attended the 1868 election campaign, and he used that force to keep himself and his loyalists in power. He did oppose Ulysses S. Grant for president by backing the Liberal Republicans and endorsing Horace Greeley in the 1872, but this was only after Grant had first made the grievous blunder of opposing Warmoth, a sitting Southern Republican governor, in the factious struggles to maintain control over the state party in 1871 and 1872. Professor Rodrigue fails to point out that Warmoth was hardly alone in his political apostasy in this unusual election campaign of Republican Grant against Republican Greeley; the longtime champion of the radical wing of the national party, Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, also bitterly opposed Grant's reelection. Warmoth did amass a fortune in office, and he almost certainly spread around money to make sure he had the votes to secure his power, but anyone who has spent much time in the land of *laissez les bon temps rouler* ought to understand that the world of Louisiana politics corrupted Warmoth more than he corrupted it. All of these things made Warmoth into the sort of power artist that Huey Long admired. Today we are left to wonder if Reconstruction failed precisely because such carpetbagger power artists failed.

James K. Hogue is associate professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. His book, Uncivil War: Five New Orleans Street Battles and the Rise and Fall of Radical Reconstruction*, was published by Louisiana State University Press in 2006. It is a study dedicated to analyzing Reconstruction as a military campaign of post-war occupation, insurgency, and counterinsurgency, and America's first military attempt at what we today recognize as nation building.*