

Conceiving a New Republic: The Republican Party and the Southern Question, 1869-1900

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Recommended Citation

Peskin, Allan (2007) "Conceiving a New Republic: The Republican Party and the Southern Question, 1869-1900," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 4 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol9/iss4/10>

Review

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Fall 2007

Calhoun, Charles W. *Conceiving a New Republic: The Republican Party and the Southern Question, 1869-1900.* University Press of Kansas, \$39.95 hardcover ISBN 9780700614622

Reconstruction and the Republican Party

Little by little, the ghost of Charles A. Beard is being exorcised from American historiography. During the first half of the twentieth century his views dominated textbooks and college lecture halls and were widely disseminated in his many books and those of his epigoni such as Howard K. Beale and C. Vann Woodward.

As they saw it, American history was best understood as a continuous struggle between various kinds of property interests. Or, as the Master himself put it: Economics explains the mostest. Thus the Constitutional convention was, in reality, a conflict between those delegates invested in real property and those who held mostly personal property. Likewise, the Civil War (or The Second American Revolution, as they preferred to call it) represented a successful effort of the emerging capitalist classes to wrest power from the agrarians who had long controlled American politics.

It followed from this that during the Reconstruction Era the triumphant northern bankers, merchants, and industrialists would try to consolidate their power through their chosen political instrument, the Republican Party, by passing business-friendly legislation. Rather than openly avowing their intentions, these Republicans hid behind the smokescreen of equal-rights rhetoric, while professing a concern for the newly-emancipated freedmen. Thus the Fifteenth Amendment was really designed to enfranchise more Republican voters and the Fourteenth was actually a cunningly-devised protector of corporations. When, however, public support for racial equality waned, the Republicans cast aside their black wards and abandoned Reconstruction by striking a deal with like-minded Southern capitalists, in whose hands they left

the now defenseless freedmen.

In the past half century, each link in this argument has been subjected to devastating scholarly inquiry, until scarcely any part of it remains. Yet textbooks still speak of the Republican abandonment of Reconstruction in the 1870s in much the same terms as the Beardians employed. In *Conceiving a New Republic*, Charles W. Calhoun seeks to correct this anomaly. In a painstaking, thoroughly researched analysis of congressional debates, public speeches, and private correspondence unearthed from nearly sixty manuscript collections, he traces Republican attitudes towards race and the South.

What emerges is a consistent and apparently sincere concern for civil rights which motivated Republican Party leaders for at least a quarter century after Appomattox. Rather than abandoning Reconstruction at the customarily assigned terminal date of 1877, these Republicans, as Calhoun documents, pursued racial justice through the mid 1880s until the voters themselves threatened to abandon the GOP unless it turned its attention to the new issues of a new time. Calhoun correctly sees the failure of the Blair Education Bill and the Lodge Enforcement Act of the 1890s, as well as the resurgence of the openly racist Democratic Party as signals the Republicans could ignore only at their own peril.

This leads him to minimize the much-debated Compromise of 1877 which, some have claimed brought Reconstruction to a premature end. Calhoun implicitly rejects C. Vann Woodward's neo-Beardian analysis which contends that economic issues, such as railroad subsidies, were the real (though hidden) agenda of the politicians. To Beard and his followers, history moves in mysterious ways and the historian must penetrate the mask of appearances to uncover the underlying and usually sordid reality. Since class interest determines everything in this schema, there is no room for ideals, especially high-sounding ones, except as a cloak for privilege.

Calhoun, on the other hand, employs the straightforward and deceptively simple strategy of assuming that Republicans generally meant what they said. The great advantage of this approach is that it honors the past by treating it on its own terms rather than attempting to impose some predetermined pattern upon it. The drawback is that it requires Calhoun to reproduce huge gobs of nineteenth-century political rhetoric which oftentimes can be stupefying. On balance, however, the advantages outweigh that drawback by providing a fresh

and persuasive portrait of Republican leaders during a critical era in our nation's history. Often maligned as front men for special interests or else derided as bearded nonentities, they emerge from these pages as sincere spokesmen for a noble, though temporarily lost, cause.

Finally, in order to uphold my hard-won reputation as a crab, I must append two critical nitpicks: (1) this book sorely needs a critical bibliography; and (2) the dust jacket design is both murky and muddled, further proof that you can't tell a book by its cover..

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