

No Party Now: Politics in the Civil War North

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Review

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Smith, Adam I.P. *No Party Now: Politics in the Civil War North*. Oxford University Press, \$55.00 hardcover ISBN 9780195188653

Changing Politics in the Civil War North

For the generation of historians who have come of age in the last three decades the rather counter-intuitive assertion that the existence of a fiercely competitive, albeit stable and generally unchanging, two party system in the Civil War North worked to invigorate the Union war effort has long stood as an unquestioned truth. As a result, in spite of the avalanche of books on virtually every facet of the Civil War that have been written in recent years, relatively few have bothered to examine the workings and broader consequences of war-time politics in the Union. Within the last few years, however, a new cadre of historians led by Mark Neely has begun to challenge this paradigm and have, in the process, offered up a number of very suggestive avenues for further research and reinterpretations of perceived historical truths.

This new framework informs Adam Smith's *No Party Now*. After putting the old paradigm to the test, Smith finds it lacking. In particular, Smith contends, that in contrast to the more traditional renderings of the era's political culture that emphasized stability and consistency, partisan politics during the war years was, in actuality, in a state of constant flux and was characterized by a great deal of fluidity and volatility. While not a novel discovery, Smith's nuanced examination of the subject does stand as an important contribution to the literature.

Smith's work succeeds in outlining the Republican Party's skillful manipulation of the northern electorate's insistence upon the perceived necessity of war-time consensus to ensure that it remained the majority party (he is less successful in examining the Democratic side). Relying upon the nation's long standing tradition of anti-party hostility, Republicans denounced Democratic criticism as illegitimate and treasonous and, led by more moderate and conservative elements, worked diligently to construct a non-partisan Union Party

movement (that, coincidentally, also held the more radical wing of their won party at bay). Though initially successful in their quest for a middle ground, Republicans soon found their efforts challenged by bad news from the war front and, as a result, by an increasingly strident oppositional partisanship. Stepping up their efforts to paint their opponents, who also employed the non-partisan, nationalistic rhetoric of the day, as dangerous threats to the nation, Republicans seized the moment to move in a more radical direction, striking out against slavery and promoting emancipation as a war aim and thus, ironically, as a necessary step in recreating national consensus and for winning the war.

Smith's thin volume clearly lays to rest, what, if anything, remains of the traditional party era view of the era with its emphasis on unflinching partisan loyalty to well-entrenched political parties. *No Party Now* does not succeed, however, in fully negating what is, in this reviewer's mind, the more significant point made by party era historians—that the existence of a functioning two-party system in the northern states actually advantaged the North vis-à-vis the South. If anything, Smith's work offers the reader tantalizing evidence that such was indeed the case. The use of anti-party rhetoric and the argument for national unity, although not entirely successful in eradicating partisan conflict and opposition, nonetheless, did encourage and enable moderate and conservative Republicans to work together and did facilitate the passage and defense of more radical measures such as the Emancipation Proclamation, national conscription, and the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus. Such measures, one could readily argue, strengthened Lincoln's hand and acted to invigorate the Union war effort, if only by making opposition politics, and thus possible obstructionist policies, more difficult to pursue. Clearly, such contradictory perspectives muddy the water and make it abundantly clear that much work remains to be done to flesh out this emerging new political history of the war era.

In spite of overreaching on this important point, Adam Smith's *No Party Now*, when taken as a whole, stands as a very useful and readily accessible overview of Civil War era politics and offers a compelling account of the tense relationship between liberty and unity in the face of crisis. Scholars, students, and general readers alike will find the book's treatment of its subject matter to be informative, thought provoking, and (especially in light of contemporary debates over war policy and partisan strife), very instructive.

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