

The Enemy Within: Fears of Corruption in the Civil War North

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Review

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Smith, Michael Thomas *The Enemy Within: Fears of Corruption in the Civil War North*. University of Virginia Press, \$35.00 ISBN 978-0-8139-3127-2

Uncovering Northern Corruption

In this lively and provocative book, Michael Thomas Smith reminds those of us in Civil War studies to avoid the snares of modernization theory and Unionist triumphalism when we look back at our ancestors, who in turn were looking back at theirs as much as they were experiencing a new world emerging under fire. That which we sometimes carelessly assume they were embracing, they also deeply feared.

Most Americans, Smith argues in this thesis-driven book, brought an old-fashioned “premodern political philosophy” into the Civil War with them (2). This 18th-century republicanism led them to be “obsessed with corruption,” fearful of the encroachments of government power against individual rights and deeply suspicious of the massive growth of governmental spending during the war (2). With considerable skill, Smith links these traditional values to Victorian values concerning masculinity—the self-disciplined man ought to behave with self-sacrifice rather than greed, and was to be condemned when he did not.

By 1861, Republicanism was pretty watered down, and it sounds rather anachronistic to suggest that this corpus of beliefs retained much ideological coherence. Still, accusing the party in power of corruption contained considerable persuasive power, whatever its origins.

Smith uses the continuing force of this traditional set of values to criticize those historians who argue that the Civil War was the first total, modern, and triumphant war, primarily James McPherson. Such an approach “underestimates the persistence of traditional ways of thinking in the North, and overestimates the extent to which that region embraced new concepts of centralization,

modernization, bureaucratic efficiency, and the unrestrained use of force" (8). [Disclosure here—Smith includes me in his band of misguided analysts. I don't mind, although I agree with much of his criticism and don't believe our textbook fits this negative and highly simplistic paradigm.]

In common with much of the work of his mentor, Mark Neely, Smith frames his book like a lawyer's brief—asserting a one-dimensional thesis that he will then set out to prove. Paradox and contradiction, the web and woof of history, does not live comfortably within such constructions. However, when he gets down to cases, Smith develops a considerably more nuanced understanding of the meanings of corruption during the Civil War. He renders his sweeping generalization in more complex and convincing, if more modest ways, when he gets down to brass tacks.

Most of Smith's case studies are well-known, but he gives them original and thoughtful interpretations. For example, Ben Butler, the beast, the fount of corruption, would seem to be the obvious candidate to demonstrate Smith's thesis about unRepublican, unmanly, self-serving greed. Almost despite his thesis, however, Smith demonstrates quite convincingly that both in his financial dealings and in his treatment of the citizens of New Orleans, particularly women, Butler astutely understood contemporary gender roles and appropriate economic aggression when he presented himself to the North as an effective leader. Butler's "real genius lay in his ability to seamlessly reconcile two potent and seemingly all but reconcilable visions of ideal manhood, and his promise to wield this limitlessly potent masculine force without mercy, to humble and crush the nations' enemies. His suspected corrupt misuse of power at the same time made him feared as a threat to the nation's liberty, and loved as the potential savior of the republic" (65- 66).

Aha! A paradox! Smith's Butler manipulated contradictory and conflicting meanings inherent in those broad "republican" and male values. This version of the argument is more compelling than the unitary assertion of his thesis.

Smith's first case study examines the manufacture of shoddy goods for the military. This word was invented during the war. The main text for this chapter is a floridly melodramatic novel Smith rediscovered, *The Days of Shoddy*, written in 1863 by Henry Morford.

Paired with the Butler chapter is one concerning the scandalous John Fremont, that effete, grafting commander who could, his detractors argued, neither control his wife, nor “maintain the appearance” of self-sacrifice and honesty (79). Smith then turns to the 1864 scandal at the Treasury Department, where claims were made that all those unprecedented female clerks were in fact a set of trollops who had joined with their male employers in creating “a House of Orgies and Bacchanals” (97). Smith subsequently explores wider examples of corruption—bounty jumpers and the semi-illicit cotton trade.

Those lurid claims about the bordello in the Treasury Department, and almost all the other charges of corruption came, Smith demonstrates, from the Democrats in congress and the press. When a congressional committee examined the evidence about the Treasury, Smith writes, the charges collapsed, and the ugly gossip was disproven. And, in all cases, the facts were more complex than the Democratic charges about them.

What was really bugging the Democrats was that the Republicans were now controlling the “spoils,” as Smith himself argues at one point (18). Charges of corruption were indeed endemic in the Republic as Jacksonian Democrats had redefined it. The source of the ideology of anti-corruption during the Lincoln administration was essentially that made by the Democratic Party—on the whole it was specifically partisan rather than expressive of shared ideological values, a distinction unmade in these pages, and one that undercuts Smith’s sweeping generalization.

And what other charges could the Democrats use to oppose the party in power during a civil war without appearing to be disloyal? Charging corruption was the lowest common denominator and the safest mode of attack. As we know, many Democrats steamed ahead into Copperheadism, a position that would brand them as disloyal, and keep them in the minority for most of the rest of the century. Despite noting that Democratic pens dripped the corruptionist charges, Smith fails to explore this political setting when he argues about northern opinion as a whole.

More generally, the Smith thesis fails to contain the ironies and contradictions of Americans as they raced into the capitalist world. As he himself demonstrates in his excellent chapter on Butler, the same people could crave that which frightened them. The “go-ahead,” aggressive, accumulative spirit was as strong as was the resentment for those who were doing better at it

than one was—which meant that “they” must have been corrupt, while “I” wanted to just be an independent, progressive sort of person, unafraid of seizing the main chance. Fears of corruption, in other words, lived hand-in-hand with eagerly materialistic ambition, often in the same person.

At the very end of his book, Smith himself comes around to this conclusion: “Civil War Northerners dreamed of a bright, progressive future, but carried with them on their trek into that new world their same old fears, which made their break with the past slow and incomplete” (178). Here, Smith’s paradoxical conclusion amounts to an able criticism and revision of the Smith thesis. I believe this final formulation makes a great deal of sense. It reinforces the analysis in *Sugar Creek*, John Mack Faragher’s seminal book on the simultaneously forward- and backward-looking values and practices of farmers of the Illinois frontier earlier in the nineteenth century.

Two more points. Other deep-seated and fearful cultural values have transmogrified over the long haul rather than disappearing. Racism would be the best example, particularly as contained in the ideology of the same Democrats Smith examines. Indeed, Jean H. Baker’s brilliant 1983 book, *Affairs of Party: The Political Culture of the Northern Democrats in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, covered endemic racism and other ideological issues with power and richness. Finally, Smith argues that, “corruption-obsessed [Civil War-era Americans] operated within the confines of a political culture vastly different from its modern counterpart” (12). But why does Smith employ the same modernization theory here that he otherwise criticizes, thus undercutting an understanding of the carry-over of premodern values into later times? After all, what is a reactionary? What about the Tea Party?

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