

Declarations of Dependence: The Long Reconstruction of Popular Politics in the South, 1861-1908

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Review

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Downs, Gregory P. *Declarations of Dependence: The Long Reconstruction of Popular Politics in the South, 1861-1908*. University of North Carolina Press, \$39.95 ISBN 978-0-8078-3444-2

A New Look at Reconstruction Politics

The cover proclaims this a “highly original” study, and for once a jacket blurb tells truth. One ought to be grateful for anything fresh appearing on the Reconstruction era, moving the topic beyond the issues highlighted by the civil rights years. Frequently scholars call for extending the chronological limits of the era, and this work nicely achieves that by examining an overlooked dimension of social life. Focusing on North Carolina almost exclusively, this author does have something novel to say, and much of it even seems persuasive.

Historians emphasize personal independence as a legacy of the Revolution and a dominant theme in Jacksonian era politics. Downs takes this insight in a different direction. In his analytically ambitious introduction, Downs contends that the prevailing emphasis on the expansion of citizenship rights overlooks an important countertrend: the expansion of claims of benign dependency during Reconstruction, “American patronalism” in the author’s coinage (1). After the Civil War began, white families found themselves incapable of providing for themselves. They wanted material help, and protection from the demands of the Richmond government. The war shifted previously private obligations onto the state, empowering women in particular to make unprecedented demands. “Through languages of gender, women and men learned to make use of dependence, not just as a victimized status imposed by the state but as a tool for state expansion,” Downs writes (6). Before the establishment of an administrative bureaucracy, this placed a high premium on personal relationships with officials, real or assumed. A profuse correspondence demonstrated that “many, many people acted as if they had a right to depend on government for food, shelter, even love in the allegedly laissez-faire nineteenth century” (2).

This development is overlooked in the historiography because unlettered people invoked voluntary dependency in erratic, even delusional terms (3). But far from being reactionary, these were “innovative efforts to take advantage of new government powers” (7). Downs thus makes broad claims for his study based primarily on the incoming correspondence of North Carolina governors. The letters may sound rustic, but “American liberalism inspired and was constructed within these intimate appeals” (5).

The central figure in the book is the wartime governor and then senator Zebulon Vance, whose long service made him “the literal face of power” (142). Civil War historians know Governor Vance as a thorn in the side of the Davis administration. An anti-secessionist Conservative, from the state’s western portion, his modest class background encouraged poorer people to turn to him. Requests flooded in for draft exemptions and food relief, often expressed in terms of friendship, fantastic as Downs terms many of these claims (27). Vance encouraged the appeals, and did what he could to oblige them, in order to build popularity and disguise the limits of his actual power. This became a lifelong pattern of Vance’s leadership, even as North Carolina’s Redeemer governor, in pardon requests and in insistent requests for government jobs based on personal need and premised on racial solidarity. So many people named sons after him and requested presents that he humorously claimed it a major drain on his finances. His terms in the U. S. Senate lifted this emphasis to political principle, tapping a language of politics that “celebrated intimacy over merit” (156). Vance opposed the Pendleton Civil Service Act as a perversion of government, and he was a nationally-prominent opponent of Democratic President Cleveland’s civil service reforms. The discussion of Vance’s role seems compelling overall.

The author incorporates African Americans’ political demands in the narrative readily, because he contends that their understanding of power often paralleled these wider trends. Emancipated by the Federal military in the random circumstances of wartime, the “contrabands” in refugee camps depended on the whims of sympathetic officers. Downs speculates that their background made them look toward individual patrons, especially given the often arbitrary behavior they confronted. Ex-slaves made of Lincoln “a good king, a necessary patron in a world where rights seemed not abstract but embodied in particular leaders” (44). Expectations for help conflicted into the contrary expectations of the U. S. government, which feared making a dependent class of the emancipated slaves by providing help to the able-bodied. The Freedmen’s Bureau sought to systematize the provision of aid, and target it toward the

worthy poor, and Downs finds that Radical Republican governor W. W. Holden had much the same desire for bureaucratic rationality. This was not what the freedpeople looked for. These conflicts notwithstanding, the ex-slaves had good reason to invoke the only halfhearted friends they had. The weak and scattered military presence in the postwar South itself encouraged these habits because the understaffed Bureau acted more like a patron than a bureaucracy: "If its force was intense within its sight but irrelevant outside of its gaze, then the freedpeople were not wrong to personify the bureau into a powerful but distant friend" (94).

The discussion of parallel black and white popular understandings of power seems insightful, and perhaps for this reason *Redemption* looks "less an end than a pivot in a thirty-year political system" (131). There are other things to like: the book's brief discussion of lynching depicts it as a similar form of informal, community-based white supremacist vigilantism, an insight he extends to the patronage origins of the Wilmington riot. The overthrow of Populism in North Carolina grew largely out of black officeholding, which does nicely illustrate the importance of the book's broad theme. The book also does well to synthesize the literature on governmental reform in the Progressive era into its overall framework. Disfranchisement and segregation fit into this pattern of administrative rationality overtaking traditional patterns of thought, attempting to systematize structures of racial supremacy. As Downs notes, "By associating the state with the happiness of all white people, and then defining that happiness upon whites' continued reproductive success, the movement created the logic for public health and education movements" (187)

As with any work of interpretive ambition, this work poses more questions than it settles. The book is entirely focused on North Carolina, which raises obvious issues. These might be easier to overlook if the subtitle didn't invoke "the South." The typicality concern is barely addressed, and one wonders if a more strongly Jacksonian polity would reveal different patterns, or whether the dominant figure of Vance encouraged fulsome avowals of personal dependence. Also, the work starts abruptly with 1861, talks of the wartime "development of a politics of dependence" with a thirty-year time frame (1). But would the prewar letters to the governor read that differently? The question would seem worth explicit discussion. The author does observe that the wartime volume of letters doubled, which supports his argument, but the book leaves unexamined the issue of record-keeping or the postwar volume of correspondence. One does get the sense that material is being selectively provided to back a case, because the

relevant letter counts are only occasionally provided. Also, one wonders why the author describes the book's topic as "Reconstruction patronalism," when the war itself seems like his decisive turning point, and the book's central figure, Vance, drops out of politics during these years. In a work of such intellectual ambition, all these pedestrian questions might have been anticipated.

The book is well-written, with an occasional humorous turn of phrase and also display of literary insights, like the discussion of the word "condescension" in nineteenth-century usage (34). The command of political detail seems less sure, at least outside of the war and Reconstruction era. The author states that "The Mexican-American War and the annexation of Texas raised simmering tensions to a boil" (15). True enough, but the order seems counterintuitive. The author refers to the Populists as backing "broad programs of government warehousing," rather an odd description of what seems to be the Subtreasury plan (165). No matter, this is an original, significant book that will give historians a good deal to think about.

Michael W. Fitzgerald, St. Olaf College, is the author of Splendid Failure: Postwar Reconstruction in the American South and other works. He is currently finishing a study of Reconstruction in Alabama.