Lincoln And The Democrats: The Politics Of Opposition In The Civil War

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Review

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Neely, Mark E. Jr. *Lincoln and the Democrats: The Politics of Opposition in the Civil War*. Cambridge University Press, \$24.99 ISBN 9781107637634

The Northern Democrats: Muddled and Mythologized and Stubbornly Loyal to the Union

In 1938, Professor James G. Randall asked the question, “Has the Lincoln theme been exhausted?” We know the answer by now – it hasn’t been and probably never will be. But if every nuance of America’s 16th president continues to be re-examined to the minutest degree, the story of the party that opposed him has been largely neglected. Pulitzer Prize-winner Mark E. Neely, Jr. does his part to help rectify this in *Lincoln and the Democrats*, a probing and often revelatory look at the loyal opposition during the Civil War.

Neely’s credentials as a Lincoln scholar are formidable. In reading this book of interrelated essays, there’s a sense of deep knowledge informing his interpretations. He offers insightful critiques of various earlier studies of the Civil War era, including such works as Joel Sibley’s *A Respectable Minority*, George M. Frederickson’s *The Inner Civil War* and Jean Baker’s *Affairs of Party*. Essentially, Neely takes issue with the familiar claim that the Democrats were dominated by traitors and primarily motivated by racism during the years of Lincoln’s presidency. His view is more complex, informed by a careful reading of the Democratic party press of the time.

Rather than stress the bitter partisanship between Democrats and Republicans, Neely points out how private and civil institutions functioned to help support the Union war effort. Democrat-controlled local governments generally voted to fund military volunteers (something Republican officials didn’t always do). Neely cites the interesting case of Tammany Hall paying for exemptions from the draft after the horrific New York anti-draft riots of 1863. He goes into detail to demonstrate that the U.S. Sanitary Commission was more than a charity project by the Republicans (as Frederickson and others have

claimed). Neely uses these examples to assert that Northern Democrats were largely supportive of the war.

The book's middle chapters seek to disprove that the Democrats were controlled by their notorious peace wing while exploring the party's rather vague ideas about the Constitution. Studies like Jennifer L. Weber's *Copperheads* (2006) have emphasized the active role of disunionist elements in the Democratic Party. Neely takes a very different view, stressing the isolation of the more extreme peace advocates. He likewise disputes the notion that the Democrats were in thrall to white supremacist ideas. He delves into the sordid career of pro-slavery advocate Dr. John Van Evrie to demonstrate how little real influence this noxious figure had among party elected officials or the rank and file. New York governor Horatio Seymour was more typical of the cautiously moderate leaders the Democrats followed. (Of course, the Democratic Party's ideology was indisputably racist. Neely's point is that discussions of race didn't dominate the party's pitch to the voters during the Civil War.)

Lincoln and the Democrats is particularly valuable in examining the claim that the Democrats represented an unbroken political tradition from the Jefferson Administration onwards. They built up this tradition to counterbalance the Republican attempt to make loyalty to the Union their exclusive property. Identity as a Democrat became a form of nationalism that transcended ideology or stands on the issues. Stubborn partisanship kept the party alive at a time when many predicted its demise. According to Neely, the Democratic Party "pretty much invented the idea of the loyal opposition in war." (83)

At times, there didn't seem much else besides tradition and the will to survive to keep the Democrats going. Neely notes that 1864 Democratic presidential nominee George B. McClellan "was no politician at all...he stood for nothing in politics." (125) Disagreeing with many past historians, he portrays the party's ideas about the Constitution as opportunistic and incoherent rather than a principled defense of conservatism. Despite noisy demands by some Democrats about settling the war through negotiation, the party "could not figure out a plan for peace." (170) McClellan's views (such as they were) didn't mesh with the party's 1864 platform, contributing to the sense of desperation that afflicted the Democrats that year.

Neely concludes his book with a provocative exploration of Lincoln's constitutional views. Lincoln had been on "the steady course of liberal

antislavery constitutional interpretation” until the looming Civil War forced him to veer in a different direction. (175) His proposed amendments to help stave off secession didn’t show him at his best. Far more noble and progressive were his efforts to expand his pardoning power and reach for a humanitarian standard in international law. Neely discusses the fascinating case of Spanish slave-trader Jose Agustin Arguelles to show how Lincoln favored human rights over narrow legal precedents.

Surprisingly, Neely doesn’t make many direct comparisons between Lincoln’s ideas and those of the Northern Democrats. (This may be because so few of the latter had any substantive ideas to offer.) The value of *Lincoln and Democrats* doesn’t lie in a tight linear narrative or the pitting of one historical figure against another. Rather, the book focuses in on specific aspects of Civil War era scholarship and challenges some long-held assumptions with vigor. Anyone curious about the Democratic Party’s conflicted past – as well as Lincoln’s growth as a constitutional thinker – will find this book well worth reading.

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