

The Republic For Which It Stands: The United States During Reconstruction And The Gilded Age, 1865-1896

Kevin Adams

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Adams, Kevin (2018) "The Republic For Which It Stands: The United States During Reconstruction And The Gilded Age, 1865-1896," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.20.1.12

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol20/iss1/7>

Review

Adams, Kevin

Winter 2018

White, Richard *The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865-1896*. Oxford, \$35.00 ISBN 9780199735815

The Gilded Age Revised?

“Historians often write of Reconstruction and the Gilded Age as if they were separate and consecutive eras,” Richard White declares near the beginning of *The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865-1896*, “but the two gestated together” (2). With this frank statement behind him, White then leads readers on a journey through the crucial, though too often bypassed, years of the late nineteenth century. It is a journey both disorienting and familiar given recent observations that we may be living in a second Gilded Age in the early twenty-first century. While White is circumspect about making comparisons with our own time, it is impossible to push the legacy of our own time completely out of frame. This produces an odd effect where the sum of the book’s parts seems greater when one is working one’s way through the tome. This is particularly true for readers primarily interested in the Civil War and Reconstruction, who are likely to have a much different take on the book than the general reader.

This reviewer imagines that specialists in the study of Reconstruction (it should be noted that the Civil War itself is only the slightest of backdrops to this story) will object on numerous grounds to what White does with the topic. One thing that seems clear is that the author’s reading did not dive very deeply into the recent historiography. While Eric Foner and Michael Perman still have much to teach us, to lean on them heavily lends a desultory feel to the discussion of Reconstruction. The list of authors not consulted comprises a veritable who’s who in the field; one will search in vain for citations to recent studies by Joan Waugh, Elaine Frantz Parsons, Jason Phillips, Kidada Williams, William Blair, just to name a few. On one hand, White may not have placed emphasis on the

Reconstruction period when he sat down to conceptualize the book--readers of the acknowledgements will notice, for example, that the only scholar in the field who seems to have read the manuscript is David Blight. On the other hand, this might be a consequence of White's analytical position. Since the book's arguments about Reconstruction hew closely to the post-revisionist positions first charted in the 1970s, the inclusion of a wide range of recent scholarship may have required more analytical work than White was prepared to devote to Reconstruction. Be that as it may, it is a disappointment that the generally excellent bibliographic essay found at the end of the book fails to contain a wider sampling of the recent Reconstruction literature.

A larger issue concerning White's approach to Reconstruction involves his interpretation of the Republican Party. From the first pages of the book, we are informed the fissures within the Republican Party were real and consequential. This line is constantly repeated throughout the book's 870 plus pages of text; so insistent is White that uninitiated readers might wonder how Republicans accomplished anything at all. Part of this stance derives from White's read of post-Civil War parties: "These parties were not particularly ideological," White maintains, with party coherence derived from ethnocultural factors (3). As a result, any time that issues seem salient, White is quick to insist that the issues served as a smokescreen for other agendas. White's presentation of Republican division, it should be noted, is carried out with practically no discussion of voting behavior in Congress, or the popular vote in national elections. And, though he smartly carries the discussion of Reconstruction throughout the entire book, he is quick to dismiss any expressions of Republican commitment to voting and/or civil rights as akin to vestigial organ on the body of the party. To this reviewer, it seemed like White either misreads or reads incompletely the work of scholars like Charles Calhoun, who is cited regularly in the text. While Calhoun argues that, over the course of the Gilded Age, the displacement of concerns over the civil rights of African Americans with interest in economic issues occurred among the GOP, Calhoun also shows that in the 1880s, the national party made a spirited attempt to win southern states (nearly doing so in several border states), that federal marshals oversaw southern elections in the first part of that decade, and that the Lodge Elections bill of 1890, handled far too briefly by White (see especially 627-30) represents the real transition to a politics centered upon a "full dinner pail." White would have also benefited from an examination of Pamela Brandwein's *Rethinking the Judicial Settlement of Reconstruction*, a pathbreaking work the revises much of what we think we

know about the important Supreme Court cases of the era.

White's final position on Reconstruction will perhaps prove most controversial to students of the subject. "Reconstruction was not doomed to fail," White asserts, but had failed because of Republican ineptitude (336). For all of the mistakes made by Republicans, mistakes made in good faith and bad, such a summary judgment underplays the centrality of white southern opposition to Reconstruction—or to racism in American society more generally. Impugning the GOP for not responding more forcefully to white terrorism is completely justified, but to focus one's historical explanation for Reconstruction's shortcoming entirely on the party ignores how racialized structures of power in the south shaped the agency of both whites and blacks in that region.

That said, the contributions of this volume are clear and impressive. First, White instantiates Elliott West's concept of a "Greater Reconstruction" better than anyone else has to date. White's exposition of the linkages between the *Crédit Mobilier* scandal, the Freedman's Savings bank, the political economy of railroad development, especially in the south, and national politics during a fraught moment of Reconstruction is simply brilliant (265-66). So too is his explicit comparison between Radical Republicans and the Indian Peace Commissioners as leading equivalent (and related) nation-building movements (109, 113-17). In elucidating the contours of the Greater Reconstruction, White suggests two important points: first, one has to do more than invoke the concept, but actually has to draw out distinct and clear points of contact; second, those trained in western history are best positioned to adjudicate claims about a Greater Reconstruction, since they know the scholarly ground best. Indeed, White's frequent reliance on his 2012 study *Railroaded!* sometimes tells us just as much about federal aspirations and the limits of the federal prerogative as his coverage of the canonical aspects of Reconstruction.

Second, the volume is filled with interesting connections and approaches, connections that others may not have made. What makes White such an interesting choice for a volume like this is that if one were to ask American historians what field they believed White worked in, "historian of the Gilded Age" would probably not appear as one of the top five responses. Simply put, White's body of scholarly work not only reveals a vast collection of topical interests, but it has also transcended hard and fast chronological bounds. Where White has made his name as a scholar is in the fields of western history, environmental history, and American Indian history, and the sections of *The*

Republic for Which It Stands devoted to those topics are written with verve and insight. See, for example, his chapter “Dying for Progress,” which explores “a largely urban Gilded Age environmental crisis that people recognized but could neither name nor fully understand,” or his poignant accounts of those who were eager to displace native societies in the belief that “rain follows the plow” (476, 425-39).

A particular strength of the book—and one reason why Americanists with a broad teaching mandate will enjoy the book—is White’s keen eye for data. Statistics for lecture abound in *The Republic for Which It Stands*. While not always pitched as classic social history, the numerous sections in the book devoted to the analysis of data inevitably draw readers back into the prosaic (and often grim) realities of life in the late nineteenth century. Even hardened veterans of Gilded Age historiography might be taken aback by the fact that New York City cleared 10,000 dead horses from its streets in 1880, or that Gilded Age plutocrats enjoyed dining on birds that frantically fattened themselves when kept in total darkness that were then drowned in brandy, roasted, and eaten whole (500, 474). Tellingly, the statistical charts sprinkled throughout the book seem unique among the Oxford series volumes, and they often are based on the most recent publications from other disciplines. Two highlights are White’s discussion of both internal and external migration and their relationship to geographic mobility, and his detailed exposition of the factors that left the citizens of an increasingly prosperous United States shorter, less healthy, and hungrier than Americans in the first half of the nineteenth century. If one takes a step back from the grinding minutiae of a nearly 900 page book, White’s reliance on social science data serves to buttress a major synthetic device of the book, the period concern with family and/or homes (5). While the family and the home sometimes vanish from the narrative, they remain original and persuasive lenses for understanding the history of this period, particularly in their gendered and racialized incarnations.

Perhaps the best way to encapsulate everything found within the pages of *The Republic for Which It Stands* is to say that it is a study easier experienced than described. While White’s discussion of Reconstruction is not likely to satisfy specialists in that field (for a variety of reasons), the volume aspires to be something much more than an account of the immediate postwar years. And, even for the dissatisfied, there is more than enough to draw one back to the book, even if one is only looking for gripping lecture anecdotes.

Kevin Adams

Kent State University

The author of Class and Race in the Frontier Army: Military Life in the West, 1870-1890, Kevin Adams specializes in the intersections between the military and society during the Gilded Age and is a former Associate Editor of Civil War History.