

Oliver P. Morton and the Politics of the Civil War and Reconstruction

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Recommended Citation

Daly, John Patrick (2019) "Oliver P. Morton and the Politics of the Civil War and Reconstruction," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 3 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol21/iss3/18>

Review

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Summer 2019

Fuller, A. James. *Oliver P. Morton and the Politics of the Civil War and Reconstruction.* Kent State University Press, 2017 \$59.95 ISBN 9781606353103

Oliver P. Morton and the Politics of the Civil War and Reconstruction is an outstanding biography of a vital subject. Morton deserves the greater attention James Fuller gives him. Morton's career as Indiana's Republican governor has always merited attention, but Fuller goes a step past this to show that his even longer career as a senator during Reconstruction was equally important. Civil War historians know Morton primarily as the wartime governor of Indiana (1861-1867). Famously, Morton did not call the state legislature into session when Democrats took control of it. Morton feared the Democrats' Copperhead tendencies and tepid support for the war. Morton instituted one-man rule and raised funds on his own. Despite the technical illegality of some of Morton's actions, Fuller convincingly documents the wisdom and effectiveness of Morton's leadership. Fuller presents Morton as a consistent fighter for equality and nationalism who saw the power of the Republican Party as the best means of promoting both. The historiography of the Civil War leader has too often labelled Morton a ruthless opportunist. Partly due to caricatures and slanders against him, Morton has not been the subject of a full biography in over a hundred years. This biography updates and corrects scholarship by showing Morton as principled, judicious, and skilled in his use of governmental power to promote freedom.

Fuller's biography accomplishes its greatest feat by turning attention to Reconstruction and Morton's career as a senator from 1867-1877. Morton was a leader of the Senate and the Republican Party. He was as forceful an advocate for civil rights as more famous "Radical Republicans," such as Congressman Thaddeus Stevens and Senators Charles Sumner and Lyman Trumbull. Fuller is well versed in the current scholarship of Reconstruction that casts the era as a

continuation of the American Civil War by other means. Morton certainly saw the era that way and waved “the bloody shirt” longer and harder than any other Republican. Fuller discusses this tactic as well as any historian has, and highlights how the tactic exposed the continued mass violence of southern Democrats against Republicans after 1865, more than it recalled the Democratic Party’s role in starting the American Civil War. Morton also correctly and repeatedly pointed out that Ku Klux Klan and White League mass murder went both unprosecuted and unpunished during Reconstruction. His forceful pursuit of civil rights, national governmental power, and his prosecution of Copperheads and white supremacists not surprisingly appeals more in 2019 than it has in the past to racist and state’s-rights historians who dominated popular memory and scholarship for far too long.

Although the book has tremendous current relevance, Fuller’s lively analytic narrative follows Morton’s life and career in the context of his times. Fuller places Morton’s apparent reversals of his positions in the perspective of powerful events that shifted the context of Morton’s action, not the content of his principles and goals. The charges of opportunism against him ring hollow in Fuller’s able hands. For instance, in 1865, like many Republicans, Morton did not advocate for African American voting rights and spoke positively of Andrew Johnson. His mind was quickly changed by the brutal wave of violence against both African Americans in the South and all Union men across the region -- and Johnson’s complicity in both. Morton saw equality and freedom could not be achieved by a series of steps. A dire crisis of survival for Unionists in the South necessitated African American voting and Republican political power that would protect civil rights for all and bring convictions for those who violated them. In a less dramatic fashion, during his wartime governorship, Morton realized that sympathizers for the southern cause in Indiana constituted an existential threat to the state, equality, justice, and national survival. His maneuvers to govern alone and raise funds independently of the suspended legislature and to prosecute Copperheads vigorously were tactics the times called for. Fuller does not say a Copperhead rebellion and conspiracy were imminent, but that it reasonably looked that way in the moment of the War. After recounting Confederate cavalry leader John Hunt Morgan’s raid into Indiana, Fuller gives the laudable judgment that: “If the Copperheads continued to organize and timed their attacks in coordination with the Confederate Military, disaster might well occur. Morton remained vigilant for good reason.” (145) Morton even survived assassination attempts during the war. Fuller criticizes Morton when it is appropriate, but also

shows that he was incorruptible and fought for his cherished views of nationalism, equality, and Republican Party power.

Fuller's biography is essential reading for any historian of the American Civil War and is an original and outstanding contribution to the new scholarship of Reconstruction. The book also has many other delights. Its portrait of Indiana history is impressive, especially its analysis of complex political and economic alignments in the state. The discussion of Indiana's regional diversity, symbolized in the role of the National Road for antebellum Hoosiers, is useful. Fuller discusses other complicated political issues with a deft touch, such as the gold standard debate and Reconstruction legislative machinations. Fuller brings Morton to life in depictions of his marriage, support of women's rights, and struggles with stroke-induced paralysis that left him reliant on crutches during his Senate career. Fuller also effectively assesses the slanders against Morton, especially contemporary charges of womanizing and corruption. White supremacist Democrats stooped to any tactic in the era to discredit men they hated for supporting antislavery and later civil rights. Democrats commonly used violence, brutal racist rhetoric, wholesale lying and false or exaggerated charges of corruption even before the American Civil War and the tactics were sadly effective during Reconstruction; so effective that they lived on in the histories of the Era. Fuller's biography is a great corrective to the historiography of Morton. With this study, Morton takes his rightful place as a central figure of Hoosier and national politics.

Dr. John Patrick Daly is a professor of Civil War history at The College at Brockport, State University of New York, and author of When Slavery was Called Freedom (2003). His current book, Reconstruction, The War after the War: The Southern Civil War 1865-1877 is under consideration by Fordham University Press.