

### Spying on the South: An Odyssey Across the American Divide

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## Review

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**Horwitz, Tony.** *Spying on the South: An Odyssey Across the American Divide.* Penguin Press, 2019. \$30.00 ISBN 99781101980286

*Spying on the South* juxtaposes two intervals when the United States appeared to have fractured into hostile tribes. Writer and journalist Tony Horwitz set out to probe today's "American divide" with a template in mind—the effort by Frederick Law Olmsted to comprehend North-South antagonisms during the 1850s. Just as Olmsted once had done, Horwitz decided to head South.

Olmsted would become America's premier landscape architect, who created New York City's Central Park and many other iconic public spaces. Before starting this celebrated career, however, he was hired by the recently-established *New-York Daily Times* to report from the South. Between 1852 and 1854, as North-South strains increased, young Olmsted wandered widely across the slave states and penned a stream of columns, later enlarged into three books. He "traversed what would soon be enemy territory," Horwitz explains, "talking and eating and bedding with Southerners against whom he and other Northerners would zealously wage war in the coming years" (7).

Horwitz recapitulated Olmsted's travels, armed with skills honed as a newspaper correspondent. He approached people with a "big grin" and counted on his ability "get along with just about anybody, no matter how different our backgrounds or beliefs or temperaments" (309, 347). Like Olmsted, Horwitz hoped "there was always room for dialogue, and great value in having it, if only to make it harder for Americans to demonize one another" (348). But he was haunted by "inescapable echoes of the 1850s" (7).

Horwitz encountered many Souths, from "distressed and depopulated" West Virginia, marooned by the collapse of extractive industries and the rise of drug addiction, to the booming Austin-San Antonio corridor of west-central Texas, which displayed a "meteoric growth" that

surpassed anything he had seen “in my years of roaming the continent as a reporter and writer” (271). He toured “trophy home[s],” where white plantation owners once lived in luxury even as black slaves toiled and suffered “fearful” abuse (134, 171). Today these have become wedding venues and tourist destinations, oblivious to harsh antebellum realities. Horwitz went to Colfax, Louisiana, where armed vigilantes massacred over a hundred blacks in 1873, the single most violent episode in Reconstruction; there he found a monument that memorialized three whites who died “fighting for white supremacy” (183-85). He witnessed a surreal spectacle in which enormous trucks careened through mud as drivers quaffed a concoction spiked with 190-proof grain alcohol. Shortly after, he stopped at a town that boasted of its 348 churches.

Horwitz identified salient themes across this vast and varied terrain. White Southerners, he found, often coupled an intense “conservatism and religiosity” with a visceral belief that any money raised through taxation will be wasted. They hated “central authority” and “Big Brother government,” and they wanted to be left alone. Their ethos—which Olmsted earlier recognized—prized individuality over community and decried any possibility of “mutual benefit” (239-40). Yet these same champions of go-it-alone libertarianism also demanded laws to prevent abortion and deny gay rights.

Originally a “moderate Free Soiler” rather than a “red-hot Abolitionist,” Olmsted became more critical of the South as his journeys continued. He was repelled by the horrors of slavery and the intransigence of its defenders, and he lost faith “that a middle ground could be found” (18, 85). But he was delighted to find German immigrants in west-central Texas who deviated from the Southern mainstream. Some “Forty-Eighters” (liberal veterans of the failed 1848 revolutions in Europe) openly opposed slavery. Olmsted mused about moving to join this “free-labor communitarian society” and helping to build “an anti-slavery fifth column behind Southern lines,” perhaps the nucleus for a separate state of Western Texas (296, 300-1).

Horwitz had fewer illusions than Olmsted about Texas, but he likewise gives the Lone Star state outsized attention in his book. And why not? Colossal Texas, home to a mere three hundred thousand souls in the 1850s, is today a nation within a nation, with a population that approaches thirty million. Horwitz eagerly explored the Guadalupe River valley as he tried to find traces of the German Texas that so entranced his predecessor. This quest ended badly: a misanthropic guide subjected him to humiliations and debilitating injuries. These hard experiences reminded him that Confederates had inflicted a “reign of terror” against the would-

be free-labor German communities during the Civil War, after which the survivors found it prudent to bow to dominant norms (317).

Most of the Southerners Horwitz met were white. When in New Orleans, however, he participated in a rollicking Sunday service that overcame his self-consciousness and liberated him to become the “white guy in a black church, clapping out of unison and jerking like a headless chicken.” He contrasted the “extraordinary welcome” he enjoyed there with what he feared would be the less hospitable experience a lone black man might find in “the city’s white flight suburbs” (149-50). The church service uplifted its congregants, but the realities of African American life in today’s South are more sobering. One resident of Greenville, Mississippi, admitted that he would have given “a thousand-to-one odds” against the possibility of seeing “a black president in my lifetime.” Even though the unexpected happened, “we’re still at the bottom. . . . I’m still on my side of the fence, white folks on the other. What’s really changed?” (109).

Horwitz also felt welcomed by a kind Mexican-American couple, who lived near the Rio Grande. They even drove him thirty miles across the border to attend a festival in a Coahuila town, where Olmsted long before had visited. Notwithstanding the perils of Mexican drug cartels and militarized American forces that treated surreptitious migrants like fugitive slaves, Horwitz’s hosts saw a brighter future. “I want my boys to go to Ivy League schools,” said Kristel Sanchez. “We’ve had a black man as president, and it looks like next week we’ll elect a woman. Sometime soon it will be one of our sons or daughters in the White House” (389).

Donald Trump’s victory, propelled by “divisive and inflammatory falsehoods,” struck Horwitz as “a political jolt unlike any in the forty years since I cast my first vote.” It revealed that the “reasoned discourse” Olmsted originally sought during the 1850s was a “virtual impossibility” today, and it screamed of “commonalities between his troubled era and mine.” Horwitz glumly recalled that Southern fire-eaters had slandered presidential candidate Abraham Lincoln as a “Black Republican” conspirator, hell bent on destroying slavery. But Horwitz also recognized that misleading stereotypes were not confined to the South: his friends in the Northeast viewed Texas “as arid, alien, and hostile, like ISIS-controlled parts of Syria” (396-98).

What might historians make of Horwitz’s ominous meditation? As I compose this review in October 2019, his prescience stands out. Every day we learn that what he knew was bad is in fact worse: the federal government has been hijacked by kleptocrats in cahoots with foreign

autocrats. But one ought not assign the white South entire responsibility for the current state of affairs. Rural white America, excluding a few eccentric pockets such as Vermont, is almost as complicit. Most crucially, the entire Republican Party, both its leadership and its rank-in-file, has (with a few honorable exceptions) cheerfully embraced what first appeared to be a hostile takeover.

Horwitz's critique of the South also downplays any evidence of countervailing possibilities. Three times during his lifetime, Democratic presidential candidates from the South won the top office, aided by a crucial coalition of African Americans, whites, and Latinos from their home region. But neither Lyndon Johnson nor Jimmy Carter nor Bill Clinton rate so much as a passing mention in this volume. As recently as 2008 and 2012, Barack Obama energized that same coalition of voters to tip several key Southern battlegrounds. It may be more than a liberal fantasy that South's so-called purple states are ready to move in a new direction.

*Spying on the South* deserves a wide audience. Its author displayed a heartening ability to converse with ordinary folk. By sitting on the next bar stool and asking a new acquaintance about his "job and life and hopes for the future," he hoped to lower the temperature of "the overheated national debate over our differences" (*New York Times*, 28 April 2019, SR4). But Horwitz also shared the comment of a rare small-town white Southern Democrat: "the divide is so wide I don't see anything that will bridge it" (240). That somber judgment now appears all the more poignant, because Tony Horwitz collapsed and died in May 2019 while out promoting his new book. He was too young, only sixty. It is a crushing loss.

*Daniel W. Crofts, who taught at The College of New Jersey before his 2014 retirement, is the author of Lincoln and the Politics of Slavery: The Other Thirteenth Amendment and the Struggle to Save the Union (University of North Carolina Press, 2016). Learn more at [www.danielwcrofts.com](http://www.danielwcrofts.com).*