

Institutional Politics of the Civil War Era

Jeffery Hardin Hobson
jhobso8@lsu.edu

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

Recommended Citation

Hobson, Jeffery Hardin (2022) "Institutional Politics of the Civil War Era," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.24.1.01

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol24/iss1/1>

Editorial

Institutional Politics in the Civil War Era

Hobson, Jeffery Hardin

Winter 2022

Politics has gained a capacious meaning in the field of American history. Rightly so, for in the era of this journal's focus, the majority of Americans were disenfranchised and thus were forced to resort to politics out of doors and beyond the polls. Therefore, to better understand the politics of the Civil War era, historians have increasingly focused their scholarship on the ways Black Americans, women, Native Americans, and immigrants agitated for change outside the U.S. Capitol, the White House, and state legislatures. This rich political history from the bottom up has been cataloged in this journal, especially our Spring 2021 issue, which focused on Black Americans' activism in the Civil War era. Nonetheless, investigating institutional politics and the "Great Men" who politicked remains an essential element of Civil War era studies. The books reviewed in this issue demonstrate that studying institutional politics continues to yield new insights, understandings, and perspectives on the Civil War era.

Joseph W. Pearson's *The Whigs' America: Middle-Class Political Thought in the Age of Jackson and Clay* examines the relationship between Whigs' middle-class identity and their political ideology. Reviewer Harry Watson writes that "Pearson presents a sweeping defense of the" Whigs' ideals, though he "is not blind to their faults." Pearson also examines Whigs' ideals in contradistinction to Democrats' and emphasizes the former's optimism and the latter's pessimism concerning the increasingly interconnected marketplace economy. Watson finds that "Pearson's sketches of Whig beliefs are sensitive" and "convincing."

In this issue's *Civil War Treasures*, Hans Rasmussen shares several examples of manuscripts held in LSU's special collections that reflect how middle-class Whigs helped to create modern political campaigning and sloganeering. He begins with their familiar battle cry for the 1840 presidential election—"Tippecanoe and Tyler Too!"—before he discusses examples of Whigs' grassroots political organizations, the rousing political tunes they composed, and the politically motivated campaign biographies they penned. Rasmussen shows that while the

Whigs' "campaign biographies, songs, and polemical tracts did little good at the ballot box," they still "offer the clearest insights into the opinions and self-perceptions of party operatives" during the Whig Party's short life. To learn more about these Whig Party artifacts, visit LSU's special collections website and its home in Hill Memorial Library.

No "Great Man" looms larger in Civil War era politics than former-Whig, Abraham Lincoln, as is evidenced by the 16,000-plus volumes dedicated to his life, career, and political ideology. Lincoln looms large in this issue as well. We feature reviews of two new additions to the ever-expanding Lincoln corpus as well as three books related to his antagonistic relationship with northern antiwar Democrats.

In *Lincoln and the American Founding*, author Lucas E. Morel probes Lincoln's political ideology and situates it within the Founders' ideological legacy. Reviewer David J. Gerleman writes that Morel demonstrates Lincoln's politics and governance are best understood when "viewed through the prism of America's founding documents." Gerleman writes that this slim, "eminently readable" volume "is densely packed with astute observations beneficial to general readers and Lincoln scholars alike."

Attorney *cum* historian Noah Feldman presents a counterargument to Morel's conclusions about Lincoln's relationship to the U.S. Constitution in his new book, *The Broken Constitution: Lincoln, Slavery, and the Refounding of America*, which Frank J. Williams reviews for this issue's "Look at Lincoln." Feldman argues that Lincoln fundamentally reinterpreted and reshaped the U.S. Constitution and, in the process, replaced the Framers' "compromise constitution" with a "moral constitution." Feldman contends Lincoln's "moral constitution" was shaped by his personal interpretation of the founding document, which he believed gave him as the executive and commander-in-chief expansive powers, which ranged from the ability to declare martial law and suspend *habeas corpus* to imprison political adversaries. Williams finds *Broken Constitution* to be a "well-written and well-researched book," the conclusions of which "will provide debate for historians of all persuasions in the years to come."

Matthew Pinsker reviews two books that use the antagonistic relationship between Lincoln and northern antiwar Democrat Clement L. Vallandigham to examine these expanded executive wartime powers. Though the two books share the same subject, the authors approached it "with utterly different styles," Pinsker finds. Legal scholar Thomas C. Mackey's *Opposing Lincoln: Clement L. Vallandigham, Presidential Power, and the Legal Battle over Dissent in*

Wartime “exudes scholarly authority,” Pinsker writes. On the other hand, retired columnist Martin Gottlieb’s *Lincoln’s Northern Nemesis: The War Opposition and Exile of Ohio’s Clement Vallandigham*, “adopts a much breezier tone,” in Pinsker’s estimation. Beyond their tones, the two differ in how they analyze their subject. Mackey’s “interest clearly lies more with Lincoln than Vallandigham.” Mackey looks at how the Lincoln Administration reacted to Vallandigham’s wartime dissent, his ensuing deportation, and the Supreme Court’s decision to uphold Lincoln’s actions against the Ohio congressman. Gottlieb channeled his journalistic instincts to dig up fresh sources, especially from Vallandigham’s Dayton, Ohio. Those sources give Gottlieb’s *Lincoln’s Northern Nemesis* a localist view of Vallandigham’s and Lincoln’s clash. The two authors’ differing approaches and styles will appeal to different audiences. Mackey’s *Opposing Lincoln* “is well-designed for classroom adoption” while Gottlieb’s *Lincoln’s Northern Nemesis* will please “Civil War buffs seeking an enjoyable” read.

Vallandigham was part of a more robust antiwar Democratic Party faction, which J. Matthew Gallman inspects in his new book, *The Cacophony of Politics: Northern Democrats and the American Civil War*. Reviewer Michael Todd Landis writes that Gallman “delights in the chaos” of Civil War era politics in his new work. Though Gallman focuses on party politics, he does so through “vignettes from private citizens, pundits, and editors.” Ultimately, Gallman provides “readers a sense of the opacity of partisanship in the early 1860s.” By “poking holes in well-worn labels and stereotypes,” Gallman reveals how Democrats decided just what it meant to be a Democrat during the Civil War. Landis is certain that *The Cacophony of Politics* “will give grad students and specialists plenty to chew on.”

Most Americans are unaware that Latter Day Saints prophet Joseph Smith sought the presidency, but Spencer W. McBride’s *Joseph Smith for President: The Prophet, the Assassins, and the Fight for American Religious Freedom* fills that lacuna. Reviewer Derek R. Sainsbury finds McBride’s appraisal of the prophet’s “sincere but quixotic campaign” to be an “important work” that exposes “antebellum religious inequality and the systems that perpetuated it.” Sainsbury writes that “McBride adroitly captures an undercurrent of genuine fear” that compelled many Americans to suppress religious minorities like the Latter Day Saints. McBride uses Smith’s campaign to show how the combination of Americans’ fear-inspired religious bigotry with partisan politics abrogated religious minorities’ constitutional rights. Sainsbury

concludes that McBride’s “book is a must read” for anyone interested in antebellum religion, politics, and the intersection thereof.

In this issue’s author interview, McBride and I dive into Smith’s bid for the presidency. In doing so, we discuss how Smith endured tough lessons in the hollowness of states’ rights philosophy, which inspired his decision to run for president. Our discussion touches on Smith’s platform and his campaign’s infrastructure, and how the two related to his role as prophet in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. We also discuss how *Joseph Smith for President* fits into McBride’s interest in and scholarship on the intersection of religion and politics in the long nineteenth century. I close by asking McBride a fun counterfactual: If Smith’s bid for the White House were successful, what kind of president would he have made? Listen to our conversation to hear his interesting answer.

Another would-be president is the subject of Reg Ankrom’s newest book, *Stephen A. Douglas, Western Man: The Early Years in Congress, 1844-1850*—the second installment in Ankrom’s four-volume biography of the Little Giant. Reviewer Michael E. Woods writes that Ankrom “illuminates the interpersonal and institutional talents that fostered Douglas’s political success” in the “rancorous pre-Civil War politics.” Despite his intimate familiarity with his subject, Ankrom does not ignore “Douglas’s sophistries and deceptions,” Woods writes. *Stephen A. Douglas, Western Man* provides “valuable material that will be of interest to Civil War buffs, Illinois history aficionados, and academic historians,” writes Woods.

Andrew R. Black’s *Buried Dreams: The Hoosac Tunnel and the Demise of the Railroad Age* uses the construction of a 4.75-mile-long Massachusetts tunnel to explore the political economy of internal improvements in the Civil War era. Beyond that, Black’s book uses the tunnel’s construction to help readers understand nineteenth-century engineering and public projects management, both of which presented obstacles to the tunnel’s completion. Reviewer Scott E. Randolph writes that *Buried Dreams* “is a charming book” with “crisp” writing that deeply drills into the “minutia” of antebellum engineering as well as into the lives of the engineers and managers who oversaw the two-decades-long project. Randolph believes *Buried Dreams* will be a welcome addition to the libraries of people interested in “nineteenth-century transportation, or technology, or political economy.”

The hollowness of states’ rights philosophy reemerges in John M. Sacher’s *Confederate Conscription and the Struggle for Southern Soldiers*. Despite secessionists and Confederates’

rhetoric of states' rights, the nation's leaders created a robust central government and enacted the first conscription in U.S. history. Reviewer Paul Quigley writes that "Sacher rightly terms Confederate conscription 'revolutionary'" because it prioritized the needs of the federal government over the those of the eleven Confederate states and their citizens. Sacher's book provides "a genuinely fresh approach to the subject," by moving beyond the traditional debate over whether the draft represented and fomented dissent. Instead, Sacher focuses on the passage of conscription and its "*implementation . . .* to explore differing interpretations of what the Confederacy really meant." Especially important is Sacher's framing of the conscription debate as an outgrowth of the "competing claims of homefront and battlefield." Quigley is confident that Sacher's volume "deserves immediate status as the standard work on Confederate conscription."

These new books about the party politics and the "Great Men" who governed in the Civil War era demonstrate that looking at familiar subjects from new angles provides a new understanding of the age. Books reviewed in this issue show that there remains room for debate about Lincoln's actions as a wartime president and how those actions affected contemporaries and helped create the world we live in today, despite the vast volume of works on his life and politics. Though Joseph Smith is hardly an obscure figure, McBride's new volume shows how repression and suppression politicizes otherwise nonpolitical people and can even inspire them to seek the highest office. Looking into a short railroad tunnel further illuminates nineteenth-century Americans' attitudes toward public projects and the nuts and bolts of their construction. By shifting the focus on Confederate conscription away from its relationship to dissent, we see what Confederates believed the Confederate project represented to them, and how they balanced the exigencies of life on the homefront and battlefield. These studies in institutional politics in and of themselves give us a great view into the Civil War era, and when combined with the bottom up view of politics of the time, which has gained traction in recent decades, the view becomes ever clearer.