

The Cacophony of Politics: Northern Democrats and the American Civil War

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Review

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Gallman, J. Matthew. *The Cacophony of Politics: Northern Democrats and the American Civil War*. University of Virginia Press, 2021. HARDCOVER. \$35.00 ISBN 9780813946566 pp. 416.

“Cacophony” is an apt title for this book, as the descriptor denotes a jarring, chaotic mixture of sounds. In *Cacophony of Politics: Northern Democrats and the American Civil War*, J. Matthew Gallman delights in the chaos, offering a dizzying litany of anecdotes and personalities to give readers a sense of the opacity of partisanship in the early 1860s. “One chief goal here is to demonstrate how fundamentally messy, and often inconsistent, Civil War partisan politics really was,” he warns at the start. (3)

Ostensibly about Northern Democrats, the monograph is more an exploration of Civil War conservatism and the varieties of resistance to the Lincoln administration. There is very little on policy, party operations, or actual officeholders. Instead, the reader is presented with a smorgasbord of vignettes from private citizens, pundits, and editors. Gallman is admittedly most interested in “ordinary citizens who did not always articulate partisan points of view” but who often acted “in symbolic ways,” like rioting, deserting, and joining associations (8). But many of the featured voices, such as James Bayard, Pierce Butler, and Reverdy Johnson, were not even Northerners, but Southerners. And several, like Robert Winthrop, were life-long Whigs. Moreover, the relevancy of many of his vignettes is unclear. A lengthy section on Kentucky families in chapter four, for instance, seems out of place. The presence of tangents and the prominence of non-Northern / non-Democrats adds to the *cacophony* of the narrative.

Nevertheless, there is an overarching chronological argument about the evolution of the party: Democrats in 1860-61 were bewildered by secession and did not know what it meant to be a “Democrat”; they grew into a coherent opposition by reacting to Lincoln’s policies; by 1864 they exhibited “growing audacity,” though they still suffered from divisions (221). And Gallman makes smart use of Provost Marshal records, a previously underutilized source. Reports from the

marshals, Gallman demonstrates, are an excellent tool to gauge the reliability of Republican accounts of Democratic depravity.

Gallman shines when poking holes in well-worn labels and stereotypes. Monikers like “Copperhead,” “War Democrat,” and “Peace Democrat,” he rightly points out, often obscure more than illuminate. On this topic, the individual vignettes are enjoyable and effective. Take, for example, the tale of Mayor Sherman of Chicago, who saw himself as a “War Democrat.” Yet his own son, US Colonel Sherman, denounced him as a “Copperhead.” Which Sherman to believe? Which label is correct? Gallman leaves it up to the reader, which may be a refreshing take on Civil War politics. While other scholars see clear categories, Gallman perceives an ever-swirling kaleidoscope of opinions and emotions. Gallman’s approach is akin to Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle: you can’t fully explain or understand a Northern Democrat at any given time or place; rather, all you can do is guess about their likely views. “Democrats had a tough time defining who they were,” he asserts (175) .

Such an assessment is both a strength and a weakness of the monograph. On one hand, Gallman is spot on: political categories often crumble when you scratch the surface. Ask 100 Democrats in 1861 what it meant to be a Democrat, and you would get 100 different answers. Ask those same folks the same question in 1864, and you’ll probably get a whole new set of contradictory comments. On the other hand, though, not coming to some kind of conclusion about the partisan divisions with which we are all familiar is a bit of a letdown. Labels like “Copperhead” need to be reckoned with.

On one topic, Gallman is crystal clear: the Democratic Party of the Civil War era was *not* pro-slavery or racist. *Cacophony*’s variegated style is set aside suddenly in favor of a “precise” treatment of Democratic views of race and slavery in 1864 (257). Gallman does not mince words: “the Democratic Party did not campaign against emancipation in 1864” and any attempt “to see the Democratic Party as the racist, proslavery party in 1864 . . . misses the many hues at play” (283). The “hues” in question is a reference to a 1945 book by James Randall, whose “varying shades and hues” assessment of Democrats serves as a touchstone for Gallman. The author exhibits real frustration with more recent scholars who have been pointed in their criticism of Democrats and pro-slavery politics.

Indeed, Gallman’s *Cacophony* harkens back to the mid-twentieth century consensus view of American history. That historiography denied the centrality of slavery, downplayed partisan

divisions, and emphasized commonalities. Gallman does likewise. In his brief telling of 1860, for instance, he almost entirely excludes Breckinridge Democrats, ignores Democrats' pro-slavery victory with the Lecompton Constitution, and recasts Stephen Douglas as a well-meaning moderate, overlooking the fact that Douglas enslaved people and was most famous for pro-slavery legislation, such as the Appeasement of 1850 (including the Fugitive Slave Law) and the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

Likewise, Gallman's assessment of the passage of the 13th Amendment casts Democrats and Republicans as brothers. That monumental legislation passed the unruly House of Representatives in January 1865 not because of the Herculean efforts of Lincoln and Republicans, but because of Democratic "political pragmatism" (322). Democrats came to embrace emancipation, he concludes, because their opposition was never really about slavery or race. Throughout the book, the author relies on well-spoken elites—men who were savvy enough not to speak bluntly about the hottest topics of the day—to demonstrate that Democrats were many things, but not pro-slavery. Overall, Gallman emphasizes perceived similarities between Democrats and Republicans, and carefully relegates the issues of slavery, emancipation, and race to one section of one chapter and to the conclusion.

It is worth noting that Gallman is not alone in his endeavor. Several other scholars have lately labored to clean-up conservatism and side-line slavery. Yet, many more have held fast to their critique of white supremacy and pro-slaveryism. Perhaps there is an opportunity here: Gallman's *Cacophony*, while problematic on its own, may prove quite useful in dialogue with other scholarship on the topic. Jennifer Weber's *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln's Opponents in the North* (New York, 2008) is an obvious choice, as well as James Oakes's *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865* (New York, 2013). Historiographic debate is usually a good thing, and Gallman's calming voice and provocative interpretation will give grad students and specialists plenty to chew on.

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