

Young America: The Transformation of Nationalism before the Civil War

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Recommended Citation

Grant, Susan-Mary (2022) "Young America: The Transformation of Nationalism before the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.24.3.14

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol24/iss3/14>

Review

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Summer 2022

Smith, Mark Power. *Young America: The Transformation of Nationalism before the Civil War*. University of Virginia Press. 2022. HARDCOVER. \$49.50 ISBN 9780813948539 pp. 277.

Over the last decade several historians have, from different angles, explored the extent to which nationalism (or nationalisms, perhaps) in the United States was both influenced by and a response to the upsurge of nationalist sentiment and nation-building in Europe in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Of particular interest have been the revolutions of 1848. The outcomes of these political upheavals brought to the nation's shores many Europeans who would prove to be influential within America's development politically, artistically, culturally, musically, and militarily generally, and the Union's war effort specifically, including Carl Schurz, Franz Sigel, and Max Weber. In 2012, two studies appeared that identified 1848 as a turning point for the United States: Andre M. Fleche's study of the war years themselves, *The Revolution of 1861: The American Civil War in the Age of Nationalist Conflict* (University of North Carolina Press); and Paul Quigley's more focused study of white Southern and Confederate nationalism, *Shifting Grounds Nationalism and the American South, 1848-1865* (Oxford University Press). Fleche in particular argues, on p. 3 of his study, that 1848 "opened up a transatlantic dialogue regarding nationalism, workers' rights, and the future of representative government," with a view to illuminating what he defines on p. 6 as "the intellectual environment in which mid-nineteenth-century Americans thought and acted." Now, opening up that debate still further we have Mark Power Smith's detailed and careful study of the ways in which the agitations arising from the demands of liberal nationalism in Europe raised awareness, specifically among the "Young America" faction of the Democrats, of what Smith describes as "an international order fizzing with possibilities" (3).

In some respects, however, the core concept of Smith's thesis here is just how limited, when transplanted across the Atlantic, many of these possibilities turned out to be. As disseminated via the *Democratic Review*, Young America Democrats advocated for an intellectual culture that would, in their view, serve to "legitimate and guide the nation" along

a blueprint of natural rights, expressed politically as popular sovereignty, driven by a wider Democratic opposition to federal control. However, as Smith points out, this “natural,” nationalist philosophy had a dark side (28). Whereas “political science and literature naturalized popular sovereignty for white men,” its scientific arm tended toward the exclusion from the nation of supposedly “inferior” peoples. An unholy trinity of “states’ rights, popular sovereignty, and white supremacy” that contradicted Young America Democrats’ purportedly “progressive worldview” and liberal democratic agenda was the result: a nationalist and political perspective that reinforced, rather than undermined the outright denial of natural rights that chattel slavery represented before its eventual termination over the course of the Civil War (28).

On this subject, Smith offers an alternative to the traditional explanations for the racist strain in Democratic political culture which, as he notes, have arrived at diametrically opposite conclusions: one side arguing that this was an anomaly in an otherwise solidly liberal outlook; the other that Democratic natural rights rhetoric was little more than a smokescreen for the white South’s self-serving agenda. Both, Smith argues, miss the point. White supremacy was inherent in Democratic nationalist ideology because, he stresses, its central tenets of “white supremacy, free labor, and popular sovereignty . . . had traction across the nation.” Young America Democrats, in effect, followed the science of the day in order to construct a nationalist outlook that had universal application. Contra Whig thinkers of the day, who stressed a “disinterested patriotism” as the bedrock of the nation, it was Young America Democrats’ faith in intellectual culture that challenged the very meaning of liberal nationalism; a future-focused national faith grounded in supposedly natural laws predicated on “a racialized view of mankind” (49-50).

Smith pursues the various iterations of Young America Democrats’ ideological outlook, largely although not solely as this was aired in the pages of the *Democratic Review*, leading newspapers of the day, and in Congressional debate, through topics as varied as the Dorr Rebellion of 1841-42 over franchise extension in Rhode Island, the challenges posed by the nation’s territorial expansion westwards in the 1840s, the increasingly acrimonious debate over its hemispheric limits following the Mexican War of 1846 – 48, and Cuban annexation. All, he explains, were increasingly underpinned by the racial, economic, and political discontinuities of the nation and the Young America Democrats’ understanding of the global order, specifically the extent to which the United States should engage with, or even seek to influence this. The Young America Democrats’ concept of the “imagined global community,” Smith observes, “turned all wars into civil wars.” On this basis, foreign

intervention was justifiable since Americans “were fighting for the same values within a shared global community” (197). Working outside any recognition of “territorial markers,” Young America Democrats based their international ambitions upon what almost amounted to a revision if not a complete reworking of the theories of Emer de Vattel’s *The Law of Nations* (1758). They promoted their interpretation of natural justice along with its racial dimension throughout the 1840s and 1850s.

In this respect, the Young America Democrats’ agenda, perhaps counter-intuitively, bore more than a passing resemblance that of the South’s Fire-Eaters. Both adhered to a “racial taxonomy...built around white supremacy,” and both saw the nation’s wealth as dependent on “the extraction of economic value in the tropics and the trade of commodities . . . on the international market” (118). Yet neither was enough, in the end, to sustain this racial and economic alliance in the face of those sectional forces that prompted the political disintegrations and reformations of the 1850s, resulting in the migration of some of the Young America Democrats’ ideas into the emergent Republican Party.

Ultimately, however, the fate of the Young America Democrats’ within the party, along with their natural “racial” rights ideology, paralleled the political processes underway in Europe where, Smith reminds us, “new radical groups” emerged to challenge the “young” liberal agenda (155). For both, whilst they had hardly stood still, nevertheless “the world had changed around them,” and “more interventionist forms of liberalism,” such as socialism, or abolitionism, “made popular resistance to interventionism a conservative, rather than a radical force” (158). One of the reasons for this, that Smith could have developed further here, may lie in the fact that over the course of the nineteenth century, America’s was an aging population. In 1830, some 56 percent of the population was nineteen years or younger. By 1860, this had declined to just under 36 percent. But Smith has enough other angles to develop and examples to offer us. Perhaps one of the clearest is his assessment of the inevitable march of time on Young America Democrats via Abraham Lincoln’s “Second Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions,” delivered at the beginning of 1859. Lincoln had gently teased the Young America Democrats “great passion,” their “perfect rage” for the new, and rather less gently attacked the “naivety of their worldview” predicated as this was on the assumption that the nation’s future lay in the hands of “independent and intellectually emancipated Americans,” emancipated, indeed, from time, from social and scientific discourse, and from their own nation’s history (187-188).

In the end, a short review can hardly do justice to the complexities, the range, and the depth of Smith’s argument here, his illumination of the ways in which the Young America

movement introduced the concept of natural rights into the ongoing nineteenth-century debate over American nationalism, promulgating a nationalist ideology to which their opponents, men such as Lincoln, were forced to respond. And not the least of the significant contributions of *Young America* to the literature is the way in which its thesis explodes our apparently persistent assumption that the essence of the nationalist story in the United States was one of liberty and freedom, and the Civil War the culmination of a painfully slow yet persistent process of working toward racial equality. There were other options in the mid-nineteenth century, other potential futures, ones untethered to the promises of the past and the premise of the Declaration of Independence, alternatively articulated imagined national communities that were racially exclusive in conception and ideological construct. Smith reminds us that Young America Democrats, informed as they were by the science of their day, actually “saw themselves on the cutting edge of Enlightenment thought,” and their agenda could easily be interpreted as both “more liberal and forward-looking than some of their Republican counterparts” (199). In this respect, they fit squarely within the old argument that as a nation, the United States compensated for its relatively brief past with a focus on the future. But time eventually wears that argument away, and youth as the basis of a nationalist, or even internationalist outlook has always had a limited lifespan.

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