

### Civil Wars and Reconstructions in the Americas: The United States, Mexico, and Argentina, 1860-1880.

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#### Recommended Citation

Fleche, Andre M. (2023) "Civil Wars and Reconstructions in the Americas: The United States, Mexico, and Argentina, 1860-1880.," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.25.1.05

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol25/iss1/5>

## Review

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Winter 2023

**Rothera, Evan C.** *Civil Wars and Reconstructions in the Americas: The United States, Mexico, and Argentina, 1860-1880*. Louisiana State University Press, 2022. HARDCOVER. \$50.00 ISBN 9780807171479 pp. 325.

In the past decade, historians of the U.S. Civil War and Reconstruction have paid increasing attention to the international aspects of the period. Until very recently, most of these works have focused on the human, diplomatic, and intellectual relations between the United States and Europe. Evan Rothera's, *Civil Wars and Reconstructions in the Americas*, joins a small but growing list of studies that seeks to broaden the field's perspective by considering the significant ties between the U.S. and Latin America during the Civil War era.

Rothera's book, which draws on both transnational and comparative research methodologies, offers an analysis of the histories of the United States, Mexico, and Argentina during the turbulent years of the mid-nineteenth century. Rothera points out that between 1860 and 1880 all three nations fought destructive civil wars, a commonality that he contends was not lost on contemporaries. Indeed, Rothera writes that "people saw these conflicts as interwoven or at least parallel" (4). He maintains that in each case the nations of the Western Hemisphere took part in a larger global struggle, which pitted "republicanism and democracy against forces of reaction such as aristocracy, monarchy, oligarchy, and conservatism" (4). Rothera argues that by the early 1860s a group of "transnational warriors" from North America, South America, and Europe sought to transform the world by enacting liberal reforms, which might include the abolition of slavery, the promotion of democracy, and the development of public education (26). These reformers often corresponded with each other and in some instances traveled to take part in the conflicts of their foreign compatriots. All these liberal projects faced violent resistance that continued even after formal victory by progressive forces. Consequently, leaders in all three countries abandoned their original ideological purity as they embarked on a "common search for order" (10). Rothera concludes that by 1880, politicians had come to value "stability" over progressive change (8-9).

Rothera divides his book into two distinct parts. Part one, consisting of four chapters, takes a transnational approach, which is characterized by the study of the flow of people, goods, and ideas between countries. In chapter one, Rothera describes a community of “transnational warriors” consisting of individuals who participated, usually in the name of liberal values, in two or more conflicts around the world. These ideological soldiers of fortune included men who fought alongside Garibaldi in Italy and Uruguay before joining the Union Army in the United States; Civil War veterans who crossed the border to participate in the Mexican resistance to the French puppet, Maximilian; and US citizens who participated in the European Revolutions of 1848 and then the American Civil War. Chapter two focuses more specifically on the ties between the Civil War in the United States and the concurrent French invasion of Mexico. Rothera argues that such Mexican political leaders as Benito Juárez and Matías Romero engineered a true “rapprochement” with the United States by depicting their resistance to the French and the Civil War in the U.S. as twin battles between the supporters of republican government and the supporters of oligarchy. U.S. consuls in Mexico reciprocated by taking action to support Juárez, and significant numbers of Union veterans traveled to Mexico to join the Liberal armies. In chapter three, Rothera explores Fourth of July celebrations in Mexico and Argentina, arguing that they often stressed shared commitment to the preservation of republican government. The first part of the book concludes with a study of Domingo Sarmiento, the Argentine political leader who served as minister to the U.S. during the early years of Reconstruction. Rothera argues that Sarmiento’s admiration for the work of Horace and Mary Mann, as well as his familiarity with efforts in the U.S. to educate the formerly enslaved, led him to develop a public education system in Argentina.

The book's second part takes a comparative approach, which juxtaposes national histories to point out similarities and differences between them. In three chronological chapters, Rothera recounts the rise and fall of Reconstruction in the United States, the efforts of Domingo Sarmiento to crush out regional rebellions in the aftermath of Argentine unification, and the attempts of Benito Juárez to restore order after his victory over the French. He argues that all three nations faced “similar types of disorder, instability, and chaos ... often involving central government versus provincial or local forces” (140). While each government enjoyed successes in suppressing dissenters, as time went on the victors grew increasingly reluctant to punish former rebels. By 1880, the leaders of each country found themselves forced to accommodate

reactionaries by accepting arrangements that promoted stability, namely the authoritarian rule of Porfirio Díaz in Mexico, oligarchic government in Argentina, and the Jim Crow system in the United States.

Rothera's work is wide-ranging and well-researched. It relies on fresh materials from US consular records and little-known Spanish-language sources from archives in Latin America. Its findings strongly reinforce the prevailing view of the era advanced by the work of Don Doyle and many others, which holds that an ideological conflict between liberal republican government and regressive authoritarian power dominated the global politics of the era. Rothera's work goes beyond these previous studies by acknowledging that a period of conservatism followed the apparent triumph of liberal reform. Rothera's book makes other original contributions. It argues that in the decades between the end of the Mexican War and the renewed US imperialism of the late nineteenth century, liberal politicians in several countries worked together to create a period of Pan-American cooperation. In the process, some Latin American leaders even found ways to invoke the Monroe Doctrine to their own ends. By examining the US consuls and civilian volunteers who worked in Mexico on behalf of Juárez, Rothera's book provides a counterbalance to the many works that have studied Confederate refugees in Mexico who, mostly, supported Maximilian. Rothera's discussion of affairs in Argentina will be new to many students of the U.S. Civil War. In comparing the histories of all three countries, Rothera demonstrates that the United States did not escape the "instability" its citizens often claimed had plagued Latin American nations.

Some of Rothera's arguments will undoubtedly find critics. In recent years, revisionists have cast doubt on the degree to which liberal values shaped the behavior of nation-states and, especially, international soldiers-of-fortune. Still, it must be said that Rothera's work joins others in offering powerful evidence that many transnational actors held fervent ideological convictions, even if skeptics have demonstrated that more than a few found primary motivation in money, fame, and national self-interest. Rothera himself acknowledges that some self-styled liberals in the US and abroad supported the Confederacy, and he concedes that, in this era, Mexico and Argentina did not share the same critical debate over slavery and race relations that the US did. Both points would have benefitted from additional elaboration. In general, the wide scope of Rothera's work has left plenty of room for further exploration. For example, the book identifies a few previously unknown "transnational warriors," but surely there are more stories to

tell about Latin Americans who participated in or commented on the US Civil War. Other readers may complain that major events of the era, including Argentina's incredibly destructive War of the Triple Alliance, received scant mention.

That said, *Civil Wars and Reconstructions in the Americas* will take its place as one of the most thorough and sustained analyses yet written of the mid-nineteenth century relations between the U.S and Latin America. Scholars who wish to understand the complex and interrelated set of crises that troubled the Western Hemisphere during the 1860s and 1870s will find the work indispensable. Anyone interested in the global context of the American Civil War will read this book with profit.

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