

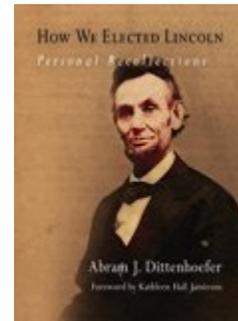
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Abram J. Dittenhoefer. *How We Elected Lincoln: Personal Recollections*. Foreword by Kathleen Hall Jamieson. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. xiii + 99 pp. \$15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8122-1914-2.

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When Politics Mattered

The republication of *How We Elected Lincoln* by the University of Pennsylvania Press is a welcome addition to the vastly growing body of classic Civil War books that are being reprinted by modern presses. A book such as this, that recounts the thrill and importance of politics to Americans in the mid-nineteenth century, is particularly valuable in historiographical times such as these. Several recently published works have downplayed the centrality of politics to the “Era of Party.” Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin, in *Rude Republic: Americans and Their Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (2000), argue that voters in the mid-nineteenth century were not really an engaged electorate and that politics was a lowly, unrespectable activity. The practice of voting, in their estimation, was mere routine.[1] These arguments have been carried forward by Richard Franklin Bense in *The American Ballot Box in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (2004). Using testimony from contested congressional elections, Bense argues that election returns from the nineteenth century do not really tell us anything about voter preferences because violence, intimidation, fraud, and ignorance of policies pervaded the nineteenth-century polling place. “Policy positions clearly mattered to party organizations and their activists,” Bense writes, but “political discourse in and around the polls was remarkably silent with respect to these very issues.”[2] In short, voters did not seem to know much or care much about the issues at stake in elections.

Both of these recent studies are provocative, but they

are, I believe, in sore need of a reply. While Bense’s work, for example, focuses on tens of thousands of pages of testimony from nearly every part of the country, it is a problematical research base. Bense finds problems at the ballot box because his source base exists for the sole purpose of describing problems at the polls. Such a research design is tantamount to investigating hospital records and concluding that all members of a society must be sick. While historians have offered some scholarly replies to these recent works, and will surely offer more, the republication of *How We Elected Lincoln* is a very nice start.[3] In this memoir, originally published in 1916, Abram Dittenhoefer offers an insider’s account of how he and others helped Abraham Lincoln win the presidency in 1860 and 1864. Politics mattered to nineteenth-century Americans, as Dittenhoefer’s story makes unmistakably clear.

Abram Jesse Dittenhoefer was born to pro-slavery Democratic parents in Charleston, South Carolina in 1835. When he was four years old his family moved to New York City, which he considered “virtually” a southern town since it had so many commercial ties to the South. Nevertheless, Dittenhoefer “became known as a Southerner with Northern principles” (p. 1). By age nineteen his fidelity to the Democratic party was beginning to weaken, and, after reading a newspaper account of a Senate debate between Ben Wade of Ohio and Judah Benjamin of Louisiana, he converted to the Republican party. Although his father warned him that he would be ostrac-

cized as a Republican in New York City, Dittenhoefer followed his conscience; eventually he even convinced his father that slavery was immoral and that he should vote for Lincoln.

Dittenhoefer recalls his early activities for John C. Fremont in 1856, before he was even old enough to vote. "I stumped for Fremont and Dayton, making many speeches ... and participating in several barbecues, which were then the usual accompaniment of a political campaign.... The thrilling battle-cry of that campaign was, 'Free Speech, Free Soil, Free Men, and Fremont!' These words were shouted at all public meetings and in all public processions, and were received with the wildest enthusiasm ... it still thrills me as I write" (pp. 6-7).

Dittenhoefer remembers meeting Lincoln on the day of his Cooper Institute address in 1860, and seeing and hearing that speech in person. Lincoln "was a very homely man.... His tall, gaunt body was like a huge clothed skeleton. So large were his feet and so clumsy were his hands that they looked out of proportion to the rest of his figure ... but after he began to talk he was awkwardness deified." Although his "voice was unpleasant, almost rasping and shrill at first,... his earnestness invited and easily held the attention of his auditors" (p. 16). When Dittenhoefer called on Lincoln the following morning, the "shouts of approbation of the previous night were still ringing in my ears, but the figure of the awkward Illinoisan suggested nothing in the way of public enthusiasm or personal distinction. He then and there appeared as a plain, unpretentious man" (p. 19). Dittenhoefer thus offers a portrait of Lincoln on stage and alone in his hotel room, a rare glimpse of the future president in one of his finest hours.

Dittenhoefer recounts the well-known story of Lincoln's nomination at the Republican convention in Chicago, and then the election campaign of 1860. During that canvass, Wide Awakes throughout the North had marched in parades, listened to speeches, sang campaign songs, and enjoyed bonfires. Dittenhoefer claimed (writing in the Progressive Era, it will be remembered) that the Republicans had an earnest desire "to win by fair means," unlike political parties in some "more recent national contests" (p. 38). "I threw all my energy into this campaign, and, though young, I was frequently making several speeches during a day and evening. I marched with the Wide-Awakes, and was sent to different parts of the State, where, with other speakers, I addressed large audiences," though he was not always greeted by friendly crowds (pp. 39-40).

After describing the outcome of the election of 1860, and Lincoln's journey to the east, Dittenhoefer includes several chapters of short anecdotes about the president in wartime. These stories are intended to reveal the president's humanitarian character, personal courage, and "great, tender heart" (p. 54). Dittenhoefer also recounts incidents of foreign policy, the draft riots in NYC (during which his home was nearly ransacked by rioters who shouted "Death to Dittenhoefer!"), war profiteering in the North, Lincoln's movement towards emancipation, and the struggle over the Republican nomination in the summer of 1864. While many of the stories and anecdotes will be familiar to Civil War scholars, a good number will be new and engaging.

Dittenhoefer closes his memoir with his recollections of the election of 1864, recalling that "mass-meetings were held every day and night of the week" for the two months preceding the election (p. 91). Campaign rhetoric, according to Dittenhoefer, was acrimonious. "Night and day, without cessation, young men like myself, in halls, upon street corners, and from cart-tails, were haranguing, pleading, sermonizing, orating, arguing, extolling our cause and our candidate, and denouncing our opponent. A deal of oratory was hurled into the troubled air by speakers on both sides" (p. 92). Dittenhoefer proceeds to quote a large portion of an anti-McClellan speech he delivered at the Cooper Institute in which he "prove[d] that George B. McClellan is the leader of the Confederate forces" (pp. 92-95). Although Lincoln feared losing the election, Dittenhoefer recalls how Union victories on the battlefield turned the tide for the Republicans.

As a memoir, *How We Elected Lincoln*, of course, has to be read with caution—it was written more than half a century after the events it describes. Nevertheless, the author has a story to tell, and he tells it in a readable, interesting fashion. College professors in lower-level U.S. history survey courses might find it a useful book to assign. It is short enough (ninety-nine pages) that freshmen and sophomores should be able to read the whole book without losing too much sleep, and many of the details about electoral politics in the 1860s will be new (and hopefully interesting) to undergraduates. The book is also useful because it addresses a number of issues that are important to or contested among historians. Dittenhoefer is critical of the "terrible evils of the 'carpet-bag' governments" (p. 84), his remarks about McClellan and the Copperheads in the election of 1864 lend themselves to discussion of dissent in wartime, his description of divisions within the Republican party in 1864 might spark

an interest among students who notice the importance of party loyalty to contemporary politicians, and, contrary to much recent historical scholarship, Dittenhoefer frequently reminds his readers that Lincoln was indeed the Great Emancipator. As early as a speech in New York City, on his way to the White House, Lincoln “likened the Union to a ship and its traditions to the cargo, saying that he was willing and anxious to save both the ship and the cargo, but if not both, the cargo would have to go overboard for the safety of the ship.” Dittenhoefer considered this 1861 remark “the first gleam of emancipation” (p. 47).[4]

In republishing *How We Elected Lincoln*, the publisher might have added a more substantive biography than the one-sentence biography on the back cover (the new introduction says very little about the author). An appendix containing some of Dittenhoefer’s speeches might have been another nice addition. While the substance of one of his 1864 speeches is included in the text of the book, some of his other speeches were published in newspapers (and possibly pamphlets), and would have nicely supplemented the author’s personal recollections. After less than an hour of digging, I turned up two speeches published in 1864, and more are almost certain to exist.[5] Such primary documents would have complemented the reminiscences that make up the bulk of the book.

How We Elected Lincoln does not offer the elaborate descriptions of specific political rallies or meetings that some readers might hope to find. Nevertheless, this book touches on many of the major issues of Civil War Amer-

ica while reminding twenty-first century historians that the nineteenth century was a time when politics mattered to ordinary Americans. It is a useful little book that should find a wide readership among Civil War historians, enthusiasts, and general readers.

Notes

[1]. Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin, *Rude Republic: Americans and Their Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[2]. Richard Franklin Bense, *The American Ballot Box in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 290-291.

[3]. Some historians have replied to the arguments put forth by Altschuler and Blumin. See, for example, “Political Engagement and Disengagement in Antebellum America: A Round Table,” *Journal of American History* 84 (December 1997), pp. 885-909; and Michael D. Pierson, “‘Prairies on Fire’: The Organization of the 1856 Mass Republican Rally in Beloit, Wisconsin,” *Civil War History* 48 (June 2002), pp. 101-122.

[4]. For the text of this speech, see Abraham Lincoln, “Reply to Mayor Fernando Wood at New York City,” February 20, 1861, in Roy P. Basler et al., eds., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953-1955), 4: pp. 232-233.

[5]. See *The New York Times*, September 30 and October 19, 1864.

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