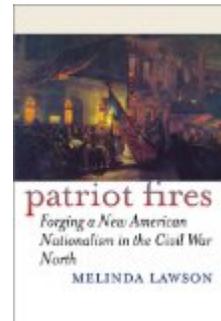


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Melinda Lawson. *Patriot Fires: Forging a New American Nationalism in the Civil War North*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002. xv + 265 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1207-9.

Reviewed by Allan Bogue (Department of History, University of Wisconsin, Madison)  
Published on H-CivWar (March, 2006)



## Nation-building through Liberty and Loyalty

This book is a study of the “cultural and ideological response to” the challenges presented Americans by the Civil War. The war experience, Lawson suggests, can be viewed as an exercise in nation-building, one that was cultural and ideological as well as economic and political. How did war affect American nationalism and American democracy—the “claims of democratic liberty” versus “the demands of patriotic loyalty?” How did one define patriotism, self-sacrifice, acceptable self-interest, and dissent, or balance liberty and security, democracy and power, as well as define nationalism (pp. xiii-xiv)?

In an introductory chapter Lawson promises to explore the process by which American interpreters of the Civil War “helped shape the cultural and ideological American nation-state.” Acknowledging the influence of Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm, she seeks to identify some spokespeople, and explain their motivation, ideas, and understanding of loyalty in shaping a “transcendent American nationalism” during the Civil War. Antebellum American nationalism, she suggests, was a “unique amalgam” stemming from an English heritage, the new world environment and the country’s short history (p. 5). The English inheritance included lingering religious, judicial, and social vestiges, but the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and republicanism were rejections of that legacy. These, plus the evolving economy and politics of the new nation, contributed to a contractual patriotism. A “society held together by kinship, patriarchy and patronage” had morphed into one “defined by space, opportunity,

shared democratic institutions, and ambition,” where self-interest ruled. Mid-nineteenth-century Americans, Lawson notes, understood the world in “republican, liberal, providential, cultural, and ascriptive terms” (pp. 6, 7). The sense of nationalism was tenuous; Americans saw little of their national government. But the “agents of Civil War nation-building brought European-style tools to their task, depicting the nation in more traditional, historical, and cultural terms” and contributing to the growth of a different kind of American nationalism (p. 4).

Lawson’s argument, she tells us, is informed by the contrast between a national identity which is rooted in history and tradition and producing “an undefinable feeling” and one based on a “more rational contractual national identity, rooted in an idea.” The transformation from one to the other had three basic dimensions. The nationalizing agents “cultivated a preeminent national loyalty rooted in existing religious, political, and cultural values, and identities;” they “redefined the relationship between the individual and the national state, presenting the state as benefactor, not threat to individual Americans;” and “they enveloped the national state in a mystical aura [author’s italics]” (p. 12). Acknowledging America’s old ideological roots, they found “new underpinnings in history, tradition, and culture” and gave a spiritual meaning to the “newly empowered nation-state” (p. 13).

In studying “self-conscious nation builders” Lawson emphasizes that she is not examining the “hearts and

minds” of the people but rather how “people, who were in a position to speak and be heard, ”defined national identity and patriotism.“ Their efforts combined to produce a ”transcendent American nationalism“ (pp. 12, 13). Lawson identified six Unionist groups or individuals who initiated ”national projects and their discourse“: the women promoters of the sanitary fairs; Jay Cooke, the banker financier; the national political parties; the Union Leagues of Philadelphia, New York, and Boston; a trio of abolitionist speakers and publicists; and Abraham Lincoln.

Organized predominantly by woman volunteers, the sanitary fairs opened with parades that evoked a sense of national purpose and then presented exhibitions of the arts–domestic, industrial and artistic–and historical artifacts, designed to stir both local and national pride in past achievements and confidence in the future. As in the following chapters Lawson outlines her subject and skillfully dissects the currents of thought prevailing in the statements of organizers and in the activities and exhibits. The fairs evoked “such long-standing cultural forms as localism, domestic feminism, and Christian charity” but sometimes “mold[ed] them into new understandings of identity and duty.” They emphasized the charitable role of American women and its religious roots, soldier sacrifices, and the need for participants to sacrifice. Although lacking “significant ideological content,” the patriotic theme of the fairs summoned a selfish people “toward sacrifice for the good of the whole” (p. 39).

In Jay Cooke, the nation’s leading war bond salesman and banker, Lawson found a follower of Adam Smith whose advertisements appealed to the rational self-interest of bond buyers. To buy United States bonds was to be patriotic. Cooke “developed a market-model patriotism wherein the Union faithful came together ... as appetitive individuals acting in their own interest ... [yet] furthering the public good in the process” (p. 51). Later Cooke pictured himself as having motives similar to those shared by the fair organizers but his war publications deny this. Actually he skimmed the interest earned while federal funds passed through his bond accounts. The idea was not new that the “nation might directly serve its citizens’ material interests”—what was new was that Cooke democratized the idea. (p. 64)

Under the heading, “The Partisan Construction of National Identity” Lawson surveys the national politics of the era and traces the efforts of Democrats and Republicans to define loyalty in ways consonant with party needs. The parties operated within the era’s political cul-

ture, “a system of habits, forms, and rhetorical modes through which” they competed for power. This culture “served as a resource for the construction of a national identity rooted in party loyalty,” providing the basis for heated exchanges on “the meaning of patriotism” (pp. 68-69). The parties were nationalizing forces, joining local policy interests to national, popularizing American symbols and institutions, and interpreting issues for the populace. Although partyism was briefly renounced, party competition prevailed throughout. Republicans considered themselves true patriots. Their treatment of Democrats was double-edged. The traitorous Confederates had once been Democrats (mostly) so Northern Democrats who opposed Union war policies must also be traitors. But Northern Democrats had votes and enticement was in order. Therefore Republicans called themselves the Union party, which carried Lincoln to re-election. This, argues Lawson, was mere strategy. The Democrats blamed Republicans for the war and breaches of the Constitution, played on workers’ fear of competition from black labor, and portrayed themselves as defenders of white America. Finally victories on land and sea tipped the partisan balance in favor of Lincoln and the Republicans.

The Union Leagues were upper-class gentlemen’s clubs in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston, which began in 1863 and “devoted themselves to transforming Americans’ contractual notions of patriotism and nation into unquestioning, even organic ideas of loyalty and national identity” (p. 98). Lawson briefly sketches the background of the clubs, their leading organizers and the ideas of the latter. Each metropolitan center was unique, but Lawson notes that old city elites had been struggling to maintain status in the face of economic change and aggressive politicians. In the clubs they reasserted their leadership under the mantle of loyalty to the Union while downgrading leaders tainted with Southernism like Augustus Belmont. Only dedicated patriots could be part of the upper class in these cities. The leagues’ most striking contributions were their commitment to emancipation and their assistance in raising African American troops. In the latter instance, loyalty, not race, defined a patriot (p. 111). At the level of the general public and working men and women, the publishing arms of the clubs produced pamphlets and broadsides that explained constitutional issues, defended the Northern war effort, and excoriated critics. Some leagues sought to displace the idea of contractual patriotism with the belief that the nation was an organism. Despite other sources of the idea, maintains Lawson, it was Edward Everett Hale’s story, “The Man

Without a Country,” that made this romantic nationalism acceptable to Americans, emphasizing the importance of personal commitment to the nation.

Other activists supported their country by urging extension of the precepts of the Declaration of Independence to the point where there would be “freedom, equality, and justice for all, regardless of race” (p. 129). Of these, Lawson examines the ideas of Wendell Phillips, Frederick Douglass and Anna Dickinson. Their version of a transcendent nationalism gathered support as the idea spread that abolition was necessary if the war was to be won. Slavery must be destroyed, Phillips suggested, if a northern free labor society was to be maintained. He came to believe that “the only true patriots were working for abolition” (p. 139). His positions were always rooted in the Declaration of Independence and he believed that society was progressing toward one in which social justice and equality prevailed. But he wavered in support of Lincoln and the Northern war effort, and voted against the president in 1864. Like Phillips, Frederick Douglass believed that social improvement was to be the rule but providentialism and millennialism colored his vision. There was to be no racism within his ideal society. An enthusiastic abolitionist initially, he ultimately endorsed a colonization project but viewed the war as an act of God, designed to free the slaves and move the nation toward its millennial state. He argued for black enlistments, applauded black soldiers’ demands for equal pay, and urged conferral of full citizenship on them. Dickinson’s youth, gender, charm, and oratorical skills brought great crowds to hear her, perhaps capturing “the imagination and affection of the Northern public” like no other abolitionist orator (p. 148). Her material came from the general body of abolitionist thought and from the Republican rationale for the war rendering “palpable the evil of the South, the virtues of the North, and the duties incumbent upon the Nation’s patriots.” She played a leading role in “America’s transcendent national drama” (pp. 151-156).

Lastly Lawson discusses Abraham Lincoln, who constructed a “composite national identity” which “drew from nearly all the elements in the Union’s patriotic repertoire” (p. 160). In his utterances, Lincoln portrayed a nation cherishing the right to rise, where economic self-interest was acceptable, and where people, their soldiers, and president willingly sacrificed for the greater good. In dying for their country the soldiers exhibited “the highest type of patriotism,” said Lincoln, but Americans who renounced party ties for the Union were “eminently patriotic” (pp. 163-164). Increasingly in 1863 and thereafter, Lincoln reminded his audience of God’s will and of the

religious themes of “suffering, sacrifice, and redemption” and speculated that He was purging the land (p. 163). Lincoln’s statements kept him close to the people and he always remained the patronage-wielding politician. His commitment to country did not constitute civil religion but rather “commitment to a ‘city on a hill.’” Lincoln believed the founding fathers had identified “equality as a *proposition*,” leaving the way open for improvement (pp. 165). Thus he had stood against the further spread of slavery. But his free nation was to be one of white men and women, although at war’s end he modified this position. To many Lincoln’s death “proclaimed the final realization of the nation” and Lawson quotes Whitman, who suggested the tragedy imparted a final “organic element, ... the cement of a [heroic] death” to the construction of patriotism (pp. 173, 178).

This book illustrates the welcome tendency among historians of the Civil War to examine and analyze aspects of the conflict’s broader impact upon American society and the reactions of Americans to it. Lawson writes very well and her impressive bibliography suggests that she has ranged widely in the course of her research. The choice of subjects for her case studies was admirable, although one wonders what systematic analysis of the letters of family members to their loved ones in service might have revealed. She is insightful in her dissection and analysis of the threads of thought current in the mid nineteenth century. The four eminent writers of the dust jacket blurbs imply a four-star rating for the book or at least three and one half. This reviewer concurs; it is an excellent addition to the genre of political culture analysis.

However, a word of caution is perhaps in order. This brand of history carries its own dangers. The peppery Wisconsin historian of the South and the Civil War, William B. Hesseltine, likened the writing of the history of ideas to nailing jelly to a wall and another scholar offers the analogy that are some cultural analyses like a beautiful new car which unfortunately lacks an engine. That approach may lead to reductionist homogenization. The historian of ideas runs the danger of lapsing into mere speculation and assertion; the culturalist sometimes appears to ignore the fact that it is the human agent who selects options and, if needs be, invents new ones. Lawson, however, has avoided such traps and apparently used her sources well, although I suspect that the eminent author of a classic study of Jay Cooke’s operation would have objected to being identified as Harriet rather than Henrietta Larson in text, notes, and bibliography.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

**Citation:** Allan Bogue. Review of Lawson, Melinda, *Patriot Fires: Forging a New American Nationalism in the Civil War North*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. March, 2006.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11596>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).