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Richard H. Abbott. *For Free Press and Equal Rights: Republican Newspapers in the Reconstruction South.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004. ix + 266 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2527-9.

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Seeking Legitimacy through the Printed Word

Few scholars have done more than Richard H. Abbott to further our understanding of the history of the Republican Party in the Reconstruction South. In his *The Republican Party and the South, 1855-1877: The First Southern Strategy* (1986), Abbott explored the Republican Party's efforts to establish itself in the former Confederacy. At the time of his death in 2000, Abbott had a manuscript accepted for publication, but it was unedited. John W. Quist polished the manuscript, and has given us Abbott's excellent and accessible study of the southern Republican press. Building upon a region-wide sample of four hundred and thirty southern Republican newspapers between 1857 and 1877, Abbott shows how the party's southern editors both struggled against opponents and each other to establish their party in the South.

The emergence of a Republican press in the South was no small feat. Convincing white southerners to join the Republican Party, an organization that many of them deemed illegitimate and forcibly imposed from the outside, proved difficult. Luring African Americans into the Republican fold was easier, but high illiteracy and poverty levels limited their ability to patronize Republican newspapers. Roughly half of the Republican papers established in the South failed within two years of opening. Editors persisted despite such obstacles, Abbott argues, because they believed that an effective party press was essential to prove their party's legitimacy.

This desire for legitimacy bolstered Republican editors' commitment to equality. Abbott drew his title from the two most important elements of the editors' appeal: free speech and equal rights. Southern Republican newspapers hoped to reform their region's political culture. In the past, the need to defend slavery stifled political dissent and stigmatized outside influences. After the war, Republican editors insisted that if the South hoped to modernize, it must end the "mental slavery" that elite planters exercised over their poorer white neighbors. Freedom of speech and democratic values were as necessary for progress as the railroads most southern Republicans supported. The South, they asserted, must become free from fear, ending violent reprisals against political opponents and allowing free and open debate. Such a broad commitment to freedom reinforced their arguments in favor of equal rights for blacks. Freedom of the press and African American citizenship went hand-in-hand in many of these editors' eyes.

Republican editors found themselves in a nearly impossible position in the South. Desperate to establish their party's legitimacy, but unable to sustain their newspapers through subscriptions and advertising, they relied upon government patronage to survive. In the war's wake, Andrew Johnson used federal printing rights to build support for his lenient Reconstruction policy in the South. Congress recognized the utility of Johnson's practice, and assumed that power at the same time they commandeered Reconstruction policy from the president. But patronage proved to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, Republican newspapers folded without it. Printing contracts from federal, state, and local governments supplied most of the Republican newspapers' operating costs. On the other hand, while patronage boosted their survival rate, it also prompted battles amongst Republicans for the vital printing contracts that weakened the party internally.

Abbott drew heavily upon Michael Perman's *The Road to Redemption: Southern Politics, 1869-1879* (1984) to frame his discussion of the Republicans' inner rifts. Like Perman, Abbott identified radical, centrist, and regular factions within the Republican ranks that quarreled over the party's need to recruit "respectable" white southerners into a party dependent upon their former slaves' support. Radical editors, who held sway between 1867 and 1868, appealed primarily to the Unionists, freedmen, and lower-class whites most likely to support its free labor doctrines and oppose white planters. Moderate south-

ern Republicans, classified as centrists, believed that legitimacy required increasing the party's white membership. Although the radicals and centrists loosely agreed on most issues, the centrists followed a competitive approach that privileged the recruitment of white southerners over party doctrine. A "regular" wing supplanted the radicals after 1869, which continued skirmishing with centrists over issues regarding the Ku Klux Klan and the role of African Americans in the party. Regulars generally were carpetbaggers who held federal patronage positions, and were more committed to defending blacks' rights and even opening political offices to the freedmen. Native-born centrists refused to go that far.

The book's successes far surpass its shortcomings. Abbott wrote an excellent short history of the business operations of Republican newspapers, and proved definitively the importance of patronage and the concept of a free press to their editors. These appeals bolstered the party's quest for recognition in a political culture that resented it. Perhaps one area where he could have been stronger, however, was in his treatment of the roots of the Republican editors' ideology. A more thorough analysis of the southern Unionists who formed the core of the Republican press in the South might have yielded greater insight into these whites' beliefs. Many southern Unionists were ostracized or even forcibly silenced during the secession crisis and the war, and their previous struggles undoubtedly informed their postwar ideology. Abbott could have offered a greater sense of the evolution in these editors' ideology if he had followed them through secession and the war into Reconstruction. Regardless, this is a fine book and a major boon for Reconstruction scholars seeking to understand the broader role of southern Republican newspapers in their research.

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