

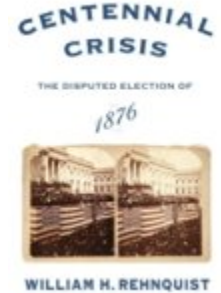
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

William H. Rehnquist. *Centennial Crisis: The Disputed Election of 1876*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004. ix + 274 pp. \$26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-375-41387-2.

Reviewed by Roger Bridges (Executive Director Emeritus, Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center)

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The Presidential election of 2000 triggered innumerable questions about other contested presidential elections in American history. Of those disputed elections, the 2000 election seemed to many pundits, and others, to be an almost mirror image of the Hayes-Tilden cliffhanger in 1876. Because of the seeming similarities among the anonymous, whiskered, presidents in the late nineteenth century, few Americans had heard of President Rutherford B. Hayes. Of those who had heard of the President, many tied him to, or blamed him for, the abandonment of Radical Reconstruction and its promise for a new egalitarian democracy in the United States. He has been accused by many of having deserted the idealism of Radical Reconstruction for the spoils of the Presidency, its patronage, and the gaudy materialism of the Gilded Age.

Based almost exclusively on secondary sources, this work adds little to our understanding of the compromise. Rehnquist believes the results were salutary for the nation, but he fails to recognize that the basic result of the deal was the exclusion of African-American participation in American politics. He sees nothing wrong in allowing the increasing curtailment of their rights and participation in southern politics. His approval of what is now considered wrongheaded—acceptance of “Home Rule”—

causes him to fail to delve into those southern misdeeds that led to the closeness of the election. He does not fault southern leaders for their ruthless efforts to keep thousands of black voters, and their Republican friends, from the polls.

Rehnquist’s analysis of the election and the resulting compromise demonstrates little understanding of modern research concerning Radical Reconstruction, or the politics of the North and the South. He still believes that had Andrew Johnson’s Reconstruction policies prevailed, the “tragic mistakes” of the period would have been avoided and the resulting postwar strife prevented. The realization that such a plan would have excluded the loyal population of the South, and probably delayed for generations the protections that led eventually to the “Second Reconstruction,” does not inform his work.

This book will tell readers more about Rehnquist’s philosophy and legal reasoning for the modern Supreme Court’s participation in the recent Bush-Gore election than it does about the Hayes-Tilden election. While it provides interesting biographical vignettes of participants in the Compromise of 1877, the work provides no new insights or a modern understanding of the compromise.

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