



Mark E. Neely, Jr. *The Boundaries of American Political Culture in the Civil War Era*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. xvi + 159 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2986-8.

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Recasting Political Life in the Middle Period

Mark E. Neely Jr. has long been recognized among his peers as an ever-original (and at times controversial) scholar of America's middle period. His corpus of work illustrates a breadth of interests. Equally comfortable writing political, social, and military history, Neely offers a nuanced, multidisciplinary, and contextual methodology that remains, even today, curiously underrepresented within Civil War studies. Whether addressing the presumed "totality" of the conflict, viewing Federal generalship through the lens of nineteenth-century Victorian manhood, or considering the limits of Confederate constitutionalism, Neely's ideas always provoke thought and are not to be dismissed.[1] This latest volume, a slim but forceful monograph examining recent trends in the era's political and social historiography, likely will stir debate worthy of that prompted by his earlier work; it is a book that should, at the very least, find a place within any graduate-level seminar in nineteenth-century and Civil War politics.

Neely ambitiously seeks in this work to re-establish political history—considered for over a generation to be something of a backwater within the genre—as a fruitful topic of inquiry for scholars of America's middle period. The four essays contained within critique honored titles in Civil War-era political and cultural history and their collective (if not always explicit) contention that party politics mattered little in the workaday lives of ordinary American citizens. Neely identifies especially Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin's *Rude Republic* (2000) and Joel H. Silbey's *The American Political Nation* (1991) as major works which have helped shape this growing consensus in political history. The author also addresses such social histories as Iver Bernstein's seminal *The New York City Draft Riots* (2000) and reassesses the connection between racial attitudes and mid-nineteenth-century political culture as presented by Jean Harvey Baker in her important work *Affairs of Party* (1983). This is not a contentious appraisal; Neely admits that "only very good

books stimulate debate and send us back to the sources to look further into historical questions" (pp. x-xi). Nevertheless, he notes rightly that "history in the academy is more an argument than a story ... and animated dialogue with other historians is a sure way to advance ... understanding" (p. xi).

The author's approach in *The Boundaries of Political Culture* befits his vita. Years of archival work has allowed Neely to assemble myriad scraps of nineteenth-century material culture frequently overlooked by other scholars, including, as presented in chapters 1 and 2, campaign ephemera produced for household display. Examining such items as Currier and Ives's lithograph portfolios (10 percent of which was devoted to political subjects intended for domestic consumption), portrait photography, and parlor statuary leads Neely to conclude that, contrary to Altschuler and Blumin's claims, "family and political life existed in Lincoln's era on a seamless continuum of eager engagement" (p. 29). Too, Neely finds that this abiding connection between consumerism and political life enabled the major parties of the day—hardly the money-making machines that have come to dominate the current electoral landscape—to spend so little and yet reap great yields. "Private enterprise and its customers," the author concludes, "provided substantial funding to political campaigns without cost to the parties." Engagement in politics "was so high ... that the people willingly paid for what they got" (p. 65).

Perhaps no citizens' group paid more to express its political will than the northern Union League clubs. In chapter 3, Neely reasserts the Leagues' commitment to the Union cause in general (including the Republican Party's liberal principles regarding race) against the contentions of social historians that it existed principally as a conservative merchant's association to better leverage national officials to adopt pro-business (and, by extension, anti-labor and anti-immigrant) policies. An examination of League rosters, publications, and political

techniques reveals, instead, a progressive organization of broad talent, including scientists, academics, physicians, and dramatists. Indeed, comparatively few of its members hailed from the merchant class; those who did “were needed ... for their money, not their point of view” (p. 81). And raise money they did. In what was perhaps the first large-scale systematic association of moneyed men in American political history, the Union Leagues aggressively distributed handbills, pamphlets, and broadsides communicating the Republican Party’s patriotic wartime message. Nowhere to be found in League literature were references, for example, to such allegedly “partisan” concerns as hard-money policy or tariff reform, not to mention social or ethnic identity. While conceding that class interests came to dictate somewhat Republican policy toward the close of the century, Neely concludes flatly that “it is a mistake to read the Gilded Age Republican Party back into the party of the Civil War” (p. 94).

Still, Neely recognizes that boundaries did sometimes exist between the popular and political cultures of the day. In what is perhaps the most innovative and controversial essay (chapter 4), the author explores blackface minstrel entertainment, finding that, contrary to Baker’s contention in *Affairs of Party*, the Whig and Republican parties relied as much upon elements of minstrelsy to spread their campaign messages as did the Democratic organization. Minstrel entertainments, Neely con-

tends, were in fact nonpartisan; that is, they enjoyed broad-based support from electorates regardless of political stripe. In the end, the racial themes prevalent in minstrelsy found mass popular support in a society that, in this case, separated leisure activities from the realm of political debate.

True to prior practice, Neely has crafted an important study that will provoke as many questions as it addresses. Brilliantly conceived, engagingly written, and always cogent in its analysis, *The Boundaries of American Political Culture in the Civil War Era* shows us how an original and nuanced approach to source material can yield new findings and enhance our collective understanding of America’s most tragic era.

Note

[1]. Mark E. Neely Jr., “Was the Civil War a Total War?” *Civil War History* 37, no. 1 (1991): 5-28; “Civilized Belligerents’: Abraham Lincoln and the Idea of ‘Total War,’” in *New Perspectives on the Civil War: Myths and Realities of the National Conflict*, ed. John Y. Simon and Michael E. Stevens (Madison: Madison House, 1998), 3-23; “Wilderness and the Cult of Manliness: Hooker, Lincoln, and Defeat,” in *Lincoln’s Generals*, ed. Gabor S. Boritt (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 52-77; and, *Southern Rights: Political Prisoners and the Myth of Confederate Constitutionalism* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999).

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