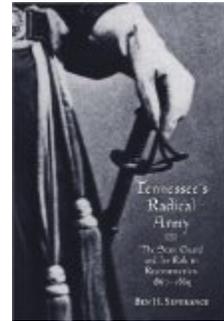


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

**Ben H. Severance.** *Tennessee's Radical Army: The State Guard and Its Role in Reconstruction, 1867-1869.* Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005. xviii + 327 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57233-362-8.

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## The Practice and Possibilities of Power Politics

In his well-written analysis of Radical Reconstruction in Tennessee, Ben H. Severance examines the nature of the state militia utilized by Governor William G. Brownlow to enforce civil rights, guarantee the black vote, and protect the state's Republican supporters. Postwar Tennessee, like most other southern states, was marked by violent agitation by ex-Confederates and conservatives, a group Severance refers to collectively as "anti-Radicals." Severance's major thesis is that military force was necessary to maintain peace and order in the postwar South. Severance uses the Tennessee State Guard as a case study of what force politics could accomplish during Reconstruction. As Severance points out, Tennessee appeared to be well positioned in terms of maintaining a successful Radical government in the Reconstruction era. The state had a large white Unionist population, an especially strong base in eastern Tennessee, and state legislators had disfranchised the ex-Confederates almost immediately after the war. If force politics was going to succeed, it seems likely that it would have succeeded in the Volunteer State. Severance demonstrates that the State Guard enforced the Radical Republican policies effectively and quite judiciously during its limited deployment, yet Redeemers still eventually took control of the state and reversed most of the Republican policies. How did this happen? Severance's conclusion is clear—the Radicals' use of the State Guard was simply not enough. "Reconstruction failed in Tennessee," Severance asserts, "in large part because the Radicals were too cautious in their use of force" (p. xvii).

Severance begins by describing the creation and development of the State Guard in 1867. He argues that Tennessee needed the state militia more than other southern states because it had been readmitted to the Union in July 1866, thereby excluding it from the jurisdiction of the Reconstruction Acts of 1867, which sent Federal troops into five different military districts in the South. Without the promise of Federal intervention, "Tennessee Unionists had to effect Reconstruction largely on their own" (p. xiv). Radicals endured the outrages of ex-Confederate opposition for only so long. After a Radical state senator was murdered by a former Confederate guerrilla in Northwestern Tennessee in January 1867, the Radicals took action to create the state militia. Realizing that they needed a strong military presence to enforce the provisions of the Franchise Act of 1866 (which disfranchised ex-Confederates) and to support the enfranchisement of African Americans, the Radicals in the State Assembly passed the militia bill on February 20, 1867. The final act decreed that the Tennessee State Guard had to be "composed of loyal men," empowered the governor as its commander in chief, and granted him the authority to raise at least eight thousand men, though slightly less than 2,000 were mustered into service (p. 20).

Ultimately, twenty-one companies were formed—five of which were exclusively African American, and two of which were racially integrated. Most of the companies were raised in the eastern portion of the state, while the highly recalcitrant western part of the state re-

cruited only two companies. Severance shows that of the sixty-one men who served as company officers (including four African Americans), forty-four (or 72 percent) had served in the Union Army in some capacity. Several had even seen service in anti-guerrilla fighting during the war, which would be of inestimable value in the fight they would conduct against the ex-Confederates in the postwar period. He argues these officers provided a stabilizing influence, as most were “battle-hardened, vigorous, mature men” (p. 54). The average officer was also a married, a moderately prosperous farmer who would not be politically irresponsible in his actions; such men joined “because the party and its Reconstruction program were important to them and because they believed that the survival of both were at stake in 1867” (p. 55). However, due to the paucity of written sources, Severance can only speculate as to the political motivations of the 1,816 enlisted men. Many were Union veterans, but just as many had been too young for military service during the war. He presumes that most had probably lived in Unionist households during the war, and joined the militia for a variety of reasons—revenge, the monthly pay, to earn respect (especially true among African American enlistees), or for adventure and martial glory. Unfortunately, Severance simply cannot make any assertions any more definitive than these.

The militia companies were dispersed throughout the state to counter anti-Radical threats and exercises of violence against Republican supporters, both white and black. While previous histories have derided the militia as a tool of Brownlow’s tyranny and nothing better than goons who spread terror throughout the state, Severance persuasively argues that the militia actually was a very disciplined force remarkable both for its restraint and efficiency. The militia was deployed primarily into anti-Radical strongholds and did an extraordinary job of enforcing ex-Confederate disfranchisement, protecting the registration and polling sites from vigilante violence, defending the freedmen who sought to exercise their newfound voting rights, and confronting conservative paramilitary organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan.

Two chapters particularly stand out for their strength. In “The Radical Army Wins an Election,” Severance demonstrates that the militia’s tireless efforts in 1867 ensured Brownlow’s gubernatorial victory and the triumph of most Republican congressional representatives despite ceaseless ex-Confederate agitation. In “The State Guard versus the Klan,” he demonstrates how the State Guard, which had been disbanded in 1868, was called back out in 1869 to combat the growing power

of the KKK. For much of the first half of 1869, the militia compelled the Klan into silence, as it would rather not operate rather than risk open confrontation with the Radical government’s effective military organization.

Why had the militia been disbanded in the first place? This is a difficult question to answer and one that Severance grapples with. He argues that Brownlow began dismantling the militia almost immediately after the 1867 election, but can offer little explanation other than the statement: “Evidently, the governor believed that quiet would return once the election was over” (p. 145). Yet, once it became obvious that their failure in the election had only angered the anti-Radicals and committed them to an even greater use of violence and intimidation to win back their state, Brownlow failed in not calling out the militia again. One major reason for his hesitation was the financial cost of keeping an active militia on the payroll. By the end of 1869, the militia had cost the state \$550,000—a healthy chunk of the \$5 million state debt incurred by the Radicals. Maintaining a steady force at those rates would seemingly have been cost prohibitive. Yet, this is where Severance makes his strongest plea for force politics, arguing that “[t]he overt militancy of counter-Reconstruction demanded a forceful response regardless of the cost” (p. 232).

Severance argues that Governor Brownlow and his successor, DeWitt C. Senter, could have used the militia more judiciously, allowing Reconstruction to continue well into the 1870s, instead of ending in Tennessee with Democratic control of state politics in 1870. Severance asserts that keeping a reduced force of approximately five companies to serve as a continual military presence and as a rapid response force against anti-Radical vigilantism would have been more economically feasible. Yet, Severance admits the limitation of his speculation: “While this ideal scenario offers an explanation for how the Radicals might have stayed in power, it does not indicate when the politics of force would have ended” (p.234). Indeed, this is the most trenchant question: when would it have ended? The state simply could not afford indefinitely to continue to deploy the expensive militia, and the ex-Confederates seemed determined to show far more patience, resilience, and perseverance in winning this local battle for social and political control than they had shown during the Civil War. In the end, this study begs the tormenting question: could Tennessee have done anything to prevent Redemption and the concomitant resort to disfranchisement, lynch law, and Jim Crow that followed?

Severance has offered a very useful case study of

force politics in action. This reader has a few criticisms, generally minor and concerning more sins of omission than anything else. Severance's study overtly seeks to redress the unflattering portrayals of the State Guard in previous historical studies. Yet, couching an argument in this very specific historiographical debate limits his ability to expand its scope. This is, after all, a very narrow topic in rather limited time frame. The study only focuses on the years 1867-69, and the guard was only active for 15 months. Severance chooses not to offer a larger comparative perspective, and places this in rather limited context of the experience of Reconstruction elsewhere. He makes occasional references to other similar experiences, most notably Arkansas Governor Powell Clayton's use of force in 1868 to combat the Klan, but not much more. Certainly Tennessee was unique in that it was readmitted to the Union in 1866 and therefore had very few U.S. troops, but a comparison with similar uses of military force in other states to protect their citizens and the integrity of the

polls would have given greater perspective and depth to this study, and placed it in more direct conversation with other works on Reconstruction. Finally, this reviewer would have liked to see the author explore the service of the two integrated militia units more. While having local people serve to support the Radical government is relatively unique in and of itself, the idea of whites and blacks serving together in the same unit (even if they had similar political proclivities) not only is extraordinarily unique at this time, but also offers a tantalizing glimpse of the possibilities of interracial cooperation. As such, it deserves more analysis than the few pages devoted to it in this book.

These criticisms should not diminish the importance of this thoroughly researched, cogently argued book. Severance has written a valuable study that ought to encourage future scholarship on the efficacy of force politics during Reconstruction.

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