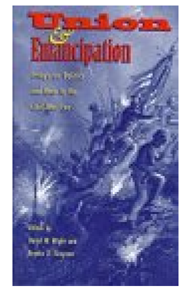
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David W. Blight, Brooks D. Simpson, eds. *Union and Emancipation: Essays on Politics and Race in the Civil War Era.* Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1997. x + 231 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87338-565-7.



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Published on H-CivWar (October, 1997)

This compact collection of essays on the Civil War era offers greater focus than most festschrifts and more consistently high quality. All of the contributors were students of Richard H. Sewell at the University of Wisconsin, to whom the volume is dedicated; several have become distinguished historians in their own right. Their contributions range from case studies based on archival research to considered comments on controversies in historiography. The essays vary in ambition and persuasiveness, and collectively they reach no grand conclusions. Yet taken together they underscore the value of approaches that center on political culture and the nation-state for understanding the place of the Civil War era in the larger narrative of American history. Individually they represent worthy additions to what has become an enormous body of historical literature on the period.

The book's seven essays cluster around two prominent themes in Civil War scholarship: the prewar politics of sectional conflict–the subject of Sewell's best-known book, *Ballots for Freedom: Antislavery Politics in the United States, 1837-1860* (1976)–and the ways that race and emancipation shaped political culture in the decades straddling the war.

The first three essays promote mildly revisionist views of political developments during the sectional crisis. Robert E. May brings his unrivaled command of the sources on antebellum southern expansionism to the question of whether American presidents were indeed part of a "Slave Power Conspiracy" intent on spreading southern institutions in Central America and the Caribbean. Did Presidents Taylor, Fillmore, Pierce, and Buchanan support filibustering adventurers such as William Walker? May admits that Pierce's record is mixed, but in general, he contends, even "doughface" presidents like Pierce and Buchanan acted the way presidents were supposed to act; that is, they tried to use their power as commander-in-chief to deter and punish filibustering attempts. To that extent, at least, Republican charges that the Slave Power controlled the White House were overdrawn. May's essay does not treat domestic expansionism, however, and he mentions in passing that one reason Pierce and Buchanan opposed filibustering was that they feared it jeopardized their persistent attempts to purchase territory from Mexico and the Spanish empire, territory which they knew would be open to slavery once acquired. The Slave Power thesis, in other words, has been dented but hardly demolished by this informative essay.

Michael McManus's contribution shows how the Wisconsin Republican party adopted a states' rights position in the 1850s to resist federal enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law. The outlines of this story are well known, but McManus covers in detail the ongoing tension between states' rights and nationalist antislavery factions among Wisconsin's Republicans, a struggle which affected state politics into the Reconstruction era. The fact that during the sectional crisis both northerners and southerners used states' rights ideas when convenient (and abandoned them when necessary) might suggest that constitutional principles were not deeply held but secondary to sectional allegiances and attitudes toward slavery. McManus, however, sees a fundamental and enduring legitimacy in the Wisconsin version of states' rights, which was intended to preserve freedom, as opposed to the South Carolina version defending slavery. He takes the reader far beyond his evidence–in fact, toward contemporary libertarianism–when he concludes by advocating “partiality” toward whichever government, federal or local, “promotes liberty against those who would impose sweeping restraints on personal freedom in order to achieve their version of a just society” (p. 56).

Peter Knupfer’s essay on “The Generational Roots of the Constitutional Union Party” resurrects the neglected third- party movement that sought to rescue the Union from the twin threats of antislavery and secession in the 1860 election. Taking his cue from the oft-repeated characterization of the group as (in Horace Greeley’s words) “an Old Gentlemen’s Party,” Knupfer argues that the Constitutional Unionists represented an older generation not so much in the age of their leaders or voters, but in harking back to the political assumptions of the Jackson-Clay generation. What looked like “Old fogeyism” in 1860 was an effort (led mainly by Old Whigs) to sustain what had been the *modus vivendi* of managing tensions over slavery up until 1854: by compromising and subordinating them to progressive economic legislation. This conclusion confirms rather than overturns what Greeley was saying, but the real value of Knupfer’s contribution is its thoughtful assessment of the relevance of the concept of “political generations” for historians.

The next four essays concern various themes related to race and emancipation. Louis Gerteis’s contribution on “Blackface Minstrelsy and the Construction of Race” promises to connect the emerging evolutionary theories of race in the first half of the nineteenth century and the development of blackface musical entertainment. This proves more than it can deliver as the essay skips awkwardly from a synopsis of racial theories to a narrative history of the minstrel genre. What makes the essay worthwhile is not a coherent thesis, however, but a “thick description” whose vignettes suggest that blackface minstrelsy was not one thing but many things: racist stereotyping, comic masquerade, political commentary, soap opera for whites, and “talking back” for blacks.

Ira Berlin’s “Who Freed the Slaves? ” is the most forceful piece in the collection and the closest it comes to popular history. Drawing upon the splendid collection of freed people’s documents from the National Archives that he and others have edited, Berlin responds to James McPherson’s critique of the notion that the slaves freed themselves. This involves agreeing with McPherson that Abraham Lincoln supported emancipation decisively once he committed to it, but it also entails reminding historians that the path toward doing the right thing had been cleared for the somewhat reluctant president by abolitionists, runaway slaves, and “the logic of events.” Especially by escaping behind Union lines and presenting army commanders with a problem that passed up the chain of command, escaped slaves became “the prime movers in the emancipation drama, [though] not the sole movers” (p. 112). When taking shots at McPherson, Berlin verges on overstatement, and his essay throughout tends to homogenize slave responses. But in his final pages Berlin presents a balanced and truly exemplary analysis of how “bottom-up” and “top-down” history can be connected.

Equally balanced and compelling is Brooks Simpson’s carefully argued essay on U.S. Grant and black soldiers, in itself worth the price of the volume. In this nuanced and well-documented contribution, Simpson traces Grant’s attitude toward and his use of black troops during and after the war. While not hiding Grant’s prejudices, Simpson shows how military imperatives, orders from his superiors, the desire to protect black soldiers from southern reprisals, and the hope of conciliating southern whites combined to produce inconsistent but generally well-intentioned policies on the part of Grant the commanding general during combat and the first year of Reconstruction. Especially when contrasted with outright racist northern generals such as William T. Sherman and Edward Ord, Grant emerges as a genuine champion of the blacks’ military role as well as a pragmatic politician who “tried to do right by black and white alike” (p. 149).

Finally, David Blight’s eloquent meditation on “Reunion and Race in the Memory of the Civil War, 1875-1913” brings the volume’s themes into the twentieth century. After extended opening remarks that contain, among other things, a critique of Ken Burns’s PBS film, “The Civil War,” Blight settles down to examine two episodes: a disagreement between two important black spokesmen, Frederick Douglass and Alexander Crummell, over whether and how slavery should be recollected in 1885; and, more fully documented, the elaborate reunion of Union and Confederate veterans staged at Gettysburg in 1913. Blight’s presentation of the latter event especially highlights how controversies over the Civil War’s causation and the implications of emancipation were swept out of memory as opinion-makers of both sections linked arms along the white supremacist “road to reunion.” Blight’s demonstration that the contest over the memory and meaning of the Civil War continues to the present is a valuable reminder that history is too important to leave to politicians and producers of popular culture–or to sequester in scholarly monographs, for that matter.

All in all, these essays contain no earth-shaking relevations or startling theses, but each makes a meaningful contribution to an ongoing discussion. Methodologically, they successfully combine traditional subjects and solid archival work with newer approaches that developed during Richard Sewell's distinguished career: political culture, "bottom-up" history, social constructionism, and the study of historical memory. In their devotion to craft and careful innovation, they are a fitting tribute to Sewell's guidance and example.

Citation: Carl J. Guarneri. Review of Blight, David W.; Simpson, Brooks D., eds., *Union and Emancipation: Essays on Politics and Race in the Civil War Era.* H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. October, 1997.

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