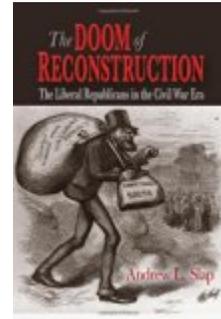


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Andrew L. Slap. *The Doom of Reconstruction: The Liberal Republicans in the Civil War Era*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2006. xxv + 306 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-2709-9.

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The Impending Doom of Reconstruction: A Reinterpretation of the Liberal Republicans

Scholars traditionally have described the division in the Republican Party between President Ulysses S. Grant and Horace Greeley, which occurred during the election of 1872, as a battle for party control. Andrew L. Slap, however, contends that the split within the party was more complex than a simple power struggle among party elites. In an effort to develop a more meaningful understanding of Liberal Republicans, Slap redefines them. He uses the term “liberal republican” (in lowercase) to define individuals involved in the reform movement that began in the decades before the Civil War and the term “Liberal Republican” (in uppercase) to identify members in the political party that was formed at the Cincinnati Convention on May 1-3, 1872. The author’s primary thesis is that the liberal republican movement actually doomed Reconstruction in 1872. As Slap correctly notes, the fact that members of the movement helped to destroy Reconstruction efforts in the South was ironic, especially considering that many of the leading members of the movement had led the effort to reconstruct Southern states and had aided African Americans in their quest to gain full civil rights during most of the 1860s.

According to Slap, liberal republicans were devout followers of classical republican ideology, including an adherence to public virtue, independent citizenship, and vigilance against tyranny. Before the Civil War, liberal republicans were closely aligned to Northern political leaders who believed that Southern slavery endangered the republican government in the United States. As such, liberal republicans fought to end slavery in the South by first creating the Free-Soil Party in the 1840s and later

the Republican Party in the 1850s. Though liberal republicans remained members of the Republican Party in the 1860s, they had to compromise their republican ideology to secure victory against the slaveholding South. Nevertheless, liberal republicans assailed President Lincoln for corrupting public virtue by using the patronage system to unify the heterogeneous Republican Party in 1860. They also opposed several wartime measures, such as the Legal Tender Act (1862) and the Morrill Tariff Act (1861), both of which they felt violated republican ideology by dangerously enlarging the power of the federal government and corrupting the nation’s virtue. Despite their differences with leadership, liberal republicans continued to give lukewarm support to their party because they believed that slavery still posed the greatest threat to the republican form of government in the United States.

At the end of the Civil War, liberal republicans moved in different directions. Their long-perceived threat of the South’s slave system to republican government led them to support the reconstruction of the South. However, reconstruction required the use of federal power that they viewed as potentially tyrannical. While supporting the use of military to protect their republican government, they also became increasingly concerned that wartime changes in Northern states threatened that very system. By the end of the 1860s, some liberal republicans complained that federal land grants to railroad companies had created a railroad power more dangerous than the old slave power. Other liberal republicans became apprehensive that the protective tariff promoted corruption and plunder in government. As a result, they

soon formed a movement to counter these threats. Even though many called for the end of Reconstruction efforts in the South, the majority of liberal republicans believed their agenda exceeded events in Southern states. Leaders of the liberal republican movement from the West considered civil service reform among their primary concern, while members from the East were more concerned with the tariff issue. At the first national liberal republican meeting, members of the movement decided to restrict their issues to revenue and civil service reform.

Slap reveals that the drive to form a national liberal republican reform movement gained momentum after liberal republicans succeeded in winning the governorship and open U.S. Senate seat in Missouri during the elections of 1870. Following the success in Missouri, liberal republicans attempted to forge a national movement by either seizing control of the Republican Party or creating a new political party. Unable to obtain control of their party, they decided to create a new party—the Liberal Republican Party. As Slap notes, this was not out of step with nineteenth-century politics. Politicians, including liberal republicans, believed that political parties were formed around great ideas. As such, they thought that when a party’s objective was accomplished, new political parties would organize around the next great idea. Even though liberal republicans were optimistic, the author contends that a lack of political talent soon ruined their movement. At their first national convention, held in Cincinnati in May 1872, personal rivalries and mistakes allowed outsiders to take control of the Liberal Republican Party and to nominate Greeley as its presidential candidate. Greeley’s support of the protective tariff and the patronage system stripped the Liberal Republican Party of the movement’s founding principles. With the party abandoning republican ideology, many original members of the movement refused to support Greeley and eventually either campaigned for the reelection of Republican President Grant or left politics altogether.

Greeley’s nomination and the Republican Party’s willingness to adopt civil service and tariff reform as part of their own platform forced the Liberal Republican Party to change political directions. As the election of 1872 approached, Liberal Republicans focused their campaign

on the dangers of Reconstruction policies and the misdeeds of President Grant, which were minor issues in the minds of original members of the liberal republican movement. The result was that Republicans and Liberal Republicans based campaigns on the validity of Reconstruction policies in the South. The Liberal Republicans lost valuable ground when President Grant signed into law the Amnesty Act (1872) that restored the political and civil rights of most white Southerners, thereby diminishing one of the Liberal Republicans major criticisms of Reconstruction policies: its denial of self-government to many citizens of Southern states. In the end, Liberal Republicans were unable to prevent the re-election of Grant.

Following the election of 1872, the Republican Party began to dismantle its Reconstruction efforts. Even though Grant won the election, the campaign estranged many important members of the party who had previously supported protecting the rights of Southern freedmen. By 1876, Republicans had abandoned Reconstruction efforts. As Slap convincingly argues, the liberal republican movement, started for other purposes, played a significant role in the “Doom of Reconstruction.”

Slap provides a fresh interpretation of the Liberal Republican Party and makes a strong case that traditional accounts of the party have failed to place it in its proper context. In making his case, the author’s study naturally focuses on political explanations for the doom of Reconstruction. While Liberal Republicans undoubtedly contributed to the failure of Reconstruction, Slap places too much emphasis on the role that the divisions within the Republican Party had on the abandonment of federal Reconstruction efforts in the South. His focus on political causation dismisses the importance of other equally significant factors, such as white Southerners’ violence against freedpeople and their white Republican allies; limited military resources stationed in Southern states; and limited manpower and funding for the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands, which was charged with the duty of protecting Southern blacks. Nevertheless, Slap’s *The Doom of Reconstruction* is an important addition to Reconstruction historiography and should be on the shelves of all serious scholars of this turbulent era.

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