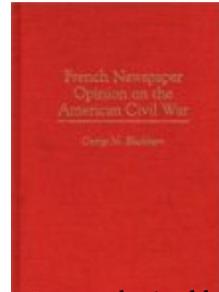


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

George M. Blackburn. *French Newspaper Opinion on the American Civil War*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997. xii + 158 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-30261-9.

Reviewed by Richard Sonn (University of Arkansas)  
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This reviewer approached this survey of French journalistic attitudes toward the Civil War in America with some ambivalence. The book is Number 171 in a series entitled Contributions in American History, yet it is manifestly not about American history, or even American diplomatic history. The author's thesis is that differing attitudes toward the North and South in the Civil War reflected internal French political positions, and that the French press can be taken as a good barometer of French public opinion. Further, the author argues that, in the context of a moderately repressive Napoleonic regime that discouraged direct criticism of the government, it was possible to criticize that government indirectly by commenting on the American situation, with opposition papers favoring the North and championing the abolition of slavery. Thus the book is really concerned with French attitudes and politics, and only tangentially with America.

The other major caveat concerning this book (aside from its rather exalted price) is the exclusive focus on the French press. The author has thoroughly researched his topic and cites a great many newspapers representing all mainstream currents of opinion, from those supporting the government (Imperialist) to Legitimists supporting the restoration of the Bourbon family, the more liberal Orleanists, and Republicans on the left. He does not cite more radical journals of socialist or anarchist orientation. Learning what thirteen Parisian and sixty-two provincial newspapers had to say about a variety of episodes concerning the Civil War, from the Trent Affair to the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, could easily inspire lethargy if the author had become mired in detailed reportage of a large number of rather peripheral journals. It is, therefore, to the author's credit that he is able to summarize his findings in a coherent and concise

fashion, so that in a book of barely 140 pages he is able to convey a broad range of opinions. Prestigious journals, such as the Orleanist *Revue des deux mondes*, are accorded more space than less influential organs, and occasionally the author includes direct quotations that are well-chosen to convey characteristic attitudes. Given the restricted space he has available, he generally resists the temptation to quote directly, and, when he does, he translates his French sources clearly. In short, this succinct account accomplishes what it sets out to do, and if one approaches it with this limited expectation, one will not be disappointed.

In his introduction, Blackburn cites previous books dealing with French responses to the Civil War, but he does not attempt to criticize their findings or compare their conclusions to his own. The first two books cited appeared in 1924 and 1931; more recently, in 1968, there appeared Serge Gavronsky's *The French Liberal Opposition and the American Civil War*. This is a much fuller account than Blackburn's, including as it does a wide array of French political figures as well as opposition newspapers. Gavronsky also placed French attitudes toward the Civil War in the context of the heritage of America as the model republic, a beacon to French liberal thinkers from the American Revolution until the 1860s. Blackburn's book does not supersede Gavronsky's; it accomplishes a different and more limited objective. Blackburn also cites David Pinckney's article, "France and the Civil War," in Harold Hyman, ed., *Heard Round the World: The Impact Abroad of the Civil War* (1969). Pinckney's forty-five-page article is still the best overview on the subject; if one were to read only one source on French views of and policies toward America during the war, this would be it. Pinckney is especially good in detailing the particular economic dislocations caused by the drop in Amer-

ican cotton shipments. After the great economic boom of the 1850s, the French economy experienced a contraction in the early 1860s, due in part to the free trade pact with England as well as to the Civil War. Pinckney also considers what the French learned, or failed to learn, about modern military tactics. The most important lesson could have been the superiority of defense, especially of using entrenchments, but the one French captain of engineering who wrote about this was ignored. Instead, the French were more attentive to the battle of Sadowa, fought in 1866. Blackburn's book, emphasizing internal French political attitudes, does not deal at all with military tactics.

One more contrast emerges in comparing this new book to those that appeared in the 1960s. Gavronsky includes a handy biographical index for all the principal members of the liberal French opposition, while Pinckney cites such supporters of the northern cause as Alexis de Tocqueville (who died, however, before the war broke out), Victor Hugo, Francois Guizot, and Eugene Forcade, editor of the *Revue des deux mondes*. For Blackburn, newspapers are more important than personalities, and one does not get any sense of important opposition figures. This somewhat impersonal approach may reflect his attempt to convey public opinion rather than that of particular editorialists, though he fails to argue very convincingly that public opinion was accurately reflected in these papers. Blackburn concludes a useful opening chapter on "France in 1861," in which he summarizes the range of political positions, by observing that

The relative consistency of French journalists provides convincing evidence that expressions of opinion regarding the Civil War were genuine. In addition, the general political stance of French newspapers—largely Liberal in Paris and Conservative in the provinces—is evidence that the views of French newspapers about the Civil War roughly reflected the views of their subscribers (p. 16).

He also reveals the startlingly low circulation figures of these newspapers. Twenty-two Parisian political journals sold a total of 236,000 copies in 1861; in the provinces, 202 governmental journals counted 207,000 subscribers, while thirteen Orleanist newspapers had 20,000 readers, thirty-four Legitimist papers 31,000, and thirteen Republican nearly 23,000. If one includes the Legitimists as conservatives, even if in opposition to the emperor, one finds few liberals in the provinces; yet we know that opposition to Louis-Napoleon's coup d'état of December, 1851, was centered in the south and south-

west of France, not mainly in Paris. While this study may accurately mirror newspaper opinion, I doubt that these limited circulation figures have much to say about the opinions of most French citizens other than the newspapers' subscribers.

Following his opening chapter that pictures France in 1861, the author treats the French responses to the election of 1860 and southern secession, and then the *Trent* affair of late 1861. He then proceeds chronologically to "Changing Military Fortunes and Emancipation," and argues that 1862 was the pivotal year of the war from the French point of view. The *Trent* affair was resolved in January, 1862; Robert E. Lee's repulse of George McClellan at Richmond and the battle of Antietam replaced expectations of a quick northern victory with the feeling that neither side could win the war, and that a negotiated peace would be preferable to endless war. Napoleon III offered his services as mediator of the conflict in October, 1862. The Emancipation Proclamation greatly excited French liberals, and finally the cotton crisis became most serious in 1862. Blackburn deals with the cotton crisis and mediation attempts in subsequent chapters; in this one, he claims that slavery became a political litmus test, with Liberals emphasizing it as the key issue, Conservatives minimizing it and registering disdain for the hypocrisy of offering to free slaves only in areas which the North did not control. French Republicans generally concurred that Lincoln should have freed all American slaves. Instead of focusing on slavery, French Conservatives emphasized economic issues, such as the Morrill Tariff, or saw the conflict in ethnic-religious terms, with Protestant, Anglo-Saxon northerners oppressing Catholic, French-descended southerners (clearly we are in the realm of partisan opinion rather than factual reportage). Conservatives also feared that Lincoln was seeking to inspire a mass servile insurrection, such as the French had experienced in Saint Domingue.

In the chapter on the cotton crisis, Blackburn in part retreats from his reliance on newspapers and reports more straightforwardly on French economic conditions during the war, while relying on several secondary sources. Unemployment peaked during the winter of 1862-63, as did cotton prices. By 1864, France was getting cotton from Egypt and India, and also shifting to wool and linen as alternative fibers. He notes that French markets were "guttled with goods that could be absorbed only with time" (p. 84); one presumes he means "glutted." In any case, the French economy was hurt as much by the decline of exports of wine, brandy, silks and other fabrics to the United States as it was by loss of southern

cotton.

Concern for the impact of the Civil War on the French economy led directly to Napoleon's attempt to mediate the conflict, supported by Conservatives as a wise attempt to end the needless shedding of blood in America as well as Europe's economic distress. Liberals felt that French intervention would help the South, and that, in general, France should not intervene in the conflict. A subsequent chapter called, simply, "1863 and 1864," suggests that French interest in the Civil War waned in these years, as the war seemed interminable. Most excitement was generated when the fighting was closer to the French coast, as the *Alabama* and the *Kearsarge* battled just off Cherbourg on June 19, 1864. Although the Confederate ship was sunk, French Conservatives perceived "the sailors and officers of the *Alabama* as men going valiantly to death for their political faith, for their flag, for their country; each of us has rendered homage to that act of devotion, to that martyrdom!" (p. 119).

A final brief chapter called "The End of the War" summarizes Blackburn's findings. Ideology was the princi-

pal determinant of French attitudes toward the Civil War, with Imperial papers favoring the southern cause and believing until the end of the war that it would triumph, while Republicans and Orleanists both favored and expected a Union victory. Legitimists, being both Conservative and in opposition, were more mixed in their stance. Major events also affected attitudes; Confederate victories in 1862 gained support for the South. Just as these issues divided Americans, they also divided Frenchmen, if less bitterly, so that Conservatives spoke of northern aggression and racism, Liberals of nationalism and abolition. Blackburn has provided a concise view of French opinion, though it is journalistic rather than public opinion. This is not a path-breaking book, but it is readable and useful to students of French politics and, to a lesser degree, to those interested in diplomatic issues surrounding the Civil War.

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