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Heather Cox Richardson. *The Greatest Nation on Earth: Republican Economic Policies During the Civil War.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997. viii + 342 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-36213-0.

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American economic historians do not pay enough attention to the history of economic policymaking, and when they do take up one of the usual policy suspects–tariffs, banks, transportation–these are often treated as specialty topics in isolation from each other and from the political context of the times. We generally leave to political historians questions about contending economic philosophies and ideologies, especially for the nineteenth century and especially for the federal government. Perhaps we are implicitly committed to a view that American policies were driven by interest group pressures and pure politics, so that the whole concept of implementing an economic program seems out of place.

There is at least one glaring exception to this image, the insurgency of the Republican Party during the 1850s and its abrupt ascension to political power in the 1860s. To be sure, wartime conditions were exceptional in ways that had little to do with ideology. But even in the midst of war–to some extent because of these extraordinary circumstances–Republicans were able to push through sweeping changes in national policy in any number of areas, with a minimum of political opposition. Many of these are standards in the economic history curriculum–tariffs, banking, the Homestead Act, railroad land grants–but rarely are these treated as a cohesive policy package enacted by a party in power. This quasi-neglected topic is the subject Heather Cox Richardson's new book, growing out of a Ph.D. thesis from the Harvard history department.

According to Cox, the story has the structure of classical tragedy. In the "self-righteous optimism" of their celebration of individual labor and private property, the Republicans enacted policies that "unwittingly lay the groundwork for the turmoil of the late nineteenth century" (255). Believers in active government support for economic development, party members thought they were opening opportunities for family farmers and ordinary workers. But because they underestimated greed, corruption, racism, and the exercise of economic power, what they gave the country instead was the Gilded Age: "their vision contained the seeds of its own destruction" (vii). This interpretation is not entirely novel–this version is more-or-less what I remember learning in my undergraduate American history class–but to map this transformation in historically specific detail would be no small achievement.

Unfortunately, the book's individual chapters are not up to the task of carrying such an ambitious historical structure. In her focus on legislative histories, Cox rarely gets close enough to the substance of the issues to be able to compare intentions and reality in any depth. Her command is stretched to the breaking point in the second and third chapters, which deal with war bonds and monetary legislation. These subjects are certainly important, and wartime financial policies had lasting consequences; but they hardly fit the framework of a fresh political opportunity to implement a pre-existing economic philosophy. What Lincoln said about his entire administration–"I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me"–applies as well to Chase's desperate struggle to pay the wartime bills, and to William Pitt Fessenden's reluctant support for greenbacks. In general, Cox does not make enough room in her narrative for the possibility that in many areas, Republicans were pressured by events into policies they would otherwise not have dreamed of adopting.

Her best cases are in the next four chapters: taxes and tariffs, support for agriculture–not just the Homestead Act, but the founding of the Department of Agriculture, and the Morrill Act establishing land grant colleges–transcontinental railroads, and, of course, slavery. On many of these one can make the case that a naive enthusiasm for positive action gave birth to something quite different in practice. On the other hand, one can also argue that many of these measures had positive long-run benefits, whatever the calculations and intentions behind them. To pursue these sorts of evaluations rig-

orously would require a different kind of book, one with more of an empirical base and more follow-up study into the postwar implementation of legislation that originated during the war. To expect such material in a relatively conventional political history is doubtless unfair. What Cox might have provided within her own frame of reference, however, is a better-developed sense of the political context behind each of these measures–not just the Republican ideology, but the lineup of interest groups and the evolution of the debate over time. It would be extremely helpful to know whether the party really functioned as a legislative unit on economic issues, drawing up strategies, choosing leaders, imposing discipline. But organizational matters like these are almost entirely neglected by Cox, and one is led to infer by its absence that by and large the party did not operate in these ways.

With her interest in ideology, Cox is often too ready to take political rhetoric at face value, as in the arguments of Justin Smith Morrill (influenced by Francis Wayland and Henry Carey) that his tariff legislation was not traditional special-interest protectionism, but instead would benefit all members of society (105). Morrill may have been sincere in this belief, but how much of the political support for his tariff bill was attributable to his sincerity?

One particularly interesting shift in the Republican position is noted but not really explained. Although the party had some of its roots in the nativism of the 1850s, by the end of the war it was a champion of immigration (160-168). Cox attributes the change to wartime shortages of farm labor. But was it a permanent change, and did it correspond to a change in the party's political constituency? To answer these questions one would have to trace political developments beyond the wartime period, which Cox is not generally inclined to do.

Whatever the book's shortcomings, Cox has formulated or at least revived an extremely interesting set of issues that deserve further attention from economic historians and others. Reading her concluding chapter, however, reminded me that there are still some fairly strong differences between political and economic historians in working assumptions about American history. Cox takes it as axiomatic that the Gilded Age was a disaster. Republican policies, she says, "paved the way for the eventual demise of the small farm" (256). "The standard of living for city workers, especially immigrants, fell to appalling levels" (257). None of these statements are footnoted, and the author seems unaware that documenting them would be a real challenge. The deeper problem is that the entire construction of a disastrous Gilded Age is unexamined. This willingness to accept contemporary rhetorical formulations at face value seems oddly out of date nowadays–which is not to say that on closer examination these conceptions would be entirely wrong. This promising subject area seems ripe for re-examination.

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