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Michael F. Holt. *Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992. 365 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-1728-6.

Reviewed by Peter B. Knupfer (Kansas State University)
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This collection of ten essays, nine of them previously published, is a fitting prelude to the impending publication of Michael Holt's long-awaited study of the American Whig party. Not only does the book revive, revise, and refresh Holt's challenging and occasionally quixotic interpretation of party politics before the Civil War, it also reminds us that the pursuit of party history is not a dying art. For whatever one may think of Holt's understanding of the causes of the Civil War, he has demonstrated again and again the value of researching political institutions and processes. The essays are typically combative, and not just as Holt debates his opponents: the very nature of his work, which emphasizes partisan motivations and the exploitation of irrational perceptions by politicians to the exclusion of thoughtful political discourse, is provocative. Ever sensitive to the the personal prejudices and disputes of powerful men, attuned to the rapid and erratic pulse of a highly decentralized and intensely competitive party system, and alert to his own provocative role in the ongoing controversy over the politics of the Civil War era, Michael Holt might be considered the Stephen Douglas of antebellum political historiography.

Some of the essays, such as his narrative histories of the Democratic, Know-Nothing, and Antimasonic parties, have become a standard in the periodical literature on nineteenth century parties. Two long review-essays examine books by Dale Baum, David Potter, and Stephen Maizlish, whose emphasis on the sectional conflict over slavery Holt vigorously disputes. Others, including articles on the election of 1840 and on the brief revival of the Whig party in the late 1840s and early 1850s, display a refreshing willingness to rethink some of the conclusions about the salience of ethnoreligious impulses in local politics Holt reached in his study of Pittsburg Republicans. His essay on the election of 1840, for instance, substitutes class and economic issues for ethnoreligious motivations in accounting for the Whigs' triumph in 1840 and directs future research into the relationship between cycles of economic expansion and contraction and voter behavior in elections.

Of special significance is Holt's explanation, in an essay appearing here for the first time, of the disappearance of the Whig party. Comparing the condition of the Whigs in the mid-50s to the fortunes of the British Conservative party of the 1850s and the post-Watergate Republican party, Holt points out that the relatively low barriers to entry in American politics made it very easy to start a party, and very hard to keep it alive. The key to success, he claims, would always be whether the party could articulate strong enough differences between itself and its opponents to give the voters a clear alternative on election day. In the early 1850s, the Whigs no longer offered such a clear choice. On the other hand, the British Conservative and post-1950s Republican parties were so well established through law and custom that steep declines in their support did not prove fatal. Historians of antebellum politics would do well to ponder this point. The all-embracing compass of political parties in te second party system easily obscures the simple fact that in theory, in contemporary ideology, and in practice, parties were voluntary, temporary, civic associations unrecognized by the law and subject to the whims of a fickle electorate.

One might call this the "libertarian thesis" of party development, because it emphasizes free competition among politicians and private organizations for the votes of their citizen/clientele. The invisible hand of the marketplace of social and economic resources regulates this heady discourse, and those who fail to appease their customers fail to thrive as well. One might extend Holt's analysis to the postbellum era. After the Civil War, parties, like their counterparts in the business world, sought to stifle the competition – after all, no one wanted to go the way of the Whigs. They suppressed third party competitors by stealing their electorates and controlling access to the ballot box, and they firmly established themselves as legally recognized and regulated political oligopolies.

The conclusions that Holt draws from this arresting and simple observation about antebellum parties will strike some as a bit extreme. Because parties were such ephemeral things, Holt's politicians are keener to save their own skins and that of their parties than they are to address and resolve serious issues. Although Holt clearly recognizes the force of republican ideology, in his hands this belief system is but a set of widely held paranoid perceptions that distort political discourse and help drive a party system to self-destruction. Aside from reconfirming and expressing the public's fidelity to a vague revolutionary heritage of civic probity and self-government, republican ideology's connection to the major public issues that dominated the correspondence and public utterances of party politicians remains attenuated at best in his account.

Perhaps this helps us understand Holt's repeated claim that the slavery issue was an insufficient, if necessary, cause of the American Civil War. That is, he questions the idea that northern "moral antipathy to slavery" was a primary motivator of Republican party politics. In essay after essay he argues, to the point of protesting too much, that the Republican party was simply a northern, antisouthern organization that exploited northern fears of the Slave Power's threat to republican government. Holt's thesis has come under withering attack, most recently by J. Morgan Kousser, who labeled it the "irrepressible repressible conflict theory" in a blistering critique published in *Reviews in American History* (21 [June, 1993]: 207-212). Kousser's claim that "Michael Holt is a prisoner of revisionism" (ibid., p. 207) all too facilely takes the bait Holt has cast into the study of the causes of the Civil War. Because Holt does not carefully define what he means by the "sectional conflict," the "slavery issue," and "the sectional conflict theory," he promotes a reductionist image of the historians' debate over the 1850s as a sterile, Manichaean choice between "slavery" and "non-slavery" as the cause of the Civil War. Research on antebellum politics, including Holt's, has foreclosed that discussion. Currently there is no serious debate over whether slavery did or did not cause the Civil War. There is a good deal of discussion about the relationship between ideology, economic change, and Westward expansion, questions linked variably but inextricably with slavery (as an economic system, as a moral problem, as a challenge to the republic's changing politics). Because Holt subtly shifts his emphasis back and forth among "slavery," "moral antipathy to slavery," and the "slavery issue," he can pick and choose among subsets of the larger issue of slavery's status in the republic.

Holt's analysis does have useful and ultimately enriching consequences for the study of antebellum politics. It bids us to pay closer attention to the way that voters might be drawn into a debate that they wished to avoid. It tells us that voters and leaders adopt issue orientations that are frequently contradictory and whose changing salience can distract them from what subsequent historians claim to have been the "real" issues.

But Holt's interpretation of partisan motivations also leads him into highly speculative and ultimately unsatisfactory explanations of the political behavior of important politicians. More comfortable when addressing the behavior of mass publics, Holt ranges into difficult terrain when handling Abraham Lincoln. His essay on Lincoln and the politics of Union displays the pitfalls of his larger theories about party development and political behavior. Holt argues that Lincoln decided very early in the war to replace the Republican party with a Union organization centered in the border regions of the lower North and upper South. Because Lincoln's fidelity to the Union was stronger than his commitment to any one policy regarding slavery, he diverged radically from Congressional Republicans on a range of war policies and tried, fitfully but consistently, to outflank radicals by attracting old-line Whigs, Know-Nothings, war Democrats, and unattached conservatives into a Union party dedicated to crushing the rebellion. All of Lincoln's important decisions, from the selection of his generals to questions of emancipation, "can be explained by the calendar of conventions and elections in the states" (p. 30).

This stimulating essay introduces a number very important issues for Civil War historians to consider. The most intriguing theme – the continuity of Union party labels and of calls for a national conservative party from 1849 through 1868 – is sorely in need of careful investigation. The recurrent attempts by conservatives to build a national Union organization have not received systematic treatment from historians, who, with some exceptions, tend to treat any divergence from existing party labels as deviant third-party behavior in a solidly two-party system. Lincoln's decision to adopt the Union designation in 1864 especially needs attention, considering the wealth of issues related to reconstruction, dissent, and economic policy that the party had to deal with that year. Furthermore, Holt's emphasis on the problem of forming a Union party points to the way that the realignment of the 1850s altered the rules of American politics: a national party no longer had to incorporate diverse geographical interests, for its ideological convictions and the issues it addressed could attract enough voters to build national majorities in a single section.

But Holt's Lincoln, unlike the rest of the Republican party, rejected that new understanding of American politics, if one is to accept Holt's claim that Lincoln was trying to create a bisectional party to restore the Union. Here Holt's thesis about Lincoln falls considerably short. The essay is astonishingly devoid of any reference to military events, as if Lincoln's decisions occurred in the usual hothouse atmosphere of domestic partisan politics, instead of within sight of rebel flags flapping over the Potomac. Thus, Lincoln replaced George McClellan and Don Carlos Buell in late 1862 because, Holt claims, the Democratic resurgence in the fall elections made further employment of these Democratic generals politically unnecessary. No mention here of McClellan's failure at Antietam, or of Buell's at Perryville, both occurring just before these generals got the boot. By Holt's account, Lincoln's preoccupation with party-building at the expense of his own party – to which he owed his election and his influence over Congress – even overshadows the clear, thoughtful, and deliberate declarations of broader aims and principles expressed in the Gettysburg Address and the inaugural addresses (none of which receive mention). Indeed, of all the essays in this book, this one most closely demonstrates the truth in Kousser's assertion that to Holt, the Civil War was an inconvenient and aberrant event whose odd intrusion into American political development can only be explained by chance events, irrational impulses, and political partisanship. One has no sense on reading this essay that there was a shooting war going on or that there might be a difference between a statesman and a politician in American politics.

But the reader will emerge from studying this book with a number of important insights that should be on the agenda of political historians. One of them – the connection between local elections and national politics – has been around for some time. Holt properly urges us to consider the ways that the voters' assessments of government at all levels of the federal system influenced policy-making at all levels. Another – the unique character of nineteenth-century parties before the secret ballot and the institutional reforms of the Progressive Era, deserves more study. Finally, Holt's claim that the motivations of nineteenth century voters mattered less in setting the policy agenda than did the results of elections, is a challenging and highly debatable conclusion that political historians will be quarreling over for a long time to come.

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