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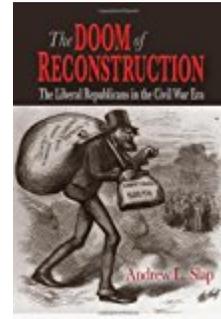
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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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Published on H-CivWar (October, 2009)

Commissioned by Matthew E. Mason



Liberal Republicans: Disaffected Elites or Classical Republicans?

In *The Doom of Reconstruction*, Andrew L. Slap offers readers an extensive revision of the small, yet powerful group of reformers who called themselves liberal republicans. Situating his argument in opposition to classic studies, like John Sproat's *"The Best Men": Liberal Reformers in the Gilded Age* (1968) and Ari Hoogenboom's *Outlawing The Spoils: A History of the Civil Service Reform Movement, 1865-1883* (1961), Slap challenges the well-worn argument that liberal republicans were disaffected elites who sought to reclaim their power and status within Republican Party ranks by ousting Ulysses S. Grant and his minions from power throughout the 1870s. He contends that historians have too quickly and too frequently blurred the lines between the liberal republican movement and the Liberal Republican Party, giving us a false picture of what liberal republicanism really sought to achieve.[1]

Slap argues that it was through the lens of classical republicanism that liberal republicans viewed the complex political and social world of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Because of this, liberal republicans only hesitantly acquiesced to the extension of power to the Union government during the Civil War. According to Slap, they believed that increased federal power was a necessary measure to protect republican government; however, the prolonged military occupation of the South, the increase in congressional authority to suspend political rights in the region, and the expansion of executive power to counteract white terrorism convinced liberal republicans that the American Republic was under attack.

Reform, they believed, was the key to the survival of the American Republic amid the unprecedented centralization of federal power during the 1860s and early 1870s. Yet, when liberal republicans attempted to institute reform through a national political party, a combination of "mistakes, rivalries, and bad luck" allowed the movement to slip out of the hands of liberal republicans at the Cincinnati convention of 1872 (p. xxv). Falling under the control of the professional politicians they opposed, the liberal republican movement accidentally created a platform to attack the legality, viability, and longevity of Reconstruction. Slap concludes that liberal republicans never found the right formula to construct and preserve republican government for whites and blacks in the South without the use of a permanent military force. And the extended military occupation of the South was something that they refused to accept.

Historians familiar with the era will not be surprised that *The Doom of Reconstruction* begins with the prolonged struggle between Carl Schurz, Charles Drake, and B. Gratz Brown during the Missouri gubernatorial elections of 1869. The author correctly labels the internal party struggles between Missouri Republicans a "dress rehearsal" for the national liberal republican movement (p. 2). Where Slap differs from recent historiography is his claim that liberal republicanism in Missouri was a microcosm of the fluid nature of mid-nineteenth-century politics. To prove his claim, the author turns to antebellum America and the Civil War to trace the evolution of a liberal republican mentality. He maintains that the

liberal republicans' effort to construct a national coalition from different political persuasions was heavily connected to their own participation in the construction of the Free Soil and Republican parties—the latter of which began as a third party and grew to become a major political force.

A real plus is Slap's analysis of future liberal republicans' antiparty mentality during the Civil War. Recent publications, like Adam I. P. Smith's *No Party Now: Politics in the Civil War North* (2006), demonstrate the importance of antiparty sentiment during the Civil War years. Slap complicates this picture by asserting that future liberal republicans adopted antiparty sentiment during the Civil War because they believed that everything, including party loyalty, should temporarily be suspended to save republican government. Their antiparty beliefs led most of them to accept an increase in federal power as a temporary war measure. Yet, in the early years of Reconstruction, the author argues, "war measures [became] a double edged sword, one that allowed them to strike at slavery and the rebellion that endangered republican government, but that also, by creating a powerful central government and increasing opportunities for corruption, threatened the republican institutions they were meant to preserve" (p. 72). The author contends that it was the latter that gave rise to the liberal republican movement in Missouri, and eventually, the national Liberal Republican Party.

The roots of liberal republicanism may have developed in antebellum America, but according to Slap it took Grant-era corruption to scare Schurz, Brown, and their followers into action. Schurz's successful effort to build a political coalition led individuals like Charles Francis Adams to throw their support behind the national movement. With the help of the American Free Trade League, liberal republicans tread carefully early on and attempted to reform the Republican Party internally by pushing civil service reform and free trade; however, they also created small, unified organizations throughout the country that could be combined into a national political party in case internal reform failed. Slap contends that when the latter occurred the ineffective leadership and "lack of political skill" among liberal republicans led them to lose control of their movement and men like Horace Greeley who opposed many of their views to gain control of the Liberal Republican Party (p. xxv). Once the party was in the hands of Greeley and other politicians who did not adhere closely to liberal republicans' vision for reform, the need to win the election trumped initial efforts to create a national reform

coalition that mimicked the earlier attempt to do so in Missouri. With so many opposing political viewpoints combined under the banner of liberal republicanism, ultimately, posits Slap, the only single issue that the party could unite around was their common belief that Reconstruction should come to an end.

The author concludes that the differentiation between the liberal republican movement and the party is critical to understanding Reconstruction era politics because of the legacy of the movement after 1872. Schurz and Charles Francis Adams Jr. rallied adherents who remained loyal to the movement's original principles and pushed for candidates who supported their goals. By sheer luck, they found their man in Rutherford B. Hayes. Hayes never officially identified himself as a liberal republican in 1872; however, Schurz worked closely with him in the liberal republican breadbasket of Ohio while he was the state's governor. Moreover, Hayes adopted Schurz as one of his closest advisors and trusted his opinion so much that in the summer of 1876 Hayes frequently met with Schurz and adopted the majority of his suggestions in his letter accepting his nomination to the presidency of the Republican National Convention. Schurz's influence on Hayes demonstrates the continued influence of liberal republican ideology on the Republican Party; however, their inability to reconcile classical republicanism with the necessity for a vigorous Reconstruction policy unintentionally provided the cannon fire that "doomed" Reconstruction.

This study is a welcome and necessary revision of the origins, intentions, and legacy of liberal republicanism. *The Doom of Reconstruction* provides a solid case study of why New Political Historians' attempt to understand Reconstruction era politics through demographics and voting patterns should be revised to include a more nuanced analysis of mid-nineteenth-century politics. Furthermore, the author provides a solid foundation for future political historians of the Civil War and Reconstruction to build on.

Despite its many strengths, though, readers familiar with the era will leave this study with some important reservations. There is no question that this study improves the reputation of the twenty-three individuals Slap identifies as the liberal republican leadership, yet he is not able completely to reverse the well-rehearsed historiographical charge of liberal republican elitism. In fairness to the author, he does point out that the leaders were indeed elites, but he runs into an important stumbling block by asserting that their status as elites

did not influence their political actions. Proof of this is his statement that “while few people went to college [in antebellum America], the vast majority of the liberal republicans attended some of the country’s best colleges and universities” (p. xxiii). Therefore, liberal republican ranks were infused with aristocratic readings and theories about how American society should operate in relation to classical republicanism. Moreover, the author’s conclusion that liberal republicans were the catalyst that ended Reconstruction in 1877 is problematic. Heather Cox Richardson’s groundbreaking study *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865-1901* (2001) provides solid proof that if questions of race, class, and politics are analyzed together the loss of Republican control of the South did not stop national debates about Reconstruction, nor did it completely destroy opposition to southern Democrats after 1877. Other well-known studies, like Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore’s *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (1996), illustrate that the transition from the Reconstruction era to the Jim Crow South was a gradual process that was not a foregone conclusion until as late as the early twentieth century in some southern states like North Carolina.

Richardson’s and Gilmore’s studies are only a small sampling of an expanding historiography that proves why historians must stop using 1877 as an endpoint for Reconstruction. Although Slap cites Richardson’s study, his analysis of the liberal republicans does not refute studies that carry Reconstruction far beyond Hayes’s administration. Readers will not leave this study with much confidence that liberal republicans were the driving force that ended Reconstruction.

The Doom of Reconstruction provides a necessary revision of liberal republicans’ place in Reconstruction era politics. Slap offers an engaging and well-researched narrative that differentiates between the prolonged evolution, development, and political machinations of the liberal republican movement and the Liberal Republican Party. Because of this, political historians or graduate students studying Reconstruction should read this study.

Note

[1]. The author uses the term “liberal republican” in lowercase to differentiate between the movement and the political party, which he capitalizes. I will do the same throughout this review.

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Citation: Chris Fobare. Review of Slap, Andrew L., *The Doom of Reconstruction: The Liberal Republicans in the Civil War Era*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. October, 2009.

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