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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.

Reviewed by Adam Smith (Sidney Sussex College, UK)

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The dramatic emergence of the Republican party and then its dominance throughout the Civil War era has always fascinated those who wish to understand the coming of the war and the rise of industrial capitalism in the United States. The relationship between these two developments, which between them created the modern American nation-state, has always been a matter of dispute. Most explanations, however, begin with an attempt to understand the role of the Republicans.

Eric Foner's path-breaking study of the ideology of the party before the Civil War (*Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 1970) established the terms of debate for the modern discussion of these themes. He suggested that abstract anti-slavery sentiment was blended with Unionism and with a faith in the individual opportunities presented by the free labor system (explicitly contrasted on both moral and material grounds with slave labor). An egalitarian society in which each man had an equal chance in the "race of life," as Lincoln put it, should have been among the fruits of war.

Heather Cox Richardson explains that her study was stimulated by an attempt "to understand the ideology of the late nineteenth-century Americans who built industrial America" (p. vii). In pursuit of this end, Richardson has been drawn to write about the formation of economic policy by the Republicans who dominated the wartime congresses. In the pages of the Congressional Globe she sees the "construction of both a world view and of a newly active national government designed to promote that view" (p. vii). Her study is both an analysis of the structure and mechanics of policy-formation and also (although she eschews use of the word) a study of the ideology of the Republicans who are her principal actors. Whereas Foner studied speeches and private letters in order to interpret the meaning behind political behavior in the 1850s, Richardson studies public action and legislative outcomes in order to compare theory with practice. She is far too good a historian to get drawn into unnecessary debates which would detract from the story she is telling, but one of the most compelling reasons for reading this book is precisely the light that it sheds on what abstract ideas like "party ideology" might actually mean when they are forced through the processing plant of congressional policy-making.

Each chapter is concerned with an aspect of economic policy-war bonds, monetary policy, tariffs, agricultural legislation, the transcontinental railroad, and slavery. In each, the aspirations of leading Republican policy-makers are set in the rapidly shifting context of the war and the interplay among different sections of the party. Richardson limits the study very clearly to the intentions and dynamics of congressional policy-makers. She does not attempt to discuss outcomes, only intentions. There is no detailed discussion here of, for instance, the failures of the Homestead Act, or the implications of banking legislation.

The story she tells is shot through with irony. "Republicans' beliefs about political economy," she writes, "came from a rural antebellum world of farming, small enterprise, and strong religious belief in economic justice–a world that the war, and in large part, the Republicans' own economic legislation undermined" (p. 255). An optimistic faith in a harmony of economic interest between capital and labor made them insensitive to the declining bargaining power of workers. As wage-labor expanded and (despite the Homestead Act) opportunities for individuals to own productive property were restricted, the emerging reality belied the faith in individual responsibility and integrity in which Republicans believed. According to Richardson, Republicans were genuinely amazed when employers did not accord labor its full share of the profits or when investors were not effective policemen of the nation's new large-scale corporations. The "flawed theory" on which wartime economic

policy was based led to the excesses and disappointments of the "Gilded Age." This is not an entirely novel view, but to describe the process with the detail and clarity she does is a tremendous achievement. In any case it is a sober corrective to the explanatory framework used by Richard Bensel and others who see the wartime Republican party as the agent of a "Leviathan" government, deliberately constructed for the benefit of northern capitalists.

One of the most interesting aspects of her analysis is the emphasis she places on the regional divisions within the party. She convincingly explains that one of the most important divisions within the party during debates on currency, banking and agricultural legislation was that between East and West. The final chapter on slavery is notable for the sensible and convincing characterisation of the relationship between anti-slavery ideas and notions of a free labor society, backed up by the experience of black troops which made the freedmen appear to Northern Republicans as the archetype of the American worker–for the moment.

The cleverness and clarity of this book are a product of its relatively tight focus. By avoiding the claim that she is writing about "ideology," she insulates herself from certain kinds of criticism. She lucidly sets out her evidence, elegantly explaining the procedural manoeuvres and the personal influences which shaped legislation. As a sophisticated study of the making of public policy, this is a book which would irritate political scientists by its dignified refusal to make her analysis more abstract. Context is everything.

The Harvard Ph.D. on which this book was based, supervised by David Donald, is a model to which all graduate students should (and do) cast envious eyes; and this book makes a substantial contribution to our understanding of the Republican party during the war. But inevitably there are some limitations. The neatness which makes this book so engaging can also create a frustration with her explanatory framework. How far were Republicans in congress scrambling to respond to events, rather than masters of their own economic plan? Her chapters on bonds and on monetary policy highlight the difficulties that arise when trying to describe war measures as the considered result of a pre-existing economic philosophy. Furthermore, the Republicans' small-town American Dream in which everyone could aspire to own capital was buffeted not only by "events" but also by the interests of the financiers and large-scale industrialists who bank-rolled the party and the country through the crisis.

Most seriously, there is no examination of the function of the political party or of public opinion more generally. She uses "party members" as a synonym for congressmen (and occasionally other influential party leaders) without attempting to assess the values and influences of party activists in the country, still less of the "party in the electorate"–those who had voted for Republican candidates at election time. And even within congress, it is also harder to judge the distinctiveness of the protagonists aims and projects than it might have been if the Democratic opposition had featured more strongly in the analysis. Although she avoids the word "ideology," she writes about the aims and ideals of "Republicans" on almost every page. The reader is left wondering about the origins of the ideas and aspirations on which these policies were based, about how they were communicated to the electorate, and in what ways they defined the supporters of the Lincoln administration at the polls. But none of this detracts from the illumination and readability of what is an admirable book about congressional policy-making, filling a long-overdue gap in the vast literature on the Civil War.

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