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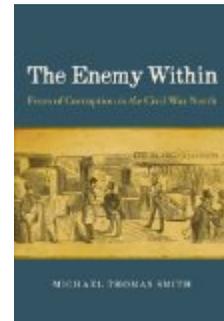
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Michael Thomas Smith. *The Enemy Within: Fears of Corruption in the Civil War North*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011. 240 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-3127-2; ISBN 978-0-8139-3137-1.

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The “Last Best Hope of Earth”?

Restoring to view the pervasive, popular fears of corruption and scandal in the Civil War era, Michael Thomas Smith’s *The Enemy Within* affords readers a well-researched and compelling new look at the political culture of the Northern home front. Adopting the historian Harry Watson’s wide-ranging definition of “corruption” as any “social, economic, [or] moral changes that could undermine the basis of republican society,” Smith argues that these apprehensions occupied a crucial place in the period’s political culture (p. 2). Smith insists that the energy with which Northerners feared an array of dodgy characters—“power hungry” generals, bounty jumpers, enlistment swindlers, corrupt brokers, and the so-called shoddy aristocracy—exposes their most cherished ethics, values, and ideas. In so doing, Smith joins a growing chorus of scholars who are lending depth and texture to the long-neglected study of the war behind the lines above the Mason-Dixon. And, along with Mark Wahlgren Summers’s recent book, *A Dangerous Stir: Fear, Paranoia, and the Making of Reconstruction* (2009), Smith contributes to an emerging literature excavating the rich emotional history of the Civil War era.

While the growth in the scope and size of the federal government during the war years made corruption and scandal perhaps predictable, the response of Northern civilians to these misdeeds was anything but. Rather than dismiss wild conspiracy theories, charges of profiteering, qualms about paper currency, and allegations of sexual impropriety as baseless wartime propaganda,

Smith takes Northerners’ consuming obsession with corruption as definitive evidence of the persistence of republican thought during the Civil War era. Squarely rejecting the conclusions of Joyce Appleby and Jean Baker, two historians who posited that republicanism had disappeared by the 1850s, Smith argues that while the classical opposition to capitalism had no doubt dissipated, Civil War Americans could not as easily dispatch “the other republican bogeymen” they had been taught to fear (p. 6). Concentrated executive power, modernization, immigration, aristocratic pretension, unbridled spending, bounty-bought soldiers, and the selfish pursuit of individual gain continued to present credible threats to liberty, manliness, and virtue in the minds of many Northerners.

Smith takes to task the existing historiography for “underestimating” the “persistence of traditional ways of thinking in the North,” and for overemphasizing the “modern” and “total” character of the Civil War (p. 8). Premodern political thought, the author maintains, provided the ideological context in which the war was fought. “Northerners,” he writes, no doubt responding directly to George Fredrickson’s influential *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union* (1965), “did not unanimously welcome the advent of modernity with open arms or minds” (p. 126). Indeed, Smith uncovers intriguing evidence of Northerners’ searching guilt and sense of dread about the shortcomings of their society at war. For some Northerners,

“corruption” demonstrated both a disconcerting lack of patriotism and a detestable greed. Participation in a war over the fate of the republic challenged Northerners’ very conceptions of themselves. This insight is one of Smith’s most compelling contributions to the field.

Exacerbating this “unsavory but potent blend” of fears among traditional-minded Northern civilians were nineteenth-century notions of “manliness” (p. 153). Building on the work of historian Gail Bederman and others, Smith argues that “manliness” required men to possess strong characters and display both virtue and self-restraint. Personal morality and public virtue were intimately connected. Whispers of General John C. Frémont’s “lack of patriotism” and rumors of General Benjamin F. Butler’s cotton speculating, then, only served to confirm the worst—that Northern men were indeed inferior to the honor-bound Southerners who were whipping the Yankees on the battlefield.

In tightly argued chapters, Smith narrates the controversies over “Beast” Butler’s occupation of New Orleans; the foppish Frémont’s notorious mismanagement of the Department of the West and his costly defense of St. Louis; the “revealing and unjustly obscure” hunt for alleged prostitutes among the female clerks of the U.S. Treasury Department (p. 125); swindling bounty-jumpers; and the Northern investors who renewed commercial ties with Southern cotton planters, conjuring up contemptible, anti-republican images of chattel slavery. Each chapter demonstrates convincingly the ironic threat that moral, political, and military corruption posed to “the last best hope of Earth.”

Several of these chapters, especially the one on bounties and reenlistment fraud, make useful connections between the battlefield and the home front. Smith suggests several ways in which corruption, both real and imagined, hindered the progress of arms, but there is certainly more to be said—especially with regard to the issue of cowardice, which presented a particularly compelling challenge to the republican romance of a virtuous citizen army. Smith might also have extended his study beyond the narrow confines of the war years by considering how returning veterans, often described as “morally corrupted” by their experiences on the killing fields, prompted widespread civilian fear and resentment.

Did fears of corruption wax and wane with the exigencies of the war? Did the partisan political culture of wartime and the tenacity of the Southern rebellion enervate the staying power of republicanism? Unlike Michael Green and Adam I. P. Smith, two historians who

have recently demonstrated that wartime concerns led Northerners to embrace a more powerful central state (their works are conspicuously absent from the bibliography), *The Enemy Within* insists that Northerners never deserted their intense, republican suspicions of national authority.[1] To be sure, this interpretation lends itself quite naturally to an explanation for the failures of Reconstruction, and offers a welcome corrective to the dominant Civil War metanarrative that perceives Union victory as the crowning achievement of a unified Northern commitment to a progressive, economically modernizing, and state-building war effort. Nonetheless, the author is so eager to demonstrate the persistence of pre-modern political thought that he might foreclose a potentially exciting discussion of how “old fears” interacted with new ideas and unprecedented wartime realities. Though conceding early on that “Civil War-era political culture” was not “entirely pre-modern,” but rather represented a potent mix of “liberal and neoclassical ideas,” Smith is throughout the study rather uninterested in the ascendancy of American liberalism (p. 11). For example, in *Patriot Fires: Forging a New American Nationalism in the Civil War North* (2002), historian Melinda Lawson recently demonstrated how the thousands of Northern civilians who purchased the Philadelphia financier Jay Cooke’s war bonds were enthusiastically participating in an innovative, self-interested patriotism.

Still, Smith’s book, built upon careful research in newspapers, government documents, and a wide variety of manuscript collections, deserves to command the attention of any serious student of mid-nineteenth-century political culture or the Civil War’s Northern home front. Its conclusions will undoubtedly stir rich debate and will hopefully entice scholars to produce studies that equally enrich our understanding of just how vigorously liberty was contested in the Civil War era.

Note

[1]. Michael S. Green, in “Freedom, Union, and Power: The Ideology of the Republican Party During the Civil War,” in *An Uncommon Time: The Civil War and the Northern Home Front*, ed. Paul A. Cimbala and Randall M. Miller (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), argues that the war “stepped up the Republican Party’s efforts to make itself, and its beliefs, truly nation” (p. 144); in an essay in the same volume, Adam I. P. Smith argues that the war overwhelmed locally based civic activism and “gradually prompted a drive for greater centralization of everything from the recruitment of soldiers to the diffusion of political propaganda” (p. 149). For

a survey of this literature that proved especially useful to this reviewer, see Matt Isham, "The Northern Home Front during the Civil War: A Quest to Understand," at the Web site *The People's Contest: A Civil War Era Digital Archiving Project*, The Pennsylvania State University Libraries, <http://peoplescontest.psu.edu/>, posted August 1, 2010.

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