

Rebecca Starr. *A School for Politics: Commercial Lobbying and Political Culture in Early South Carolina.* Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. x + 218 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-5832-1.



Reviewed by Gregory D. Massey

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James M. Banner called it the "problem" of South Carolina. The state's involvement in staple agriculture and the large proportion of slaves in the population resulted in a political system dominated by the planter class. White planters obstructed any tendencies toward democracy within the state, at the national level they vehemently defended their social and economic system based on slave labor. In the antebellum period, South Carolina stood defiantly outside the mainstream of American political life. The state that pitted its will against federal authority in the nullification crisis became the first state to secede from the United States.[1]

Robert M. Weir examined a separate but linked phenomenon--colonial South Carolina's remarkable internal harmony. The wealthiest men in British North America were the Carolina low-country rice planters, whose shared wealth precluded the clash of economic interests. An internal threat, the black majority, and two external threats, foreign powers and Indian tribes, made harmony necessary. Most important, lowcountry whites were united by an ideology that revered

the independent men of property who supervised the maintenance of harmony at home and defended the colony against outside political threats.[2]

Now Rebecca Starr has produced a book that examines the process that lay behind these social and ideological developments. That process, or method, entailed the use of "informal, interest group political practices," the kind associated with commercial lobbies. Starr employs the term lobby "to describe a kind of political activity pursued by groups joined by some common interest" (p. 4). Interest group politics took hold in South Carolina because of the colony's commercial orientation. Its planters and merchants shared commercial interests. Unlike tobacco planters in Virginia, Carolina rice magnates were personally detached from their staple crop and viewed it as a commodity. Rice united planters and merchants in pursuit of common commercial goals. Carolina's wealthy elite also shared a disdain for political philosophizing. As pragmatic men, they were more interested in what worked and focused on political tactics rather than political theory. How people do things, Starr asserts, "may have an important for-

mative influence" (p. 3). When a process like lobbying works, it takes on a life of its own. To the practitioners, it may become a cherished value that must be maintained and protected.

Prior to the 1770s, interest group politics worked well. Allied with merchant lobbies in London and Bristol, Carolinians worked to exempt rice from restrictions imposed by the Navigation Acts. Their petitions went to the Board of Trade, an agency that heard colonial complaints and then made recommendations for action to the king and the Privy Council. More often than not, lobbying tactics proved successful in gaining South Carolina's principal commodities, rice and indigo, a favored placed in imperial trade. After Lord North shifted imperial decision-making to Parliament, interest group politics did not work so smoothly. In Parliament the lobbies competed for attention with a variety of national interests and thus had difficulty getting their positions heard.

Still, Carolina's leaders learned lessons from lobbying that they applied to internal and national politics. The fundamental assumption behind lobbying, "that the claims of interest are important in making law," helped produce a political culture that emphasized the rights of interests over the rights of individuals. Not surprisingly, this view was later elaborated in John C. Calhoun's concurrent majority, which protected minority interests against those of the majority. Because unity strengthened a lobby and heightened its chances of success, the process "affirmed the social value of harmony" (p. 6). Consensus was achieved when interests were balanced. When Carolinians responded to the Townshend Acts by refusing to import British products, they appointed a committee of thirty-nine men to enforce non-importation. The committee was composed of thirteen planters, thirteen merchants, and thirteen mechanics, thus balancing "the three major interests of the lowcountry economy" (p. 88). Finally, lobbying invariably pitted interest groups in negotiations with a greater power. If that power

refused to yield and make concessions, the lobby could then apply the ultimate pressure tactic and withdraw.

One example of how South Carolina's political leaders applied these lessons was their strategy during the Continental Congress's debates on non-exportation. Carolina delegates to Congress pressed to remove rice from the list of commodities that would not be exported. Affirming the principle that competing interests should be weighed equally, Edward Rutledge wrote, "Equality is the basis of public virtue" (pp. 92, 162). Unable to win their point, four of the five Carolina delegates walked out of Congress. Their withdrawal prompted a renewal of negotiations, and Congress finally relented and granted an exemption to rice. South Carolina's other products did not receive exemptions, which aroused the ire of indigo planters and backcountry producers of corn, hemp, and lumber. To accommodate these interests and restore unity, Carolina's provincial legislature developed a plan to exchange one-third of the rice crop for non-exempted products of equal value. Although "the scheme was unworkable," it underscored an important point about lobbying: successful negotiations with an outside power rested on maintaining at least the appearance of internal consensus (p. 93).

In the two decades after the American Revolution, South Carolina's lowcountry elite responded to internal crises in ways that suggest the enduring influence of lobbying methods. In the early 1780s, the House of Representatives received numerous petitions from loyalists seeking to remove their estates from confiscation or amercement. To balance the needs of a petitioner against the interests of a backcountry population that highly resented loyalists, the House referred the petitions to "committees composed exclusively from the petitioner's place of residence" (p. 114). Lowcountry leaders, who held a disproportionate share of legislative seats, used committee assignments to answer backcountry demands for a political voice.

Over time backcountry delegates received a higher percentage of committee assignments. The House often referred sensitive matters to committees that met in secret and rarely kept records.

When a committee made a report, the House normally voted its assent. This practice kept conflicts behind closed doors and helped the House maintain a harmonious face before the public. In the process, the committees performed a function akin to the British Board of Trade. Under British imperial policy, the Board of Trade conducted interviews, heard competing views, and then submitted a report to the Privy Council, which usually concurred with the board's recommendations.

By 1808 cotton had transformed the South Carolina backcountry. Cotton planters in the backcountry and rice planters in the lowcountry shared both commercial interests and an interest in sustaining slavery. Yet the 1808 constitutional amendment that reapportioned representation did not use majority rule as a guiding principle. Instead, the state's leaders drew on their political culture and balanced the interests of the two sections. The backcountry gained control of the House of Representatives, while the lowcountry retained dominance in the Senate. At the very least, Starr contends, the experience with lobbying served as a "crucial tutorial," supplying lowcountry leaders with the "political know-how" to guide them through the crises of the postrevolutionary years (pp. 110, 135). While other states were fractured by the political conflicts of the early republic, South Carolina's lowcountry leaders maintained their hold on power, "prevented social divisions from coalescing into formal parties," and reapportioned legislative seats on their own terms (165).

If lobbying influenced South Carolina's political culture and underpinned an ethos that valued harmony, an important question remains: what role did slavery play in this process? In the postrevolutionary period at least, Starr doubts that harmony among whites was largely prompt-

ed by their fear of slave rebellions. To be sure, whites expressed little doubt in their ability to handle their domestic institution. What they did fear, however, was interference by outside forces. Whether it was a British policy that encouraged slave rebelliousness, or a Continental Congress that promoted the formation of black battalions, or a federal Congress that considered hearing antislavery petitions, white Carolinians inevitably joined ranks and projected a united front against threats to their property and, by implication, their liberty. Even for the early period covered by Starr, the state's harmony owed much to the imperative that whites defend slavery against any outside political threats. In 1790, when Congress debated considering Quaker memorials that prayed for the end of the slave trade, Thomas Tudor Tucker, mindful of his state's interests and of the need to maintain internal unity, made an ominous threat: "Do these men expect a general emancipation of slaves by law? This would never be submitted to by the southern states without a civil war." [3] After reading Starr's book, Tudor's words, while inflammatory, appear less aberrational and, ironically, more reasonable. His statement, after all, accorded with the values of his political culture, a culture shaped by lobbying tactics that emphasized the protection of interests and the preservation of harmony.

To some degree, Starr's thesis is tentative. Lacking direct evidence, she frequently has to rely on similarities in practices to demonstrate that commercial lobbying exerted a formative influence on South Carolina's political development. Yet it is difficult, for example, to read her discussion of the analogous function of the legislative committees and the Board of Trade and conclude that the similarities are merely coincidental. While historians may disagree over the extent of lobbying's influence, Starr's argument that the "methods of lobbying entered South Carolina's political culture and came to shape it," ultimately proves convincing. "Perhaps this account will prove suggestive enough to open new lines of in-

quiry from a new angle of vision," Starr writes in her introduction (p. 3). This book fulfills that goal.

Notes

[1]. James M. Banner, "The Problem of South Carolina," in *The Hofstadter Aegis: A Memorial*, ed. Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), 60-93.

[2]. Robert M. Weir, "'The Harmony We Were Famous for': An Interpretation of Prerevolutionary South Carolina Politics," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 26 (December 1969): 473-501.

[3]. Helen E. Veit, Charlene Bangs Bickford, Kenneth R. Bowling, and William C. diGiacomantonio, ed., *Documentary History of the First Federal Congress*, Volume XII: *Debates in the House of Representatives, Second Session, January-March 1790* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 306.

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