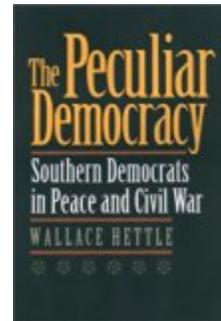




Wallace Hettle. *The Peculiar Democracy: Southern Democrats in Peace and War*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001. xi + 240 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2282-7.

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Jefferson, Jackson, and Democracy Betrayed?

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Wallace Hettle confronts the old question of how responsive antebellum southern politicians were to their constituents. He is especially interested in discovering whether the Democratic party served the interests of yeoman voters or became increasingly elitist. For the most part, to use an old phrase of Eugene Genovese, the book comes down on the “planter hegemony” side of the equation. Southern politicians often argued that black slavery was essential for white liberty, but Hettle agrees with Frederick Douglass, Hinton Rowan Helper, and especially with Abraham Lincoln that slavery oppressed nonslaveholding whites as well as African-Americans. The implicit assumption is that a majority of white male voters were or should have been hostile to slaveholding interests, but the book pays much more attention to the actions of leading politicians than to the much more difficult (if not impossible to answer) question of what voters actually wanted to achieve through the electoral process.

Much of the argument rests on a particular (and in places idiosyncratic) understanding of Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson. It is certainly ironic that as historians have explored the complex (and more recently biological) connection between Jefferson and slavery, Hettle presents Jefferson simply as a pastoral republican who saw slavery as a serious barrier to the realization of his agrarian and democratic ideals. The effort to separate Jefferson’s ideas from their slaveholding context is interesting but not convincing. In contrast to the quiet and contemplative Jefferson, Jackson was much more boisterous

and active. Like many recent scholars, notably Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Hettle argues that honor and manhood are essential for understanding Jackson’s appeal, and anyone glancing even superficially at presidential election returns quickly sees that Old Hickory loomed as a political colossus in the honor-laden South. Jacksonian “democracy” was not simply an extension of Jeffersonian “republicanism,” but Hettle believes that both political leaders appealed to a sense of independence while avoiding class differences. It might be noted that their rhetoric, however, and especially that of their supporters, carried a sharp edge that divided voters along class and occupational lines.

Following the lead of Steven Hahn and Stephanie McCurry, Hettle claims that an appeal to “rural manhood” helped unite antebellum southern Democrats. Although naturally enough the Whigs are somewhat slighted in this volume, the convergence of the parties on economic questions during the 1850s is readily acknowledged. This development made it all the more important for Democrats to use “egalitarian symbolism” (p. 44) during election campaigns. Like Hahn and others, Hettle believes that the southern yeomanry remained skeptical if not hostile to commercial development, yet it has always seemed to this reviewer that such arguments rest more on repeated assertion and political conviction than on solid evidence. There is neither the electoral data nor the impressionistic evidence to sustain this interpretation. Hettle does, however, point to some interesting examples of southern Democrats opposing stay laws and blocking tax increases on slave property. If proposals to reopen the

African slave trade, however, were designed to broaden slave ownership and relieve yeoman discontent, very few influential politicians embraced the idea.

Political skills and fervent enthusiasm ultimately carried southern secessionists to victory. Hettle equates Unionist opposition with a strong commitment to democracy and therefore accuses secessionists of abandoning their small farmer constituents. This intriguing though not particularly new argument rests in part on a choice of terms. Some historians, including Hettle, prefer the word "Unionist" to "Cooperationist" when describing those who opposed immediate secession during the winter and spring of 1860-61, and that choice usually indicates a historian who will argue that popular support for disunion was shaky at best. Some secessionists did fear that a majority of the voters did not support their position and in the state conventions managed to block proposals for submitting the question to the people. Yet the firing on Fort Sumter, and especially Lincoln's call for troops, largely ended these debates, and the high percentage of white males who served in the Confederate army should give us pause about assuming that secession was unpopular. Hettle himself hesitates to baldly state that a majority of voters would have opposed secession, and certainly the mechanics of secession, especially the election of delegates to the state conventions, deserve much more attention from historians.

The bulk of Hettle's book consists of well-crafted, interesting sketches of Democratic politicians to advance his thesis about a betrayal of democratic principles. Reviewers will inevitably quibble about the choices. In the chapter on John C. Rutherford of Virginia, for example, far too much interpretative weight is given to scattered comments of a fairly obscure figure. But Hettle is much more surefooted in dealing with the always complicated Joseph E. Brown of Georgia. For instance, with an intriguing reference or two to European history, he provocatively describes Brown and his yeoman supporters as vacillating. Despite a reputation as a malcontent and supporter of white farmer interests against both the planters and the Confederate government, Brown maintained that nonslaveholding whites had an important interest in slavery, refused to stir up class resentment, and in his own way remained loyal to the Confederacy. Hettle does not take Brown's criticism of Jefferson Davis seriously enough and needs to weigh the governor's political opportunism, but the chapter certainly buttresses the main argument of the book and is an outstanding contribution to the literature on Brown.

Hettle devotes a chapter to Governor Francis W. Pickens of South Carolina, another leader caught in the cross-currents of antebellum and Confederate politics. Pickens, and indeed the wartime history of South Carolina (aside from military affairs) have generally been ignored by historians. Hettle focuses on two major issues: the contest between States Rights Democrats and National Democrats before and during the secession crisis and the establishment of an Executive Council that in essence stripped Pickens of political power. The latter topic especially fits into Hettle's emphasis on antidemocratic tendencies in the Confederacy. Yet the office of governor had long been a weak one in the state and even though the Executive Council stirred some political controversy, the reader is never told exactly what tasks this body performed.

Unlike Pickens who put aside personal reservations to serve his state and the Confederacy, Jeremiah Clemens not only vigorously opposed secession but eventually became a notable wartime Unionist. Here Hettle entwines themes of honor and corruption with the complex story of an unusual political career. In the United States Senate, Clemens had at first opposed the Compromise of 1850 but then abruptly changed course when the tide of opinion in North Alabama ran toward accepting the settlement. Attacks on Clemens's character and opposition from powerful Democrats eventually led him not only to oppose secession and eventually become a "Tory" but also to write fiction that repudiated the cult of honor by creating a Christian hero, Tobias Wilson, who transcends the destructive forces of southern culture. Both Clemens and Pickens become the gentle and genteel counterpoints to the aggressive and swaggering disunionists who led the South to disaster.

The final chapter on Jefferson Davis presents the Confederate president as a firm friend of white democracy who ultimately repudiated his own states rights constitutionalism during the war and failed to address the needs of hard-pressed civilians. This interpretation largely follows Emory Thomas and Paul Escott, but Hettle adds that Davis clung to the political theories of John C. Calhoun and "rejected the individualistic heritage of Jefferson and Jackson for an ideal of an organic slaveholding community" (p. 164). However contradictory these points might appear, the author does manage to synthesize a substantial body of scholarship. Unfortunately Hettle cites the usual Davis critics to conclude that the Confederate president became so unpopular during the war that he could never have been reelected. Of course Davis was ineligible for reelection under the Confederate Constitution and

more importantly received far more support in Congress, from newspaper editors, and from citizens generally than many historians have acknowledged. To Hettle, however, Davis becomes a tragic figure who allowed slavery to destroy southern democracy and the Democratic party.

The Peculiar Democracy is itself a peculiar work. Hettle has thoroughly grounded his solid primary research in the secondary literature but his analysis often slights or ignores contradictory perspectives and evidence. He offers telling quotations and has a good eye for poignant detail. The biographical approach generally works well because he has tied each of the individuals to his cen-

tral theme. He writes with a kind of controlled passion that only occasionally becomes preachy. Although many objections can be raised both to the book's central arguments and to individual chapters, Hettle has raised some difficult and important questions. His answers are worth discussing and debating.

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