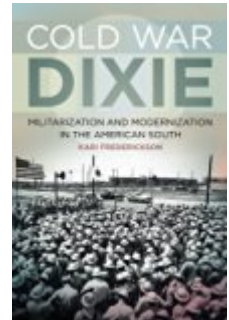


Kari A. Frederickson. *Cold War Dixie: Militarization and Modernization in the American South.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013. xii + 226 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8203-4520-8.



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Against the background of escalating Cold War tensions, President Truman authorized an accelerated hydrogen bomb development program in January 1950. Tasked with the creation of a new facility to develop the necessary materials for the bomb, the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) contracted the Du Pont Corporation to build and operate the Savannah River Plant (SRP) later that year. The SRP installation covered over three hundred square miles, in portions of Aiken, Barnwell, and Allendale Counties in southwest South Carolina. By the 1960s, SRP employees and their families accounted for about one-third of the population of the surrounding region. Given the lack of studies examining the local impact of Cold War military spending on the South, despite the centrality of such spending to the development of southern economies after World War II, Frederickson “places America’s longest war at the center of regional change” (p. 4). The result is a compelling study for those interested in southern industrial development and modernization, black

struggles for economic and civil rights, and the rise of the Republican Party in the South.

Frederickson divides her narrative into seven chapters and an epilogue, which detail the origins of the hydrogen bomb project, the SRP’s construction, and the social, economic, political, and environmental consequences of the plant’s location on the region. Chapter 1 traces the Truman administration’s decision to pursue the production of a hydrogen bomb, the contracting of Du Pont to build and operate the plant, and the choice of the rural tri-county South Carolina region for the new facility. Since gaining the “merchants of death” nickname for making huge profits from weapons sales in World War I, Du Pont officials were keen to rehabilitate the company’s national image. Du Pont’s president, with public relations in mind, agreed to commit the company to designing, building, and operating the new facility, provided Truman first issue a formal request stressing the national importance of the project. The choice of the South Carolina site stemmed heavily from the region’s low construction wage rates, and the fact

that most of the people to be displaced from the area were black tenant workers who could be removed cheaply.

The second chapter provides a long history of the Aiken area before the arrival of the SRP. A hotspot for Reconstruction-era violence, the area reinvented itself as the “Sports Center of the South” by the turn of the twentieth century, and attracted many wealthy northern visitors in the winter months. Aiken County was 42 percent black in 1940, and witnessed considerable Ku Klux Klan activity, especially in the area’s mill villages. White Aiken had three clear social divisions: Old Aikenites, Winter Colonists, and mill workers.

Between the announcement of the plant’s location and the beginning of construction in August 1952, six small towns and villages were eliminated, which removed some 8,000 people permanently from their old homes. Chapter 3 explores the physical and cultural loss experienced by these displaced people, and the tensions between traditional and modern conceptions of “land, space, and community” (p. 50). These disagreements were most apparent in suits contesting the compensation for removing residents from their homes. Attorneys for the displaced, which included former Governor Strom Thurmond, repeatedly emphasized residents’ close relationship with the land in seeking greater compensation for homes than initially offered by the federal government. Frederickson also sensitively details the ambiguous racial ramifications of the removal of former residents, whose number included some 3,000 landless blacks. The new communities created by displaced people, like “New Ellenton,” abandoned former racially mixed housing patterns in favor of strict racial demarcations, while the two new all-black communities were denied incorporation, and hence could not apply for state or federal assistance for the construction of necessary public services.

Chapter 4 examines the construction of the SRP. It focuses in particular on arguments over the disruption of traditional wage structures in the area and the influence of labor unions in plant construction, and the thwarted efforts of civil rights organizations to substantially improve employment opportunities for African American men and women by employing Cold War arguments. Existing agricultural and textile employers in the region worried about the loss of low-paid black and white labor, given the higher wages available to employees in both skilled and unskilled work at the SRP, while anti-union politicians fretted over the possible political influence of thousands of union members employed during the facility’s construction. Ultimately, construction union members exercised little long-term political influence in South Carolina, as most of these workers relocated to other projects after the completion of the SRP. The employment gains of African Americans were similarly modest. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League (NUL) demanded the enforcement of federal fair employment provisions to negate Cold War propaganda that highlighted American racial discrimination. However, neither Du Pont nor AEC officials would commit to honoring fair hiring practices, as they did not want to meddle with the “local culture” (p. 96). Although the SRP employed more African Americans than any other AEC installation, by early 1954 only about 6 percent of the plant’s 8,000 employees were black, the vast majority of whom worked in unskilled, semi-skilled, or service positions. Black employment gains remained tediously slow, with black complaints over unequal pay, poor prospects for promotions, and dangerous working conditions culminating in a 1997 employment suit.

Chapter 5 details the impact of the SRP’s workers and their families on the economy of Aiken County and its surrounds. The Truman administration’s determination to avoid creating a “garrison state” led to the SRP being the first ma-

for AEC installation to lack a company town. It relied instead on existing infrastructure and private enterprise. The resultant problems from inadequate housing and urban sprawl foreshadowed trends initiated by economic modernization in the following decades elsewhere in the South. Stressing their sacrifices for the good of the nation, citizens near the SRP “became active in the marketplace of federal dollars,” behavior that demonstrated South Carolinians’ “level of comfort with the idea of the compensatory welfare state” (p. 108). As with job opportunities at the SRP, there remained clear racial dimensions to the provision of housing for construction and plant workers. Housing developments provided for blacks were inadequate, while federal provisions for housing ironically created segregated housing patterns that had previously not existed.

In chapter 6, Frederickson examines the impact of Du Pont’s “culture heralding efficiency, rationality, consumption, technological innovation, and progress” on the local culture (p. 124). Modern concepts concerning boundaries and land use replaced older, more fluid relationships between urban and rural areas. Alongside connecting consumerism with a faith in scientific discovery, Du Pont regularly encouraged its employees to become politically active. By 1968, Aiken had transformed from an “upscale tourist town” to “modern space” with an environment and residents heavily influenced by Du Pont and the AEC (p. 138). Suburbanization progressed logically from the “security and industrial dispersion requirements of the Cold War state” (p. 137). Most starkly, employment in Aiken County shifted from a reliance on agriculture and textiles in 1950, to the overwhelming employment of men and women in nonagricultural industries ten years later.

Chapter 7 studies the role of SRP employees in revitalizing the Republican Party in Aiken County and stresses Cold War-centered stimuli for partisan change in South Carolina. The emphasis on Aiken County Republicans’ concerns for efficiency

and modernization in government is a valuable corrective to studies that have neglected the New Deal and Cold War origins of southern Republicanism, yet Frederickson’s downplaying of racial factors in the GOP’s early 1960s growth remains curious. While SRP employees who initiated local Republican clubs around Aiken County were undoubtedly molded by “notions of efficiency and modernization” (p. 147), their support for Republican candidates of the 1960s demonstrated at least an acceptance, if not endorsement, of hardcore anti-desegregation sentiment. The 1962 GOP Senate candidate William Workman, to whom Aiken County gave a majority of its votes, and Albert Watson, who represented suburbanized Aiken and Lexington Counties as a party-switching Republican from 1966 to 1971, professed stridently segregationist views. Workman’s 1960 *Case for the South* justified lynching blacks in order to prevent interracial sex, while Watson ran South Carolina’s last openly segregationist statewide political campaign in 1970.[1] Similarly, the breakthrough election of three Republicans to the Aiken City Council in 1965 was likely as indicative of white disaffection with the Democratic Party as an interest in modernization and efficiency, since the Democratic candidates included the first African American municipal election nominee in the state’s modern history. The chapter also details the reluctant, but nonviolent, acceptance of establishing racially unitary public schools in Aiken County, which Frederickson attributes to the growth focus of SRP employees, the area’s diminishing black population, and the strong educational reputation of the county’s black public schools.

Overall, *Cold War Dixie* is a well-researched and well-argued study of the impact of Cold War spending on a southern community. In particular, Frederickson offers an excellent case study of the ambiguous economic benefits new industries provided for blacks, and the impact of Du Pont’s personnel and corporate ethos on the culture and politics of Aiken County and its surrounds. More

studies of this kind will help demonstrate the extent to which other, smaller military installations mirrored the social and political trends initiated around Aiken County by the construction of the SRP.

Note

[1]. William D. Workman, *The Case for the South* (New York: Devin-Adair Co, 1960), 218, cited in Bruce H. Kalk, *The Origins of the Southern Strategy: Two-Party Competition in South Carolina, 1950-1972* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2001), 57-58.

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