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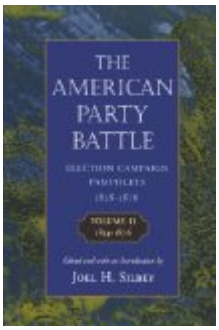

Joel Silbey, ed.. *The American Party Battle: Election Campaign Pamphlets.* Cambridge, Mass, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1999. xxiv + 284 pp. and xxi + 272 pp. $20.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-674-02646-9.

Reviewed by Robert Cook

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In his prefatory remarks to this two-volume collection of political pamphlets, Joel Silbey contends that American political life was shaped and dominated by organized party conflict throughout the middle decades of the nineteenth century. This "highly adversarial political nation," (p. xi) he claims, was the work of ideologically charged political elites who successfully mobilised the voting masses (mostly adult white males) with appeals, often issue-specific, to the electorate's hopes and fears for the future of the Republic. Pamphlets, he argues, played a critical role in linking elites and masses at every point of the ongoing electoral cycle. By 1840, Whig and Democratic committees were circulating large numbers of printed tracts to recruit the maximum number of voters to their respective cause. Seldom, if ever, did these productions attain the heights of literary greatness. Very often they were reprintings of set-piece orations, pastiches of newspaper clippings, and routine accounts of party conventions, rather than carefully honed contributions to political theory. It matters little. Historians interested in the evolving relationship between politicans and voters in nineteenth- century America must turn to materials like this to gain new insights into the world-view of the leaders and the led.

Those familiar with, and sympathetic to, Silbey's oeuvre (not to mention that of Michael Holt and William Gienapp) will find plenty of ammunition here to support the view that the ideology of republicanism was a critical factor in the linkage of political elites and masses before, during, and after the Civil War, and that political conflict in nineteenth-century America was marked by a high degree of continuity. The authors of these pamphlets (and for that matter the voices of other writers and speakers which they incorporated) repeatedly charged opponents with attempting to undermine the Republic in one way or another. The underlying refrain of political combat was watchfulness. As a group of New England Anti-Masons announced at a meeting in June 1834: "Fellow citizens! guard well your rights. If you preserve them, they will be preserved. If you leave them to the care of others, you may, perhaps, be deceived" (p. 125).

The seventeen pamphlets included in this collection are well chosen. There are one or two dull

tracts, not least a long, turgid Republican attack on Samuel Tilden issued during the 1876 presidential election campaign. All are representative pieces, however, both in terms of style as well as thematic content. Several are classics of nineteenth-century party combat. Volume one, for example, contains a lethal demolition job on Winfield Scott by the Illinois Democrat, Stephen Douglas, in 1852. Addressing a gathering of Virginia Democrats in Richmond's African Church, Douglas adeptly lambasted the general's political abilities while simultaneously depicting him as the cypher of "General Seward" and "the abolition wing of the whig party north" (pp. 273, 274). William H. Seward is himself represented by a speech that he gave in his home town of Auburn, New York, in October 1856. At a time when the new Republican party was battling to supplant the nativist Know Nothings as the main opposition to the Democrats, Seward insisted on the primacy of the slavery question: "There must be two major parties, because at every stage of national life some one question of national conduct, parent to all others, presents itself to be decided. Such a question always has two sides, a right side and wrong side, but no middle side" (p. 72).

While few can have any doubt about the broad significance of this genre, such pamphlets pose as many questions as they provide answers. Some historians might argue that they serve less to prove the existence of mass partisanship and ideological continuity than they furnish evidence for the ways in which artful politicos sought to stir up ordinary Americans who, as Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart Blumin have argued recently, may have been rather less ideologically committed than Silbey and others would have us believe.[1] Even though these pamphlets can surely promote a better understanding of linkage in the nineteenth century, the modern reader must confront the problem that they constitute an elite source--one that was generated in the main by professional politicians and party organisations who had a range of motives for seeking votes. Seward, for example, had good personal reasons for advancing a manichaean argument against supporting the Know Nothings. A nativist surge at the polls might have thwarted not only his attempts to establish the primacy of the slavery question (and by extension the fortunes of the new Republican party), but also, in view of his past record of courting foreign votes in New York, his own political future. For many politicians power could be an end in itself as well as (or even instead of) a means to implement policy. The impact of these writings on ordinary voters, moreover, clearly requires much deeper research. Who read political pamphlets? How widely were they disseminated? Is there any evidence they influenced voters and elections? How important were they compared with other forms of party political expression such as newspaper editorials and offprints of congressional speeches?

While Harvard University Press is to be commended for making these pamphlets available to a wider readership, readers should be alerted to the fact that the editor's preface and introduction appear in both volumes in spite of the fact that the two tomes are meant to be read in tandem. This is unfortunate because a single printing of Silbey's remarks might have freed up more space for material from the late 1860s and 1870s, the period most poorly represented in the collection. Even more serious, however, is the absence of an index--an inexplicable omission which will undoubtedly constrain the utility of this important collection.

Notes

[1]. Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin, ***Rude Republic: Americans and Their Politics in the Nineteenth Century*** (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

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