How the South Won the Civil War is very much a book for our times. Often challenging and always readable, Heather Cox Richardson in her latest book explains the way that privilege and race prejudice, West and South, have created a less democratic America, always by cladding their ends in language of individualism and white supremacy. Starting after the Civil War and proceeding into the “new conservatism” of Barry Goldwater and the demagoguery of later Republican leaders, magnates from the resource-rich frontiers and planters from the South have joined hands to protect their gains. They have found many takers for their philosophy among those who make common cause with their exploiters. As a result, those with no commitment to a full, fair count have become a menace to the very republicanism that they claim to serve. Those from whose lips the word “freedom” falls most generously, Richardson’s book makes clear, use it in the service of authoritarianism.

It’s a fetching view, immediately relevant to America’s current travails and simple enough to convince those hungering for a tidy way of seeing how a government by the people grew so imperiled —especially if, neither living in the West nor the South, they want someplace else to blame. Richardson offers evidence in plenty of oligarchs’ skill in tailoring commonplaces about democracy to protect racial and economic privilege and suppress freedom for groups outside their own ranks.

Certainly there is plenty of truth in Richardson’s general argument. Critics, though, will wonder whether cherry picking bits of the past may overstate the argument. Beyond doubt, the myth of western individualism was used to undercut public action on behalf of the unprivileged; unquestionably, plutocracy West and South drew race lines for their own selfish advantage, and found plenty of support from middling and poorer sorts. Yet one could argue just as easily that the cult of “rugged individualism” came out of the North and East just as forcefully in the Gilded Ages. Horatio Alger and William Graham Sumner needed no instruction from the West. For a suffrage and political system dominated by conservative, native-born whites,
Rhode Island's stood in a class by itself, at least until 1935.

Alongside that restrictive western ethos, perhaps, another historian might notice quite a different tradition, there from the first. If the West produced fat cats like William Sharon and white supremacists like Francis G. Newlands, it also nurtured fierce enemies of what they termed “the Interests”: Governor Hiram Johnson of California, Senator George Norris of Nebraska, and William Jennings Bryan. A story that leaves out the Populist movement in the 1890s, the Non-Partisan League in the 1910s, and the militant labor movement in the mines and mills, from Coeur d’Alene to Cripple Creek, the Industrial Workers of the World in one generation and the Congress of Industrial Organizations and Cesar Chavez in others may be selling a less reactionary West short. Anybody keen on seeing American radicalism at its most constructive would not look to New York or Boston, but to the Dakotas in the early twentieth century. Any wanting to see to find collective action, rather than individualism run rampant might pay a visit to the general strike in Seattle in 1919 or that in Oakland in 1946. Grant the crushing force of capital and conservative power, the eventual defeat of Norris by the reactionary Kenneth Wherry in Nebraska, of the younger Robert LaFollette by Joseph McCarthy in Wisconsin. The West has always had a conflicted legacy and still does. The very states least supportive of Native Americans’ voting were also the first to enact woman’s suffrage. Indeed, any map of the United States before 1914 would show a West predominantly in its favor, without a single state east of the Mississippi to give it company.

None of these points denies the heavy contribution of certain groups of powerful men in the West and South to the current situation, nor the role that language about individualism and a very truncated definition of freedom have played. Even so, the countervailing forces and crosswinds of both the South and the West cannot simply be written out of the story or wished away. Readers, be advised: there is more to the story than any one book can afford you!

Authors should not be held responsible for their titles, but How the South Won the Civil War really does illustrate the problem with oversimplifying the past. Insofar as the Civil War was about racial equality, “the South”—always meaning well-heeled white southerners exclusively—made no unconditional surrender. Still, it is hard to claim that they won, when the power of prejudice had found a comfortable berth in the West, East, and North before the war already. But Union veterans would have pointed out that what the Confederacy fought for first and foremost was independence from the United States, and second, to preserve the institution of slavery. The inequality that its vice president hailed was not simply a constriction of civil rights, but their absolute denial in every respect to a people that he considered unworthy of freedom. It would take a bolder argument than any sane person dare make to claim that “the South” won its independence, and the Union was sundered forever, or that slavery in all its abominations survived and does to the present day.

Would a greater sense of nuance have removed some of the forcefulness from Dr. Richardson’s argument? For there are many times when readers may feel that the material used to bolster the larger case is a little trickier than she makes out. Quite possibly some might quibble with the statement that James Madison wrote a Constitution “to guarantee that wealthy slaveholders would control the government” (p. 21), and think it as open to doubt as the statement that Charles Sumner was attacked from behind in 1856 or that the “shot heard round the world” at Concord Bridge was fired from Lexington green. They might point out that the reason southern leaders “wrote ballots that excluded Lincoln’s Republicans” (p. 42) was because there was no official ballot: each party issued its own tickets. Is it fair to explain Wyoming’s enfranchisement of women exclus-
ively by Democrats being “furious” over Negro suffrage? Or that the voters in 1860 voted to repudiate “the mudsill theory” in favor of “the free labor theory,” when, in fact, Republicans got less than 40 percent of the vote? Was the 1939 *Wizard of Oz* really the story of “an individual winning victory over a corrupt and distant government” (p. 143)? Or *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) about a hero “sent forth to combat a corrupt Congress,” as opposed to a scheme furthered by an agent of the state’s political machine? To understand *Stagecoach* (1939) as having “the cavalry”—the government—arrive “always a little too late” as opposed to in the nick of time certainly turns one of the most exciting bits of that picture into much more of a bummer than most audiences likely did.

Often, in fact, the errors go beyond dubious interpretations of events. Did Congress craft the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870? Did Republicans lose control of the South in 1880? Did Democrats gain control of the Congress in 1890? Was it true that Democrats—not some, but apparently all—were cut out of the vote in post-Civil War Missouri? Or that the 1872 Liberal Republican movement “brought most of the nation’s journalists to their campaign” (p. 90), or that Carl Schurz replaced Charles Drake in the Senate? Or that Andrew Carnegie made a fortune out of Civil War contracts “that were funded largely by tax dollars paid by workingmen” (p. 81), and if so, why don’t his biographers know about it? We find the Joint Committee of Thirteen deciding the fate of the ex-Confederate South; we are told that the reason the Democrats were able to elect James Buchanan in 1856 was that northern voters split their ballots between two candidates “who opposed the Slave Power” (p. 39)—which must have been news to Millard Fillmore. Readers are left with the impression that Grover Cleveland, who had “promised to curb the powers of the rich” in 1884, won a plurality four years later and was denied re-election only because “Republican operatives maneuvered the Electoral College to award victory to Benjamin Harrison” (p. 99), as if that plurality had no connection to the disfranchisement of black Republican voters down south and the College needed no manipulation: Cleveland’s loss of New York and Indiana kept a Solid South from awarding him the electoral majority he needed.

Richardson’s book, like all of her other recent work, makes a stimulating read. It is sure to rouse indignation among those who agree with it and those who doubt its premises. It gives hearty food for thought for those who may wonder whether free government, as we know it, is moving into a twilight in this country. It is up to the critics to posit alternative explanations to *How the South Won the Civil War* that will offer a more persuasive case, if one can be found.
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