
Reviewed by Mark W. Summers (University of Kentucky)

Published on H-CivWar (October, 2023)

Commissioned by G. David Schieffler (Crowder College)

“Theodore,” a Speaker of the House once told the impetuously righteous Theodore Roosevelt, “if there is one thing more than another for which I admire you, it is your original discovery of the Ten Commandments.”[1] Readers of Jeremi Suri’s Civil War by Other Means may feel the same way about this last in a long parade of popular polemics about how white racism, terrorism, and weak-willed national leaders defeated the postwar promise of a juster social order. The usual suspects stand in the dock, some cruel, some craven, and the usual heroes bask in the glow of approval, with Radical Republicans as prophets scorned, and as far as any resistance on their own part is concerned, freedpeople barely noticed. The account is written with verve, and the events make incandescent drama—as they have done again and again in other accounts. Those who know absolutely nothing about the period and who do not care whether Suri has his facts right will appreciate a good read.

Holding a chair for Leadership in Global Affairs may be honor indeed for a member of the University of Texas’s History Department, and Suri has earned it by his prolific output of books dealing with near-current events; but a distant past needs more than a whirlwind tour, heavily reliant on secondary sources with an icing of primary documents, usually sifted from websites like Slate magazine. Manuscript collections, newspapers, congressional hearings, the records of the Freedmen’s Bureau, and the hideous details of the dozen or so volumes of the Ku Klux Klan testimony plunged into depth might tell something more than the obvious: that between the obstructionism of Andrew Johnson and the violence erupting down South and public indifference building up North, Reconstruction faltered and then perished.

Just because an answer is simple does not make it untrue. Still, one wonders at the heavy concentration on what white terrorists and feder-
al authorities did. Black people sprinkle the account as victims, and little more. The accomplishments of Republican state governments, their very reason to deserve a longer life, go as unsaid. So, too, with the very impressive achievements of a freed people in creating communities, raising churches, and doing their best to get a fair recompense for their labor. It is as if the work of Eric Foner and so many other scholars of the struggle in the cotton and rice fields, the efforts of the African Methodist Church, and the activism of labor movements both North and South had gone unwritten.

As a diatribe aimed at a mass market, *Civil War by Other Means* ranks high. Scholars, on the other hand, will puzzle at how a book can assume that up to the Civil War, Republicans only cared about slavery for northern white workers’ sake, as if there were no moral component. Only to Suri did Abraham Lincoln’s call for banning slavery’s spread into new territories give him a “notoriety,” when that had been the standard party line since its formation. The Kansas-Nebraska Act might as well not have existed, for all the attention it gets, and readers will marvel to learn that the Democratic Party seceded. Only if one assumes, as the author seems to, that saving the Union was a minor or unworthy goal, can one contend, as he does, that Johnson was bent on reversing “the Republican victory in the Civil War” (p. 121). Constitutional scholars will wonder, indeed, at the allegation that the Fourteenth Amendment did not guarantee a right to marry, to work, or to own property. Chroniclers of Louisiana Reconstruction will puzzle that the 1866 New Orleans riot targeted “African American reformers,” and those familiar with the Johnson impeachment will cavil at the implication of rank bias in “a highly partisan Republican” presiding over the trial: if anything, Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase’s fairness roused charges that he was pettifogging to help the president escape conviction (pp. 126, 144). Benjamin Wade’s defeat for governor of Ohio in 1867 will amaze political junkies, who had no idea that he was running, while economic historians will puzzle at the claim that northern “business leaders” clamored for an inflated currency after the Panic of 1873, with farmers shouting for free silver (p. 184). As for the contention that civil service reformers were led by James G. Blaine or that James A. Garfield was killed “over the question of who should be included in America’s democracy,” Gilded Age historians will be left gasping (p. 257).

Let it not be said that Suri only rounds up the usual suspects! At the book’s conclusion, he offers lessons in why Reconstruction failed. Partisan gerrymandering gave the Redeemers a free hand to annul the black vote. Instead of permitting vice presidents to succeed recently elected presidents, as happened with Lincoln, a whole new election should be called. The disputed 1876 election proves “that our democracy needs to eliminate the electoral college and create a system of national rules for all elections, ensuring that only the candidates with the most votes win” (p. 266). The country went wrong in not passing a constitutional amendment “guaranteeing all citizens the right to vote” (p. 263). All these, the author warns ominously, are a must, to prevent a new civil war.

Historians will rub their eyes at such a cart hitched to so wild a horse as Reconstruction. Does anyone really think that a presidential election, held months after the Civil War’s close, would have led to a more just solution—unless the former Confederate states were denied any say in it? How would 1876 have ended better, with popular votes alone counting? For it was Samuel J. Tilden and his white-lining Democratic friends, not Republicans, who had the majority. As for that proposed constitutional amendment, who imagines that if proposed in 1869, it would have outlasted a snowflake on a hot griddle? The votes simply were not there. Critics will wonder how far Suri has been using his prescription for today’s problems to dose the ailments of a very different time. Academics may not agree with David M. Kennedy’s blurb on the back, declaring that no
scholar has written about the years after the Civil War “with more brio, passion and outrage”—has he forgotten Claude G. Bowers’s *The Tragic Era: The Revolution after Lincoln (1929)*? or W. E. B. Du Bois’s infinitely better researched *Black Reconstruction (1935)*?—but they will wonder: combined with such slapdash storytelling, is a “blisteringly good read” enough?

Casual readers may get their first glimpse of what has been told again and again. But *Civil War by Other Means* is to professional histories what junk food is to a healthy repast.

Note


If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar


**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58746

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.