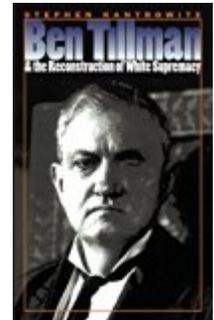


**Stephen Kantrowitz.** *Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000. 422 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8078-4839-5.



**Reviewed by** Phillip M. Carpenter

**Published on** H-SHGAPE (August, 2002)

### Putting the "Pol" Back in "Politics"

In focusing on South Carolina's post-Reconstruction resurgence of white supremacy as a "political program," Stephen Kantrowitz has performed a valuable service to modern historiography. While not ignoring cultural and socially structural influences on the "reconstruction" of white hegemony, he reintroduces the centrality of raw politics in the development of systematic, violent, and degrading change. The 1868-1876 intercession of "radical" Reconstruction had profoundly withered what was implicitly understood during Slavocracy's rule: that white supremacy was an unquestioned fact of all facets of Southern life. If this once-implicit and legally enforced social construction was to be resurrected, it required explicit and forceful political leadership. "Historic prejudices" were insufficient by themselves, Kantrowitz argues. The savage repudiation of official attempts at racial equality "did not simply 'rise up' from the ashes of white Southerners' hoary racism. It had to be fed and cultivated. In this setting "men of the leadership class forged political arguments and organizations that put white

men's expectations of mastery to work" (pp. 2-3). Foremost among them was 'Pitchfork' Ben Tillman (1847-1918), South Carolina's two-term governor and four-term U.S. senator from 1890 until his death.

*Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy* explores through rich primary sources the decisive stages of this pioneering demagogue's career: first as a political terrorist; then as a governor who openly condoned lynching to control the state's majority population; and ultimately as a national leader who exhorted the North to see the error of its more racially tolerant ways. For those who have read Francis Butler Simkins' still-renowned 1944 Tillman biography, much may be familiar but exceedingly profitable reading nevertheless. For instance, Kantrowitz enhances Simkins' observations on Tillman's opposition to, and clever co-optation of, the third-party movement of Populism. Notwithstanding most modern historians' defense of Populism's economic and political egalitarianism as an achievable program, Tillman unmistakably comes across as the more astute and, unsurprisingly, realistic of

the two. At least in cynical terms he was less averse to Populist proposals (he jumped on the free-silver bandwagon and eventually, though quietly, bowed to a "subtreasury" concept) than he was to dubious political judgment. In Tillman's estimation Populist leaders had made a "fatal blunder ... in organizing the third party too soon" and, even more egregiously, had belied up to the bar of biracialism rather than concentrating on transregional white cooperation (p. 246). In doing so Populists alienated most white Southern Democrats and thus destroyed any hope of success. Tillman could forgive fellow whites many transgressions, but not that of a wasted political opportunity.

The author also expands on past assessments of Tillman as a strutting and promise-filled reformer who produced practically nothing in the way of results. Despite his claim of working tirelessly on behalf of impoverished white farmers, Tillman's idea of reform reduced to little more than a vague Jeffersonian concept of independent producerism. After all, real economic reforms might have benefited blacks as well as whites, and that was terrain he would not traverse. What's more, he opposed on states' rights' grounds many proposed federal measures that would have aided aggrieved workers. Whether it was the nationalization of railroads in the interest of farmers or limitation of cotton-mill hours, Washington's intervention into the search for improved living standards would have been an insidious infringement on states to manage their own socio-economic affairs. How familiar that sounds today.

Chiefly, however, as the book's title suggests, Kantrowitz concentrates on Ben Tillman's vision of methodically "reconstructing" whites' undisputed supremacy, something lost during Congressional Reconstruction. In Tillman's amended view, those deserving supremacy were white farmers, pure and simple. It was they who collectively toiled and produced, thus they who should collectively rule. Their whiteness, their status as family

heads, their biological and moral superiority to lazy and sexually aggressive blacks all dictated they should reign politically, socially, and economically. To achieve this, white solidarity was of course critical. But with heroes and solidarity come villains and outsiders, and part of Tillman's political genius was that in addition to blacks he presented his base with sharply defined ones: the Redeemer "aristocracy" and usurious merchants. He "redr[ew] the circle of legitimate political and economic authority to include the farmers and to exclude all who opposed their interests... Only certain white men were truly white and truly men" (p. 111). The old political aristocracy had forfeited its authority and any just claim to "whiteness" by trading favors for black votes; credit-dispersing merchants were illegitimate because of "their unproductive livelihoods." The battle lines were drawn--and it was Tillman as martial architect.

This rounds out Kantrowitz's account of both the centrality of politics in reconstructing white supremacy and one politician's indispensable role as the mover and shaker. Tillman self-servingly portrayed agrarian "revolt" as a "fire ... everywhere smouldering and ready to burst. I have only fanned it into flame." Too many observers have relied on the similar foundation of "historic prejudices" to explain white Southerners' late-nineteenth century reconstruction of supremacy, according to Kantrowitz's study. "Such metaphors [as used by Tillman] are convenient for those who fail to see political movements as the products of human agency or for those who wish to make such efforts seem natural" (p. 125). Far from being "spontaneous," the so-called farmer rebellion was largely a product of Tillman's political organizational skill and talent for grass-roots mobilization.

In addition to the titled subject are underlying themes of white "manliness" as indistinguishable from the code of white supremacy; of a conservative-Democratic racism virtually equal in virulence to Tillman's; and a persistent quandary

that arose from the latter's internal contradictions. The first subtheme--manliness--seems to suffer in that the author includes both manly violence and "manly restraint" as components of a distinctly patriarchal white supremacy. Consequently he boxes the argument in by definition. Furthermore, Kantrowitz alludes to a black manliness of similar characteristics to white males (that is, it could be violent or restrained), and notes as well white women's venomous racism--both of which would appear to vitiate in argument any peculiar manliness within white supremacy's reconstruction. The second recurrent thesis--conservatives' rough equivalence to Tillman when it came racist depravity--is perhaps open to debate, yet Kantrowitz presents evidence a tad one-sided. For this reviewer, at least, his third subtheme is the most intriguing. How did Tillman reconcile the lawlessness and envelope-pushing politics he himself had used to reestablish white control with his subsequent need as South Carolina's chief executive and party boss to maintain state order, authority, and some semblance of official rectitude? For Kantrowitz, the irony of Tillman's career was that in the literal end, he could not. Having witnessed over his objections the ascendancy of certain demagogues who were more "Tillmanite" than their eponymous model, Tillman concluded that the white masses he once encouraged had wasted their "democratic" opportunities. Rather than honing Jeffersonian republican virtues, they stooped to supporting the likes of a cursing, gambling, besotted, violence-instigating Cole Blease, Tillman's one-time protegee. The once-noble white farmers now only made fools of themselves, Tillman lamented, by falling for the "wiles and tricks of demagogues." Two years before his death he wrote, "I have come to doubt that the masses of the people have sense enough to govern themselves" (pp. 301-02). Coming from the virtual prototype of pernicious Southern demagoguery, his was no minor conversion.

Copyright 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved.  
H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of

this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).

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

**Citation:** Phillip M. Carpenter. Review of Kantrowitz, Stephen. *Ben Tillman and the Reconstruction of White Supremacy*. H-SHGAPPE, H-Net Reviews. August, 2002.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=6623>



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