

The Doom of Reconstruction: The Liberal Republicans in the Civil War Era

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Review

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Slap, Andrew L. *The Doom of Reconstruction: The Liberal Republicans in the Civil War Era.* Fordham University Press, \$70.00 hardcover ISBN 9780823227099

The Politics of the Civil War Era

Liberal Republicanism as a Movement

Liberal Republican is a term narrowly associated with the presidential election of 1872. Andrew L. Slap's book is concerned with much more than that. At the outset, he orients the reader, explaining that his book is about a movement that ran throughout the entire Civil War era and well into Reconstruction. When addressing that movement, he uses the lower-case, as in liberal republican. He sees a clear distinction between the liberal republican movement and the Liberal Republican Party of 1872, which he defines as betraying key elements of the movement. Resurrecting the deep commitment to healthy republican institutions that characterized the liberal republicans at their best, he examines the origins of many liberal republican leaders and highlights their fear that a republic corrupted by slavery could not long endure. He makes it wholly understandable why they would carry this early concern about republican corruptibility into the era of Reconstruction. Carl Schurz, Lyman Trumbull, and Charles Francis Adams are some of the leading characters in his story.

In a careful analysis, Professor Slap shows that most of the leaders of the liberal republican movement received their political education in the Free Soil Party of 1848. This early development conditioned them to think independently and in principled terms. After the Civil War, with the Democratic Party's seeming acceptance of the basic reforms required of the South, liberal republicans moved to bring about a quick end to Reconstruction and a fresh alignment of political parties which they saw as necessary to advance reform. With such expectations, they did not intend to abandon the freedmen to their former masters but rather take republicanism to its next level of development.

The fact that most liberal republicans came from the ranks of Democrats and Free Soilers set them apart from other Republicans who were firmly Whiggish in their origins. During the war, as the Republican Party supported protective tariffs, economic policies involving paper currency, national banks and federal railroad subsidies, liberal republicans identified a new tyranny arising and sought to quash tendencies toward monopoly and political oligarchy before they could grow. This reality explains much of their urgency to split the Republican Party while the task of Reconstruction remained unfinished.

Men who had been at the vanguard of the anti-slavery crusade in the 1840s, ironically, were unprepared for the destruction of slavery as an institution. Throughout the book, Professor Slap emphasizes that liberal republicans were not naïve but then portrays them as yearning for a Reconstruction that could protect blacks in the South without a permanent use of federal force. Their sentiment revealed a structural flaw in their ideology that had fueled an iron resolve against slavery but was unprepared for the challenge of culturally remaking the South and nation after emancipation.

Lincoln held firm against slavery's expansion into the territories, and the war came. The clash of arms eventually led to the destruction of the institution that had generated so much controversy. But a long-term federal commitment to bring about a fair and just peace was lacking. The liberal republicans were not alone in their expectations that Reconstruction be both temporary and of short duration, but they are memorable for the role they played in trumpeting these expectations.

As the presidential contest of 1872 approached, the liberal republicans moved to create a third party, which they hoped would lead to the development of a new party system. They wanted this new system to address issues apropos to the emerging industrial economy that they saw endangering republicanism in multiple ways. Unfortunately for them, others came to their Liberal Republican convention, took it over, and defined the new party in ways that alienated many longstanding liberal republicans. Horace Greeley, who differed with liberal republicans on key issues such as free trade and civil service reform, won the presidential nomination, leaving only impatience with Reconstruction as the primary area of common agreement. For those who had shepherded the movement up to this point, the Greeley nomination was a fiasco. However, the liberal republicans were not without effect in this struggle gone awry. They had

articulated why Reconstruction had to end precipitously for the health of republican institutions. Their principled stand encouraged others. At both ends of the era of Civil War and Reconstruction, liberal republicans effectively maintained an idealistic rhetoric of high moral imperative.

In the election of 1876, voter intimidation and ballot-box stuffing became so prevalent that no one then or since has been able to make a convincing case that any party legitimately acquired majority support at the polls. Demonstrably the most corrupt presidential election in all of U.S. history, the contest of 1876 was settled only by a quid-pro-quo arrangement that allowed Republicans to keep the White House while surrendering the last three of their southern state governments to white supremacist Democrats. Insurgent violence and political corruption had brought the nation to the brink of ruin, and Reconstruction was abruptly concluded to save republican processes in future elections. This abandonment did not result in the purity and principled politics long sought by the liberal republicans. Professor Slap does as much as is humanly possible to make them understandable in their time and place, but a bitter memory remains regarding their legacy.

Ward M. McAfee is Professor of History, Emeritus, at California State University, San Bernardino, and the author of several books concerning the era of Civil War and Reconstruction, including Religion, Race, and Reconstruction: The Public School in the Politics of the 1870s (SUNY Press, 1998).