

The Young America Movement and the Transformation of the Democratic Party, 1828-1861

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Review

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Eyal, Yonatan *The Young America Movement and the Transformation of the Democratic Party, 1828-1861*. Cambridge University Press, \$75.00 hardcover ISBN 9780521875646

Young America and Antebellum Politics

The label Young America surfaced in the 1840s to denote an exuberant romantic nationalism and the literati who espoused it. Rather a spirit than a movement, a feeling than a faction, it lacked a precise program or constituency. Its premier spokesman was the spread-eagle expansionist John L. O'Sullivan, editor of the New York *Democratic Review* and coiner of the phrase Manifest Destiny.

As a political moniker, Young America was still more inchoate, becoming loosely applied to a cohort of rising Democratic party statesmen led by Stephen Douglas of Illinois. This book is about those Democrats and their influence on American politics. Yonatan Eyal argues that the Young America Democrats, whom he also calls New Democrats, presented a more progressive, open-minded, and reformist ideology than their Jeffersonian or Jacksonian forebears, converting what had been a defensive, agrarian, small-government party into a forward-looking, market-oriented internationally conscious organization fit for the new age of steam and railroads (19).

The Young Americans dreamed big. Abjuring their party's localist and agrarian legacy, they celebrated innovation and industry. Repudiating crabbled strict constructionism and fears of a centralized state, they touted federal sponsorship of transportation improvements at home and the opening of new markets abroad. Heralds of a republican new world order, they hailed the European revolutionary upheavals of 1848 and championed American commercial expansion and territorial acquisition and conquest. Their confident embrace of power and optimistic view of the future made New Democrats often look and sound like Whigs, though they lacked the latter's elitism and fear of

popular democracy.

Eyal devotes most of his text to expounding New Democratic principles and policies. He lays out imperial claims of influence, claiming Young American parentage for the Homestead Act, the pro-railroad policies of Gilded Age Republicans, the Pendleton Civil Service Act, and Progressive clean-government reforms. Yet he fails to surmount, or resolve, a crippling ambiguity at the core of his thesis. As he concedes, Young America was a vague concept, ephemeral, inconsistent, and fleeting (10). Eyal applies the term to both a generation of politicians and the agenda they pursued. Yet often the two did not match up. Eyal's New Democrats frequently opposed his New Democratic policies, while Whigs and Old Democrats supported them. So which at bottom defined Young America, its personnel or its program?

Eyal tries to have it both ways. Young America was both an ideology and an identity, a vision and its viewers. In practice, this flexible formula produces maddening contradictions. James K. Polk was the country's first Young America president and pursued the Young America projects of expansion and free trade with monomaniacal zeal, although he vetoed the internal improvements that Young Americans craved (119, 13). Generational self-consciousness was the crucial unifier of Young America Democrats, yet Old Democrat Thomas Hart Benton donned a Young America cap when he favored a Pacific railroad and telegraph subsidies (9, 71). Another geezer, Lewis Cass, adopted the Old Foggy strict construction perspective on the telegraph but exemplified the expansionist, pro-internal improvement Young Americanism of western Democrats (166). The Transcendentalist author Margaret Fuller, nobody's idea of a Democratic politician, nonetheless by advocating women's rights at home and republicanism abroad, . . . effectively became a Young American (101). Too many such cases turn Young America into an *omnium gatherum* and erase Eyal's sharp generational divider between the old Democracy and the new.

The confusions multiply and finally overwhelm Eyal's exposition, which in its closing chapters descends into abject special pleading. With increasing illogic, Eyal credits New Democrats for everything progressive and forward-looking, terms he uses so promiscuously as to empty them of meaning. Young Americans, or at least some of them, embraced liberal attitudes on race and promoted pacifism, the abolition of capital punishment, temperance, an end to dueling, and a rethinking of women's marginalized role in politics (146, 161). Praising purported New Democratic positive values of both unionism and

antislavery, Eyal wrecks on a series of untenable straddles. New Democrats were genuinely opposed to slavery, excepting those who were not. The spirit of Young America held the Democratic party together against the Young American antislavery impetus that was tearing it apart (215). New Democrats were stalwart champions of Union, not counting those who propagandized for secession. By the end, the coherence in Eyal's argument has become more elusive than the substance in Young America itself.

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