

A Dangerous Stir: Fear, Paranoia, and the Making of Reconstruction

Thomas J. Brown

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Brown, Thomas J. (2010) "A Dangerous Stir: Fear, Paranoia, and the Making of Reconstruction," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol12/iss2/17>

Review

Brown, Thomas J.

Spring 2010

Summers, Mark Wahlgren *A Dangerous Stir: Fear, Paranoia, and the Making of Reconstruction*. University of North Carolina Press, \$39.95 ISBN 978-0-8078-3304-9

Investigating Paranoia during Reconstruction

A Dangerous Stir is Mark Wahlgren Summers's eighth major book in the past twenty-five years on mid-nineteenth-century politics, seven of which have focused on the postwar period. This latest volume applies his unsurpassed familiarity with the Reconstruction press to an examination of partisan fear-mongering in the period from Appomattox through the election of Ulysses S. Grant to the presidency. He is, on this occasion, interested in politics not as the art of the possible but as the art of the utterly implausible. Summers addresses the traction of claims that Ralph Waldo Emerson "wanted to kill all the whites in the South," or that Thaddeus Stevens proposed "a reign of terror...more bitter and unrelenting than that of the Jacobins of France" (83, 85). Although written for research specialists in Reconstruction, the book offers provocative historical context for thinking about the reactionary rhetoric of today, in which the specters of communist dictatorship and medical "death panels" have excited so many opponents of the Obama administration.

Lurid as the language of contemporary Tea Partiers may be, Summers shows that "unreasonable, sometimes unreasoning, fear" (3) took an even more dramatic form in the politics of Reconstruction. He wisely situates his study within a double frame. The first frame is an overview of what Richard Hofstadter long ago called the paranoid style in American politics, which Summers sketches from the Washington administration through the secession crisis. The second frame describes Democratic allegations of government dictatorship and Republican anxieties about fifth-column movements during the Civil War. The war, Summers observes, intensified the political force of fear by realizing such spectacular possibilities. Democrats saw the Lincoln administration constrict

civil liberties in unprecedented ways during the unprecedented circumstances of the war and revolutionize the social structure of the South through emancipation. Republicans saw a conspiracy to destroy the United States suppressed only through previously unthinkable exertion and sacrifice; the murder of the president epitomized the overthrow of the political process. Both parties carried expanded imaginations into the postwar era, and the book concludes with the gradual satisfaction of Republicans that Democrats no longer posed a direct threat of violent resistance in Washington, violent as the white southern defiance of Reconstruction continued to be in the former Confederate states.

Summers's approach highlights some new incidents and offers stimulating perspectives on familiar events, characters, and themes. Postwar politics in Maryland assume magnified importance as a platform from which the Johnson administration might launch an armed attack on Congress. Grant's exercise of his military authority is a decisive heroism, regardless of his subsequent performance as president. Andrew Johnson demonstrates a stronger commitment to constitutional government than some of his supporters would have liked. Apprehension of a second civil war contributed in several ways to the progress of social justice during Reconstruction. Democrats who depicted every Republican as a dangerous radical failed to take advantage of the differences within the majority coalition that might well have been yielded a more conservative result. Republicans afraid of a Confederate resurgence continued to support restructuring of the South. When those fears dissipated, moderates quickly retreated from federal activism and expenditure. While mostly supporting the argument that equal rights advanced further in Reconstruction than the spectrum of northern political attitudes in the immediate aftermath of the war would have suggested, Summers seeks to measure how close the country came during 1865-1867 to an even more belligerent obstruction, which might have yielded a longer and more far-reaching Reconstruction if it did not succeed in reversing the process.

A Dangerous Stir presents Reconstruction as both a historically singular moment and part of a continuous American political tradition. In the shadow of the recent Civil War, legislation and constitutional amendments enacted without representation of the former Confederate states prompted threats and suspicions of revolutionary resistance that made Reconstruction different in kind from other political and legal controversies. In a more general sense, however, wariness of the potential abuse of government power has remained a staple of opposition rhetoric. Summers ably makes the disquieting suggestion that in Reconstruction

such fear was only overcome by fear itself. But supporters of effective public responses to the challenges of our time might also find a measure of hope in this demonstration that the agitation of uninformed alarm has important weaknesses as a strategy of political obstruction.

*Thomas J. Brown teaches history at the University of South Carolina. He is the editor of *Reconstructions: New Perspectives on the Postbellum United States* (Oxford University Press, 2006).*