

The Whigs' America: Middle-Class Political Thought in the Age of Jackson and Clay

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Recommended Citation

Watson, Harry (2022) "The Whigs' America: Middle-Class Political Thought in the Age of Jackson and Clay," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 24 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.24.1.05

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol24/iss1/5>

Review

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Fall 2022

Pearson, Joseph W. *The Whigs' America: Middle-Class Political Thought in the Age of Jackson and Clay*. University Press of Kentucky, 2020. HARDCOVER. \$35.00 ISBN 9780813179728 pp. 238

Early in this study of thoughts and values among America's antebellum Whigs, Joseph W. Pearson recalls Henry Adams's blunt dismissal of the party of Clay, Webster, and Seward: "Of all the parties that have ever existed in the United States," Adams declared, "the famous Whig party was the most feeble in ideas and most blundering in its management" (4). Unconcerned with party management, Pearson presents a sweeping defense of the ideas that Adams scorned. He frames his appraisal in the vocabulary of social analysis, repeatedly insisting that the Whigs were preeminently a middle-class party, but the core of his argument rests on Whigs' beliefs and cultural assumptions rather than their socio-economic status. "The key idea," he posits, "is not that Whigs met economic criteria (i.e., enjoying material affluence that was neither meager nor extravagant) that Jacksonians did not, or vice versa, but that Whigs thought about themselves, their world, and the future in far more middle-class terms and crucially, felt little need to apologize for that view" (3).

The broad outlines of Pearson's portrait will be very familiar to readers of Lawrence Kohl and Daniel Walker Howe, or anyone familiar with the writings of major Whig leaders or the pages of their extensive press. Pearson's Whigs have little confidence in natural man, but a firm evangelical faith anchored their hopes for his moral, cultural, and material improvement. Inspired by enlightened self-interest, progress began with the individual but also required education and cooperation with like-minded others. As wellsprings of loving cooperation, pious women and families were crucial to the achievements of aspiring men. To achieve any progress that exceeded the powers of isolated individuals, citizens should band together in voluntary associations and a free, activist government. Only cooperation—aided by compromise—could lead them from a barbaric past to a millennial future. "Resolutely focused on progress," Pearson summarizes, Whigs "wanted to build a modern nation, one linked together by improved

transportation, economic opportunity, and sober habits. Comfortable in most respects with the dynamic world around them, they often tried to speed change up” (4).

Pearson clearly admires the Whigs’ virtues, but he is not blind to their faults. Alarmed by non-British and non-Protestant immigrants, “Whigs thought these the wrong sort of people to trust with political power, and throughout the era they believed in their bones that Democrats manipulated Catholic immigrants for partisan gain” (82). Most critics of slavery found the Whigs more congenial than the Democrats, “yet slavery endured throughout the era,” Pearson acknowledges, “for the most part with Whigs’ acceptance and, at least among the southern Whigs, their hardy support” (117). Though Whigs worshipped progress, Democrats “rightly saw the abusive potential in the new social and economic arrangements gaining traction among the rising mercantile interests” (12). Above all, perhaps, Andrew Jackson’s excesses “kindled a frustration among Whigs that teetered toward ossified hate” (87).

While concentrating on the Whigs, Pearson also makes room for perceptive asides comparing them to their more pessimistic rivals. “Democrats did not trust [Whigs’] plans or believe their assessment of human depravity and the need constantly to collaborate,” he writes, seeing Whigs’ projects as cloaks for manipulation and exploitation. While Whigs cheered contemporary developments in business and technology, “Jacksonians were nostalgic for a past that they felt slipping away and afraid of a future they could not predict or control.” In contrast to Whigs, Pearson continues, Democrats “worried deeply about the loss of personal autonomy and local independence due to the scheming of distant financiers and their political lackeys . . . At bottom, Jacksonians felt increasingly lost in a world in which too much seemed to be changing too fast” (5-6).

Occasionally, Pearson’s uninterest in political nuts and bolts leads him astray. He refers to Whig strategy in the presidential election of 1832, for example, but the party did not exist before 1834 (104). He also neglects the details of Whigs’ collapse in 1854, without discussing why the slavery question defeated their love of compromise.

More seriously, Pearson does not deeply explore the relationship between Whigs’ beliefs and his central analytical concept—their middle-classness. If gradations of wealth, income, education, or occupation did not affect party choice, as Pearson insists, what classes were Whigs in the middle *of*? These Whigs seem to have been middle class simply because they thought they were, but if “being middle class is more about mindset than material means, and shared ethics

matters more than similar incomes,” where do those mindsets originate (2)? What’s middling about them? And what about citizens who rejected middle class identity? Were Democrats an upper or lower class party? Or both? Where did *their* ideas come from? And if Whigs were in the middle, which extreme did the Democrats represent? A focus on ideology over interest can be quite appropriate, but Pearson’s disconnect between ideas and party platforms, or electoral calculations seems overdone.

Nonetheless, Pearson’s sketches of Whig beliefs are sensitive, convincing, and easily recognizable to scholars of antebellum politics. His Whigs are not profound thinkers, but they seem easy to like—optimistic, congenial, cooperative, civic-minded, trusting, and unselfish—rather like the ideal residents of an ideal suburb. If they seem a bit clueless about the horrors of slavery and modernization’s dark side, they certainly had lots of company in antebellum America. If their times called for sterner stuff in the end, Pearson can still not blame them for their touching hope “that there was nothing wrong with America that could not be fixed by what was right about America.” After all, he concludes, “It is an old-fashioned idea . . . but it has a certain staying power” (159). As indeed it does. In this respect, perhaps we must all hope the Whigs were right.

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