The Political Transformation of David Tod: Governing Ohio During the Height of the Civil War

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Review

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Throughout the historiography of the American Civil War, studies of the social, political, cultural, and military aspects fill volumes. In more recent years, examinations of the war’s place in the national collective memory have been exhaustively recorded. While studies of President Abraham Lincoln, as well as his Confederate counterpart, Jefferson Davis, and their military generals have dominated Civil War literature, rarely has attention to the politics of the war extended beyond the executive office. Joseph Lambert Jr.’s The Political Transformation of David Tod examines an often-overlooked facet of the political history of the Civil War – the governorship of loyal states. Few historians have ventured into this aspect of the political history of the war. A. James Fuller’s excellent biography of Indiana governor Oliver P. Morton, and Stephen Engle’s study of Lincoln’s relations with his wartime governors were among the very first of their kind. For Lincoln’s volunteer army to be successful in recruiting and outfitting state troops far afield, the governors of those states had to exhibit a dedication to the preservation of the Union and support the efforts to abolish slavery in the United States. Thus, Ohio governor David Tod, a prominent Democrat in the state, stands as an unlikely candidate to secure the trust of the president. Yet the war brought about a wartime leader who placed the needs of the nation before the platform of his party, despite the risk to his political aspirations.
Lambert’s study of Tod’s early years establishes the understanding of the social and political upbringing that molded his career in politics. Born into a politically active family and in the years following the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, Tod was surrounded by questions about the politics of slavery from a young age. Throughout his upbringing, Tod’s political acumen was sharpened by popular democratic thinking and by 1858, his star was ascending in the Democratic Party. A supporter of the Northern Democrat Stephen Douglas, Tod watched with great anticipation during the race for the Illinois U.S. Senate seat in 1858. Two years later, after the Democratic Party’s electoral debacle in Charleston, Tod found himself with a front-row seat to the convention in Baltimore. In a moment of critical mass for the party, Tod, the ranking vice president of the Ohio delegation, chaired the convention and managed the nomination of Douglas for the presidency in 1860 despite the party being so divided. Lambert pays dutiful attention to Tod’s efforts in 1860 to strengthen the fractured nature of the Democratic Party.

When war came, Tod did not shy away from his duties even if it was to the detriment of his political capital. Elected in 1862, Tod entered the Ohio governor’s office as a leading voice for his Democratic Party. Following President Abraham Lincoln’s Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, bearing in mind how much “Ohio blood had been sacrificed,” Tod spoke out in favor of the measure declaring the mandate be “heartily endorsed” (Lambert Jr., 143). Tod’s support of the measure, as Lambert asserts, has been overlooked. In public and in private, his belief in emancipation was unflappable; but his support for the arming of Black troops was at best conditional. On page 145, Lambert dissects the complications and conflicts facing Tod in welcoming Black servicemen identifying his social understanding, certainly, but his political opinions regarding slavery and race. Even in this regard, Tod eventually evolved to advocate Black troops’ service afield.
Despite reservations, he openly championed a federal plan for emancipation that was quite the departure from the viewpoint of a Douglas-styled democrat. Through the immense sacrifice of young lives, and the leadership of men like Lincoln and Grant, the governorship of Indiana’s O.P. Morton, Massachusetts’ John A. Andrew, and Ohio’s David Tod, by 1865 the nation had been saved and slavery was abolished. Tod’s term of office had ended, but his influence in Ohio politics remained strong up to and even after his death. Today his likeness, forever immortalized in bronze, prominently adorns a relief panel affixed to the Ohio Soldiers’ and Sailors’ Monument in Cleveland.

Students of the Civil War will find Lambert’s examination of Tod’s governorship insightful. In shedding light on Tod, Lambert joins Engle and Fuller as an early pioneer in documenting the lives of those often-forgotten executive figures without whom the war would have been impossible to prosecute. As the history field gradually but certainly moves away from the “Great Man” school of thought, perhaps an exception might be made for those individuals who, though forgotten by the popular narrative, evolved to fill the role needed in a time of crisis and served dutifully to fulfill the needs of the time. Tod is worthy of that exception as Lambert so ably demonstrates. Again and again, he rose to meet the needs of his time.

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