Two Counties in Crisis: Measuring Political Change in Reconstruction Texas

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Review

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Robert Dillard’s Two Counties in Crisis explores three decades of political culture in two divergent Texas counties. Collin County, a frontier county largely home to emigrants from other Southern states, is contrasted against Harrison County, a cotton growing county with 145 planters who each owned more than 20 enslaved peoples. Dillard claims that these counties, and Texas more broadly, did not neatly align with the political culture of the rest of the Confederacy. In a combination of political science and history, Dillard argues that a culture of backlash and resistance to federal authority defined Texas state politics in the Civil War era. While the author’s claims of exceptionalism are unconvincing and unsubstantiated, Two Counties in Crisis demonstrates the contentious state level politics of Reconstruction.

Dillard also introduces readers to the governors of Reconstruction Texas. These figures, though fascinating, undermine claims to Texan exceptionalism by fulfilling what readers familiar with Reconstruction history might expect. For example, James Webb Throckmorton voted against secession, served in the Confederate military, and served as Provisional Governor from 1866 to 1867 where he incorporated his ex-Confederate comrades back into political life and supported swift national reunification. Contrastingly, Edmund Jackson Davis was a staunch Unionist that served in the Federal military before a term as Governor from 1870-1874 where he instituted Radical Republican policies. Surprisingly, Dillard does not analyze the correspondence of any of the book’s central figures. The analytical possibilities for insights into the ideologies...
that undergirded secession, Unionism, and competing visions for Reconstruction remain largely unfulfilled. Moreover, Dillard includes little on the electioneering processes itself. Sustained consideration of how Black suffrage and Confederate disenfranchisement impacted the election process would have considerably enriched an analysis reliant on the models of political science.

*Two Counties in Crisis* shines when Dillard analyzes the Texas Constitution of 1876. After 121 pages, readers are finally confronted with the book’s central claim: a political culture predicated on resistance and hatred fomented fears of “Federal overreach” and “centralization” to deliver a state constitution that continues to hamper the effective governance of Texas into the 21st century. In a standout chapter, Dillard impressively deconstructs the making of this regressive state constitution. In the era of Reconstruction, Texas politicians “were more intent on responding to the passions of the day than in creating a government that could effectively respond to the long-term needs of its citizens.” (154) The weakness of the constitution was intentional from Democrats, who formed a significant majority of the constitutional convention’s delegates and harbored a distrust of liberal democracy after Radical Republicans had pursued public education, internal improvements, and tamped down on racial violence. The structural limitations on power proffered by the constitution have led to nearly 500 amendments stemming from more than 700 proposals. Though the Texas constitution may be an indecipherable document, Dillard’s incisive analysis details the culture of backlash that spawned its creation.

Unfortunately, the convincing analysis of the 1876 Constitution is overshadowed by some troubling authorial decisions. Dillard cites little history beyond works of Texas Civil War era history, foregoing engagement with much of Reconstruction historiography, including Eric Foner’s 1984 *Reconstruction*. Engagement with the wide array of scholarship on Reconstruction would have offered this text much to consider on Radical Republicanism, Black political
activism, and postwar economic transformations. In one instance, Dillard defers judgement on racial violence to the Dunning school and revisionists without any reference to the sixty years of subsequent scholarship that have explored the causes and ramifications of white supremacist violence. This misstep also reveals a worrisome practice across the book: Dillard’s frequent uncritical acceptance of the conclusions of Charles Ramsdell, an acolyte of the Dunning school. The only mention of Ramsdell’s troubling beliefs is a passing notice that Ramsdell supported the “lost cause.” (45) Though Ramsdell’s work certainly was the first major study of Reconstruction Texas, scholars have long moved passed the Dunning school’s conclusions drawn in support of segregation and disenfranchisement. The wealth of primary sources Dillard recovered would have been better utilized in conversation with a broader and more relevant historiography.

Two Counties in Crisis oscillates between eye-opening and confusing. Dillard’s chapter on the constitutional convention of 1876 convincingly demonstrates that the overthrow of Reconstruction continues to shape how Texas governs. Dillard demonstrates that backlash from state governments continues to limit the promise of the Reconstruction era constitutional amendments. Unfortunately, this does not extend uniformly across the book as a dizzying array of extensive quotes from Civil War era newspapers appear on seemingly every page without adequate analysis. The almost nonexistent attention to the influence of gender and race on political culture also make this text seem outdated. Ultimately, it’s unclear whether this work really is a study of the political culture of two divergent counties, a composite biography of central elected officials, or a survey of Texas’ Reconstruction history. Though the core claim of the book is often elusive, there are enough interesting anecdotes, quotes, and details to always merit turning the page. Despite the immense promise of the book’s premise and intentions, Two
*Counties in Crisis* is much like Reconstruction itself – replete with unfulfilled potential that leaves me wondering: what if?

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