


REVIEW ESSAY

KNOW NOTHING POPULISM AND THE ORIGINS OF THE GOP

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ark Voss-Hubbard. *Beyond Party: Cultures of Antipartisanship in Northern Politics before the Civil War*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. Pp. xii, 266, appendix, notes, essay on sources, index, cloth \$45.00.)

Robert F. Engs and Randall M. Miller, eds. *The Birth of the Grand Old Party: The Republicans' First Generation*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002. Pp. x, 224, notes, bibliography, contributors, index, cloth \$46.50, paper \$18.95.)

Historians have had a good deal of trouble coming to terms with the Know Nothings and their role in the formation of the Republican Party. Opposition to the extension of slavery has much more moral appeal than barring foreign Roman Catholics from office or requiring voters to be literate. The Know Nothings turn up as a chapter in Gustavus Meyers' *The History of American Bigotry*, and in Alice Felt Tyler's classic, *Freedom's Ferment*, under the rubric of "Denials of Democratic Principles." More recently

Eric Foner, Dale Baum, and Tyler Anbinder have dissociated nativism and the Republicans.

The Birth of the Grand Old Party, edited by Robert F. Engs and Randall M. Miller, is a set of original essays by some of the best known historians of the period. Essays appear by Eric Foner, Michael F. Holt, Phillip Shaw Paludan, Mark E. Neely, Jr., Jean H. Baker, and Brooks D. Simpson along with an "Afterword" by James M. McPherson. The editors provide a solid, textbook-like, essay, "The Genesis and Growth of the Republican Party: a Brief History." Foner writes about ideology; Paludan addresses the impact of the war; Neely discusses religion and the Republicans; and Baker details the Republicans' limits when it came to woman suffrage. The best essays are Holt's restatement of his well known views on the Republicans' anti-southernism and Simpson's equally well known views on Republican radicalism and nationalism during Reconstruction. McPherson argues that some of the essays' differences in emphasis can be reconciled, but takes issue with the general impression that the authors leave that during the first generation the Republicans went from a party of antislavery reform to becoming the party of big business.

In other words, this is just another book of essays by well-known historians offering few insights and little that is new. *The Birth of the Grand Old Party* does have one distinctive characteristic—its quite wonderful illustrations. The book originated in an exhibition and symposium at the Library Company of Philadelphia. Its forty-nine pictures are sometimes familiar, but they are well chosen and the editors have provided excellent, long captions. *The Birth of the Grand Old Party*, however, lacks an essay on the nativist connection. Only Holt discusses the Know Nothings. A revision of Voss-Hubbard's last chapter or an essay based on his book, *Beyond Party*, would have filled out the story.

Voss-Hubbard begins with a brief allusion to the 1998 gubernatorial victory of the professional wrestler Jesse Ventura in Minnesota, as the most recent example of the deep strain in American history of populist opposition to political parties and politicians. Building on Ronald P. Formisano's seminal work, Voss-Hubbard highlights the counterpoint of partisan and antipartisan discourse in American political debates since the colonial era. While there is no indication of this in the title of Voss-Hubbard's book, the Know Nothing movement of the 1850s is its subject. He sees the Know Nothings as a case study of nonpartisan and antipartisan political practices. In something of a departure from accepted wisdom, Voss-Hubbard associates

the Know Nothing movement with both populism and a wide range of democratic reforms. Further, he joins Holt, Formisano, William E. Gienapp, and Joel H. Silbey in recognizing "the Know Nothing contribution to the Republican emergence" in the 1850s (p. 247).

Of course there are contemporary scholars, led by Foner, who dispute this interpretation. The anti-Catholic strain, which Voss-Hubbard acknowledges to be the most important element of Know Nothing ideology, has relegated the movement to a chapter in "The Politics of Unreason." Thus the liberal, reformist, and democratic Republican Party of Abraham Lincoln could hardly have drawn water from this poisoned well. Yet it is clear that any discussion of the emergence of the Republicans that leaves out the new party's crucial relationship to the Know Nothings distorts the picture and undermines a clear understanding of the party's "first generation."

Voss-Hubbard set out to "simply conduct a grass roots analysis of the northern Know Nothing movement" (p. ix). His study focuses upon three counties in what became Know Nothing states: Essex County, Massachusetts; New London County, Connecticut; and Dauphin County, Pennsylvania. He tells the story of the brief career of the Know Nothings in these three states with detailed description of politics in the counties mentioned. (Although Voss-Hubbard's initial coverage of Pennsylvania's society and economy in his perfunctory initial chapter disappointed this reviewer, his analysis of Pennsylvania nativism and the eventual Republican victory adds a great deal to our understanding and is recommended to all the readers of this journal.)

Beginning with Part 2, the book comes alive to provide the best study we have of the brief life of Know Nothingism and its crucial role in the creation of the Republican Party. It is essential for historians looking back over centuries not to telescope the past, but rather to try to imagine real time in the minds of the people we study. This is especially important when dealing with "third party" insurgencies or periods of realignment. Voss-Hubbard proposes a three stage development. In the beginning there was a rather disorganized social movement based on secret fraternal groups formed in response to the personal consequences of massive immigration into the United States beginning in the mid 1840s and the changing structure of the industrializing economy. Those who became nativists were socially and economically threatened by these changes. In this context Voss-Hubbard assumes Holt's argument that the major parties had compromised on the old issues and had nothing new to say. On the new issues involving labor, temperance, and nativism, they

were mute. There were also constitutional matters that they had to address and, of course, the growing problem of slavery in the territories.

His second phase involves the necessity of organization for the nativists to govern effectively and retain power to continue their crusade. In 1854–55, the Know Nothings suffered from a wealth of political riches and swept practically everything before them in these three states. They had drawn together a set of very single-minded movements—labor reform, abolition of slavery, temperance and prohibition, anti-Catholicism, and pure nativism—under a “big tent” opposing politics as usual.

Voss-Hubbard is impressed by the solid reform credentials of the Know Nothing legislatures. He is, however, well aware of how the attempt at governing—here best seen in Pennsylvania where they had to deal with their well organized Democratic opponents—forced the Know Nothings to become partisans, using open conventions, party tickets, and “platforms that blended nativism and antislavery in roughly equal measure” (p. 108). Voss-Hubbard notes the antislavery credentials of most Know Nothings and even that Thaddeus Stevens joined the order.

In his final chapter, Voss-Hubbard addresses the question of “North Americanism and the Republican Ascendancy.” As national Know Nothingism entered into its third and final phase, the North Americans fused with their rival antiparty “third party,” the Republicans, whose main issue was the opposition to the extension of slavery in the territories. Between 1856 and 1860 the key to Republican success was to capture the Know Nothings’ constituency. They were able to do this by broadening their narrow antislavery appeal and incorporating the Know Nothing message. In this process of party building the Republicans were aided by splits among the national Know Nothings. In 1856 the North Americans finally severed their tense relationship with the American Party that nominated Millard Fillmore on a platform embracing popular sovereignty. They then began the process of fusion with the Republicans in the presidential campaign of 1856. “The populist and nonpartisan cast of the Fremont movement often has not received enough emphasis” (p. 197).

Like Holt (in *The Birth of the Grand Old Party*) Voss-Hubbard believes the reformulation of the Republican antislavery message as one emphasizing the danger of the Slave Power to white northerners. “The expansion of slavery constituted a threat to themselves the North, and therefore the nation” (p. 199). The Dred Scott case and the Lecompton Constitution in Kansas reaffirmed this position. The Panic of 1857 enabled the Republicans to expand

their economic appeal to labor and Know Nothings. The expanded Republican nationalistic message selectively stole the nativists' clothes and secured most of their votes for Lincoln in 1860. In conclusion, Voss-Hubbard contrasts the Know Nothings' and the Republicans' manipulation of vernacular antipartyism—the former used it to break down the partisan loyalties of the second party system while the later employed it in building a new party that would “restore a moral purpose to partisan politics” (p. 216).

