ESSAY REVIEW

Parties and Political Culture in Nineteenth-Century America

Politics and Statesmanship: Essays on the American Whig Party. By THOMAS
    BROWN. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985. v. 330p.
    Bibliography, index. $32.50.)

The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856. By WILLIAM E. GIENAPP.
    (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987. 640p. Maps, tables, bib-
    liography, statistical appendix. $35.00.)

Masters and Statesmen: The Political Culture of American Slavery. By KENNETH
    S. GREENBERG. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press,
    1985. xii, 195p. Bibliography, index. $22.50.)

The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865-1928. By MICHAEL
    E. McGERR. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986. ix, 307p.
    Selected bibliography, index. $24.95.)

*The Line of Duty: Maverick Congressmen and the Development of American
    Political Culture, 1836-1860.* By JOHANNA NICOL SHIELDS. (West-
    port, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985. xix, 297p. Illustrations, tables,
    appendices, bibliography, index. $37.50.)

The "Spider Web": Congress and Lobbying in the Age of Grant. By MARGARET
    SUSAN THOMPSON. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985. 288p.
    Tables, figures, illustrations, index. $29.95.)

    During the past generation the research agenda pursued by academic
historians has changed markedly. Studies of national political leadership,
statecraft, diplomacy, and generalship are on the decline. Practitioners of
the "new social history" most often study communities, families, sex roles,
and class relationships.

    What, one might ask, has become of political history? To guess that it
had atrophied would not be entirely wide of the mark. Certainly, a smaller
proportion of history graduate students today choose dissertation topics about
politics than ever before. But since social historians must ultimately consider

who exercises power in society and how they do it, political questions remain central to the historical enterprise.

The study of politics has in fact been invigorated by the rise of social history and the concern to know more about ordinary people. "New political historians" have done much to enlarge our understanding of political constituencies and mass behavior. They have reconstructed the belief systems and ideologies through which people viewed the political world. So, too, many now writing "new political history" rely on quantitative techniques first used in other social sciences.

New political historians who study the United States have made especially notable contributions in two areas—political parties and "political culture." Political parties, of course, have long attracted the interest of both historians and political scientists. Only in recent decades, however, have investigators begun to scrutinize the historical roots of voter loyalties. That inquiry led directly back to the nineteenth century, when partisanship first crystallized, and when, we now realize, parties commanded more intense voter allegiance than they do today.

Historians of American political behavior have learned that the rise of the "second party system" during the 1830s produced the first mass political parties in world history, the Jacksonian Democrats and their rivals, the Whigs. Twice during the nineteenth century, in the 1850s and again in the 1890s, existing party arrangements and voter loyalties experienced relatively abrupt changes. The term "critical realignment" is now often used to label these transitions; the "third party system" thus took shape in the 1850s and the "fourth" in the 1890s. Together the second and third party systems comprise what has been called the "party period" of American history, when parties were strong and when voters believed that parties had deeply significant differences. At the height of the party period—during the realignment of the 1850s that inaugurated the third party system—the collapse of the Whig party and the rise of the new sectional Republican party disrupted American politics as never before or since.[1]

An outgrowth of inquiries into nineteenth-century voter behavior is the concept of "political culture," defined in an anthropological manner to

[1] Walter Dean Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics* (New York, 1970); William G. Shade, "Political Pluralism and Party Development: The Creation of a Modern Party System, 1815-1852," in Paul Kleppner, et al., eds., *The Evolution of American Electoral Systems* (Westport, CT, 1981), 77-112; Richard L. McCormick, "The Party Period and Public Policy: An Exploratory Hypothesis," *Journal of American History* 66 (September, 1979), 279-98; Joel H. Silbey, "The Salt of the Nation: Political Parties in Antebellum America," in Silbey, *The Partisan Imperative: The Dynamics of American Politics Before the Civil War* (New York, 1985), 50-68.

include the constellation of accepted ideas and practices through which political issues are resolved in a particular society. We may thus differentiate between the political culture of, say, the United States and Great Britain. And we may also explore differing partisan definitions of a national political culture. Applied to political parties, the concept of political culture encompasses "thought and feeling, word and deed"—the characteristics that define the appeal of a particular party and distinguish it from a competitor party. Recent books thus have explored the political culture of the two national parties that first took shape during the 1830s and gave form to the partisan rivalries that flourished through the remainder of the century.[2] And one of the books considered here suggests that the antebellum South constituted a distinct political culture, notwithstanding the fact that most southern voters maintained allegiances to the national parties.

The six books under review afford a good opportunity to evaluate the efforts of a rising generation of new political historians. Each is the author's first book, each originated as a Ph.D. dissertation, and each explores some aspect of nineteenth-century American political history. None focuses only on Pennsylvania, though William E. Gienapp sheds much light on developments in this state.[3]

The most important of the works under review, Gienapp's *Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856*, demonstrates that new insights and new techniques produce the most impressive results when addressed to meaty topics and researched the old-fashioned way. Gienapp tackles one of the most challenging questions of American political history. Why did the Republican party suddenly emerge during the mid-1850s? At no other time since national political parties first took shape a century and a half ago has a new party established itself successfully. Equally unique was the response to the rise of the Republican party—a runaway sectional crisis followed directly by a bloody civil war.

One might presume that historians would long since have studied the origins of the Republican party in minute detail. Not so. Gienapp establishes that many aspects of the story remain poorly understood, and that historians

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[2] Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago, 1979), 2; Jean H. Baker, *Affairs of Party: The Political Culture of Northern Democrats in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca, NY, 1983). Note also William E. Gienapp, "Politics Seems to Enter into Everything: Political Culture in the North, 1840-1860," in Stephen E. Maizlish and John J. Kushma, eds., *Essays on Antebellum American Politics, 1840-1860* (College Station, TX, 1982).

[3] See also William E. Gienapp, "Nebraska, Nativism, and Rum: The Failure of Fusion in Pennsylvania, 1854," *PMHB* 109 (October, 1985), 425-71, part of a fine recent issue devoted to articles on "Politics in Antebellum Pennsylvania."

have seriously misconstrued its basic contours. The problem, in large part, is hindsight. Patriotic and providential pro-northern interpretations of political development during the 1850s have proven remarkably durable. Tradition depicts the young Republican party as the political consequence of a quickened northern sensitivity to the plight of the southern slave. Its rise appears fated and inexorable, its agenda humanitarian rather than self-interested. Instead of political analysis, we substitute a morality tale. The actors on the pre-war political stage perform the first act of a drama culminating in emancipation, Gettysburg, Appomattox, and the martyrdom of Lincoln.

Gienapp insists that we re-examine the traditional account. He confronts us with overwhelming evidence that the political upheaval in the North between 1853 and 1855 resulted *primarily* from anxieties quite unrelated to North-South tensions, and that the erosion of earlier party loyalties occurred *before* the Republican party became formidable. He further demonstrates that the Republican party came perilously close to suffering a stillbirth until it was rescued by the intersection of two dramatic events in May 1856, and that northern sectional consciousness, when it did crystallize into a powerful political force in 1856, was rooted in complaints about excessive southern power far more than in sympathy for the slave or a resolve to abolish slavery.

Each of these main points deserves fuller explication. Gienapp builds upon and extends an interpretation developed by other political historians, notably Ronald P. Formisano and Michael F. Holt,[4] who emphasize the impact of ethnic and religious tensions on northern politics during the early and middle 1850s. Accelerated urbanization and a surge of foreign immigration, especially from Ireland and Germany, made many native-stock Northerners eager recruits for a politicized temperance crusade and for a putative political reform movement rooted in fears of Catholic power. The

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[4] Ronald P. Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s-1840s* (New York, 1983); Formisano, *The Birth of Mass Political Parties: Michigan, 1827-1861* (Princeton, 1971); Formisano, "To the Editor," *Civil War History* 21 (June, 1975), 185-89; Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York, 1978); Holt, *Forging a Majority: The Formation of the Republican Party in Pittsburgh* (New Haven, CT, 1969); Holt, "The Antimasonic and Know Nothing Parties," in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., ed., *History of U.S. Political Parties*, 4 vols. (New York, 1973), 1:575-620 (especially 593-620); Holt, "The Politics of Impatience: The Origins of Know Nothingism," *Journal of American History* 60 (September, 1973), 309-31; Joel H. Silbey, " 'The Undisguised Connection': Know Nothings into Republicans: New York as a Test Case," in Silbey, *The Partisan Imperative*, 127-65.

"rise of ethnocultural issues," Gienapp affirms, "destroyed the second party system" (p. 66).

Studying closely the chronology of developments in many different states and localities, Gienapp shows that the disintegration of earlier party loyalties was well under way in 1853, before the Kansas-Nebraska bill had been introduced and at a time when "the slavery issue was less significant politically than it had been for years" (p. 67). Nor did the furor raised by the Kansas issue during 1854 eclipse the already simmering ethnocultural anxieties. The nativist Know Nothing party surged to power in 1854 while the fledgling Republican party only organized itself in a few states. As one frustrated antislavery observer explained: "This Catholic power is felt at the north a more dangerous power than the Slave Power & therefore absorbs all other considerations" (quoted on p. 164).

One must not, however, conclude that the two impulses were unrelated. The traditional account, of course, sanctifies the antislavery cause while reviling Protestant bigotry. In fact, Gienapp insists, the two were strongly linked. A large majority of House members elected from the North in 1854 combined Know Nothing affiliation with opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Conspiratorial fears of southern power and papal power intersected in the minds of many worried Northerners.

As late as the spring of 1856, the Know Nothing party appeared to dominate the political insurgency in the free states. Here, especially, the advantage of hindsight can lead the historian to misinterpret the actual balance of forces and the prospects for Republican success. The distortions embalmed in the traditional account make it difficult, notes Gienapp, "to appreciate the Republican party's precarious situation" as the presidential election year unfolded (p. 273).

Then came the stunning events of May 21 and 22, 1856, which together convinced northern voters that the "Slave Power" posed the paramount menace to their liberties. News about the "sack of Lawrence" on the Kansas frontier arrived just after South Carolina Congressman Preston Brooks had used a heavy cane to beat Charles Sumner unconscious in the Senate chamber at the national Capitol. Of the two events, Gienapp judges, "the attack on Sumner was more important in producing Northern indignation" (p. 301). "Had it not been for your poor head," one supporter consoled the wounded Massachusetts Senator, "the Kansas outrage would not have been felt at the North" (quoted on p. 302). Within a month, the Republican party nominated its national ticket, effected an imperfect coalition with sufficient northern nativists to break the back of the Know Nothing party, and established itself as the second party in the nation, even if not quite strong enough to carry John C. Frémont into the White House.

Although Southerners would persistently (and fatally) misinterpret Re-

publican motivation, seeing in the rise of the new party a northern deter-
mination to abolish slavery and revolutionize southern society, Gienapp
amply demonstrates the defensive impulse behind the political antislavery
movement. Northerners thought the Kansas outrages and the behavior of
Preston Brooks (and the acclaim Brooks received in the South) meant that
"the Slave Power had united in a plan to stamp out all liberties of northern
white men" (p. 359). What Northerners resented was less the exploitation
of the black slave, a concern that was never more than politically marginal,
than the apparent intention of haughty Southerners to impose a master-
slave relationship on the free white men of the North. "Has it come to
this, that we must speak with bated breath in the presence of our Southern
masters," asked one northern newspaper after the caning of Sumner. "Are
we too, slaves, slaves for life, a target for their brutal blows, when we do
not comport ourselves to please them?" (quoted on p. 359).

Gienapp thus demonstrates how political behavior in the mid-nineteenth
century reflected attachment to a persistent late-eighteenth-century value
system often dubbed "republicanism" by modern scholars. Fears that aris-
tocratic conspiracies endangered popular liberty continued to resonate, not-
withstanding wrenching social and economic changes that separated the
mercantile republic of 1776 from the continental colossus of 1856. The
taproot for the appeal of the infant Republican party was deeply embedded
in the political culture of a far different era.

Gienapp also displays a clear-headed sense for the respective roles of
constituencies and leadership. Sensitized by the behavioral emphasis of the
new political history, he properly recognizes that the realignment of the
1850s "began as a mass-based revolt," which politicians neither precipitated
nor, at first, controlled (p. 446). Ultimately, however, leadership made the
difference. Republicans, better led than their rivals, established a party
organization that gave direction and focus to the popular upheaval.

An extraordinary amount of research has been invested in this volume.
Consider, for example, eight pages of single-spaced entries of manuscript
collections consulted (with over fifty collections cited on each page). Un-
counted hundreds of reels of newspapers on microfilm must also have
jeopardized the eyesight of this industrious scholar. Finding no adequate
bibliography of political pamphlets from the era, Gienapp supplies his own.
His command of conventional published sources is exhaustive.

One way to gauge Gienapp's achievement is to recognize that dissertations
and books have been and will continue to be written about political devel-
opments in particular cities and states during the 1850s. We now recognize
that voting behavior cannot adequately be comprehended without studying
the state and local arenas too often ignored by earlier historians. Gienapp
tackles the entire North—sixteen states in 1856, to say nothing of the

troubled territory of Kansas (about which he must, of necessity, say much). To make an impossible task barely manageable, he devotes his most systematic attention to five key states—Maine, Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio—while also occasionally pointing a searchlight at Connecticut, Indiana, and Illinois. In no sense is it a criticism to observe that New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont, or New Jersey receive scant mention. The remarkable thing is that Gienapp has mastered the complexities of so many different states and localities, and that he has integrated his findings into a coherent whole.

Specialists reading *The Origins of the Republican Party* will note Gienapp's familiarity with modern studies concerning political culture, partisan realignment, and voting behavior. This book and several more specialized articles published elsewhere place him at the forefront among modern scholars who write about political parties with theoretical sophistication *and* with the essential historical depth too often neglected by academic political scientists.

Gienapp's analysis of the political convulsions that wracked the North during the 1850s also has a massive quantitative empirical base. He displays far greater facility with modern statistical techniques than do most historians, relying especially on ecological regression, a procedure useful for estimating patterns of voter allegiance and how they changed over time. Indeed, no American political historian has yet combined such thorough research in traditional literary sources with such an impressive modern statistical underpinning.

Although his monumental labors could well have overloaded Gienapp's book with a myriad of confusing detail, he has crafted an admirably readable narrative. He deftly introduces theoretical insights and statistical evidence without lapsing into jargon that would baffle the general reader. Sharply etched portraits make the principal figures come alive—Salmon P. Chase, a paramount organizer of the political antislavery movement but a cold personality, outclassed by shrewder rivals in 1856; Horace Greeley, the erratic but vastly influential editor of the New York *Tribune*, possessed of an "insatiable appetite for public recognition" and a "growing delusion that he was a brilliant political strategist" (p. 158); the Machiavellian Nathaniel P. Banks, quasi-Republican Speaker of the House and Judas-sheep for his Know Nothing party allies at a crucial juncture; John C. Frémont, the hopelessly unqualified Republican candidate for President in 1856, whose nomination was both "a triumph of image over achievement" and "an act of grave irresponsibility" (pp. 341, 343); the tall, secretive, soft-spoken Thurlow Weed, master political tactician of his generation, determined to win the presidency for his protégé William H. Seward, but fearful that the Republican nomination in 1856 would prove barren and damage Seward's

future prospects; and finally Seward himself, the complex would-be con-
ciliator with an "undeserved reputation as a radical" (p. 190), who was the
most popular and intellectually gifted Republican leader. Seward's head
told him to follow Weed's advice (Weed thought no Republican could win
in 1856, and hesitated especially to encourage Seward, whose long-standing
opposition to nativism made it unlikely he could maximize Republican
strength), but the sudden improvement in Republican prospects in June
1856 nearly enticed Seward to claim the nomination that would certainly
have been conferred on him by the convention.

The strength and originality of Gienapp's book may best be appreciated
by comparing it with the masterwork written by the dean of political
historians a generation ago, Roy F. Nichols of the University of Pennsyl-
vania.[5] Both trace the history of a single political party during a single
presidential administration during the troubled 1850s; neither could have
been written without extraordinary industriousness, patience, and an ability
to bring order to a bewildering sprawl of source material. Nichols confronted
greater obligations to assess the exercise of power, since James Buchanan
sat in the White House and the Democrats controlled one or both houses
of Congress during his tenure. Gienapp addressed a more elusive topic: the
struggle of a new party to be born. The enrichment of Gienapp's narrative
with statistical evidence that could never have been created in the pre-
computer stone age marks one obvious change in the writing of political
history since the Nichols era. Likewise significant is Gienapp's ability to
draw upon and contribute to modern theories of partisan realignment,
political culture, and mass voting behavior. But the differences between the
two books could easily be exaggerated. What stands out, in the end, is the
rare distinction of both volumes, and the necessity to read both in order to
begin to understand the disastrous smash-up of 1860-61.

Three of the other books under review here likewise illuminate the political
history of antebellum America. Kenneth Greenberg explores the distinctive
features of southern political culture, which, he contends, reflected the
values and practices of a slaveowning society. He suggests that in the South,
and especially in South Carolina, late-eighteenth-century "republican" ide-
ology persisted longer than in the North. Southerners continued to believe
that political leadership should be conferred upon disinterested statesmen,
who should themselves never overtly seek office and power.[6] Slaveowners

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[5] *The Disruption of American Democracy* (New York, 1948).
[6] For a more extended inquiry into "republican" conceptions of political leadership, and
how they gradually changed during the nineteenth century, see M. J. Heale, *The Presidential
Quest: Candidates and Images in American Political Culture, 1787-1852* (London, 1982).

likewise chose to think of themselves as disinterested patrons, burdened by their responsibilities to a dependent laboring class.

Of course real politicians in fact nourished powerful ambitions, and real slaveowners knew that they would not wish to change places with their chattels. A separate strain in the southern value system required that the gentleman or leader assert his honor, and held that the relationship of slave to master denied all honor to the slave.[7] Even though the republican tradition and the honor code shared "a concern for personal autonomy and a distrust of power," the latter inevitably was in tension with the former because the pursuit of honor required "the assertion of power over others" (p. xi). On these affinities and contradictions, Greenberg constructs his argument.

Political parties, he suggests, "never developed so fully, nor were they so firmly rooted, in the antebellum South—especially the deep South—as in the rest of the nation" (p. 45). Southerners were more attached to the classical republican tradition of disinterested statesmanship, and to the Burkean theory of virtual representation, through which political leaders would put the broad common good ahead of narrow parochial interests. Both in politics and in the management of their plantations, Southerners preferred consensus and harmony, or at least the appearance of such. When forced increasingly after 1830 to respond to external critics, defenders of the slave system depicted it as a uniquely harmonious social arrangement, in which the interest of master and slave were identical, with masters providing disinterested leadership for the organic community. Taken to its logical consequence, the proslavery argument denied that masters could ever abuse their power or that slaves were, in fact, enslaved.

Greenberg's intriguing analysis applies best to planter-dominated South Carolina. Only there, by the 1840s and 1850s, had national political parties failed to penetrate, and only there did an all-powerful state legislature retain such prerogatives as selecting the governor and appointing presidential electors. Applied more widely to the deep South, Greenberg's ideas require greater qualification. National political parties did attract a following in all deep South states other than South Carolina. But "the political culture of slavery" was strong enough in the deep South, he suggests, to undermine partisanship during the 1850s (pp. 125, 134-35). As it increasingly appeared that anti-southern and antislavery politics were ascendant in the North, a defiant consensus emerged in the deep South—a determination to resist rather than to submit.

Greenberg's understanding of the deep South differs from that of Michael

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[7] Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York, 1982).

Holt. In *The Political Crisis of the 1850s*, Holt argued that the decline of partisanship in the deep South preceded and made possible the political extremism of the secession movement. Greenberg, criticizing Holt for having "too narrow a concept of causation," interprets the decay of deep South parties as evidence that southern political culture was ill-suited for partisanship in the first place.[8]

Greenberg recognizes that his interpretation works least well for the eight slave states in the upper South. There lived two-thirds of the white population in the South and over 40 percent of the slaves. There, too, popular politics and vigorous two-party competition flourished. In Tennessee, for example, where partisanship reached a level of intensity hardly surpassed anywhere in the nation, South Carolina's distinctive political system had few friends. In 1833, Tennesseans emphatically endorsed Andrew Jackson's handling of the nullification crisis. One legislator thought "the old Chief could rally force enough . . . to Stand on the Saluda Mountain and piss enough . . . to float the whole nullifying crew of South Carolina into the Atlantic Ocean."[9] Again in 1860, many in Tennessee bridled at the prospect of having to "bow down" to the "*Disunion Despotism* of Calhoun and his successors, the aristocrats of the least oppressed, least democratic and most anti-Republican state on this continent!"[10] One must consult other studies to comprehend the political behavior of the upper South before April 1861.[11]

What Greenberg brilliantly explains, however, is the underlying logic of secession, which prepared the deep South to react so dramatically to Lincoln's election, and which finally led so many in the upper South to side with the deep South once the war started. He shows how questions of regional honor and esteem became political pivots. Northern resistance to the fugitive slave law, and, above all, northern efforts to deny slaveowners access to the territories nourished a bitter mood in the South. Southern rights activists seized upon Lincoln's victory, declaring that Northerners had deliberately degraded and humiliated the South, and that Northerners regarded Southerners as inferiors rather than equals. Playing upon themes of liberty extinguished and honor lost, militant Southerners insisted that the choice was

[8] Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 219-59; Greenberg, "Civil War Revisionism," *Reviews in American History* 7 (June, 1979), 203-8 (quotation on p. 206).

[9] James W. Wyly to James K. Polk and James Standifer, January 11, 1833, quoted in John Barnwell, *Love of Order: South Carolina's First Secession Crisis* (Chapel Hill, 1982), 43.

[10] A. Waldo Putnam to Andrew Johnson, December 22, 1860, *The Papers of Andrew Johnson* (Knoxville, TN, 1967—), IV, 73-74.

[11] Marc W. Kruman, *Parties and Politics in North Carolina, 1836-1865* (Baton Rouge, 1983); Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 219-59; Daniel W. Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis* (forthcoming).

"naked submission or secession," of being "slaves in the union or freemen out of it" (p. 141). Just as Gienapp's Northerners believed their rights were endangered by a conspiracy among aristocratic slaveowners, Greenberg's Southerners decided that antislavery activists in the free states and Great Britain had conspired to oppress the South. Thus, Greenberg concludes, divergent interpretations of the shared "republican" tradition produced divergent political cultures North and South, thereby setting the stage for secession and civil war.

Thomas Brown's study of the Whig party intersects at several points with themes developed by Greenberg. If the South as a region clung more persistently to the "republican" tradition, then Whigs as a party did likewise. Though receptive to the economic forces that were forever changing the late-eighteenth-century republic, and more ready than their Democratic opponents to use the power of government to promote improvements, Whigs only reluctantly embraced party, that ominous new entity pioneered by the manipulative friends of Andrew Jackson. To rescue the country from the perils of political leadership that put party interest ahead of public interest, Whigs proposed a revival of statesmanship. Unwilling "to pander to the whims and fancies of the electorate," the statesman would exercise independent judgment. His appeal to "reason, moderation, and self-control" would restore political virtue and the republican community (pp. 9-10).

The discrepancy between ideology and practice must have depressed thoughtful Whigs. However successful the "log cabin and hard cider" campaign of 1840, it hardly constituted an appeal to sober rationality. And though Whigs included leaders of undoubted stature (chapters of this book focus on Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, William H. Seward, and Alexander Stephens), the only successful Whig presidential candidates were retired army generals who lacked both political sophistication and, as it turned out, good health. The party itself, founded by men who hoped to resurrect a more consensual and harmonious political order, disintegrated amid the increasingly fierce internal conflicts that wracked American society after 1850.

The most original chapters of Brown's book examine the southern Whigs. Unsatisfied both with Charles G. Sellers's portrayal of southern Whiggery as a pro-commercial economic interest group and with William J. Cooper's view that southern Whigs simply tried to outdo southern Democrats in appealing to sectional anxieties,[12] Brown contends that Whigs both North

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[12] Charles G. Sellers, Jr., "Who Were the Southern Whigs?" *American Historical Review* 59 (January, 1954), 335-46; William J. Cooper, Jr., *The South and the Politics of Slavery, 1828-1856* (Baton Rouge, 1978).

and South cared most about identifying the common interest that bound all sections together. Whigs hoped to enjoy the material benefits of economic progress while reinvigorating the classical republican virtues of moderation and self-restraint. Whig hopes instead boomeranged. Southern Whigs expected their northern counterparts to disavow antislavery polemics and take a statesmanlike position on divisive sectional issues. But northern Whigs increasingly considered slavery to be inconsistent with the party's fundamental values of economic development and rational self-control. Predisposed to see the exercise of federal power as an efficacious means of promoting both economic progress and moral reform, northern Whigs overwhelmingly embraced the territorial restriction of the Wilmot Proviso and opposed opening the Kansas territory to slavery. Georgia's Alexander Stephens was left to warn that southern honor could not abide unequal treatment in the territories.

Overall, however, Brown's volume does not supplant Daniel Walker Howe's *Political Culture of the American Whigs.* Brown and Howe build somewhat similar interpretations of American Whiggery around a series of biographical portraits. Of the two, Howe's book is more tightly argued. It introduces all the principal characters scrutinized by Brown, plus several others, and it better analyzes the evangelical component of northern Whiggery. Both Howe and Brown take the conventional view that sectional issues destroyed the Whig party; neither come to grips with the ethnoreligious tensions so ably analyzed by Gienapp. The most astute brief treatment of Seward remains an essay written by Major L. Wilson.[13]

Johanna Nicol Shields, building on the analysis of congressional roll-call votes compiled by her mentor, Thomas B. Alexander, has identified "maverick" members of the House of Representatives between 1836 and 1860. To qualify as a maverick, a congressman needed .to deviate significantly from his party or region on at least two issues, or on related issues in two or more different congresses. Only those persons who left documents collected by the Library of Congress, or who were themselves the subject of memoirs or biographies, are included by Shields. She thus identifies 84 mavericks, and, for purposes of comparison, 171 "conformists."

The most significant conclusion to emerge from this study is that mavericks clung more systematically than conformists to late-eighteenth-century

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[13] Major L. Wilson, "The Repressible Conflict: Seward's Concept of Progress and the Free-Soil Movement," *Journal of Southern History* 37 (November, 1971), 533-56, reprinted with minor changes as "Seward and the Repressible Conflict," in Wilson, *Space, Time, and Freedom: The Quest for Nationality and the Irrepressible Conflict, 1815-1861* (Westport, CT, 1974), 211-37.

"republican" values. Mavericks were less tied to party, they resisted diverting the business of the House to a bureaucracy of committees, they thought the individual congressman should use his judgment rather than rubber-stamp the sentiments of the mass electorate, and they eagerly upheld the ideal of statesmanship that Brown identifies especially with the Whig party. One may also detect evidence consistent with Greenberg's view that partisanship was weaker in the South: over 40 percent of southern representatives considered here were mavericks, compared to barely one-quarter of Northerners. Shields, noting that the average maverick served longer in Congress than the average conformist, and that a disproportion of mavericks held positions of leadership, concludes that mavericks played a significant role in antebellum politics.

Unfortunately, Shields's research design has inevitable and disconcerting limitations. Democratic mavericks ran the gamut from the free-soiler David Wilmot to Robert Barnwell Rhett, "the father of secession," while Whig mavericks ranged from the political abolitionist Joshua Giddings to such southern stalwarts as Robert Toombs and Francis W. Pickens. Shields herself calls attention to the "hodgepodge" and "astonishing variety" of mavericks, but offers reassurances that "common grounds" can be identified to link such disparate types (pp. 77, 113). Perhaps, but one can hardly expect more than broad generalities. Shields confronted an additional obstacle: the partisan affiliation of many mavericks defies easy categorization. No student of the late antebellum period will feel comfortable to find Caleb Cushing and Henry A. Wise, both prominent in the Democratic party after the late 1840s, offered as representative Whig and Republican mavericks.

The most gifted stylist would have been hard pressed to make Shields's study engaging to the general reader. Possibly a small cross-section of individuals might have been depicted in greater depth. Selectivity might also have allowed the use of unpublished sources. And both Shields and Brown should have tried to impose more chronological structure on their books. But Shields's basic problem is that her study was never well-suited to become a book. Here we have an example of why dissertation advisers, in an era of intense pressures to publish, should encourage students to define topics that have book potential. *The Line of Duty* does not even stand on its own feet: one must consult Alexander's 1967 book, *Sectional Stress and Party Strength*, to learn how specific individuals deviated from partisan or regional norms.

The remaining two books considered here examine the changes in the political order during the post-Civil War era, as the pace of urbanization, industrialization, and immigration intensified. Margaret Susan Thompson, like Shields, focuses on the House of Representatives. A "fundamentally antebellum institution," the House endeavored with only limited success

"to cope with the enlarged federal purview of postwar America" (p. 73). The Union war effort "created new appreciation for the activated potential of federal governance," while, at the same time, "commercial and territorial expansion resulted in heavy demands for traditional public services." The country began to grope "toward development of a modern national state" (pp. 40-41).

Thompson's object is to evaluate the response of the House of Representatives to the new postwar environment. She offers pungent criticisms of earlier efforts along the same lines by the young Woodrow Wilson and by modern roll-call analysts. The elitist Wilson wrote an "arid and superficial" treatise, confusing form with reality; roll-call studies permit only "a partial and unidimensional view," ignoring organizational decisions and committee operation (pp. 16-17, 24-25).

Thompson makes a commendable effort "to go off the floor and behind the scenes of the House in the 1870s" (p. 26). She has dug deeply in rich manuscript sources, enabling her to present a convincing account of the way Speakers were selected, committee rosters filled, and patronage jobs awarded. At a time when rotation in office was still a cherished ideal in many parts of the country, each new Congress brought many new faces to Washington (50 percent of House members in 1873 were newcomers; following the Democratic "tidal wave" or "earthquake" of 1874, the number of "greenhorns" increased to fully 57 percent). In the face of such rampant inexperience, and in the absence of any institutionalized bureaucracy to advise, lobbyists "filled a variety of indispensable roles." They helped "an overloaded and underequipped policy process to hear and respond to at least some of the messages that were sent its way" (p. 144).

So far, so good. Thompson shows that one ought not necessarily equate lobbying and corruption, and that lobbying was, in certain respects, essential. But she shares the tendency, not unknown among those who come up with fresh ideas, to push an insight too hard.

In disputing the conventional view that "gloating plutocrats" (p. 264) could secure all they wanted from Congress, she tends both to minimize the actual discrepancy in power between ordinary citizens and large corporations, and to ignore quite legitimate popular fears about the growth of large-scale business enterprise. Thompson's discussion of railroads offers a case in point. She suggests that rivalries between competing rail companies prevented the development of a cohesive "railroad interest" (neither Thomas A. Scott's Texas and Pacific nor Collis P. Huntington's rival Southern Pacific could win a subsidy to build a southern transcontinental railroad). But should we therefore write off the "robber baron" tradition as mere muckraking distortion? Thompson's own research shows that the Texas and Pacific exercised enviable influence. Michael C. Kerr was apparently chosen

Speaker of the House in 1875 only after Texas and Pacific supporters were assured that he was the "favored candidate" (p. 197).

Thompson likewise rejects the idea that the Grant Era was a "great barbecue," during which corrupt Congressmen and lobbyists plundered the federal treasury. She takes aim at the classic indictment, *The Gilded Age* (1873), by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner. But she does not fully persuade. Twain's and Warner's depiction of the memorable promoter (Beriah Sellers), the hypocritical Senator (Abner Dilworthy), and the campaign in behalf of the "Columbus River Slack-Water Navigation Company" made entertaining reading precisely because it corresponded plausibly to real life. More than just fanciful imagination informed the hilarious explanation in the novel that "a Congressional appropriation costs money . . . .A majority of the House Committee, say $10,000 apiece—$40,000 . . . a little extra to one or two chairmen. . . . Then, seven male lobbyists, at $3,000 each—$21,000; one female lobbyist, $10,000; a high moral Congressman or Senator here and there—the high moral ones cost more, because they give tone to a measure. . . . "[14]

Michael E. McGerr considers the decline of "popular politics" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Between the 1830s and the 1890s, Americans proudly displayed their partisan loyalties. Torchlight parades, mass rallies, and campaign pageantry flourished for months before each election. The working classes, middle classes, and elites mingled freely at political spectacles. A partisan press roused party loyalists. Not surprisingly, larger numbers of eligible voters actually voted than at any other time in American history.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, popular politics had fallen into decline, and within a few decades it had disappeared. Concurrently, voter turnout plummeted. Fewer than half of those eligible voted in the 1920s. A modest increase in turnout during the New Deal persisted until about 1960, but since then non-voting has again reached epidemic proportions. Americans during the twentieth century thus "lost or yielded their only opportunity to affect the state" (p. 11). Non-partisan pressure groups have, in effect, replaced voters; Americans for the most part have become passive observers, no longer able to conceive that people can "act politically" (p. 215).

Central to McGerr's analysis is the concept of "political style." His definition of political style (how people "perceive, discuss, and act in politics") is broadly functional or anthropological. It dovetails nicely with what

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[14] *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*, chapter 28.

others call "political culture" (pp. 9-10). Popular politics, McGerr suggests, provided the opportunity for the rich and humble to stand together—for elites to show that they shared the aspirations and values of the masses, and for the masses (more often than not) to confer legitimacy on the leadership of a privileged elite. These rituals of community affirmation grew out of a particular set of class relationships. They allowed a degree of "inter-class mediation" during an era of accelerating social and economic change (p. 37).

McGerr assays why political styles changed, and why political involvement gave way to political passivity. At the heart of nineteenth-century political style, McGerr notes, were two presumptions—that it was natural to vote, and that one should vote only for candidates of a single political party. Popular politics fostered "enduring attachment to party," it encouraged the voter "to see himself as a member of a well-defined community," and it helped to persuade him "that his ballot . . . was worth casting" (pp. 40-41). By participating in political rallies and celebrations, voters affirmed their party commitment and encouraged others to do likewise. An "extro-verted concept of partisanship" prevailed (p. 39).

But to the "best men," the upper-class urban reformers of the post-Civil War era, popular politics and party dominance represented an obstacle to "good government." Distressed by the way political machines awarded both elective and appointive offices to party hacks rather than to educated men, and unable to find in either major party wholehearted support for their agenda of civil service reform, free trade, and hard money, the "Liberal Republican" mugwumps first raised the standard of independence shortly after the Civil War.

By the last decade of the century, the "best men" had created "an alternative political style" that "narrowed the cultural authority of parti-sanship" (p. 66). Convinced that the blind obedience of less intelligent voters allowed party bosses to maintain power, urban elitists scorned the reflexive party loyalties associated with popular politics. They also lobbied successfully for structural reforms such as the secret Australian ballot, so that voters might select candidates on the basis of individual character rather than party affiliation.

The architects of the new style, McGerr bluntly contends, believed that popular politics threatened to submerge the influence of educated voters. Unable (except in the South) "to keep the poor and the uneducated out of politics," the liberals nevertheless "wanted to deal with the poor at arm's length" (pp. 67-68). Reformers ultimately "cut away the partisan basis of mass political participation" (p. 105).

McGerr deftly traces the transformation from popular to elitist politics. Party managers tried "educational" campaigns to appeal to the independent

voter rather than to rouse the party faithful. Newspapers, once bulwarks of
partisanship, moved toward upper-class independence or toward a new pop-
ular mix of sensationalism, gossip, sex, crime, and sports. Reports of political
apathy and indifference became commonplace. By the 1920s observers
wondered what had become of "the vanishing voter." The development of
"leisure and consumption" and a "declining sense of local community"
contributed to depoliticization (p. 148).

Early twentieth-century political managers relied increasingly on adver-
tising. With popular theatrical politics an anachronism after 1896, and
educational campaigns an inadequate substitute, party leaders took a cue
from big business and began to market their candidates. Political appeals
were correspondingly simplified and personalized. Candidates soon domi-
nated campaigns, and personality overshadowed party. Primary election
campaigns "furthered the public perception of the nominee as a individual
rather than the representative of the Republicans or Democrats" (p. 177).

The marriage of politics and advertising completed the transformation
from popular community-based politics, with high levels of partisanship and
voter participation, to the "illusory community" fostered by advertising, in
which parties forfeited "their ability to speak directly to the people," and
instead tried to hold the dwindling interest of the public with "candidate-
dominated politics" (pp. 177, 182). Perhaps the most troubling characteristic
of the modern political style was that potential voters never gained a sense
that political involvement mattered or could make any difference in their
lives. Long before the rise of television, McGerr concludes, "the inclusive
popular politics of the nineteenth century had largely disappeared; in its
place was a more constricted public life, much like our own, characterized
by low voter turnout, skepticism about parties and partisanship, and a curious
emphasis on both objective discussion of issues and emotional identification
with charismatic leaders" (p. vii).

The Decline of Popular Politics joins Richard L. McCormick's *From Re-
alignment to Reform: Political Change in New York State, 1893-1910*[15] on the
short list of essential books about changes in American political behavior
during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. McCormick looked
at one key state to see why the political order that flourished during the
"party period" (from the 1830s to the 1890s) changed quite abruptly around
the turn of the century. He too found that the upper-class urban indepen-
dents played a catalytic role in weakening party loyalties. The structural
reforms they secured, especially printed secret ballots and party primaries,

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[15] (Ithaca, NY, 1981).

led to an erosion of party discipline once the dominant Republican party was tarred by scandal in 1905. Thereafter, voters in New York state increasingly split their tickets, choosing specific candidates rather than parties. A decline in partisanship led to a decline in voting. "The process was cumulative," McCormick notes, "for as politicians came to recognize the voters' new independence, they toned down their old-fashioned appeals for party loyalty, which, in turn, inspired a further loss of interest. Independence thus bred apathy. The result was a far less active electorate."[16]

McCormick and his father, Richard P. McCormick, doubt that the strong parties of the nineteenth century provided effective governance, or that the mass democracy of the nineteenth century tangibly diminished elite power. The younger McCormick suggests that the decline in voting during the twentieth century may have been counterbalanced by interest group mobilization and improved administrative governance.

McGerr disagrees. He and Walter Dean Burnham, who has for two decades written the most provocative and prescient analyses of party politics in modern America,[17] insist that popular partisanship is a prerequisite for a democracy. McGerr's argument deserves a wide audience. The relatively few modern nation-states that allow meaningful individual freedoms almost universally have competitive parties, through which ordinary citizens maintain limits on the power of government itself and on the power of privileged elites who tend always to make government responsive to their beck and call. Elsewhere, authoritarianism prevails. The twentieth century offers numerous grim reminders that a democratic polity ought not to be taken for granted. Only a short time ago, for example, Chile was regarded as a flourishing multi-party democracy. So in its day was Weimar Germany. McGerr (and all of us) surely have reason to worry about the rotting popular underpinnings of the modern American state.

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[16] Ibid., 269.

[17] Burnham, *Critical Elections and the Mainsprings of American Politics*; Burnham, *The Current Crisis in American Politics* (New York, 1982); Burnham, "Parties and Political Modernization," in Richard L. McCormick, ed., *Political Parties and the Modern State* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1984), 109-48.