BOOK REVIEWS


Histories of the American Presidency by writers like Harold Laski, Clinton Rossiter, and Thomas A. Bailey have multiplied through the years. But historians have not given comparable attention to the legislative branch of our national government, to which the Founding Fathers assigned priority in their ordering of our constitutional structure. Although in 1955 Edward Boykin published a volume on Congress and the Civil War, Boykin construed the Civil War very broadly to permit him to present a rather impressionistic view of momentous issues and colorful personalities in Congress over a forty-nine year period from 1819 to 1868.

In contrast to Boykin, Leonard Curry's Blueprint for Modern America provides an intensive analysis of the legislative activity of the Thirty-seventh Congress in areas that do not directly pertain to military matters. It is the thesis of Curry, an Associate Professor of History at the University of Louisville, that this Congress possessed more than its share of men of great ability; that, with the exception of the act establishing a national banking system, its non-military legislation offered clear examples of congressional initiative rather than of response to executive demands; and that this legislation had an enduring impact on the social, economic, and political structure of the United States during the remainder of the century. Professor Curry does not make clear, however, that Lincoln's Whig concept of the Presidency provided opportunity for the initiative that Curry ascribes to this Congress.

Among the dominant Congressional figures whom Curry describes in his Blueprint are Senator William Pitt Fessenden of Maine, the Republican Senate Leader; Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations; Senator Henry Wilson, also of Massachusetts, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Military Affairs; and two Pennsylvania congressmen, Speaker of the House Galusha Grow and the chairman of the influential House Ways and Means Committee, Thaddeus Stevens.

Among the important issues before Congress in 1861-62 were Negro emancipation, the confiscation of enemy property, the disposal
of the public domain, public improvements including transportation, taxation, and currency reform. Out of the committee activity that preceded the introduction of various bills, the debates that these bills occasioned, and the numerous roll calls on amendments came Acts of Congress of lasting importance such as the abolition of Slavery in the Federal territories and the District of Columbia, the Homestead Act, the Morrill Land Grant College Act, the Pacific Railroad Bill of 1862, a tax bill that included the first Federal income tax in American history, and legislation relating to the issue of legal tender notes.

Curry also discusses attempts on the part of Congress to achieve dominance of the national government at the expense of the executive and judicial branches of the government. He admits that direct attacks on the Executive failed, as in the unsuccessful effort of a Senate committee to bring about a reconstruction of the President's Cabinet in December 1862. On the other hand he credits Congress with success in expanding its influence on executive affairs through flank attacks and with willingness and occasional ability to dominate the Federal Judiciary. In the process Curry supports the traditional interpretation of the role and influence of the Joint Congressional Committee on the Conduct of the War and largely ignores recent Revisionist writing about the motivation and political behavior of Radical Republican congressmen.

Only incidental references to Pennsylvania congressmen and senators other than Grow and Stevens appear in this study. The two congressmen from the Pittsburgh area, James K. Moorhead and Robert McKnight, receive hardly more than bare mention, although McKnight is quoted (p. 123) in connection with his attempt to postpone the Pacific Railroad measure to the next session. Senator Edgar Cowan, a native of Greensburg and one of the ablest lawyers in western Pennsylvania, is described as an ultra-conservative who opposed West Virginia statehood, Negro emancipation in Missouri, Negro enlistment, the confiscation of slave property, and the Legal Tender Act.

Among the more interesting features of this book is the evidence it presents that sectional considerations were nearly as potent as political affiliation in determining the voting behavior of members of the Thirty-seventh Congress. A shortcoming, in the opinion of this reviewer, is the exaggerated estimate of Thaddeus Stevens's importance in the Republican Party power structure that Curry communicates. There is quite as much evidence to indicate the limitation of Stevens's political influence before 1861 as to support Curry's
statement that "he [Stevens] had long been powerful in Pennsylvania
politics" (p. 27).

Yet this is clearly an important book in the field of American
Civil War history, based on an impressive quantity of research in
government documents, manuscript collections, and books and articles
that relate to the topic, with lesser use of contemporary newspapers
and periodicals. Blueprint for Modern America demonstrates the ad-
vantages for American political history of the kind of investigation
that has borne fruit in this book. It is to be hoped that Professor
Curry's example will inspire similar explorations of the operations of
Congress, not simply during the last two years of the Civil War but
also in other periods of our national history.

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*Andrew Jackson and the Bank War.* By Robert V. Remini. (New
192. Index. $1.75.)

The significance of the Jacksonian assault on the Bank of the
United States inevitably eludes the introductory student in American
history. Even most American historians find the Bank War dull and
confusing. But, as Robert Remini argues, "The Bank was the single
most important event during the entire middle period of American
history." The author has written a tidy synthesis of the Bank War
that should convince all readers of the magnitude of that battle.

The author views the Bank War essentially through the prism of
politics. He acknowledges the broad opposition to the BUS that includ-
ed rising entrepreneurs who felt oppressed by the Bank's restrictions
on paper money, the hard money advocates, and the strict constitu-
tionalists. The core of the conflict, however, involved politics. The war
on the BUS became a crusade for the Jacksonian Democrats and it
assisted them to strengthen the party's organization. Furthermore, the
war set the mold of Jacksonian politics.

In its early stages the Bank War was a test of will between
Andrew Jackson and Nicholas Biddle. Jackson emerges from these
pages as a stubborn and dogmatic old man (sixty-one years old in
1828) who harbored the frontier prejudice against banks and who
only superficially understood the complexities of finance. When baited
his explosive temper vented its fury on his adversaries, and in battle,