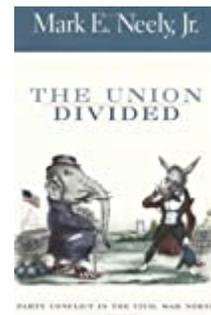


Mark E. Neely, Jr. *The Union Divided: Party Conflict in the Civil War North*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002. xi + 257 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-00742-0.



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Whenever Mark Neely has something to say about the Civil War, it is wise to pay attention. Neely's works include *The Abraham Lincoln Encyclopedia*, *The Last Best Hope of Earth*, and *The Fate of Liberty*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for its examination of arrests by the Union government during the war. That book has helped lead Neely toward a related topic, the Union government's dealings with its political opposition.

The result is *The Union Divided: Party Conflict in the Civil War North*. It is thought-provoking, challenging, often contrarian, and at times irritating. Neely has dared to go where few before him have gone: toward a synthesis on Civil War politics. Neely makes clear that *The Union Divided* is intended to be a step on the road toward that synthesis, tidying up so that someone—perhaps Neely, perhaps another scholar—can get around to a more detailed study.

The launching point for *The Union Divided* is David Potter's essay "Died of Democracy." Working from Potter's suggestion, Eric McKittrick wrote what Neely calls "the most influential piece of writing on Civil War politics ever published," the 1967 essay "Party Politics and the Union and Confederate War Efforts" (p. 59). Potter suggested that the Confederate cause suffered from a lack of a political parties, because, in the absence of a coherent, cohesive opposition party, the Confederacy had to fight

political battles on many fronts against enemies united only by their hatred of Jefferson Davis. McKittrick followed up by applying the idea to the Union: the Northern cause benefited from the existence of parties not only to direct the opposition into more organized channels, but to provide a means of defining that opposition.

Neely provides some important corrections to the Potter-McKittrick thesis. For one thing, he offers the important reminder that two-party systems, and party systems in general, are mainly the constructs of historians and political scientists. Contemporary participants hardly thought in such terms, a point that scholars tend to forget. Students of politics tend to pigeonhole their subjects into a party without stopping to think whether those subjects actually identified with that party and agreed with its actions.

At the heart of Neely's critique is a statement by McKittrick: that "the very existence of the Democratic party provided the authorities ... with a ready-made device for making the first rough approximation in the identification of actual disloyalty" (p. 60). To McKittrick, this phenomenon was partly a means of making policy but, more than that, a component of the political game. But Neely disagrees. Referring to his work for *The Fate of Liberty*, he writes that in 14,000 cases of civilian arrests, "I found not a single case in which the arresting authorities per-

formed their work in any spirit except grim dedication and determination.... An interpretation of the internal security issue in Civil War politics as 'just politics' having 'a lighter side' has simply lost touch with the feel of contemporary reality during the Civil War. It has imposed its own ironic but comfortable familiarity with the workings of political parties in twentieth-century America" (pp. 60-61).

"The revolt against politics in 1863" might almost be called Neely's smoking gun. Governors Richard Yates of Illinois and Oliver Morton of Indiana ran their states without legislatures when Democrats balked at their commands and demands. Soldiers prepared to return home from the battlefields to defend their states against partisan sedition. Rumors spread that an armed mob was ready to attack Pennsylvania's capital to disrupt the election of a Republican U.S. Senator. Neely makes the important point that what politicians said about these events, they said in private letters—and those letters claimed the existence of monstrous conspiracies; they were hardly political tracts designed to excite the public into voting for them.

But Neely provides other smoking guns. Without bluntly saying so, he shows that Republicans linked their party opposition to problems of military strategy—namely, that they disdained strategy and expected their generals simply to attack rebel troops, thereby affecting the length and nature of the war. In those cases in which Abraham Lincoln or his minions suppressed civil liberties, especially freedom of the press, Neely found some Republican editors taking the anomalous position that this was not merely justified, but advisable; surely those, especially journalists, who saw the two-party system as a pleasant way to determine disloyalty would be unlikely to dismiss the First Amendment so cavalierly.

Neely also invokes the important point, made by such distinguished constitutional historians as Arthur Bestor and Harold Hyman, that examining how the Civil War shaped the U.S. Constitution also requires studying how the Constitution shaped the war. As Neely points out, the electoral system consigned Democrats to the opposition, at least until Lincoln was up for reelection in 1864. Even if they could win control of some state houses and expand their minority in Congress, a Republican still would be commander-in-chief. This, Neely argues, did much to shape the Democratic response to the war, which reflected their frustration with powerlessness.

Neely similarly demonstrates that pure partisanship often lay at the heart of government action. His care-

ful examination of the papers of Hiram Barney, the collector at the New York Customs House, and other collections illuminates how the quest for electoral victories played a key role in policy. Following orders from above, Barney refrained from making a clean sweep of the old employees, almost all Democratic appointees. For this, he suffered considerable criticism from Republicans. As Neely points out, those who discussed patronage, and understood its importance to winning elections, concerned themselves far more with matters of self-interest than they did with the national interest during a time of civil war.

If this suggests that Neely covers a lot of ground, he does. To say that he paints a broad canvas is not merely to use a cliché. Accordingly, he leaves himself open to criticism from any number of directions—and seems to expect it, given that he makes clear that his is not the final word.

One criticism worth noting is that Neely has taken an enormous subject and produced either an ingrown book or an overgrown set of articles. He has done ample research, and no one can question his knowledge of the Civil War, its politics, and its constitutionalism. The breadth and depth of his study are obvious here. But while he achieves any good author's goal of wanting to leave the reader panting for more, in this case it often seems that something is missing. Even in as short a book as this one—201 pages of text on small pages—he tends to be repetitive and to resort to extensive and lengthy quotations. That might be understandable if the book had been based on a series of lectures, much like the volumes in the Walter Lynwood Fleming series from Louisiana State University. But that seems not to be the case here. The result is that Neely plows new ground and re-plows old ground, but, much like a subsistence farmer, a lot of it seems to be the same ground, over and over.

Neely also fails to take advantage of some ideas and theories open to him. One of these, ironically enough, is based on his proper bow toward Hyman for suggesting the Constitution's impact upon the war as a basis for study. To view the Civil War as an event apart from any other in American history is common, logical, and useful. But those four years also belong to the years before and after it. While reacting to Potter's seminal article, Neely also could have benefited from Potter's observation in *The Impending Crisis* that the years leading up to the war are viewed too often through the prism of the war rather than as history unto itself.

Party politics during the Civil War certainly reflected the effects of southern rebellion and secession.

Neely makes good use of David Brion Davis's work on fears of subversion and of Frank Klement's dissection of allegedly subversive organizations. He might have benefited from relying more heavily upon Richard Hofstadter—not merely his ideas on paranoia in politics, but one of his last works, *The Idea of a Party System*. While that book examines the years from the founding to 1840, it influenced, among others, McKittrick, who was Hofstadter's student and ardent admirer. (McKittrick's article appeared at about the same time that Hofstadter delivered the lectures that produced the book.) Hofstadter makes the case that Martin Van Buren and his generation altered American politics by bringing to it the same idea that animated courtroom combat: that it is possible to strive mightily as adversaries but sup as friends. The war demonstrates that this ideal was more ephemeral than it might have appeared, given how Republicans (more accurately, the Union party) sought to demonize Democrats. And while Neely correctly warns against applying today's standards to yesterday's politics, current players of what once was called the political game tend to resort to many of the same ideas of illegitimacy that animated the discussion during the Civil War.

Related to the problem of analyzing the Civil War as a unique moment in time, Neely also tends both to accept and to discount the role of ideology in shaping wartime politics. Citing Eric Foner's *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before*

the Civil War, he writes, “[i]t is a pity that Foner's book ends with the onset of the Civil War, because nothing as comprehensive or persuasive exists to describe the Republican party at war. And it is not possible simply to extend Foner's scheme for understanding the antebellum Republicans forward into Lincoln's presidency because the Civil War made much of the original Republican outlook, like its platform, irrelevant” (pp. 142-43). My research on the subject suggests that if the war rendered antebellum Republican ideology irrelevant, Republicans did not know it.[1] The firing on Fort Sumter did not blast every earlier thought out of their heads. Neely may know that, but he could have done more to show it.

As Neely said, though, “I could not entertain hope of reaching definitive conclusions on such a subject. This book is meant to be more tentative and suggestive. It is meant to open the subject, not to be the final word on it.” He has achieved that goal—admirably, interestingly, and cogently. The “big book” remains to be written, but whoever writes it will have to reckon with Neely. He has written the most important book on Civil War politics that we have seen, or are likely to see, for a long time.

Note

[1]. Soon to be published as *Freedom, Union, and Power: Lincoln and His Party during the Civil War*, based on a dissertation directed by Eric Foner.

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