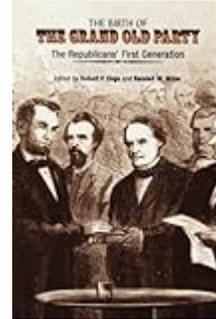


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Republicans Reconsidered

From the time of Abraham Lincoln's taking of the presidential oath of office on the steps of the unfinished national Capitol in March 1861 to the Democrats' return to power in the halls of Congress in January 1875, the Republican Party reigned supreme in American politics. It was the Republicans who decided that the secession of the South justified a war to preserve the Union, who concluded that liberating slaves would hasten the demise of the Confederacy, and who ratified three post-war constitutional amendments that permanently freed four million enslaved people and forever altered the relationship between the national government and the states. While scholars have spilled plenty of ink on all of these subjects, historians still have much to learn about the formation, motivations, behavior, and composition of the Republican Party. In this insightful book of essays, a half dozen of the most important historians of the Civil War era assess the first generation of Republicans. Composed of six papers initially presented at a 2000 symposium and exhibition at the Library Company in Philadelphia, this collection illustrates the tensions and transitions that the Republicans experienced during the Civil War and Reconstruction.

In an overview of the Republicans' early history, Eric Foner traces changes in party ideology between the 1850s and the end of Reconstruction. The notion of free labor, he familiarly argues, lay at the heart of Republicans' thinking. With faith in the inherent dignity of labor, Republicans of the 1850s believed that if individuals worked hard they could climb the social ladder and eventually become property owners or entrepreneurs. Republicans contrasted free society in the North with slave society in the South, which they viewed as socially stagnant and economically retrograde. This free labor vision helped prompt emancipation in wartime and eventually caused party members to embrace national power as a means of furthering freedom. Linking "the progress of freedom directly to the power of the national state," Foner argues, proved to be the war's most significant legacy (p. 14). But the war also changed Republican thinking in other ways. During Reconstruction, nearly all party leaders severed the ideological connection between freedom and property-holding, as few embraced land reform for the South's four million freedpeople. This development, Foner contends, marked a decisive shift in free labor ideology, "fixing the dominant understanding of economic

freedom as self-ownership and the right to compete in the labor market, rather than propertied independence” (p. 22). Foner’s essay reminds us of the fluid nature of free labor ideology during the Civil War era.

Michael F. Holt takes a different approach. Focusing on the Republicans’ rise to power and Lincoln’s victory in 1860, Holt argues that the party’s appeal had less to do with slavery and its extension than it did with northern whites’ concerns about the protection of their own liberties. Republicans built a “polygot coalition” that united disparate groups with a common enemy—the southern slave power. According to Holt neither slavery nor its potential of spreading to the West resonated with northern voters. Rather, northerners feared the threat to liberty posed by the southern slave power, as evident in three incidents in 1856: the sack of Lawrence, Kansas by pro-slavery forces; the caning of Charles Sumner by South Carolinian Preston Brooks; and a little-known episode involving a Democratic California congressman who killed a Washington waiter in a dispute. (The congressman, it was discovered, was originally from a slaveholding family in Alabama, and Republicans viewed the affair as demonstrating southerners’ contempt for northern free laborers.) Combined with targeted appeals to young voters, German Protestants, and northern moderates, these events helped Republicans cobble together a loose and fragile coalition that eked out an electoral-college victory with less than 40 percent of the popular vote. Holt challenges readers to see the precarious position of the Republicans during an era when new political parties arose and declined with frequency. Nothing about the Republicans’ victory in 1860, Holt concludes, necessarily indicated that the party would play a lasting role in American political history.

The late Phillip Shaw Paludan’s essay examines wartime Republicans, particularly in Congress. If Holt emphasizes the fragility of the Republican coalition in 1860, Paludan observes that “civil war produced the best environment possible to unite a diverse party” (p. 64). Patronage played a key role in this regard, as did Republicans’ common commitment to emancipation. Although they downplayed the issue in the 1864 election to avoid stirring up northern racism, the Republicans were still the party of freedom, and, according to Paludan, “the most effective nineteenth-century champions of racial justice” (p. 66). In Paludan’s view, though, the Republicans also produced Gilded Age America, with its privileged robber barons and oppressed workers. Picking up where Foner’s essay leaves off, Paludan shows how the Republicans’ antebellum commitment to small

producers gave way to an alliance with business elites. “Republicans went to bed with capitalists,” he bluntly states, “because they needed them to win the war” (p. 67). Although most historians sidestep the issue of the role of wartime Republicans in creating the industrial order that followed, Paludan argues that Republican policies—the Homestead Act, a protective tariff, a national currency—played a key role in forging the economy of late nineteenth-century America.

Mark E. Neely Jr. also explores the Republicans during wartime, specifically the triumph of the radical wing of the party. Neely connects the success of the radical position to shifts in northern public opinion. “Republicans could not have moved from the Crittenden Resolution to the Thirteenth Amendment in three years if the increasingly dominant ideas in the North undermined humanitarianism and democracy,” he writes (p. 108-109). Therefore, Neely sets out to explain how Republicans—particularly Lincoln—made the transition from fighting a war for the Union to a war for emancipation. Neely examines seventy-six sets of resolutions from religious organizations, heretofore ignored by historians, in the Lincoln Papers. Most represented meetings of state denominations, although some came from individual congregations. Nearly all of these resolutions urged a policy of emancipation. Neely concludes that such resolutions—retained among the countless letters received by the White House—provided Lincoln with clues about the attitudes of the northern public. The religious sentiment that they displayed, Neely asserts, constituted a significant element of the Republican Party in wartime and certainly helps to explain Lincoln’s tilt toward emancipation. Because of its use of denominational resolutions, Neely’s is the most original essay in the book.

Jean H. Baker examines the Republicans’ efforts to re-define citizenship in the aftermath of the war, with regard to both African Americans and women. Baker notes the variety of motivations that affected the drafting and the implementation of the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the Fourteenth Amendment, particularly the framers’ sensitivity to traditional notions of federalism. The language of the Fourteenth Amendment ensured that the national government would enforce some rights of citizenship, but the amendment clearly did not nationalize all rights—a fact that became obvious once the Supreme Court began to interpret the new amendment. Still, like Paludan, Baker portrays the expansion of citizenship and voting rights to African American men as a substantial achievement of the first generation of Republicans, even if the partisan desire to win African Ameri-

can votes played an important part in the attainment of black suffrage. Republicans proved less far-sighted when it came to women, as they seemed unable to break with nineteenth-century conventions about gender roles.

The last essay, by Brooks D. Simpson, examines the party during Reconstruction, during which time Republicans attempted to reestablish the majority they had formed during the late 1850s. Simpson notes that newly elected president Ulysses S. Grant came into office in 1869 under precarious circumstances, as the majority of white men had cast their ballots for his opponent. Although Grant hoped to “promote reconciliation, racial justice, and Republican interests,” his efforts foundered (p. 153). Conflicts over the readmission of southern states and a plan to annex the Dominican Republic split party ranks, and, although the Liberal Republican campaign failed to unseat Grant in 1872, only the waving of the bloody shirt ensured Grant’s victory. Reminding voters of the experience of war, in other words, “touched party allegiance at the core” (p. 166). Simpson concludes that, for much of its early history, the Republican Party proved to be, more than anything else, the party of Union victory.

As a whole, these essays make two general points. First, Holt’s and Foner’s papers in particular but others by implication, show the tenuous nature of the Republican coalition in 1860. Placed within the context of mid-nineteenth century American politics, the Republicans could very well have risen and fallen within a few years, much like the other failed attempts at party organization during the time. Even the change in the name of the party during the 1864 presidential campaign—Lincoln

and Johnson ran on the Union Party ticket—shows that allegiance to a “Republican Party” was relatively weak. Second, the authors almost all emphasize the experience of wartime in helping to shape—and solidify—the identity of the Republicans. For Foner, Paludan, Neely, and Baker, the commitment to freedom emerged during wartime, although Neely alone places the emphasis on the religious origins of the party’s emancipation policy. For Simpson it was the war itself—the quashing of the rebellion, rather than the emancipationist impulse—that defined Republicanism and made party members rally around their standard-bearer in 1872. Although Paludan and others indicate that the Republicans might also have forged a pro-business identity in wartime, James McPherson’s brief but trenchant comment in the afterward reminds us that the Republicans’ transition away from a commitment to civil rights did not occur overnight. (He notes, for example, how Democrats blocked Republican bills that would have established large-scale federal aid to education and black voting rights in the 1880s and 1890s.) McPherson indicates, moreover, that Republicans continued to attract the votes of American laborers during the late nineteenth century—a fact which perhaps shows the enduring appeal of free labor ideology.

This collection of insightful papers offers a compact compendium of recent scholarship on the Republicans. Generally synthetic and interpretive in nature, these essays nicely summarize the major developments of the period at the same time that they demonstrate the major lines of debate among historians. For this reason, *The Birth of the Grand Old Party* is sure to be of use to scholars, teachers, and students alike.

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