



Anthony Gene Carey. *Parties, Slavery, and the Union in Antebellum Georgia.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997. xxii + 339 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-1898-1.



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Parties Reviewed

This is a work that specialists in the political history of the Old South will enjoy. They will find, in the author's words, "a comprehensive, analytical narrative on party politics in antebellum Georgia" (p. xix) from the formative period of a two-party system of Democrats and Whigs in the crisis over nullification to the final sectional crisis of 1860-61 that took Georgia out of the Union. With the exceptions of chapter one, a brief overview of antebellum Georgia's social and economic development, and chapter five, an analytical treatment of key themes in party politics and governance, the text proceeds in a straight-line narrative heavily keyed to the workings of state politics.

Carey's relentlessly political focus does result in the fullest account to date of party developments in Georgia in the three decades preceding the Civil War. He is far more thorough than Phillips [1] in describing how Georgia politics actually functioned and more sensitive than DeBats [2] to the ideological dynamic that shaped the world view of Georgia whites. Most convincingly, he shows how the tensions between Georgia's parties and their respective northern wings in national party organi-

zations provide a structured key for viewing the unfolding of Georgia politics.

For Carey, Georgia's parties were fundamentally similar in their dual commitment to the liberties of white men and the preservation of slavery, the core values of state politics. Rhetoric aside, the parties in his view did not differ significantly on economic issues. What did differentiate them was a function of their success in convincing their followers that their party alone could protect Southern rights and freedoms. This in turn was accomplished by demonizing the other party's northern wing, particularly on issues relating to slavery. Blending the insights of Cooper [3] and Holt [4], Carey argues: "By declaring that *they* were *different* from their northern allies, and that only the opposition displayed a hideous national uniformity, state leaders both redefined issues to preserve strength at home and reinforced a national political framework in which each party reflexively opposed the other" (p. 63).

Party competition rooted in a dialectic of demonization carried the seeds of its own destruction. The Whigs collapsed first as a national organization when the anti-

slavery sentiments of Northern Whigs placed the Whigs of the Lower South in an untenable position by the early 1850s. The Democrats followed in 1860 when cotton state Democrats pursued a strategy of rule or ruin on the slavery issue. A politics of caricature and hyperbole that constantly fueled white fears over losing their liberties to threatening northerners reached its logical conclusion in Georgia during the secession crisis. As portrayed by Carey, three decades of partisan strife produced a virtually inevitable show of white unity over the cause of secession.

Surely, Carey's correct in arguing that "preserving slavery mattered most" (p. 250) in Georgia politics and, by extension, in the Lower South. And his emphasis upon the destructive consequences for national unity of party rhetoric aimed at trumping the opposition in posing as the defender of Southern rights highlights a central dynamic of Southern political discourse throughout the antebellum period. Nonetheless, his narrow political and ideological focus glosses over any serious engagement with the issue of the extent to which evolving social and economic conditions within Georgia might have impacted state politics and support for secession. Unlike Thornton for Alabama [5] or Ford for South Carolina [6], he fails to consider how a Southern version of a modernization process usually associated exclusively with the North might have fed white anxieties over growing dependence and a loss of republican independence. He is too quick to dismiss in a footnote Crawford's argument [7] that rises in farm tenancy, declines in soil fertility and the production of core food items, and an accelerated pace of economic development geared to new corporate interests in railroads and manufacturing all combined in the 1850s to convince many white Georgians that their liberties and family-based autonomy were under attack. Lincoln's election, in this analysis, served as the lightning rod that galvanized rural white anxieties into a bid for political independence from the North.

Carey refreshingly debunks many of the sweeping generalizations offered to explain partisan affiliations, especially those based on overly deterministic economic models. Yet, in concluding that "men chose their parties based on family influences, county traditions, charismatic leaders, economic interests, religious views, and countless other factors," he leaves us with no discernable guidelines to understand why the Georgia electorate de-

viated as it did. To point out that "levels of slave population did not vary consistently with levels of support for immediate secession" (p. 244) is statistically valid, but it blurs the larger truth that a direct economic stake in slavery, unless checked by a conservative Whiggish temperament, was the driving force behind secession. And finally, it is difficult to reconcile Carey's depiction of secession as an expression of white unity with the heated debates in Milledgeville and the marked refusal of the secessionists to submit the ordinance of secession to a popular vote.

In summary, this is a well-crafted political narrative based upon extensive research in manuscripts and newspapers. However, its analysis would have carried greater weight had it probed more deeply into the links between politics and the competition among white Georgians for economic and social power.

Notes

- [1]. Ulrich B. Phillips, *Georgia and State Rights* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1902).
- [2]. Donald A. DeBats, *Elites and Masses: Political Structure, Communication, and Behavior in Ante-Bellum Georgia* (New York: Garland Press, 1990).
- [3]. William J. Cooper, Jr., *The South and the Politics of Slavery, 1828-1856* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978).
- [4]. Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1978).
- [5]. J. Mills Thornton, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978).
- [6]. Lacy K. Ford, Jr., *Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[7]. George B. Crawford, "Preface to Revolution: Agriculture, Society and Crisis in Georgia, 1840-1860," (Ph.D. diss., Claremont Graduate School, 1988).

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