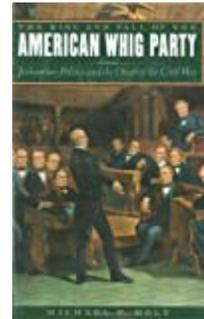




Michael F. Holt. *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. xviii + 1248 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-505544-3.



Reviewed by James L. Huston (Department of History, Oklahoma State University)

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The Whigs Are Dead! Long Live the Whigs and Their Narrative!

Political historians have known that Michael Holt was working on a study of the Whig party for over a decade, and they have grown slightly restless and impatient to view the fruits of his labor. Now they know the reason for the lapse of time. Holt's work is massive and will take months and perhaps years to digest. The narrative is complete for both state and national politics, the detail overwhelming, the research mind-boggling, the mastery of subject matter indisputable, and the interpretations imposing. In many ways, this book is a masterpiece, but a masterpiece with imperfections.

The rumors about the size of Holt's treatise can now be confirmed: it really is a huge book. Not only is it long, but the pages are oversized and the print somewhat small. This subject is brought up only to emphasize the reason for its length: it is not one book but several. The three books that compose the *Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party* can be easily detected: the rise of the Whigs to maturity, 1820s to 1844 (about 250 pages); the crisis of the Whigs in the aftermath of the Mexican War, 1846 to 1852 (about 450 pages), and the collapse of the Whigs as a party, 1852-1856 (about 250 pages). But

there is more in here than even this division. The book's size comes about partly because of Holt's methodological procedure: to understand American politics, one has to understand state politics, national politics, and the interaction between state and nation. Thus the reader is not only taken through a microscopic view of congressional politics but also through some twenty detailed state histories over thirty years. This book contains enough material for short monographs on the antebellum political histories of Virginia, Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky, New York, Massachusetts, Ohio, and Illinois. (This aspect of the work probably will not endear it to a number of people; after 700 pages, the last thing one wants to encounter is an enumeration of fifteen state elections in 1853—but in this work, there is no escape from year by year elections results.) And on top of this, Holt offers enough assertions about individual politicians that the book is populated with mini-biographies, ones that are so incisive that I am sure biographers will be in attack mode for years to come.

Given the immensity of the monograph and its encyclopedic treatment of American political history in the

antebellum years, I cannot possibly detail all the interpretations and evaluate them in this review. Rather, I will only list a few that seem most relevant (to me, at least) and leave the reader with the understanding that anyone trenching on this period on any political subject will have to consult this work. Whigs arose out of a mixed environment of Anti-Masonry and National Republicanism: their shared ideology was an animus against executive privilege (the tyranny of Andrew Jackson and his vetoes) and an insistence upon the primacy of legislative activity. The social profile of the Whigs is basically what Charles G. Sellers and Harry Watson have depicted: the Whigs were a party that attracted the wealthy even though they were not a party of the wealthy. Whigs belonged to the republican commonwealthman tradition that called for state involvement in the economy. Whigs won and lost elections on issues such as the tariff and banking. While Whigs were competitive with the Democrats, their essential problem was that they were failing to attract newcomers; the Democrats absorbed over eighty percent of new voters. That problem sent shivers through the Whigs and explained why they rejected their party's true leaders (Clay and Webster) in order to nominate soldiers—it was only by some other means of attracting marginal Democrats and nonvoters that they could ever hope to overcome the Democracy's hold on newly enfranchised voters.

Whigs were susceptible to third party attacks, which becomes one of the chief reasons for their failure in 1854 (twentieth-century parties have done away with third parties by having government-printed ballots). Factional feuds fired the whole antebellum party system in a frenzied attempt toglom onto patronage; the examples Holt fixes upon are the Fillmore-Seward/Weed, Berrien-Stephens/Toombs, William Johnston-Cooper, Reverdy Johnson-Pearce, Fessenden-Morrill, and Webster-Adams/Conscience Whig feuds. The party was in truth an anti-war party during the conflict with Mexico as both southern and northern Whigs felt that republicanism was being sacrificed to Roman schemes of conquest and plunder. If the war had not ended early in 1848, the Whigs were in fine shape as a national party without danger of sectional schism, but the peace treaty brought about the territorial issue. The territorial issue was in fact capable of resolution as southerners did not expect slavery to move westward, but their honor was at stake in the conquest. Taylor was brilliant, Fillmore was lackadaisical, and Seward Machiavellian. The Compromise of 1850 came to pass because Fillmore wielded the patronage power so as to make Whig congressmen either

not vote on certain items or to accept its provisions; but the deciding factor was the work of northern Democrats.

Throughout 1848 to 1860, Whigs tried to form a new Union party—the names of leaders in the attempt include Fillmore, Taylor, Rives, Crittenden, and Stuart—but the political fragments never did coalesce. The Whigs were slaughtered in 1852 but they did not believe the party was extinct. Rather they counted on the Democrats to blunder and allow them a new chance at the presidency. That chance was the Kansas-Nebraska Act, but the Whigs lost the initiative due to the rise of the ethnocultural issues of immigration and Catholicism as well as zealous antislavery leaders. Fillmore behind the scenes tried to capture the Know Nothings and change it into a true Union party but failed. By 1856 the Whig organization disappeared. Toward the end of the book, Holt declares that the party system, no longer operating on economic issues, allowed demagogues to arise who accentuated the differences between North and South, thereby bringing about the Civil War. Any number of these assertions might deserve an extended comment or critique, but they will have to await further dissection in the journals or in monographs to come. Some larger issues deserve attention.

Much in this book completes Holt's 1978 account in *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* by filling in missing information. Certain frameworks of analysis remain, to wit: partisan attempts to create differences, the importance of state politics, the death of economic issues between 1847 and 1854, and the rise of nativism. But readers should be alert that there is much that is different, some subtly so, some not. Of the most important of these differences is the treatment of the slavery issue. In *The Political Crisis of the 1850s*, Holt goes out of his way to deflate the importance of moral antislavery and to emphasize northern fears of the slave power; the death of the Whigs was due to the rise of ethnocultural politics and the simultaneous destruction of economic issues. But in *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, the slavery issue stands foremost. No one reading Holt's account of politics between 1844 and 1852 will come to any conclusion other than that the slavery issue wreaked havoc upon the Whigs, separating the northern and southern wings of the party. Holt tries to present a multi-causal case for the Whig's disappearance but his own evidence screams at the reader that the underlying reason was the issue of slavery. And Holt gives little explanation for why the slavery issue was so powerful. The slave power theory does not play as central a role in this book as it did in 1978.

Holt's methodology also requires some examination. His analysis depends on voting results for state legislatures, state offices, congressional elections, and the presidency. This is a welcome approach because for the first time someone has taken congressional elections seriously and has not relegated election analysis only to the presidential and gubernatorial jousts. Holt looks at parties largely as machines that compete for votes: the way to get those votes is to distance one's position from that of the other party. Moreover, and this emphasis is new, factions within a state party (and we can assume within a district, county, or city) also strive to create differences between themselves and their intraparty rivals. What connects parties together is patronage, and this is why patronage was so vital to the antebellum party system—although this part of Holt's analysis is less than complete. Finally, voters decide their positions by retrospective voting; they vote, or an important section of them does, on how well the party in power has governed. Thus, issues are vital to the public and they act on them. Democrats lost in 1840 because the public blamed the Democracy for the Panic of 1837 and the resulting depression; Whigs gained in 1846 in Pennsylvania because citizens of that state felt betrayed by the Tariff of 1846. It should be noted here that Holt goes through the social bases of politics and the ideological component fairly early in the book. Those subjects are then dropped. After page 250 or so, politicians are largely schemers for office who try to manipulate issues to their advantage and to reward their followers with patronage.

The massivity of the work may disguise what is a stunning, even stupendous, achievement. Holt has mined hundreds of manuscripts, scores of newspapers, and hundreds of edited volumes to create his story. Although the secondary literature is given due notice at places and in the footnotes, this book is written almost altogether from primary sources. The detail is unimaginable. But what is astounding is Holt's control of this detail, of the facts he has used to weave this history. The sources are not used to prove how many people felt that Henry Clay was a lion or a buffoon—that is, multiple quotations yielding the same idea. Moreover, Holt has mined his manuscript sources with excruciating care and unbelievably thorough research. Many, if not most, of his sources are manuscript collections of ten thousand items or more (the Clay, Calhoun, Webster papers, etc.) Now many people reading this review have looked at parts of these collections; but I have the feeling that Holt waded through entire collections gathering all the information he could. The effort is absolutely overwhelming. More to

the point, Holt is using his data like a detective. The detail in this book is not really repetitive; it is used to solve problems. Holt has performed more like a detective than any other historian I can think of.

The enormity of Holt's achievement in finding and managing detail is astounding. I have no idea how he actually accomplished this task, but I can only surmise that he used a methodology that might be called "temporal literary correlation." My guess is that to control this mountain of information, one would have to make a notebook for each individual, enter into it by date the person's speeches and their contents, the letters written and the content in them, and journeys to various places. Then the various notebooks would be compared ("correlated") by date—one individual's actions and utterances with another individual's actions and utterances—to determine why an individual undertook a specific action at a certain time. Most historians manage this feat in their own way, but the extent to which Holt has managed information is nearly unparalleled. Two instances of this technique come speedily to mind. Holt finds that the bizarre stand of Alexander H. Stephens and Robert Toombs of Georgia on the territories (that slavery was prohibited in the Mexican cession by prior Mexican law and that Congress had to provide positive law to allow slavery to expand) was due to their fight with John M. Berrien over control of the Whig party in Georgia. The second is William H. Seward's "Higher Law" speech in March, 1850. By looking at the papers of Taylor, Fillmore, Weed, and Seward, among others, Holt determined that Seward's motivation had little to do with morality, national affairs, or the stability of the Whig party. Rather, he was in a patronage fight with Fillmore and needed to secure his standing with the Burned-Over District by uttering phrases that would keep those citizens loyal to him and away from Fillmore.

Whatever technique Holt used in controlling his "facts," his mastery is undeniable. It is such an achievement that it merits attention in methodology classes so that students may begin to grapple with questions of data management, the role of time in human affairs, and how events may be correlated with one another. On the matter of information control, I think Holt's book is absolutely unique among anything I have read over the past thirty years. On this score, it deserves to be called a masterpiece.

Because of Michael Holt's entrance into the profession with his *Forging a Majority: The Formation of the Republican Party in Pittsburgh, 1848-1860* in 1969 and his

then association with the New Political History, his current book on the Whigs might be ascribed by some to that school. This is not the case. Indeed, until I reconsidered, I thought of entitling this review, "Who Weeps for the New Political History?" To understand what has happened, or what has evolved in political history, let us return for a brief moment to those less-than-glorious days of yesteryear when the New Political History was in full stride. The progenitors of the school had a distinct critique of narrative political history. The old narrative political history was about politicians—the elite, the aristocracy, the movers and shakers. Left out were the masses. The New Political History wanted to discover what was motivating the masses, not the leaders. (Just to point this out: before the New Social History decided to investigate "history from the bottom up" or the history "of the inarticulate," the New Political History had already established this as *the* agenda item. But differences between the two schools then piled up and produced a divorce. Political historians found conflict in ethnic and racial conditions but not in class; the New Social History was built almost exclusively on class differences.) The New Political History demanded the use of statistical analysis: state the problem, list the assumptions, make the null hypothesis, use the appropriate statistical test, and then accept or reject the null hypothesis. (This still operates to some degree in sociology, to a greater extent in political science, and wholly so in economics; but it has collapsed almost entirely in history.) Words were not to be trusted; only numbers were trustworthy and capable of replication—that is, like a science results could be duplicated by others and thereby achieve a quality of objectivity. One never could tell how popular an editorial or a speech really was, could not determine whether words were idiosyncratic or representative of the average viewpoint. Using quotes to establish an interpretation led to interminable quarrels—narrative history was a "war of the quote." Events were unworthy of study; that led to "episodic," incidental history that ignored long-standing trends. And the public did not respond to policy appeals, to long-winded orations on banks, rivers and harbors, or free silver. No "issue" was treated with more contempt than the tariff—the common voter could never understand the real issues, the figures, and the implications of tariff rate changes. Rather, these policies were symbols of larger understandings—like pietism or lattitudinarianism. People responded to symbols because they had group associations—they voted in groups—and groups responded to symbolic appeals. The rational voter who weighed policy decisions by dint of a self-interested calculus was a figment of a classical liberal imagination.

Holt's book on the rise and fall the Whigs has little in common with the New Political History of the 1960s and 1970s. True, he has lots of tables in the narrative and in the notes. Most of the tables are simple calculations of percentages between the parties in assembly seats won, votes cast in state and congressional contests, and preferences in presidential contests. He determines rollover and dropoff in voting. For nonvoters, he relies on the results of ecological regression. In terms of theory, he applies Morris P. Fiorina's theory of retrospective voting with a vengeance, and he approves as well of John Reynolds and Richard McCormick's theory of the rise and fall of third party challenges. But beyond this, Holt's work is almost a conscious rejection of the New Political History. It is narrative and event-driven. Indeed, in the preface Holt declares that he has come to believe in historical contingency—that individuals and circumstances in one event often deflect the normal flow of history into other channels. The path of history, in other words, is contingent upon the uniqueness of events and personalities. Moreover, this book is almost wholly on elites—it is on the political leaders. Almost left out in Holt's book is the public itself, and that is one of the work's true weaknesses. If one removed the quotes from this book, its length would barely exceed 300 pages. This is a book of quotes. And Holt takes issues seriously, the only caveat being that issues become important only under certain conditions. To see the seismic alteration in the treatment of issues, like the tariff, one need only compare Michael Holt in 1969 with Michael Holt in 1999.

Even though Holt has integrated parts of the New Political History into his work, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party* really belongs to the grand narrative tradition. In its own way, it is a part of the "return to the narrative" that generated some excitement and comment about ten years ago. The historian that Holt's book most reminds one of is Roy Franklin Nichols in *Disruption of the American Democracy* (1948). And the similarity is not just sweeping political narrative; it also includes the focus on the patronage problem.

By comparing Holt's treatment of the Whigs with the original thrust of the New Political History, one finds that certain research areas have gone untouched and now cry out for investigation. Holt somewhat accidentally outlines a new research agenda for political history by his focus on patronage. The old political history looked at political leaders and assumed that the people followed; the New Political History assumed that political leaders were irrelevant and that the real questions revolved around party identification and mass voting behavior. Holt in

some ways is probing into the question of the interaction between leaders and masses. He does so unsystematically and without theoretical guidance, but his impulse is to finger patronage as the key link. This should be understood: much of Holt's book is dedicated to unraveling the patronage fights of Whigs between 1846 and 1854—that is a major source of the monograph's length (and, fair to mention, tedium). At best, Holt implies that in order to be elected, politicians needed a "machine" or a group standing behind the leader who determined policy positions and public appeals. The group contacted individual voters and shepherded them to voting booths. The group acted for the politician out of expectation of reward if electoral victory was achieved—that is, places in local, state, and national governments.

Patronage may or may not be the key in this process, but certainly the great area of mystery in American political history is the role of leadership, its relationship with the voting public, and the interaction that takes place. What sustains party activity, how individuals actually organize their districts, counties, and states is generally known. How leaders shape their constituents and are then shaped by them is unknown. The means of communication could be more thoroughly addressed. It would seem that important politicians had one common feature: they scribbled letters all day long. Letter-writing and its political importance, by itself, deserves study as a means of holding parties together. How patronage works in the party system, as a system, requires careful theoretical work. Obviously, if patronage were the vital element in party stability, then one party would always be dying. Only one party wins the power of patronage; and the other should disappear if organization men worked only to obtain the spoils of office. Along these lines, it might be mentioned that studies looking at electioneering for state assembly and state senate offices are virtually nonexistent. Holt's work therefore does point to a research agenda in political history.

More specifically, Holt's emphasis on patronage brings up one specific question. Perhaps historians need to go back and look at Abraham Lincoln and the patronage. Lincoln, alone of the presidents from Polk to Andrew Johnson, did not endure monster internal party divisions because of patronage. Perhaps Lincoln was far wiser than historians have realized when during the winter of secession he was so assiduously attendant to patronage policy and not to southern fireaters.

The question of patronage, however, does bring forth the problematics in Holt's presentation. First, the public

is virtually written out of this history except in the beginning fifth of the book. This becomes critical for the last part. It is clear from Holt's account that the public is constraining politicians in their choices on policy positions. Nowhere is this truer than on the slavery extension issue. But Holt makes little attempt to understand the public on slavery issues. His focus on leadership leaves open the question of why the masses would not follow union men and compromisers, especially in the North. For Holt, the critical problem is controlling internal party strife over patronage, for he states that these quarrels are what tore the Whigs apart and led to the Civil War. He believes that the slavery extension question was eminently compromisable because southerners had no real hopes of taking slavery into the West. However, they were sensitive to insults to their honor and to their minority position in the federal government. Therefore, a compromise should have been easy to construct. What made it so difficult was patronage. Local leaders, fighting other local leaders, demanded patronage from administration leaders to keep their machines intact—this is how Holt merges the local with the national. Moreover, to make themselves stand out among others, individual politicians took stands that elevated conflict to win local partisans to their standards even though such positions endangered the Union.

Indeed, one can take Holt's ideas in the form of seven assumptions and explain the sectional division of the parties and the death of the Whigs in about ten sentences (as oppose to 1000 pages). One, a two-party system exists that is evenly balanced in each state of the Union. Two, one set of states, geographically contiguous, has a special and important interest whose loss would be considered catastrophic; this interest does not exist in the other states. Three, this interest can only be protected by political control of both state governments in which the interest exists and of the national government. Four, a party claims attention from the public by accentuating their differences from the other parties. Five, political control can only be won by elections. Six, elections can only be won by having potent organizations with willing members who will contribute time and money to a candidate's election. Seven, willing members of a political organization expect to be given political offices when victory comes. If the initial condition is equal political strength in all the states, then the dynamic is that over time differences will be drawn out and exaggerated to win office and reward members of the machine. It takes little imagination to see how, given these assumptions, that a sectional division of politics will occur over time, pitting states with the particular interest against states

without the particular interest.

Holt's thesis on the coming of the Civil War is highly revisionist and reminiscent of the blundering generation approach of the James G. Randall generation (he is most aware of this charge, see p. 982). Those ideas of a compromisable issue, of ambitious politicians, and of essential national homogeneity in institutions and values perhaps deserve a reconsideration. But there are immediate problems, some of which have been previously indicated. First, Holt does not explain the public's response to the slavery issue because he tends to ignore the public. Two, patronage is the key element to his estimation of blundering politicians. Was patronage that vital to political success, or was patronage vital because politicians knew that at stake was the victory of either freedom or slavery? Finally, Holt never offers an assessment of slavery itself. The conflicts it was capable of producing are not grappled with, and he seems to have the idea, almost certainly untrue, that slavery would have simply withered away over time. Holt's treatment of the slavery issue is the great imperfection in this otherwise masterly work.

Moreover, the death of the Whig party has other possible explanations. Whatever kept the Whigs together? The Whigs are generally known as the party of the interventionist program, of an active economic policy to stir commercial and industrial development. But this was never true of the entire Whig party, for much of the southern wing was openly states rights. The national Whig party only had unity in opposition: they were opposed to the Democrats. Their one ideological doctrine, shared by all, was an abhorrence of executive power. Is this really enough ideological substance to construct an enduring party edifice? Comparison with the

Democrats is instructive. Democrats believed, in greater or lesser degree, in white man's democracy, in abolition of privilege and monopoly, in states rights and local popular sovereignty, and in laissez faire policies. One of the striking features about the Democrats is that one can take Democratic newspapers from virtually any part of the country and interchange them and no difference emerges: the Democratic faith was as true in Mississippi as it was in Maine (EXCEPT for slavery-related subjects). One cannot do that with the Whigs. One is immediately struck by the fact that southern Whig newspapers are different in program and in ideology from their northern counterparts. Ultimately the Whig party failed because its adherents simply lacked common ground. The Whigs were never truly a national party; they were at best an opposition grouping lacking a common purpose.

The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party will ultimately be treasured as the essential sourcebook on antebellum politics, for information on individuals, for elections results, and for congressional legislation. It is written vigorously. There are few works that contain such lucid explanations of complicated political activities, and on patronage questions it will remain the standard for probably a decade. But Holt's interpretations will probably receive a different fate. Controversy will follow this book for some time, and it is highly dubious that a resuscitation of the "blundering generation" approach to antebellum politics will find many adherents.

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