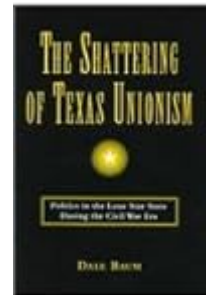




Dale Baum. *The Shattering of Texas Unionism: Politics in the Lone Star State During the Civil War Era.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999. xvi + 283 pp. \$37.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2245-7.



Reviewed by Ricky Floyd Dobbs (Department of History, Texas A&M University-Commerce)

Published on H-South (September, 2000)

Understanding the Dynamics of Texas Unionism, 1857-1869

Understanding the Dynamics of Texas Unionism, 1857-1869

Serious scholarly revision of Texas's Civil War and Reconstruction experience sputtered until the 1970s, but took off in the 1980s and 1990s. But old ideas and prejudices die hard. As recently as fifteen years ago, even college level Texas history textbooks still read like Dunning School fossils. Walter Buenger, Randolph Campbell, Gregg Cantrell, Barry Crouch, Carl Moneyhon and others have distinguished themselves altering long-held viewpoints. To this list now add Dale Baum, whose previous studies have covered such varied subjects as Civil War era Massachusetts and the notorious 1948 Johnson-Stevenson US Senate race in Texas. Baum's most recent book, *The Shattering of Texas Unionism* contributes quantitative relief to the landscape of Texas politics between 1857 and 1869. It disputes conventional wisdom, and both confirms and refines revisionist views already in the literature. It acknowledges Texas's vaunted "distinctiveness" from the rest of the lower South, but demonstrates that Texas was indeed more like South Carolina and Mississippi than many Texans would like to admit.

Trying to determine a concrete ideology or other unifying factor for "unionism" in Texas prior to the Civil War has proven difficult to qualitative historians, and Baum's analysis of "unionism" has demonstrated why it is so difficult. In short, Texas unionism was an inchoate pattern of voting and political participation shaped by region, ethnocultural factors and strong personalities. No clear ideological imperatives or even a rallying political agenda existed for Texas unionists. "Unionism" was both opposition to, and dissent within the Texas Democratic party, particularly between 1857 and 1861. The very term "unionism" is problematic. At best, Baum argues, "unionism" might be distilled to opposition to secession and/or hostility toward the Confederate experiment after 1861. Other modern accounts argue Texas unionists during wartime inhabited three categories: those who assimilated into the Confederate order, the shut-ins such as Elisha Pease and Sam Houston who retreated from public life, and the exiles—incipient reconstructionists—who either subverted the Confederate regime at home or fought it on the battlefield. Baum confirms this pattern.

Prior to Harper's Ferry, Texas unionism represented

a force in state politics. Voters hostile to pro-slavery extremism and talk of disunion rallied behind Sam Houston. In a sense, Houston's leadership stands as a continuation of the politics of personality that dominated Texas's Republic period. By the late 1850s, Houston's controversial stands had made support for him more ideologically demanding; for example, his opposition to the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act. Removed from the Senate, the old warrior had stood for governor in 1857, only to be defeated by extremist Hardin Runnels. In a 1859 rematch, Houston defeated Runnels in a victory that has traditionally been read as a change of heart by Texas voters, a temporary rejection of extremism occasioned by a greater feeling of comfort within the Union. Baum disputes this. Rather, he demonstrates that apathy by Runnels's supporters, a strong showing by Houston among new voters, and to a lesser extent Houston's own personal magnetism, seemingly reversed the trend.

John Brown's raid prevented Houston from establishing, as Baum explains, "an institutional barrier that could have held latent secessionist sentiment in check" (p. 230). Combined with a summer of heightened tension, anxiety and violence, known as the Texas Troubles, the November 1860 election of Abraham Lincoln made inevitable the progression toward rebellion. These desperate times led to a break-up of the coalition that had elected Houston in 1859 and made such a seeming affirmation of unionism. According to Baum, fully half of Houston's 1859 supporters voted for the Breckinridge Democratic ticket in 1860, making Breckinridge's victory surprisingly easy, if one holds to the notion of a durable unionist base orbiting Governor Houston.

Baum breaks with other modern scholars in arguing that Texas secession represented "a series of calculated choices by rational men at all levels of the social pyramid" (p.231). According to Baum, the secession referendum of February 1861 was the result of a generally fair poll of voters. There were some exceptions. Though unionists at the time complained of rife fraud, which of course disadvantaged them and did not reflect the true union sentiment of most Texans, this work finds fraud to be rare. Baum discovered likely fraud by unionists in Uvalde County in South Texas, but most fraud revealed by quantitative analysis of voting results seems to have been secessionist in sentiment. Faced with the choices, a Republican president of the United States and an apparently uncertain future for slavery and white supremacy, Texas whites regardless of class willingly and rationally chose secession and war.

Though Texas seceded, and many unionists lapsed into support of the Confederacy, some residual presence of the pre-war struggles remained in state politics. Traditional accounts of wartime Texas maintained that all whites did their duty, that partisanship was suspended for the duration, and that Texas was a vital and cooperative part of the Confederacy. More recent treatments highlight the reality of wartime dissent and repression, shortages and desertion, disorder and disharmony. Baum finds latent unionist leanings among some Texas voters influencing their support or opposition to candidates for governor, state judicial positions, and the Confederate Congress. A unionist minority helped tip the 1861 gubernatorial contest in favor of Francis Lubbock, arguably because his chief opponent had been the lieutenant governor who deposed Sam Houston after secession. Stranger still was the cooperation between pre-war unionist voters and East Texas planters in the failed candidacy of Thomas J. Chambers for governor in 1863. Unionists perceived Chambers's opponent, Pendleton Murrah, as being too pro-Confederate; planters saw Murrah's enthusiasm for the Richmond government as contrary to the "Texas first" attitude that had developed toward the Confederacy as the war worsened.

Baum next follows unionist voters into Reconstruction, and there the erstwhile coalition collides with the reality of a Texas inwardly unchanged by war and defeat. If whether or not to secede defined the pre-1861 unionist constituency, the question of how much freedom was due black Texans after 1865 defined the limits of unionists' vision for Texas's future. The 1866 constitutional convention election produced a body dominated by former secessionists and conservative unionists. The convention refused any reforms of the racial caste system other than truculently recognizing emancipation. Hopes by some for the rise of a post-war coalition of yeomen and anti-secessionists failed to materialize. The elections held under the 1866 constitution saw the defeat of Texas's emerging Republican party by a Democratic party representing conservative white attitudes toward race regardless of pre-war sentiments regarding secession. Elected in 1866, Governor James Throckmorton had been an opponent of secession, then a Confederate officer, and remained a conservative Democrat utterly opposed to the rights of African Americans. The new legislature imposed the harsh Black Codes on freedmen.

In truth, then, the unionist coalition was already shattered. But Congressional Reconstruction breathed life into it once more and gave the Republican party in Texas one shot at governing. Organized efforts to enroll black

voters combined with white disfranchisement made possible a new, progressive constitution in 1869 and the election of Radical Republican E. J. Davis as governor the same year. Examining the level of white disfranchisement, Baum discovered that denial of the vote was not even across the state. Counties with large slave populations on the lower Brazos and Colorado rivers reported unusually low numbers of white voters; portions of East Texas notable for their violent treatment of freedmen and rampant disorder manifested unexpectedly high counts of white voters.

Republicans had dominated the 1869 constitutional convention, but they soon clashed among themselves causing the party to run two candidates in the 1869 governor's race, one of the most controversial in Texas history. The ultimate victor, E. J. Davis, faced fellow unionist exile Andrew Jackson Hamilton. Both men had been officers in the Union army; both had bitterly denounced secession and secessionists. But, in 1869, Hamilton took a moderate line hoping to attract the bulk of white voters. In this, Baum demonstrates, he was successful. But, his 800 vote loss to Davis spurred allegations of fraud and collusion on the part of Radicals and the federal military government which found their way into Texas political lore. Revisionists have long since rejected such a notion. Baum confirms that fraud occurred on both sides, but in nowhere near the epic levels traditional accounts have contended. Indeed, he demonstrates that had contested county's votes been allowed to stand, Hamilton's increase in white votes would merely have narrowed Davis's victory margin, owing to an increase in the latter's black support. Again, the absent conservative Democratic voter swings an election.

Though heavily dependent upon election returns and quantitative analysis, Baum's work reveals considerable facility with a wide range of qualitative sources. Archival materials, diaries, remembrances and newspaper sources provide context to the numbers. Wherever possible, Baum provides qualitative background to fit the quantitative discoveries into human terms. This volume also

incorporates analysis of ethnocultural factors in the election of 1860 and the secession referendum of 1861. The tables and accompanying explanatory notes serve the reader well and allow for quick and effective understanding of Baum's major points. There are nonetheless limits upon the methodology to answer all questions. Among the most critical problems is the question of whether or not Texas's decision for rebellion and war in 1861 was "rational."

This last matter represents one of Baum's most interesting findings and begs the question of how rationality should be defined. Did most Texans – slaveowning and non-slaveowning alike – go to the polls and choose secession? Yes. Is this rational, reasoned, planned? Apparently, a decision was made, alternatives weighed, and the mechanics of voting the decision exercised. But, the question of whether or not secession was a rational action must also be weighed against what Texans knew and should have known – about Lincoln's views on slavery, the considerable power Southern states would still hold in the national government even with Lincoln in power, about their own best interests in the case of the yeomen. If secession occurred despite these things, then in some sense it must be an irrational response. Given the climate of fear engendered by secessionist leaders and the Texas Troubles, public reason must have been somewhat clouded. If white supremacy drove non-slaveholders to the polls, is there a point at which racial attitudes themselves are not grounded in rationality?

In summary, Baum's work is a needed corrective for misconceptions about the nature of Civil War and Reconstruction politics in Texas. His methodology is revealing and presented in an accessible manner. While quantitative research cannot answer all questions it can present enough of a challenge to "conventional wisdom" to motivate scholars to examine subjects more deeply.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-south>

Citation: Ricky Floyd Dobbs. Review of Baum, Dale, *The Shattering of Texas Unionism: Politics in the Lone Star State During the Civil War Era*. H-South, H-Net Reviews. September, 2000.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4535>

Copyright © 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.