

## THE IRREPRESSIBLE REPRESSIBLE CONFLICT THEORY

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**Michael F. Holt.** *Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992. ix + 365 pp. Tables, figures, notes, and index. \$35.00.

American historians keep wanting the Civil War not to have happened, the slavery issue not to have been intractable, keep wanting to deny the centrality of racial problems to our history, to downplay the facts that many whites positively enjoyed racial discrimination and profited from it while many others genuinely hated it and sacrificed to end it. The initial Civil War "Revisionists" developed these views out of an aversion to war and an indifference (at best) to racism, but a belief in them persists even among those who are uncompromisingly antiracist and who do not betray a hint of opposition to all wars. Michael F. Holt is a prisoner of revisionism.

One of the most thoughtful, original, widely and deeply read, and productive American political historians, as these ten graceful essays again demonstrate, Holt is his generation's heir to the revisionism of his teacher, David Herbert Donald, who was, in turn, the heir of his teacher, the original Revisionist, James G. Randall. Holt's first book, *Forging a Majority* (1969), a study of the transformation from the "second-" to the "third-party system" in the 1850s in Pittsburgh, argued that religiously inspired state and local issues, not sectional animosity, underlay the Republican victory. Asserting that white northern voters feared white southerners but were indifferent to the morality of slavery and actively disliked African Americans, Holt implied that slavery did not directly cause the North to fight. Firmly within the "ethnocultural" school of Lee Benson, *Forging a Majority* emphasized the social bases of partisan politics—not policies, elite strategies, chance events, or ideology. While ethnoculturalism could be somewhat clumsily attached to theories that emphasized slavery and the inevitability of the War, it fit more comfortably with revisionism: If what Yankee Republicans really wanted to do was to persecute the Irish, stop others from drinking, and prove their superiority to Catholics, why should they care about slaves and why were slaveholders so worried?

In an important article (reprinted here) published in the *Journal of American History* in 1973, Holt wrote Pittsburgh large, suggesting that the Republican party replaced the Whigs as the chief anti-Democratic party in the nation as a whole in two stages. First, rapid socioeconomic change stimulated discontent with the existing political parties and highlighted ethnocultural issues, which shook loose most Whigs and a few Democrats, who turned Know-Nothing. Second, Republicans consumed the Know-Nothings, adding anti-southernism (of which antislavery, in Holt's view, was only a small part) to nativism in an eventually successful formula.<sup>1</sup> This variation on the ethnocultural school, again denigrating the significance of the slavery issue, continued Holt's Revisionist tack, as did long and immensely learned essays on the Antimasonic and Know-Nothing parties, also reprinted here.

In 1978, Holt added ideology, interpreting antebellum politics as a struggle over who could best preserve the individualistic, antipartisan, anticorruptionist republican heritage of the American Revolution or, to put it negatively, over where the threat to "enslave" whites really came from.<sup>2</sup> But if consensus ruled, if all white men were small-r republicans, what was there to fight a war over? Were there any profound differences between white males in free and slave states, Democrats and Whigs and Know-Nothings and Republicans?

Now, in his wide-ranging and meditative introduction to this series of nine previously published and unrevised essays and a stimulating new comparative historical paper, Holt shows us glimpses of his intellectual development from 1969 to 1992 and offers yet another answer to the question of why the Civil War took place, though it wasn't necessary, at least in 1861. The new answer is chance—inexplicable or unluckily timed events that barely lost Henry Clay the presidency in 1844 and that denied him the Whig presidential nominations in the elections of 1840 and 1848, contests in which, Holt asserts, any Whig could have been elected. Had Clay, the mind and soul of the Whig party, won at any time in the 1840s, there would have been, according to Holt, no Texas war, no territorial slavery restriction issue, and thus, no spiral of contingent events—no Wilmot Proviso, Free Soil party, Compromise of 1850, Kansas-Nebraska Act, caning of Sumner, *Dred Scott* case, Lecompton Constitution, John Brown raid, Democratic party split, Lincoln election, secession referenda, Fort Sumter crisis, call for troops, Bull Run—no civil war, at least no war then. "Thus," Holt concludes, "did contingencies, unthinking decisions, and unforeseen events have very large consequences" (p. 18). For Randall's "blundering generation," Holt substitutes the omniscient but unlucky Harry of the West.

Holt's intellectual progression, on display here, mirrors that of much of what used to be called "the new political history." With its emphasis on voter

alignments, its scorn of elite maneuverings, its skepticism of political rhetoric, its echoes of parts of the Columbia and Michigan Schools in political science,<sup>3</sup> its static model of voter choice, and its relatively unsophisticated statistical methods, the ethnocultural school was bound to be attacked by more social scientific historians and certain to be sidestepped by more traditional ones. Once a devotee of the ethnocultural thesis, Holt gradually moved away from it as he shifted his research focus from a local case study to a national narrative of elites whose extensive paper collections teemed with policy pronouncements and campaign stratagems. Absorbing critiques of both the ethnocultural theory and *The American Voter*, Holt deemphasized structures, ethnocentric feelings, partisan stability, and social fissures and put more stress on events, issues, political fluctuations, and voter responses. The best example of Holt's partial metamorphosis, and one of the finest essays in political history produced during the 1980s, is his paper on the election of 1840, reproduced here. Ingeniously applying insights from Morris P. Fiorina's *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* (1981) by tracking the very frequent state elections from 1836 to 1844 against wholesale prices, Holt demonstrates convincingly that the Whigs did not win in 1840 only because of an issueless, whoop-it-up campaign for war hero William Henry Harrison, and that voters of the day probably punished political parties for fluctuations in the economy. Class conflict was not the only possible sort of economic interpretation of politics, not the only alternative to ethnic and religious group battles, as Benson had assumed. Without directly testing social against economic performance explanations, Holt concludes that "the central determinants of voting behavior" from 1836 to 1843 were "economic issues and contrasting party records" (p. 191). (It is possible, of course, that social groupings explained the votes of most men, but that marginal voters determined the actual outcome by their responses to economic performance or other issues. Although Holt does not suggest it explicitly, ethnocultural and performance explanations might be complementary, not conflicting.)

As he abandoned the ethnocultural thesis as the universal theme of nineteenth-century politics, Holt edged closer to recognizing that slavery issues moved many voters, northern as well as southern, but he always drew back. Did the Whig party nominate the nonpartisan, plantation-owning, obfuscatory war hero Zachary Taylor in 1848 because it was moribund after 1844, having been especially devastated in the South by the issue of extending slavery into the areas acquired by the United States in the 1840s? Holt thinks not, tracing the party's attempts, quite successful in several states, to court nativists and to stress opposition to the Mexican War and to the Democrats' economic policies. Only a series of fortuitous events—crop failures in Europe and high government spending to finance the war—inflated Democratic pop-

ularity enough to frighten pessimistic Whigs into nominating Taylor. Holt admits, however, that one of Taylor's great attractions as a candidate was that he "allowed the Whigs to run a two-faced campaign [i.e., proslavery in the South and antislavery in the North] on the slavery extension issue" (p. 236). Furthermore, penetrating, detailed analyses like Holt's of the Whig search for a winning formula from 1844 to 1848 could be written for every quadrennium from 1828 through 1860. In all eight of those periods, opponents of the Democrats struggled and usually failed to combine the perfect candidate with just the right mix of economic, ethnic, sectional, and/or slavery issues. The most divisive issue and the most difficult one to calibrate correctly was slavery, and the Democrats' opponents didn't get it right until sectionally uneven population growth allowed them to ignore the South in their electoral college calculations. The massive immigration to the North after 1830 doomed the Democrats by facilitating, in more ways than one, the victory of a party committed to reopening the slavery question.

Revisionism is partly a matter of how fine-grained one's picture is. Focus on broad demographic and economic developments—different rates of immigration to North and South, westward expansion, the growth of the slave population, and the glowing prospects of the slave-based economy—and the clash between a potentially politically powerful North and a thriving, expansionist slavocracy seems unavoidable. Focus on how to explain the failure of four state delegations to be represented at the Whig nominating convention in 1839, and chance looms large. Begin a political history in 1819 and end in 1861, and one must face up to the deep sectional split over slavery. Begin in 1852 and end in 1856, and a welter of swirling, unsettled issues and alignments cloud the image. Historians have a bias in favor of this sort of revisionism because most of us defer to those who master collections of private letters and journals, which generally have a narrow focus, and we usually abjure explicit, broad sociological or economic or even political models and precise tests of quantifiable data. Yet the broadest perspective may distort, as well, because it may overlook causal connections. A republican ideology that pervades every member of the political community, a republican language that everyone speaks, or a common concern for "the continued viability of republican government itself" (p. 321) cannot explain why white men disagreed so violently as to split the country and go to war.

Holt does not always zoom from wide-angle to telephoto length; sometimes, he views the Middle Period through a middle-distance lens. Even then, he continues to deemphasize racial and slavery issues. In "The Mysterious Disappearance of the Whig Party," written for this book, Holt rejects previous explanations of the only demise of a nationally mass-based major party in U.S. history through a series of comparisons, most extensively between the

Whigs, the British Conservatives of the 1840s and 1850s, and the American Republicans of the 1970s. Why did the Whigs die, but not the other two, when all three suffered comparable defeats at one or more elections?

Holt's answer is that it was more difficult for relative outsiders to take over a political party in the 1840s than in the 1970s because party organizations were then more important and more hierarchical, but that it was easier to displace a party in the 1840s than in the 1970s because ballot access was freer and there was comparatively more focus on state and local than on national governments in the earlier period, and in America, rather than England. When other anti-Democratic parties surpassed the Whigs in a series of state elections, the Whig party collapsed. Moreover, unlike the American Whigs, the English Tories had a solid core constituency, the Church of England and agricultural interests (p. 260). Differences in the electoral and party structures allowed what Holt terms "the undeniable power of the issues that the new parties [the Know-Nothings and Republicans] exploited" to work, and the Whigs had no immovable followers to rely on (p. 256).

Holt's use of the verb "exploited," which suggests that Republican politicians did not really oppose slavery, points to the major fact that Holt leaves out of his comparison. The contemporary Tories and the Republicans of both the 1850s and 1970s stood for issues that connected them securely to the core of their voters—religion and protection of agrarian interests in the first case, antislavery and racism in the latter two. Suburbanites and white southerners opposed to busing, affirmative action, and crime (which they associated with urban blacks) provided a firm basis for Republican revival in the 1980s, as the abolition movement and the less fervent, but much larger, group of northerners that it influenced supplied the foundation for Republican birth and growth during the 1850s. By 1852 at least, no issue tied any large attitudinal or demographic group securely to the Whigs, so the party could not survive severe electoral adversity. Slavery mattered to the electorate, but not to the Whigs.

The final marks of Holt's revisionism are his contentions that long into the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln's goal was to "destroy the Republican party as it existed in 1860" (p. 330) and to restore a bisecting Whig party, that Lincoln meant the Emancipation Proclamation not so much to free slaves as to coax rebels to return to the Union in order to avoid freeing their slaves (p. 332), that far from essentially agreeing with congressional Republicans about the aims of the war (although often disagreeing about the means), Lincoln differed from them fundamentally. The Republican party's "sole basis of cohesion was hostility toward the South and the Democratic party" (p. 330)—that is, not antislavery. Lincoln, on the other hand, favored very rapid Reconstruction not only because he wanted southern white votes in 1864, but also

because he wished to "prevent Congress from imposing radical changes on the South" (p. 350). Radical Reconstruction was "the political equivalent of war against the South" (p. 352). A Whig interpretation of history, indeed!

Provocative and clever, this Dunningesque view has been convincingly punctured by others.<sup>4</sup> Very briefly: Lincoln appointed radicals, as well as conservatives, to his administration and army, and removed them as politics and competence demanded. He used harsh, as well as conciliatory tactics to defeat the South, and he largely abandoned conciliatory ones by 1862. He, as well as the rest of the Republican party, deeply believed that slavery was evil, and, once war became a reality, they moved inexorably to destroy it forever.

Holt has reconsidered his stance on the importance of ethnocultural factors and ideology. One may hope that this brilliant, learned, and always interesting historian will change his mind about the reality of antislavery feelings and that he will finally revise his revisionism.

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1. William Gienapp, who had worked under Holt as an undergraduate at Yale, elaborated Holt's theory in his *Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856* (1987).

2. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (1978). Mills Thornton first developed this thesis for the antebellum period four years before, in the dissertation version of what became *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860* (1978).

3. Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard R. Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, *The People's Choice* (1944); Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and William N. McPhee, *Voting* (1954); Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes, *The American Voter* (1960).

4. E.g., Peyton McCrary, *Abraham Lincoln and Reconstruction* (1978); LaWanda Cox, *Lincoln and Black Freedom* (1981); Eric FONER, *Reconstruction* (1988).