

The Road to Redemption: Southern Politics, 1868–1879 by Michael Perman.
Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1984. 353 pp. \$32.00.

Clearly and crisply written, based on wide reading in manuscripts, newspapers, and secondary literature, Perman's new book is the first comprehensive synthesis, covering all the ex-Confederate states, of the extensive anti-"Dunning School" revisionist work on southern Reconstruction politics. To the racist and anti-Republican Dunningites, the era was as simple as black and white. The only divisions among Democrats were between the cautious and the heroic; among Republicans, between villains and fools. More objective recent historians, employing grayer tones, have highlighted important schisms within each party. Systematizing this previously inchoate interpretation, Perman's superb delineation of the logic of competing political strategies is the capstone of what seems likely to become the new orthodoxy—Reconstruction as the politics of factions.

By 1869, Perman argues, the influence of radicals on both sides had declined. The initial adamant refusal of most white southern leaders to accept equal civil status and suffrage for the freedmen had been nullified by forceful national government action, while efforts by some Republicans to expropriate rebel lands and to disfranchise ex-Confederates permanently had been discarded as too extreme. Subsequent battles within each party were less principled than tactical. Republican "Centrists" sought to appeal to upperclass ex-Whig antisecessionists and later split the GOP by vainly mimicking Democratic calls for drastic tax cuts, while the "Regulars" concentrated on the party's basic black constituency. Contrary to the well-known view of W.E.B. DuBois, Perman believes that no major Republican faction favored an interracial class coalition of blacks with poor whites.

Elitist “New Departure” Democrats, centered in the black belt areas, contended that the party could minimize northern intervention and attain power in the south by pledging to honor the postwar constitutional amendments and by making “nonpartisan” gestures toward blacks and former Whig leaders. Their chief intraparty competitors, the violent and ideologically purist “Bourbons,” favored “straightout” white supremacist campaigns and opposed governmentally activist appeals to the ex-Whigs. The failure of the Democratic trimmers to convert sufficient numbers of lukewarm white or black Republicans and black leaders’ demands for offices and more racially egalitarian policies led both parties after 1873 to stress “expressive” strategies designed to rally their core supporters.

Having “redeemed” the south from Republican rule, the Democrats shattered into a congeries of often bitterly contentious factions, none securely dominant: neo-Jacksonian least-government men and New South industrial boosters, white county “agrarians” and black-belt merchants and planters. Slashed government spending by legislatures and constitutional conventions during the depression of the 1870s facilitated factional coexistence, since it left few programs to fight over, but the repudiation of state debts, restrictions on subsidies to industry, and the emasculating of government services and regulatory capacities frightened away outside capital and obstructed orderly regional development.

Because he performs no independent quantitative analyses of electoral statistics or legislative and convention roll calls or any systematic investigation of policies and their impacts, Perman fails to clarify sufficiently the relation between tactical, ideological, and social groupings and probably overstates the economic effects of legal changes. Was the division between Whiggish black-belt conciliators and Jacksonian hill-country white liners so clearcut and so consistent over the years? Weren’t their strategies and those of Republican subgroups less contradictory than complementary? How unstable and opportunistic can intraparty caucuses be before a faction loses its usefulness as an organizing device? Were Republican appeals to disadvantaged whites through internal improvements and the expansion of education really doomed to failure because those policies also attracted blacks? What role did hill-country ex-Unionists play? What were the social correlates of votes on tax limitation and labor statutes? How large were the independent effects of lien and antisubsidy laws on black welfare and southern economic development? By summarizing and refining current trends in scholarship so lucidly, Perman has called attention to questions that must be investigated more thoroughly before the factional interpretation can be accepted or revised.

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