

issues in the South from 1800–1890, Robert F. Durden argues that the region passed from optimistic nationalism, often with vigorous two-party competition, in the early and middle parts of the century to pessimistic “aggrieved sectionalism” and one-party domination after Reconstruction. The white masses, he contends, inflicted the damaging transformation on themselves by gradually becoming entirely devoted to slavery and white supremacy.

In the Jeffersonian beginning, in Durden’s view, a national understanding that southern slavery was an economically and socially necessary evil allowed southerners to disagree with each other and southern politicians to lead the country. After 1820, attacks by sectional, anti-slavery northerners increasingly united the white South, nonslaveholders and slaveholders alike, on the propositions that slavery was a positive good and that their liberty and equality could not survive in a union led by the Republicans. The South missed a possible turning point in race relations by not emancipating the slaves and enlisting them in the Confederate army. Appeals to racism were primarily responsible for the abandonment of Reconstruction, after which the Democrats enjoyed “firm” (p. 125) or perhaps only “precarious” (p. 128), control in the region until the Populist revolt. Apparently aimed at the supplementary-text market, the book contains no footnotes and only a slight bibliography.

Durden’s forcefully stated but hardly new perspective may be questioned. Both northern criticism and Deep South defenses of slavery during the Constitutional Convention of 1787 and the Missouri crisis of 1819 belie the notion of a “necessary evil” consensus. Repeated outbreaks of nonslaveholder and yeoman dissent from the 1830s through the 1890s undermine the view that all white southerners agreed that the protection of slavery and white supremacy ought to be the constant theme of politics. Economic and demographic trends provide alternative interpretations for changes in mood and in the sectional balance of power. Durden’s exclusion of state-level issues and his 1890 cutoff point arbitrarily buttress the book’s thesis. Most important, by taking elites’ statements as the sole evidence of both their own behavior and mass attitudes, by slighting

The Self-Inflicted Wound: Southern Politics in the Nineteenth Century. By Robert F. Durden. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1985. x + 150 pp. Bibliographical note and index. \$16.00.)

In this brief, well-written narrative of the main lines of the development of national political

establishment-dictated constraints on the formation and expression of opinions, and by failing to treat individuals' preferences on different questions of policy as complex and interrelated, Durden finesses, rather than confronts, opposing historiographical stances. Nineteenth-century southern politicians' analyses were often unbalanced by a proclivity for confusing words with acts and acquiescence with approval. Durden is among many students of the subject who share that tendency.

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