

WARD M. MCAFEE. *Religion, Race, and Reconstruction: The Public School in the Politics of the 1870s*. (SUNY Series, Religion and American Public Life.) Albany: State University of New York Press. 1998. Pp. x, 317. \$21.95.

Not since 1870s Democratic speeches and editorials have the Radical Republicans been charged with plotting to build up a Bismarckian centralized state by using public schools to launch an anti-Catholic, pro-black "*Kulturkampf*" (p. 215). From their beginnings in Massachusetts, according to Ward M. McAfee, the "primary characteristic" of public schools "was an agenda for standardizing American culture" (p. 10). After the Civil War, education became "the Republican Party solution" to the ignorance and poverty both of freed people in the South and of Catholic immigrants in the North, but Republicans were more interested in "cultural standardization" than in "true self-determination" for blacks and more concerned "to create an unwanted cultural homogeneity" than in economic uplift for either group (pp. 11, 13, 162). Reconstruction foundered on Charles Sumner's Civil Rights Bill, for blacks preferred "control of their own institutions" to school integration, while whites throughout the country "regarded racially 'mixed"

schools with as much grace as mixing healthy children with another group infected with smallpox" (pp. 13-14, 123, 80). But after Sumner's "irrepressible stridency" led to the party's huge congressional losses in the 1874 elections, Republicans returned to their Know-Nothing roots, refocusing their statist impulses northward in an "anti-Catholic political movement" that "emerged to dominate the Republican party's nationalizing agenda" (pp. 113, 55).

Northern Republicans reluctantly agreed to eliminate the reading of the Protestant Bible from the public schools, but they backed a constitutional amendment prohibiting state support for religious schools and making separation of church and state binding on state governments, and they won Protestant votes by stressing an "imagined Ultramontane threat to American public education" (p. 191). Despite their "campaign of anti-Catholic bigotry," the "constitutional revolutionaries" were defeated (pp. 7, 4). Whereas most recent historians have bemoaned the failure of Reconstruction, McAfee, asserting that the "Hegelian" statism of American Reconstructionists contained the same "germs" of "supernationalist fascism" as the contemporary German empire did, is much less distressed (pp. 46-47). "Religious prejudice," he contends, "pushed many Americans to consider a thorough remaking of the American polity in the image of the new Germany. But racial prejudice led them back to the traditional American preference for local control" (p. 109).

Repeatedly exaggerating, failing to confront opposing hypotheses or to weigh evidence explicitly, and much too willing to repeat Democratic charges of Republican corruption, incompetence, "Caesarism," and hypocrisy, McAfee fails to persuade. A refusal to subsidize Catholic schools, for instance, hardly resembles the widespread suspension of civil liberties in Otto von Bismarck's Germany, and Republican praise for German educational accomplishments is not the same as a desire to adopt the Prussian state system. Dunningite or racist contemporary sources offer fragile support for a finding that "very little meaningful education occurred for blacks" in the Reconstruction South because of "political corruption and gross incompetence" (p. 96), especially since McAfee does not openly consider the much more measured views of Eric Foner or other recent historians of Reconstruction. George F. Hoar's 1871 attempt to require states to set up systems of public education open to every child and to provide federal dollars to those state-based schemes does not deserve to be called a "centralizing creature," and the view that the bill threatened a takeover by "federal bureaucrats insistent on racial mixing in the public schools" is pure Democratic propaganda (pp. 106, 109). There is evidence of both opposition to and support for black education in the North in documents from which McAfee cites only the opposition (see, for example, *Report of the Commissioner of Education* (1873), pp. 80, 100, 245, 313-14; (1874), pp. 81-82). Misreading legal cases and blithely

asserting that protective laws "made no difference" (p. 157) without openly contesting strongly opposing viewpoints (for example, my own *Dead End: The Development of Nineteenth-Century Litigation on Racial Discrimination in Schools* [1986]) undermines credibility. Contending that school integration was the most important issue in the 1874 congressional elections without making a systematic effort to compare its influence with that of the depression, corruption charges, and the anti-saloon crusade is unconvincing. And McAfee's conclusion that religion was "the unifying factor" in the "centralizing vision" that embodied "the Reconstruction spirit" (p. 210) is vitiated because he makes no explicit effort to weigh other factors: tariffs or gold, regional or war-induced loyalties, civil service or personalities, or, above all, race.

McAfee's is a tidy thesis that leaves out or ignores too much that does not fit.

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