REVIEW --- Books: One Side Kept Fighting

Bordewich, Fergus M . Wall Street Journal , Eastern edition; New York, N.Y. [New York, N.Y]11 Apr 2020: C.9.

FULL TEXT

How the South Won the Civil War
By Heather Cox Richardson
Oxford, 240 pages, $27.95

Mustering history to serve present-day politics is neither new nor inherently ill-judged. Since the days of Thucydides and Plutarch, history has been a field of often ruthless political contention. It continues to offer a well-stocked armory for our own political battles, when everything from the intent of the Founders and the meaning of the Constitution to the significance of slavery, class and money in American life may serve as ammunition for debate both inside the academy and out.

Onto this battlefield Heather Cox Richardson, a professor of history at Boston College, now charges, ideologically armed and ready for combat, in "How the South Won the Civil War," a short, provocative assault on conservatism and the Republican Party. Her polemic hinges on what she terms the "American paradox": the idea that "America was born in idealism and the profound principle that all human beings had a right to self-determination" but grew up "in an environment that limited that right to white men of property." This paradox, she says, while rooted in the era of slavery, continues to infect American politics today.

Ms. Richardson is the author of several well-regarded scholarly books, including "The Greatest Nation of the Earth" (1997), an exceptional study of the North's financial underpinnings during the Civil War; a history of the Republican Party, "To Make Men Free" (2014); and "West From Appomattox" (2007), about the extended effects of Reconstruction. She now ventures into more popular territory in a book that, while lucid and jargon-free, too often feels tacked together and lacking in the intellectual heft that characterizes her academic work.

Ms. Richardson endeavors to draw an unbroken line from the hierarchical politics of the antebellum South and the hostility to federal power that accompanied it, through the development of the American West by big-money plutocrats, up to the equally "hierarchical" values of modern conservatism. Like many writers of the left, she maintains that elite conservatives, whether in the Old South or the present day, could only gain political control by essentially duping voters by means of cynical appeals to shallow but potent myths about American individualism on the one hand and their enemies' endemic corruption on the other. "So long as they continued successfully to project the narrative that they were protecting democracy, their supporters ignored the reality that the oligarchs were taking over," she writes. Both then and now, she suggests, even respectable conservatives resorted to voter suppression, rigging the mechanics of government, bullying the opposition press, and dehumanizing opponents to ensure that the majority was kept from power, no matter what the cost to basic rights.

The present moment, she says, is but the culmination of a systematic campaign to exploit deeply embedded anxieties about the supposed consequences of too much power falling into the hands of unworthy people -- former slaves, the poor, the working class -- who would sink the ship of state if they seized command of it. "By 2018, the nation that had begun four hundred years before in the dream of a land of possibilities was defined by its president as a land of carnage, a nightmare," she writes. "This image enabled the Movement Conservatives who had taken over the Republican Party to enact their vision, slashing regulation and taxes on the wealthy, establishing government policies to benefit party leaders and people with money, and arranging public policy to remand the

vast majority of Americans to positions from which they could never rise. The world of 2018 looked a lot like that of 1860." Dissenters from Ms. Richardson's own somewhat apocalyptic vision, likely including the vast majority of Republicans, might point out that where she sees a malign conspiracy to undermine American democracy they see, these days, a landscape of rupture and realignment, the ultimate shape of which is far from clear.

Ms. Richardson's haste to score political points too often leaves nuance, and sometimes accuracy, behind. She asserts, for instance, that in 1860 "Americans set out to reclaim the government from an oligarchy and rededicate it to the proposition that all men are created equal." This was indeed true of the small minority of abolitionists and Radical Republicans. But at the outset of the war, as she knows, the great majority of Northerners wanted to reunify the country more or less on prewar terms and were further divided between those willing to fight and a large dissenting minority that didn't want to fight for anything at all, much less the freeing of the South's slaves. Similarly, Ms. Richardson broadly asserts that when Americans moved West after the Civil War, "they kept alive the same vision of the world that had inspired Confederates." Although this accurately describes some areas, much if not most of the West was settled not by ex-Confederates but by migrants from the upper Midwest and Northeast, who carried their own complicated sets of Yankee values with them in their covered wagons and railway cars.

Ms. Richardson's tendentious approach will doubtless offend conservative readers and probably annoy many liberals less hardened in their views than she is. That's a pity, since when she focuses on documentable fact rather than subjective argument she has many things to say that are worth hearing. She points out, for instance, that the Reconstruction state governments much-pilloried by the Southern "Redeemers" who overthrew them, and still largely disdained in popular memory, enacted rafts of egalitarian legislation -- such as equal voting rights, free public education, women's right to their own property -- that were remarkable for their time and anticipated enlightened values that virtually all Americans today are likely to share. She also argues persuasively that, economically and socially, the 19th-century West looked a lot more like the class-riven East than the colorful fictions of the frontier, with its cowboys and romanticized "republican principles, pure and uncontaminated" -- the words are Frederick Jackson Turner's -- would suggest.

She also draws some pointed parallels, noting that Robert Toombs, the former Confederate secretary of state and an influential representative of the South's leadership class, asserted after the Civil War that property qualifications for voting were imperative, otherwise "the lower classes, . . . the dangerous, irresponsible element," would control government and "attack the interests of the landed proprietors." Her intention is not just to show that Toombs was (to use a term of the era) an unreconstructable Negrophobe, which he was, but that his words also perfectly embodied an elitist tradition that continues to gnaw at the principles of genuine democracy. She similarly cites an 1890 book aimed at Northern businessmen -- titled "Why the Solid South? or, Reconstruction and Its Results" -- that she says "explained that black voting was simply a way for lazy people to enrich themselves with government aid." She goes on to assert, not unconvincingly, that such views live on today in the thinking of politicians who obsess about the purging of voter rolls in the name of preventing fraud where no fraud exists. Ms. Richardson never pulls her punches.

Purely in polemical terms, Ms. Richardson has for the most part ably deployed the weaponry at her command. Sometimes her shots land squarely, but more often not. Her pummeling hyperbole will probably confirm both like-minded and skeptical readers in their assumptions and prompt less reflection than it should among those whom she presumably hopes to convert.

Mr. Bordewich is the author, most recently, of "Congress at War: How Republican Reformers Fought the Civil War, Defied Lincoln, Ended Slavery, and Remade America."

Credit: By Fergus M. Bordewich

DETAILS

Subject:	Books; Nonfiction
People:	Richardson, Heather Cox
Lexile score:	1870 L
Publication title:	Wall Street Journal, Eastern edition; New York, N.Y.
First page:	C.9
Publication year:	2020
Publication date:	Apr 11, 2020
Publisher:	Dow Jones &Company Inc
Place of publication:	New York, N.Y.
Country of publication:	United States, New York, N.Y.
Publication subject:	Business And Economics--Banking And Finance
ISSN:	00999660
Source type:	Newspapers
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	Book Review
ProQuest document ID:	2388253730
Document URL:	http://168.156.198.98:2048/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/2388253730?accountid=1553
Copyright:	Copyright 2020 Dow Jones &Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved.
Last updated:	2020-04-14
Database:	eLibrary,U.S. Newsstream