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Book Review - The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War

In Michael F. Holt's *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War*, the American Whig Party is given a comprehensive review of its history during the Jacksonian Era. During the history of Jacksonian historiography, more and more sympathetic depictions of the Whigs have been creeping into the works of noted scholars; according to them, the Whig party staunchly defended the virtues of merchant capitalism against the Jacksonian Democratic ideal of egalitarianism (which is Holt's thesis in his own scholarship). Holt's work follows along with this perspective, framing it in a more comprehensive review of Jacksonian-era antebellum politics.

Holt's book is an incredible work, created over twenty years of diligent research and writing, showing the entire history of the Whig party from beginning to end. His primary focus is the changes in the political wings that happened to the party during its short but important time in the American landscape, as well as the hard work Whig politicians did to try to get themselves and other Whigs elected. Holt's original intention was to simply write about the failed campaign for presidency the Whigs attempted in 1844 (p. xii), but by his own admission he recognized that there was more to the party than that simple event.

There are many ways in which *Rise and Fall* succeeds as an historical work; first and foremost, Holt's language allows the reader to recognize the importance of state level antebellum politics, giving comprehensive accounts of all of those state elections in which Whig politicians had a significant and

promising presence. Other scholarship is referenced as well to supplement Holt's own primary research about the nature of these state elections, offering indispensable portraits of the machinations of these political parties during the 1830s to 1850s. Continuing from his 1978 work *The Political Crises of the 1850s*, Holt showcases an encyclopedic knowledge and comprehensive account of the national and state-level politics that took place during the Jacksonian era. Every single negotiation and controversy is documented in this work, all the way up to the Compromise of 1850, leading to a work that is most certainly an important document in Jacksonian scholarship.

In this work, Holt showcases a two-party system present in Jacksonian America that presented an extremely healthy level of competition: the Democrats and the Whigs fought valiantly for elections in most states. The differences in their ideologies were their real tipping point in these campaigns; voters lost interest when their positions were more or less similar, and their interest peaked when differences were more marked. Whigs and Democrats made their sectional differences clear, while also emphasizing the instances in which they agreed (or even agreed to disagree, as with slavery-related issues).

Despite this rough truce, factions started to crop up among Whigs in the north, particularly around the slavery question. This caused sectional divisions within the Whig party and interfered with the Second Party System. According to Holt, however, the Kansas-Nebraska Act (and the reaction it received from the public in the North) did not act as the only reason for the collapse of the Whig Party; in fact, he maintains that many Whig leaders still

pushed for unity and continuation of the party despite its passage in 1854. What's more, northern Whigs resisted melding with Free Soilers, thus cementing the desire for Whigs to stay together and not devolve into sectional infighting.

If the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 did not bring about the demise of the Whig party, then what did? According to Holt, it was a number of factors, many of which were unrelated to slavery. While northerners protested over the Act, and white southerners resented this resistance, many other issues split the Whig Party, including economic prosperity, prohibition, nativism, and changes to state constitutions. Because of this infighting and distraction, the American (Know-Nothing) party filled the political vacuum that took place, growing substantially to the point where the Whigs became nearly obsolete. Between 1854 and 1855, Holt notes that, in essence, the Whig party "bled to death" (p. 839), as its Northern ranks became "far more vulnerable to incursions by new prohibition, nativist, and antislavery parties than were Democrats" (p. 959). This led to a diminishing of the Whigs in the north, leaving merely a small, powerless minority in the south.

As opposed to more ethnocultural perspectives found in many other works of Jacksonian scholarship, in which political behavior was explained through belief structures that were shared by many, Holt maintains committed to the idea that party identities were still valid ways of representing the beliefs and choices of those within those parties. Holt's belief is that political ideologies were based strictly in politics, and not economics, morality or social identities, and both sides had many aspects in common with each other. Furthermore, Holt cements his belief that the way these parties function (e.

g. patronage, organization, voting) is the most important way to comprehend political change, instead of focusing on racial and class-related makeup.

These beliefs form the backbone of his comprehensive history of the Whig party, found in this book.

Because of the daunting task that Holt places upon himself (distilling the entirety of the Whig party during the Jacksonian era into a single tome), *Rise and Fall* is a densely-printed 985 pages of text, in addition to nearly two hundred pages of endnotes, bibliographies and indexes. Despite this incredible length to his work, Holt's prose is smartly written, with forceful and detailed narratives which maintain a brisk pace and convey vivid characterizations of real political figures. The author manages to convey a great deal of information through the clear and distinct voices of these characters, whose actions and decisions are bolstered by substantial use of supplemental source material (culled from the real documents and books Holt drew from archives and collections around the nation). Furthermore, his compelling writing manages to make a strong case for the Whig party's demise being cause for lament; by the time one finishes the book, one feels a tinge of sadness for the lost opportunities for progress stemming from the death of the Whig party.

Holt's tale of the Whigs is an extensive one, but its core is comparatively simple: the Whigs stemmed from the Jeffersonian Republicans who found victory in the Revolution of 1800. In the beginning, they acted as an opposition to Jackson's presidency in the 1820s, but in 1834 splintered off into their own group, with Kentucky's Henry Clay as leader, and changed their moniker to the Whig party. First and foremost, they were republican

antimilitarists, but then their identity evolved into something closer to public moralists. Once the 1837 economic crash occurred, their identity shifted once more into the association they'd be most identified with; pro-business, pro-development, anti-government oversight. Immediately upon this switch, they showed themselves to be quite different from the Democrats in terms of political philosophy: " Broadly put, Democrats were a coalition of those still outside the market economy who feared its spread and those who had experienced and been victimized by market mechanisms. Whigs, in contrast, attracted those who wanted to expand the market sector because they had already enjoyed its benefits or hoped to do so in the future" (Holt, p. 115). While *Rise and Fall* is an incredible read, and an important historical document, it does not come without some flaws. Though complaining of a lack of elaboration in some subjects seems overly reaching in a book that is nearly 1000 pages long and this comprehensive, there are things that Holt does not elaborate upon to complete satisfaction. For instance, Holt's assertion that the book is not about political ideology or culture does not help him elaborate on his major point that the Whigs had plenty of political ideas to share with the nation (ix). Due to the fact that Holt has gained access to a plethora of Whig related political documents, it would be more helpful if he were to have focused on the more nuanced Whig thinking that might have evaded other scholars in the past. Furthermore, Holt focuses a bit too much on the activities of political insiders, leaving little room to investigate just how the party appealed to the common man. The author manages to establish the party's positions in the bookend sections of the work, but much of the room in this work is focused on the cold details of

state elections rather than the appeals that Whigs provided to voters. A bit more information and discussion on how Whigs attracted voters in different areas and how those strategies changed with time would be a welcome addition to the already-substantial book.

Holt does an admirable job showcasing how parties and politicians interacted with each other for good or ill, but he also has a somewhat cynical view of their actions that may rub readers the wrong way. The author paints many actions as calculating to a fault, and depicts some Whig politicians as somewhat amoral, following ideology instead of principle. Holt's descriptions of politicians show them constantly weighing issues in terms of what votes it will get them, or whether or not it will hurt the other side. One example of this is the introduction of the Nebraska Bill in 1854, in which moderates stated that federal territories would not have to deal with slavery because of climate - as a result, Whigs were urged to oppose the bill to keep up intersectional cooperation within the party. This was soundly opposed by Stewardite and Free Soiler Whigs, who opposed the moderates because they " wanted to stress the real threat of slavery expansion in order to increase Northern opposition to the bill" (p. 816). While this is certainly implied, Holt does not elaborate sufficiently on the politicians' perspectives on slavery as a moral issue, and any potential backlash these decisions incurred because of that. Holt believed that the north was widespread with fears of the Slave Power increasing and expanding, but seemingly ignores the politicians' perspectives on this.

This book does not just contribute significantly to the historiography of the Jacksonian Era, it practically defines it. Holt's work takes a similar level of

depth to the Whig party that Watson provides in his book *Liberty and Power* (1990); unlike that book's moralizing about Jackson's often selfish actions, Holt's perspective (which is similarly sympathetic to Whigs) is somewhat cold and clinical, focusing instead on the history of the Whigs themselves while deemphasizing their relationships to other political parties. Pessen (1971) describes the egalitarian nature of 1800s America as one in which individual liberty and pro-business practices (principles touted by the Whig party) were heavily emphasized to the point of diminishing economic mobility and wealth distribution; Holt somewhat ignores these issues in favor of the Whig party as a passionate but flawed (and constantly infighting) group whose inability to unite and agree on many political issues was the cause of their demise. To that end, Holt's work can potentially be accused of being inconclusive, but it is nonetheless fascinating and comprehensive in its historical detailing.

In conclusion, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party* is a fantastic work, epic in scope and comprehensive in its research. While there are areas of discussion that could have been elaborated upon in greater detail for a book of this size, such as the Whig's moral positions and changing perspectives on said moral issues, the book's data itself is absolutely essential to an understanding of Jacksonian politics. In creating a comprehensive history of the Whig party, Holt offers the reader a concrete document detailing the influence of Whigs in state elections throughout the mid-1800s, and illustrates their tragic fall by way of sectional infighting. This book is an absolute cornerstone of Jacksonian era scholarship, and should not be ignored in the research of this subject. Combining this work with the historiography of other major works by Jacksonian scholars, one gets a whole

and detailed view of the Whig's tragic nature - a strong party undone by its own lack of unity.

References

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