

Hans Trefousse, The Radical Republicans: Lincoln's Vanguard for Racial Justice[1969]

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What are the concerns of Trefousse's study?

He notes the revisionist triumphant over the past decade in terms of the new interpretation of Reconstruction . . . Part of this re-thinking includes the Radicals themselves.

T tries to answer or re-evaluate the Radicals in terms of the following questions:

Who were the radicals and what characteristics did they have in common? What motives impelled them? Were they really responsible for the failure of compromise prior to the capture of Ft. Sumter? Whether they can justly be blamed for the exacerbation of the sectional quarrel, and whether they did in fact hamper the prosecution of the war? What were their strengths? Their weaknesses? Were their policies truly vindictive and were they impelled merely by selfishness and lust for power during the period of Reconstruction? In fact, did they possess any unity other than a common aversion to the slaveholders and their successors? Finally, it is important to ascertain whether or not they accomplished anything, and, if they did, why they disappeared from the stage so quickly and completely after achieving seeming triumphs.

I. The Concept

The roster of radicals. . .

Who were the core leaders: Charles Sumner; William H. Seward, he rates because of his antislavery views in the 1850s. T claims that Seward was discovered as a conservative in the 1860s but with the opposition to the Omnibus bill in 1850 he received the political title of radical. Salmon P. Chase. . . Like many of the radicals Chase was originally born in New England.

Ben J. Wade. John P. Hale of New Hampshire. Henry Wilson of New Hampshire then moved to Massachusetts. Hannibal Hamlin of Maine. Lyman Trumbull born in Connecticut. . . later became senator from Illinois. Other Republican leaders in the Senate -- Wm Pitt Fessenden, James W. Grimes, and James Harlan of Iowa, Jacob Howard of Michigan, Timothy O. Howe of Wisconsin, and James H. Lane and Samuel C. Pomeroy of Kansas-- all played important roles in the Upper House, But they were never as consistent in their politics as the "Radicals" and were not designated as such, although they did cooperate at times with the designated Radicals.

Members in the House: Josiah Reed Giddings, representative of the Western Reserve in Ohio. Also born in New England. . .

George W. Julian of Indianan. . .
Thaddeus Stevens. . .New England origins. . .
James M. Ashley of Ohio. . .
Owen Lovejoy of Illinois. . .
Others were Galusha Grow of Pennsylvania and Schuyler Colfax of
Indiana. . .Both were friendly to the house radicals. . .but a few
of the pre-war Radicals in the House. . .

T makes the point that the radicals of the pre-war period were consistent in their hatred for slavery. Many moved from the Whig and the Democratic parties because of the Compromise of 1850, or the Kansas-Nebraska bill, etc. . . They were close friends with the abolitionists. Or that is, some were very close friends. But they had certain differences that marked them off from the apostles of immediate emancipation by any means possible.

The radicals opposed the abolitionists views that the Constitution should be abrogated, etc. The radicals were essentially free-soilers. . . See what their meaning here is in the Foner book. They were free soilers rather than immediatists like the abolitionists. They were for the expansion of slavery who favored its extinction by constitutional means. Radicals believed that as long as the Constitution protected all citizens that slavery was secure in the South. They argued that it would fall upon the southern states to exterminate the hated institution. . .

The term "radical" became a fairly common expression by 1858--or before the Civil War. . .

These Republicans were called radicals because of their pronounced antislavery opinions.

T points out that they supported other reforms as well. . . Some opposed the death penalty. . .Some stood for prison reform. They opposed cruel and unusual punishments. Hale opposed and brought an end to flogging in the Navy.

He states that there was a current of antimilitarism and pacifism in the radicals ranks. Others spoke out in favor of female suffrage. . .

But there were areas in which radicals split. Their opinions on matters other than reform or slavery were across the board in their interests and politics.

T notes that they did not form a solid phalanx on the tariff issue. Some were for protection while others were for a low tariff.

On the financial question there were also many positions among the radical ranks. Some were in favor of inflationary politics. Others remained conservative on the money question. . .

Even the homestead bill found the so-called radicals divided. Those from the Midwest were more likely to support a liberal homesteading bill. Others were the Eastern states like Stevens were opposed to any measure that would "populate the West with paupers." . . .

Similar differences divided radicals on other questions (1) government regulation of industry and commerce. Some were more anti-business on overall than others. Stevens an iron-master himself would favor government subsidies and support. Others like Ben Wade opposed monopoly and any government support for business. . . .

On labor the radicals were divided. Some were pro-labor while others did not trust the newly emergent labor movements. See Montgomery on this issue.

There were differences too on feminism. Some radicals extended their reformist views for female suffrage; others were just as sexist and conservative on this issue as their conservative counterparts in the Republican party.

A key issue was Race: Here T shows that only a few of the Radicals were out in front in terms of full equality for the blacks. Most of the radicals were in favor of some form of colonization for the emancipated slaves. . . . They were racists as was the majority of the white northern constituency. . . . Be sure to make the point that they were opposed to expansion of slavery. . . . They were even in many cases for the enfranchisement of the emancipated slave But most were opposed to any ideas of equality. . . .

Summation: Difficulty of establishing any sectional pattern for the radicals. He cites the study of Allen Bogue, "Bloc and Party in the Senate, 1861-63," Civil War History (September 1967) and David Donald Politics of Reconstruction, pp. 11-12 . . .

The radicals were an amorphous group of determined opponents of slavery, who had often held progressive ideas long before the founding of the Republican party. Frequently but not always of New England ancestry they brought to Washington firmly held ideas of social betterment.

1. The Beginning

T spots the beginnings back about the time of the Compromise of 1850. . . . These desperate politicians in Washington coming from the Democratic, Free-Soil and remnants of the Whigs and the Liberty party formed a solid opposition to the Clay Omnibus bill. . . . They would not compromise with slavery. . . . The point, their origins preceded the formation of the Republican party. . . . They saw the Compromise of 1850 as a compromise with slavery and providing for the possible expansion of slavery into areas like New Mexico and Utah territories, etc. . . . They wanted both the slave trade and slavery ended in the District of Columbia; they thought the fugitive slave act an abomination, etc. . . . They were naturally a small minority in Congress. . . .

These early opponents of slavery had large targets around which they could solidify their opposition and build up alliances. T deals in

this manner with their opposition to the Figitive Slave act. . .

2. The Radicals Become Republicans

The issue that shattered the Whigs and gave birth to the new sectional party called Republican was the Kansas-Nebraska bill. T shows that the radicals were important helping to form the new antislavery party in the states. They were in part responsible for mobilizing the anti-slavery sentiment that grew out of the K-N Act and channelling it into a new political party.

He notes too that many of the radicals spurned the Know-Nothing party that emerged on the surface at the sametime. They rejected its anti-foreignism . . .and found that bigotry had no place in their principles.

The radicals were in on the ground floor in the formation of the new party. They took a leading position on the organization's councils. They helped keep it together, steered it reasonably clear of Know-Nothingism, and saw to it that its platform was forthright.

3. Keeping the Party Firm

Recounts how the radicals held the line against compromise on certain important political questions.

T notes that it was the radicals who opposed those Eastern elements of the party who tried to fuse with the Douglas Democrats after Douglas came out against Buchanan's Kansas policy. It was the radicals who were opposed to any fusion with Douglas. They would work with him in Cpngress in getting the Lecompton Constitution beaten . . .But they did not trust him. In this they were one with candidate Lincoln.

It was the radicals too who opposed the Lecompton Constitituion . . .

He notes the support the radicals gave Lincoln after his nomination by the party.

4. No Compromise!

T concludes in this chapter that the strength of the radicals during the crisis of transition and the Sumter crisis allowed Lincoln to stand firm on the principle of no compromise with the extension of slavery.

He cites their refusal to accept the Crittenden Compromise; their refusal to go along with Seward's efforts at last-minute compromise with representatives of the South. And finally, they stood firm over the refusal to surrender Fort Sumter . . .

T gives them high grades on the secession crisis. He does not find that they were responsible for the onset of the war by their refusal to countenance compromise. . .

5. War and the Struggle Against McClellan

Basis of T argument is that the radicals or ultras were after McClellan's scalp after his first reverses and demonstration that he was not the aggressive commander the North needed. . . But while Lincoln used their antipathy and taunts against the General to spur him to take action . . . For example, he allowed the radicals on the Committee to Investigate the War to ~~try~~ build a fire under McClellan, or at least attempt to get him to move. . . He waited until the right moment to release the General from his command. . . Was this after the 1862 elections and the battle of Antietam. .

6. The Struggle for Emancipation and 7. Cooperation for Victory

In these chpts T demonstrates that Lincoln and the radicals worked closely together during the war years. This relationship, was voluntary and one in which Lincoln always remained on top. Pursuing the same goals of emancipation and victory, both sought to make the army as efficient as possible and hoped to employ Negro troops to the best advantage. Lincoln appears more astute and had to be more sensitive to the other political elements in the North and the more moderate and conservative interests in his own party. But he accomplished, in time, practically everything the advanced elements in his own party wanted. They, in turn, supported his most vital measures, constituted the shock troops of the Republican party, and provided a sput for the laggard generals and politicians. . .

8. The Problem of Wartime Reconstruction

In this chpt T addresses himself to the charge that had Lincoln lived he, like Johnson, would have crossed swords with the radicals. T answers that this was unlikely. . .

He notes that Lincoln had to steer a middle course between the ultras and the conservatives on questions like emancipation, the vote, and what constituted a "reconstructed" government. He gives examples of the differences of opinion about Reconstruction in states like Louisiana and the border states like Missouri.

But he notes, too, that Lincoln was willing to move at his own pace in the direction the radicals were chartering. He cites the example of West Virginia. Despite conservative opposition, Lincoln sided with the ultras in supporting the new state of West Virginia. . . Institutionalizing its break from the Tidewater aristocracy.

Lincoln finally came around to the position that emancipation would not be reversed with the support of the Thirteenth Amendment. . . He appointed Chase to fill the vacancy on the Supreme Court after the death of Taney. . . This was after Chase tried from the position of Secretary of the Treasury to win the nomination away from Lincoln in 1864. This too was a victory for the radicals. . .

Lincoln at the end was coming around to the position of the Radicals in terms of enfranchisement of the blacks. He was willing to support enfranchisement for Louisiana blacks whom were qualified and who served in the Union Army. . .

T concludes that Lincoln was coming around to the radicals position on Reconstruction before his death, . . . That Lincoln and the Radicals could work in tandem for progress. . .

9. The Break with Johnson

The point here is that it was not for doctrinaire reasons that the radicals finally broke with Johnson, the evidence that their efforts were needed was overwhelming.

T's point is that AJ brought on the break by his failure to even consult with the radicals and confer with the moderates of the party. What was at stake was not fine points of a doctrinaire nature--but the very viability of the Republican party itself. T points out that on many other issues--the currency, tariff, economic, etc., the party ranks would split. They were aware that the party could accomplish anything only by staying together. They did not want to jeopardize the future of Republican political organization by a break with their executive leader. . . . The one aim they all shared was the desire to protect the Negro either for humanitarian or political reasons. . .

The break with Johnson was unavoidable. . . But all sides lost as a result of this rupture. What the nation was strong leadership and direction to carry on the massive jobs ahead (1) reconstruction (2) economic policy (3) restoration of some semblance of social and economic life in the South [see Coulter for the damage. . . This kind of work required at best the cooperation of the Executive and the Legislature. . .

It also required a united party surrounding a strong leader. None of these requirements were at hand after the break.

T points out that the Republicans in the Congress were fragmented. . . He cites David Donald's breakdown in The Politics of Reconstruction. Donald has distinguished conservatives, moderates, independents, radicals, Stevens radicals, and ultraradicals. . . There was no hard and fast line dividing these politicians. . . The best way to see these divisions in the GOP was not just on the question of Reconstruction and the rights of blacks. But in areas like the currency question (see Unger, The Greenback Era), and labor (Montgomery), and the tariff (Coban B-R reprint, etc). . .

T takes issue with charges that the radicals were vindictive. The evidence points in another direction. . .

They did not call for vengeance on the leaders of the Old Confederacy . . . Not one highly placed Confederate official was executed. . . Jefferson Davis spent only two years in jail before released. . . Southern generals suffered no deprivation of freedom, Southern congressmen was generally unmolested, and no prescriptions of conquered leaders marred the records of the judicial system . . .

He does not find them solely motivated by self-interest either. . . He finds them sincere in their commitment to human rights. . . They wanted security for ~~the~~ their experiment in democracy

To secure this they had to compromise. . . They had to secure two-thirds in the congress to override Johnson's vetoes. . . They had to retain moderate support. He takes as an example of their moderation and willingness to compromise the 14th Amendment. . . The failure of the Amendment to provide the franchise for the freedman was the extent of the radicals willing to take half-a-loaf. . . Also awareness that they had to move with dexterity to get the support of a majority of their party. Also aware that the North would not "buy" enfranchisement for blacks in the North . . .

T concludes that the framing of the 14th was intended as the vehicle for the ending of the "war" and the beginning of Reconstruction. That most radicals did not follow Sumner's objections about the meaning of the 14th . . . That men like Wade were willing to accept the result of reconstruction pending the South's acceptance of the 14th amendment. If they ratified it then they would be back in the Union. Even on such a crucial issue the radicals were divided. . .

The failing success of the Radicals came ironically from their earlier success in hobbling Johnson But now they were no longer a pressure group inside the Republican party. Circumstances thrust them forward into positions of leadership--they were the surrogate for the Executive that was in disgrace. They were the organizers, the drafters of legislation, etc. They now had to act more discreetly and responsibly legislatively. . .

11. The Radicals Blunder

T gives the impression that as early as 1867 there was almost a leadership vacuum in the national politics.

He emphasises again the divisions among the radicals and the party in general.

Going to the heart, he points to the 1867 defeats of Radicals and Republicans in the state elections. In Minnesota, Kansas, and Ohio (Wade's Ohio) the radicals insisted on testing the white sentiments on a universal enfranchisement bill by including party support for the extension of the vote to the blacks. They were beaten down. . . Wade was a victim of this white backlash. . . Division was evident in the patchwork of Reconstruction Acts. . .

Stevens was defeated in Pennsylvania when he tried for a Senate nomination . . . This was shocking to the radicals. . .

The radicals and moderates did team together momentarily in the McCardle case . . .

There was no agreement about proceeding with the impeachment of Johnson . . . Republicans and radicals could not agree on pushing Grant forward as their candidate in 1868. . .

Trefousse on the impeachment. . . He sees this as the ultimate radical blunder. The case against Johnson was based on technicalities to begin with--that is, charges that would be hard to prove. Secondly, the officers that were appointed to handle the impeachment were of the wrong caliber for the proceedings. . . See in this regard Ben Butler who was too pyrotechnic for a somber occasion like the impeachment of the President. . .

T adds that while Johnson goaded the Republicans to this course. . . He was after all to remain in office only one more year. . . And the better part of wisdom should have been to allow him to remain until his term was up.

What was at stake--if the radicals failed they and their program would fail.

Republicans in the southern states argued that Reconstruction and Republicanism would vanish if Johnson was not impeached. So much was riding on the removal, of the President.

Why the failure to impeach? Why did party discipline fail over such an important issue?

T gives his reasons (1) the technical nature of the charge that AJ violated the Tenure of Office Act. This act was so worded that it was unlikely that they could have gotten conviction. Judicial-minded Republicans like Trumbull, Feesenden, Grimes, etc. were not going to go for impeachment and removal on the basis of so fragile an argument. . .

Another factor, was Wade. He was the slated successor to Johnson if the President were removed. Wade's views on matters of the tariff but especially on repudiation and soft money, full civil rights for blacks, and enfranchisement for women were too much for many of the party moderates. Wade simply was not trusted by many. His tenure in the Senate was up soon . . . Had he replaced Johnson as President his control over the Patronage would have placed him in a sound position for the 1868 nomination. This the moderates and economic conservatives wished to avoid. In short, Johnson was right, but only because Wade was wrong. . .

The impact of the setback. . . T sees this expressed in the accelerated change of the party from that of Lincoln to Grant in 1868. The influx of the politicians over the "idealists." Reflected in the choice of Grant but even more so in the choice of Colfax as party VP . . .

T concludes: He sees the impeachment as a serious blunder. The failure of impeachment coupled with the defeats in 1867 elections, suggested to the radicals' enemies that their strengths were ebbing. Although they were still able to exert some influence during the Grant administration, in essence radical Reconstruction was a stillborn experiment.

12. The Last Triumphs

He ticks these off--the ratification of the 14th Amendment; the 15th Amendment; the Enforcement Acts; and finally the 1875 Civil Rights Act. . .

The decline. T argues that the radicals were virtually finished in the party by 1870-1871. How to account for this decline in a brief 6 year period. From hard core leadership and giving direction to the Republican party to decline and phase-out in just 6 short years. He cites the reasons given by Brock, Stamp, Woodward, Montgomery, etc. . .

Trefousse's own postmortem: The radicals were not able to sustain the interest in equality and keep the party on an idealistic track . . . True. T's point is that they were able to accomplish as much as they did was commendable.

This chapter gives a running account of the decline of radicalism--the factors(1)the disunity inside the party over issues like labor, tariff, national debt and currency(2)the association of the party with the business interests(3)the personnel was changing with the deaths and defeats of old line radicals(4)the Grant scandals. . .This took away the moral legitimacy of the party of Lincoln.

The 1872 Liberal Republican breakaway. . .Interesting here is the fact that most of the remaining radicals ~~st~~ satyed with Grant because they saw rightly that the Liberal Republicans with their choice of Greeley were patently for the status quo and "self government" in the southern states . . .

Their accomplishments: The victory over secession. The liberation of the slaves, the enlargement of the national government, and the constitutional guarantees of Negro rights in the 14th and 15th amendments. They were instrumental in all Lincoln's reforms and in carrying out the social revolution of 1862. They prevented Johnson from defeating the 14th amendment and frustrating the wartime revolution. If they were unable to fully protect Negro rights, if they failed to accomplish their vision of equality of all citizens, they nevertheless laid the foundation for the achievement of these goals in the 20th . . .