A Dangerous Stir: Fear, Paranoia, and the Making of Reconstruction (review)

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A Dangerous Stir: Fear, Paranoia, and the Making of Reconstruction. By Mark Wahlgren Summers. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. Pp. 344. Cloth, $39.95.)

In Shakespeare's comedy *Much Ado About Nothing*, the villain Don John convinces Claudio to denounce his bride, Hero, after planting the suspicion in the groom's mind that his love has been unfaithful. Claudio's fears, of course, are unfounded, and the young lovers eventually find their way back together after a series of comedic mishaps. In his new study of the role of fear in the politics of Reconstruction, Mark Wahlgren Summers uncovers not a comedy but a tragedy of Shakespearean proportions where fear, rumor, and misunderstanding play the central characters in a great American political drama.

Summers takes up Richard Hofstadter's concerns about the "paranoid style" of American politics and examines its influences in post–Civil War America. Unlike Hofstadter, who viewed conspiratorial thinking as symptomatic of political extremism, Summers argues that fear and paranoia "ran through the bloodstream of the body politic" in the period following the Civil War (2). The political debates over the fate of the defeated Confederacy were, Summers finds, guided by worries over "imagined revolutionary plots" and "unreasonable, phantasms of conspiracy" on both sides of the aisle in Congress (2). Republicans feared that unreconstructed southerners would renew armed conflict against the government, perhaps by instigating a foreign conflict that would succeed where the Confederacy had failed. Or maybe Andy Johnson would install himself as a kind of dictator and, with the help of reinstated ex-Confederate representatives, expel Republicans from Congress altogether. Democrats, especially southern ones, saw in Republicans the Jacobins of revolutionary France and feared an American "Terror" if Radicals were not reigned in. "On all sides," Summers declares, "Reconstruction was based not just on reasoned argument about the meaning of federalism, freedom, and the Constitution but on unfounded dread and preposterous hope" (6).

To the extent that Summers has identified what political theorist Judith Shklar termed the "liberalism of fear" that underlies the optimistic rights talk that scholars of American politics usually focus on, *A Dangerous Stir* offers a thought-provoking look at how so much of American political culture is a response to fear. Whether it's fear of a standing military, a too-powerful central state, or a fractious and potentially violent democratic electoral system, fear has played a formative role in the ideological as well as material construction of liberal states. For Shklar, these fears were legitimate. Writing in response to the rise of totalitarian regimes in

Europe during the twentieth century, Shklar understood the terror that states could inflict on individuals.[1] Summers, however, scoffs at the fears that post–Civil War Americans articulated, particularly their concern that the war might not be quite over, which he dismisses as "balderdash" (2). According to Summers, fears that more violence was to come if the government failed to stop it, or that the republic had been forever changed and perhaps for the worse, by emancipation as well as the war's immense devastation, were often little more than a paranoid frenzy whipped up by politicians in Washington. Although Summers stops short of casting Radical Republicans as the Don Johns of this story, the fearmongering he describes itself borders on the sinister, conspiratorial behavior he sets out to expose. It is not clear if lawmakers themselves believed their own rhetoric, or if they were merely reproducing a political language that by 1865 had structured American politics in ways that complicate the question of intentionality.

Either way, Summer's major contention that postwar fears of a Union still imperiled were unfounded limits the book's potential contribution to our understanding of Reconstruction politics. Those who feared that the war did not end in April 1865 were far from paranoid. Reports of violence from the South, including the activities of "regulators" and other anti-federal bands, provided convincing evidence that armed conflict remained a troubling fact, especially in backcountry regions where little, if any, law enforcement or military presence existed. Moreover, brutal attacks against freedpeople signaled white southerners' refusal to accept the war's outcome, particularly the destruction of slavery. The Freedmen's Bureau papers drip with blood—not imaginary or metaphorical blood but real blood from real bodies. The fears of freedpeople, however, do not enter into Summer's account. For the most part, his story is centered in Washington, where the tendency toward hyperbole (and perhaps our own present-day disillusionment with political "insiders") makes it easy to dismiss congressional speech making as just that. It is more difficult to dismiss the reports of Freedmen's Bureau agents describing the torture and murder of freedpeople across the South, or the letters from freedpeople themselves begging state officials for protection. When Radical Republicans spoke of such behavior as indicative of ex-Confederates' determination to reverse the war's outcome and as a threat to the nation, they did so not out of blind panic or paranoia but rather a reasoned and *reasonable* understanding that the bonds of unity among Americans were extremely fragile. Unlike the "paranoid style" that animated Know-Nothings in the 1850s or even the revolutionary generation who saw Tory conspiracies at work all around them, the fears of the Reconstruction-era were responses to events that had actually transpired:

600,000 dead, cities in ruin, 4 million emancipated, southern violence on the rise. Their trauma was hardly imagined.

The conclusions Summers draws are most troubling. Although he acknowledges that "Klan violence proved over and over, there were conspiracies afoot, murderous plots to overthrow freedom and to subvert state governments," he blames Radical Republicans. By creating panics and using them to "stretch" the Constitution, Radicals become responsible for white southerners' violent responses, what he calls the "toxic side effects" of Radical Reconstruction (271). Contrary to what David Blight tells us about postwar struggles over memory,[2] Summers believes Confederate memorialization of the Lost Cause was benign. "Nostalgia was not a danger," he writes (270). If Radical lawmakers went too far, so did freedpeople in their audacious demands for land, physical protection, and civil rights. From this perspective, Reconstruction was, indeed, much ado about nothing. While I am sure it was not Summers's intention to reproduce a watered-down version of the "tragic era," the reader is left with the sense that the last thirty years of historical work on Reconstruction has been for naught.

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NOTES

1. Judith N. Shklar, "The Liberalism of Fear," in *Political Thought and Political Thinkers*, ed. Stanley Hoffman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 3–20.

2. David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001).

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Texas Confederate, Reconstruction Governor: James Webb Throckmorton. By Kenneth Wayne Howell. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2008. Pp. 196. Cloth, $29.95.)

Edmund J. Davis of Texas: Civil War General, Republican Leader, Reconstruction Governor. By Carl H. Moneyhon. (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 2010. Pp. 274. Cloth, $27.95.)

The inaugural issue of this journal affords an opportunity to assess Reconstruction scholarship by means of two scholarly biographies of