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The Great Melding: War, the Dixiecrat Rebellion, and the Southern Model for America's New Conservatism

By Glenn Feldman. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015. Pp. ix, 388. \$59.95. ISBN 978-0-8173-1866-6.)

Reviewed by Aaron Getman-Pickering

WILD ANIMALS have been known to chew off a paw, or even an entire leg, when stuck in a trap. The American South has done the same. Dr. Glenn Feldman calls this “sophistic pruning,” in his new book *The Great Melding*, a metaphor for the South’s habit of pruning the most egregious branches of white-supremacy in order to keep the more central, systematic parts alive and healthy. The statement on the other side of the colon — *War, the Dixiecrat Rebellion, and the Southern Model for America's New Conservatism* — gives nuance to the discussion, but at its base, Feldman’s message is unambiguous: southern politics is, and has always been, about race.

The book starts with a brief summary of the late 19th and early 20th centuries in which the South, still deeply wounded by their defeat in the Civil War and subsequent occupation, learned that “Yankee, Republican, and federal rule could be broken if whites put aside their economic differences to cooperate.” The great melding, then, stripped of its linguistic niceties, was a bargain: social conservatives voted against their economic interests while business conservatives accepted and even amplified the strong social conservatism and illiberalism pervasive in Southern culture.

This melding was not accidental. It occurred mainly as a backlash to the New Deal. And while the South did have its liberals — Graves, Ethridge, Couch, Blease,

Commer, DuBose, Black, Green and Byrnes to name a few — Feldman finds that they were never liberal in any novel way. That is to say, these politicians were never racially liberal. Black, Graves, and Green could, for example, be found in Alabama’s 1920’s K.K.K. klaverns. Lister Hill’s Senate run in 1944 against James Simpson is oft-cited as evidence of Alabama’s liberalism in the 1940’s. Feldman finds it the opposite; what should have been an easy victory for Hill turned into a prolonged and ugly campaign. Simpson used race “solidly interwound with the most hallowed dogmas of the free market,” to curry favor, and Hill, who had not planned to return to Alabama to campaign, was forced to race bait to win re-election (118).

By a concerted conservative effort, liberalism came to stand for everything that the South despised: the Federal government, Yankees, Jews (often one and the same), blacks, labor unions and Catholics. This proved difficult in the throes of the Great Depression when worries about federal encroachment were overridden by the immediacy of survival. It was only after the first New Deal, 1936 or so, when Roosevelt began enacting long-standing legislation such as a national minimum wage and the right to form a union, that Southerners began to fear that a bag was being pulled over their heads; “a deep fear and dislike of the federal government served as the common denominator between economic and social conservatives” (191). Time, money and political capital was also crucial to convince

average peoples that the government was their enemy — especially because the South had received more from the New Deal than anywhere else in the country. They said that business had saved the South from “FDR, the national Democrats, and their alliance with labor gangsters” (62).

One of Feldman’s many contributions in *The Great Melding* is the depth and breadth of his research. The quotations he uses are shocking in their candor. Take this one, for example: “the Jew CIO and Roosevelt are going to make niggers out of us all... The Jew carpetbagger and the nigger question of the Civil War days are here again... may God help our case” (154). These quotes, it is important to note, are not just jaundiced rambles of rural bigots. Feldman cites industrial businessmen, hill country and black belt farmers, Vanderbilt Agrarians, hill country farmers, writers, lawyers, journalists and politicians; big mules, populists, Bourbons and union men; carpetbaggers and scalawags, rich and poor. Their alliance was a matter of the survival of Southern civilization. Phrased as such, their cause was too big to fail.

Urban legend (not historical evidence, mind you) has it that when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act he said, “We have lost the South for a generation.” Feldman, on the other hand, argues that Democrats lost the South, not all at once, but slowly in the 1920’s and then faster in the 1930’s and 1940’s. The Dixiecrats or the States Rights Democratic Party was the summation of decades of withdrawal from the national Democratic Party. While local Southern Democrats were markedly conservative, the national party was becoming more and more racially assimilated. Southerners felt that the national party had betrayed them, but they could not yet join the ranks of Republicans — it was still the party of Lincoln. And so they did in 1948 what they had done in 1928 under the aegis of the Hoovercrats: they left. In the Democratic national convention before the 1948 elec-

tion, Southern representatives literally walked out when the body voted to make civil rights a part of their national platform. Truman, once a potential redeemer of the Democratic Party with his confederate roots, was a quisling and a failure.

Feldman stresses that the Dixiecrats were not, by the most liberal interpretation, different than other Southern politicians. He writes that “while the Dixiecrats labored long and hard to portray their movement as a spontaneous grassroots expression, it was neither” (284). Their views on race and economics were no different than their fellow statesmen. Principally, it was a power-grab by economic rightists [as popularized by Ayn Rand, Ludwig Von Mises, Milton Friedman, and F.A. Hayek] “who — given the opening by the national Democratic Party to seize the standard of white supremacy to further their class program — did exactly that” (284).

Scholars of suburban republicanism believe that there is more nuance to the story than a tale of racial conservatism, and while Feldman would agree partially, he argues that this view should not be used to “consign the study of history to the realm of infinite relativism” (279). Suburbanization, Feldman would remind his reader, was, after all, a backlash to desegregation and therefore completely racially motivated. Scholars of the New South have given this nuance more than its share. Feldman reminds us of the pervasiveness of white supremacy, and moreover, how the defenders of this Southern civilization labored to euphemize the terms of White Supremacy such that politicians would never again have to “scream nigger.” They could simply say “states rights” or “local control” or even “constitutionalism.” That claim of Orwell’s — that political language is “designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable” — may have found its greatest substantiation.

Conceptually simple, but stylistically incisive,

Feldman proves beyond a doubt the true cause for the South's abrupt departure from the Democratic Party. However, through Feldman's book, it becomes clear that the shifts and volatility did not represent a fundamental difference in political ends, but rather a difference in the means by which to accomplish those ends. The South did not so much become republican as the Republican Party became Southern — they were the only party to accept its toxic amalgam of racism and economic conservatism — and so the moniker the “Solid South” holds. Feldman's book is not an indictment of Southern politics, or Southern culture for that matter, but the carefully depicted truth of a brutal backlash to the Civil War and the New Deal. The same states that went Dixiecrat in 1948 went to George Wallace in 1968. More than a side note in Southern political history, the Dixiecrat revolt represents a culmination of decades of conservative backlash, which Feldman seems to imply has been with us ever since. Dixie has had quite a say in the way politics are done in this country, and for those looking to understand the root causes, look no further; Feldman's *The Great Melding* is just the book.
