Author Interview--J. Matthew Gallman (The Cacophony of Politics) Part 1

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Hello H-CivWar Readers:


To start Matt, how did you come to write a book about the Northern Democratic Party during the Civil War?

JMG: I generally frame new book projects around a topic that interests me, but also around a new methodology or historiographic debate. My first book was on Philadelphia during the Civil War, but it was also an attempt to apply the methodologies of community studies to the home front. I then wrote a study of Irish famine migrants in Liverpool and Philadelphia that I saw as an attempt to write a comparative urban history. My interest in biography led me to write a book about Anna Dickinson, but I was also really interested in contributing to the scholarship on women in public life. Most recently I immersed myself in wartime popular culture to see what might be learned about cultural and political rules during the Civil War.

This project followed a similar pattern. I have written quite a bit about the northern states during the Civil War, but little on political history. I wanted to write about the North’s Democratic Party during the war and it seemed that there was room for a new book on the topic. Many absorbing topics fell under that umbrella. I also thought that it was interesting to attempt a project that focused on folks whose beliefs I did not share or admire. In a broader methodological sense, I hoped to write something that might be called a social history of politics. I wanted to present my views on the important political events, but I also hoped to expand how we think about political history. Thus, The Cacophony of Politics considers rioters who engaged in symbolic political speech. I also attempted to give voice to northern women who formed and articulated opinions about politics and power, even when the partisan structures excluded them.

What do you argue in The Cacophony of Politics?

JMG: As this project made the transition from intensive research to writing, I found myself pushing back against some of the things I had come to expect from monographs. So, I did something a big atypical. In the Introduction I presented the reader with six numbered “core arguments.” Some found...
their way into all chapters, and others appeared only periodically throughout the text. The key point was that Civil War politics was an inherently messy topic, which defied a single narrative.

Then I played around a bit with how to tell the chronology. The first 3 chapters and the final 4 chapters follow some sense of chronology, toughing on familiar topics, but Part II (chapters 4 and 5) abandons that chronology to make some arguments about the general shape and location of political dissent.

Finally, the Conclusion does not really follow the familiar monograph format, in that I do not attempt to revisit those original six themes from the Introduction. Instead, I pose two broad questions about the northern Democrats, focusing on treason and on racism.

So I found myself making quite a few arguments while resisting the idea that there should be a single argument.

You have a very broad topic with the Democratic Party during the war, not to mention the wealth of sources available for such a topic, how did you determine what sources and individuals to focus on specifically?

JMG: I began this project by following familiar strategies. I made lists of articles and books and other lists of useful primary sources. Then I read all sorts of things on my lists, scanning citations for items that I had omitted. Once I felt that I had some familiarity with the overall narrative, I began reading printed primary materials, including pamphlets and speeches as well as published correspondence.

Thanks to generous grants and superb archivists, I enjoyed productive stints at the Huntington Library and at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and the Library Company of Philadelphia. The following year I held a brief fellowship at the Kentucky Historical Society. At each stop, my research design was akin to a scholarly game of “Go Fish,” where I would show up and say, “do you have any Democrats?” Back in Gainesville, I acquired a digital version of the “Historical Reports of State Acting Assistant Provost Marshals General and District Provost Marshals, 1865” from the National Archives, and I spent a huge amount of time reading handwritten reports.

So, in answer to this question, I wanted to make sure that the book would tell readers the crucial factual things that I felt they should know about wartime politics, but I did not set out with a cast of characters in mind. I concluded fairly early on that I wanted to write a book driven by evocative episodes and a diverse assortment of men and women. My idea was to write about the unfamiliar and the only slightly familiar, as well as the truly famous or infamous. I hoped that I could spin tales that spoke to specific places and times while also using them to illustrate the broader themes that drove the book.

Before I set about organizing and writing, I attempted something that was pretty ridiculous. I got a large roll of paper and taped a long portion of it in a hallway, with a chronology of dates along one axis and geographic sections along the other. Then I took a stack of colored post-its and marked individual post-its with about 50 or 60 individuals, documents, or events. I tinkered with my colored events in search of the right balance. Finally I had what I was going to write about, but little sense of how the book would look. Some post-its ended up trimmed to a few sentences or ignored entirely, but
many survived as modest episodes illustrating broad topics.

Richard Hofstadter once observed that the United States was different in that it early on created the notion of a loyal opposition and peaceful transitions of power, people at the time of the war did not universally trust Democrats as a loyal opposition. How does your work add to our understanding of the opposition during the Civil War?

JMG: When we write about, or teach about, Civil War politics there is a natural tendency to fall into simple binaries: The North’s political structure pitted Republicans vs. Democrats, and northern Democrats divided between “War Democrats” and “Peace Democrats.”

Those are reasonable short hands, but when we grapple with the meaning of dissent or loyal opposition, two tweaks are in order. First, many northerners differed with the Lincoln administration on various specific issues. At the top of many lists would be emancipation, conscription, political arrests, and the war’s horrible casualties. Individual voters or observers might oppose Lincoln on any or all of those issues, but the same person could still conclude that the war was worth waging and the Union required defending. To put it another way: in the midst of the Civil War there was room for individual citizens to oppose the administration, while still supporting the war effort. Were such northerners part of the “loyal opposition” or were they just not Republicans?

This leads to a second important adjustment in our familiar thinking: the importance of timing. Each of those divisive political issues had its own wartime chronology, producing ebbs and flows in how citizens felt about the war and the administration. Meanwhile, war weariness and rising death tolls undermined support for the war, at least until positive news from the battlefield raised spirits.

It is probably wisest to look at Civil War northerners as aligned along a complicated – and persistently in flux – spectrum of ideas. Some Democrats wanted no part of the war or the Lincoln administration from early 1861. Others remained unbending in supporting the Union, and therefore the war effort, even while dissenting from some policies. But there was also a vast middle, where opinions changed and loyalties shifted, and support for the war and for the administration was largely conditional. In November 1864, with news from the front generally positive, 45% of northern voters declined to support Lincoln’s reelection. They seem to have come to that conclusion for quite different reasons, but it is not hard to imagine an election in a different month with a different result.