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[Review of] *From Oligarchy to Republicanism: The Great Task of Reconstruction*. By Forrest A. Nabors (Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 2017) 358 pp. \$45.00

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reexamine old findings and new results, dig deeper into the newly available data, adapt our methodologies, and extend this learning to new and unexpected insights, whether those results ultimately agree with or upend our conclusions” (203).

David D. Vail
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From Oligarchy to Republicanism: The Great Task of Reconstruction. By Forrest A. Nabors (Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 2017) 358 pp. \$45.00

“Forty years after the birth of American liberty, a race of kings arose from American soil,” writes Nabors in this challenging book about the antebellum South and the Slave Power (xvi). Seeing the war as a contest of civilizations, informed by political science’s Aristotelian regime analysis, he makes the destruction of a home-grown oligarchy “the great task of reconstruction”—a task left incomplete, since postwar elites used race prejudice to make a subordinate class rebuild the foundations.

Nabors’ technique is simple to the point of being elementary. To show what Republicans thought of the South and what the slave power did, he consults, almost exclusively, published Republican sources, particularly the *Congressional Globe*. In its pages, amassing facts and fearful speculations, Republicans described a place dominated by the lords of the lash, who managed to oppress both whites and blacks, pitting them against each other in the South and kneading the doughfaces according to their needs in the North. Step by step, they advanced slavery into free territory or made increasingly outrageous demands, until the republic itself faced an existential threat to democracy and liberty. Having made the Republicans’ case in five chapters, Nabors asserts its truth in the sixth chapter, conspiracy and all, by showing that slaveholding states stunted on schools and rigged representation well in the planters’ favor. His seventh chapter, abetted by his usual published sources, explains how white terrorism, reacting against the idea of elevating color over class, was the undoing of Reconstruction.

Giving the Slave Power conspiracy full-dress coverage has undeniable value. Only thus can we understand why so many antislavery advocates thought the country to be in mortal peril. Readers can certainly follow the author to this point, but no farther. Those who have read Eric Foner or Leonard Richards will barely raise an eyebrow at what Nabors has to say about how Republicans, especially the most radical, viewed the South, though they might object to Nabors’ refusal to use manuscripts, newspapers, or much in the way of statistical studies of wealth holding in the country as a whole. A few of them might wonder whether anybody in the South ever had a word to say on their own behalf or whether well-informed northerners could have poked holes in the slave power scenario. The Democratic party of 1848 that Nabors depicts, as dominated by John C. Calhoun, will surprise political historians; it certainly

would have floored the cast-iron man himself! The picture of a polity under the sway of a master class fits some places better than others, and if scholars like Oakes, Thornton, and Wooster speak true, far fewer than the Republican stereotype would have it, particularly outside the cotton belt.¹ Even regarding the matter of funding public schools, the planters' hostility found an echo across white society in the suspicion of any institution encroaching on "republican liberty," especially the liberty not to pay more taxes.

Readers may wonder why the postwar Congress did such a beggarly job of addressing the "great task," or, in particular, why Nabors fails to examine the details about the legislation of the time. Republicans could have undone oligarchy thoroughly. They could have confiscated the planters' estates or nudged new state governments to buy foreclosed property and parcel it out as small farms. They could have disfranchised the elite permanently or shut ex-Confederates from office, not based on their prewar officeholding but on how much property they held. They could have mandated homestead exemptions, enacted stay laws to protect debtors, and paid for free schools, open to all. They could have voided every charter handed out from day one of the disunion. Congress did none of those things. Is it possible that Nabors has that "great task" wrong in the first place?

Mark Wahlgren Summers
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Populism and Imperialism: Politics, Culture, and Foreign Policy in the American West, 1890–1900. By Nathan Jessen (Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 2017) 331 pp. \$39.95

During its explosive heyday between 1890 and 1896, the radical Populist movement thoroughly disrupted American politics, especially in the rural South and West. Propelled by hard times and the transformative changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution, the Populists demanded sweeping reforms designed to break the power of ascendant corporate monopolies and the compliant Democratic and Republican party politicians who did their bidding. Populist success at the polls forced the Democrats to embrace several of their proposals, most notably the free coinage of silver, and to nominate Nebraska congressman William Jennings Bryan for the presidency in 1896. Choosing fatefully to endorse Bryan's candidacy, the Populists went into rapid decline following his crushing loss to Republican William McKinley.

1 See, for example, James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861–1865* (New York, 2014); J. Mills Thornton, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800–1860* (Baton Rouge, 1978); Ralph Wooster, *Politicians, Planters, and Plain Folk: Courthouse and Statehouse in the Upper South, 1850–1860* (Knoxville, 1975).