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‘The Age of Acrimony’ Review: A Raucous Republic

The portrait of a time—not so unlike our own—when partisan discord dominated American life.



‘Nursing Our Infant Industries’ (1883) by Friederich Gaetz.

PHOTO: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

By *Michael Barone*

April 16, 2021 10:05 am ET



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Election after election decided by the narrowest of margins. Divided government, with one party holding the presidency and the other holding one or both houses of Congress most of the time. Citizens voting straight party tickets and politicians voting straight party lines, with opponents not even speaking to each other. This picture of polarized partisan parity is a familiar and fair description—or indictment—of American politics today.

But it’s not, as many suggest, unique in American history. On the contrary, the

generation following the Civil War saw a political culture of strong partisanship combined with bitterly contested elections. Most of us remember the long list of Republican presidents in the three decades after the war, but during most of those years Democrats had majorities in the House. Almost all presidential elections were narrowly decided. Between 1874 and 1894 only one candidate won an absolute majority of the popular vote—and he was declared the loser by a commission set up to resolve a dispute over electoral votes. In only five of those 20 years did one party control the presidency and both houses of Congress.

THE AGE OF ACRIMONY

By Jon Grinspan

Bloomsbury, 364 pages, \$30

So it's hard not to see echoes of our current politics in historian Jon Grinspan's chronicle of this rambunctious period. "The Age of Acrimony" isn't a detailed narrative of the era's political struggles or a political-science thesis with tables and graphs. The wondrous profusion of technological innovation and economic growth of the late 19th century is touched on, but without the robotic denunciations of "robber barons" that permeate so many historians' accounts. Mr. Grinspan's focus is on practical politics, which in this period meant mass politics—the highest rates of voter turnout and mass participation in the nation's history.

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Mr. Grinspan, a curator at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American

History, draws on its archives and store of artifacts to give readers a sense of what it was like to be part of “the vast, stomping political campaigns that dominated popular culture.” In big cities and courthouse towns men would “light stinking oil torches, don shimmering uniforms, burn effigies, roll floats, push coffins (with the names of rival politicians scribbled on their sides), sing serenades, build bonfires, light fireworks,” he writes. They would argue in saloons or “shoot their revolvers in the air, or barbecue hogs for celebrations, or heave brickbats from their roofs into teeming rallies of the other party.” Gunfire, he says, was reported at every election in Philadelphia between 1870 and 1900.

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young women made a ceremony of casting their first, “virgin” vote. But his subjects in “The Age of Acrimony” are in a different frame of mind: They are intensely aware that some 600,000 men died in the Civil War. The war may have marked a “new birth of freedom,” in Abraham Lincoln’s phrase, but it also cast a shadow over electoral politics.

Indeed, the divisions between the two parties were largely driven by different attitudes toward the war, and both parties had reason to be defensive. Democrats had tended to oppose the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, with most Southern Democrats fighting for the Confederacy and many supporting the postwar terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan. Republicans, for their part, had won the 1860 election with only 40% of the popular vote and zero support in the slave

At a time when other nations restricted voting to those with property, or had no elections at all, men in America’s young democracy “could smell, taste, and feel democracy pulsating all around them,” Mr. Grinspan observes. There was an exuberance in all this, but also notes of melancholy and desperation. In “The Virgin Vote” (2016), Mr. Grinspan described how, in the antebellum politics of the 1840s and 1850s, young men escorted by older men and cheered on by

states. By the mid-1870s, their postwar Reconstruction policy—stationing federal troops in the South to enforce equal rights for blacks—was widely unpopular, plagued by armed attacks on blacks by Ku Klux Klan members and others and murders and lynchings tolerated or encouraged by local white officials. Mr. Grinspan’s portrait of New York Sen. Roscoe Conkling, a “Stalwart” Republican disparaged by intellectual elites Northern and Southern as corrupt, gives him due credit as a principled supporter of civil rights and Reconstruction into the 1880s, when most of his fellow party members were setting aside their convictions in the face of criticism from intellectuals like George William Curtis and Henry Adams.

Mr. Grinspan doesn’t focus on all the political worthies of the period. Rather, in the manner of David McCullough, he captures many of his themes in the story of a single figure whose career intersected with prominent leaders of the day and whose interests ranged across a broad spectrum of not just political but also cultural issues. William D. “Pig Iron” Kelley—the emblematic character in “The Age of Acrimony”—was a poor boy from Philadelphia who started off as a jeweler and watchmaker, though the “frustration of crafting baubles for the rich nurtured a commitment to protecting working people,” Mr. Grinspan writes. At age 19 he somehow snagged a meeting with President Andrew Jackson and was soon giving populist speeches in Boston and hobnobbing with the eminent (and partisan Democratic) historian George Bancroft. After switching from Jackson’s Democrats to the new Republican Party in the 1850s, he became close to Abraham Lincoln. He was elected to the House in 1860 from a west Philadelphia district and served until his death in 1890—the longest-serving House member for his last 14 years.



'1789 to 1889 - The Progress of Time' (1889) by Victor Gillam.

PHOTO: NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HISTORY

Mr. Grinspan reconstructs Kelley's career from his frequent letters to his wife Carrie and his intellectually prodigious daughter Florence and from his correspondence with Frederick Douglass and Susan B. Anthony. He vowed to make his voice "the chief channel" for Anthony's women's suffrage petitions to Congress and debated with Douglass over whether to throw off "the shackles of party." Like many American politicians of the era, he traveled widely. We follow him as he dodges bullets from a black rights' opponent in Mobile, Ala., in 1867 and travels west and witnesses the golden spike being driven in to finish the Transcontinental Railroad in the Utah Territory in 1869.

Kelley was a faithful Republican in a partisan era, a strong tariff supporter—hence the nickname—from a state that produced iron, steel and locomotives. Like three presidents (Polk, Fillmore, McKinley), he chaired the House Ways and Means Committee. He sponsored the 15th Amendment guaranteeing blacks the right to vote, and he enjoyed the enthusiastic support of Philadelphia blacks.

But after the 1876 election—when, in the highest turnout in U.S. history (81% of eligible voters), Democrat Samuel Tilden won a majority of the popular vote (though Rutherford Hayes was brokered into the presidency)—Kelley lost faith in Reconstruction. As Mr. Grinspan writes: "Reconstruction was killed by political violence in the South and by the millions of White voters nationwide who gave up

on it.” The course of Kelley’s career shows idealism being converted into party loyalty and the continuing tension between the two.

Inevitably, partisan feelings faded as the war became more distant. “Fireworks reached a new scale in 1884,” Mr. Grinspan reports, but by 1892 marching clubs and boisterous parades and partisan taunts were becoming less common. A rising generation with no memories of the Civil War felt that politics could only be reformed if it “could be made dull enough that all the fun of ‘racket and rocket’ fell away.” Balloting changed too: The old ballots, produced by the parties and cast in public view, were replaced between 1888 and 1893 by so-called Australian ballots: These were printed by the states and cast in the privacy of voting booths.

But the quiet wouldn’t last long. The disillusion with the two-party system that was voiced by sniffy patrician Yankees like Henry Adams and Francis Parkman—they found it vulgar and disdained the black and immigrant masses whose votes any politician must seek—was outshouted by loud and violent demands not for reform but for revolution. American elites were chilled by the 1871 Paris Commune and by its echo in the 1886 Haymarket Square riot in Chicago, where the federal government built armories and stationed troops in nearby Fort Sheridan to quell outbreaks of labor unrest. The change was personified, Mr. Grinspan notes, by Florence Kelley’s “intellectual war with capitalism, democracy, and her family’s complicity in both.” She spent the 1880s studying child labor at Cornell University, then learning German and marrying a Russian exile in Zurich and collaborating with Karl Marx’s old partner Friedrich Engels.

This new agitation, in its turn, seemed to add to the danger of disorder arising from an excess of popular democracy. The late historian Robert Wiebe, in “The Search for Order: 1877-1920,” documented how American professions and corporations became more nationally organized in the decades around 1900, and political campaigns followed a parallel course. As Civil War loyalties faded, Democrats in 1890 and Republicans in 1894 won landslides in congressional elections. In the 1896 election, William Jennings Bryan, the Democratic nominee, took his “free silver” message to the public: Breaking an old taboo, he delivered 500 speeches to more than a million people. Meanwhile, Republican William McKinley spoke to half a million transported on trains to his front porch in

Canton, Ohio.

McKinley's campaign was a professional one, Mr. Grinspan notes, aided by "huge teams of party professionals" and run by coal and iron millionaire Mark Hanna and 31-year-old Charles Dawes, the first Budget Bureau director and Calvin Coolidge's vice president in the 1920s. The press was professionalized too. Newspapers were traditionally party organs, faithful to the politicians who subsidized them, but new mass-circulation newspapers financed by advertisers followed the lead of ambitious young publishers like Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. These press barons were faithful only to their own instincts—and to their own political careers (Pulitzer served in the Missouri legislature; Hearst was elected to Congress and nearly elected governor of New York) and causes.

The result of these changes, eventually, was a politics that was less agitated and accessible to ordinary people and more susceptible to the influence of wealthy moguls and articulate intellectuals. What "Pig Iron" Kelley would make of it is hard to say. His daughter Florence, based in Chicago's Hull House and New York's Henry Street Settlement, became a national reformer, pushing for child-labor restrictions and founding the National Consumer League. She was puzzled at American workers' indifference to socialism. Electoral politics by the 1910s had been reformed and professionalized, "leaving an electorate that was wealthier, whiter, older, and more likely to be native-born," Mr. Grinspan writes. "A new political culture had been born: one that had been cleaned and calmed, stifled and squelched," with voter turnout plummeting below 60%.

That's not all bad, Mr. Grinspan argues. "America managed to avoid the brutal mass politics that ravaged much of the world in the twentieth century." But perhaps we're going back to something "Pig Iron" would have found familiar. Turnout has been rising, sharply, to 66% in 2020. Straight-ticket voting is as strong as it has been since that time; partisan rancor seems at record levels; and both parties behave like enemies in a cultural civil war, fighting it out on social media rather than torchlight parades. Where will it all end? To judge by Mr.

Grinspan's account, only when old causes and divisions are replaced by those of new generations—after another decade or two of acrimony.

—*Mr. Barone is senior political analyst for the Washington Examiner and the author of “How America's Political Parties Change (And How They Don't).”*

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