

A New Birth of Freedom: The Republican Party and Freedmen's Rights, 1861-1866, by Herman Belz. Contributions in American History, Number 52. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1976. pp. 199. Bibliography, index.

The author writes, "The purpose of this study is to examine how emancipation that was undertaken for military reasons gave rise to federal policies protecting the liberty and rights of freed slaves and how these policies eventually led to the civil rights settlement of 1866." His book is an adequate, if not scintillating, contribution in American history. In any case, it cannot be faulted for failing its objective.

The writer anticipates a detailed knowledge of antebellum American social and political history and familiarity with its attendant terminology. Little attention is given to the emergence or principles of the Radicals. The term Copperhead is used repeatedly without amplification. No time is spent describing the wartime Congress. The writer evidently chose to address a sophisticated and, therefore, limited audience.

The work is largely recitation without interpretation. It provides a guided tour of the federal lawmaking sequence, as it affected freedmen, during a prescribed time. The book is not especially well written or readable. Its organization is also confusing. Each chapter views freedmen's rights from a limited perspective. Chapter 3, for example, is confined to "Presidential Reconstruction and Freedmen's Policy," while Chapter 4 dwells on "Congressional Reconstruction and Freedmen's Rights." As one result, the text continually lurches forward, then backward, in time. The reader is left with the impression that he or she is scanning a collection of articles rather than a comprehensive study.

For anyone with a scholarly interest in the genesis and development of federal law affecting freed slaves, the book is a valuable reference distilled from an impressive array of primary sources. It is especially rewarding for scholars of Iowa history because so many Hawkeye legislators—Grimes, Wilson, Kasson, Grinnell, Harlan—fought in the front ranks for enlightened, if politically inspired, freedmen's rights.

Professor Belz interprets sympathetically the actions of such legislators, in contradiction of some more cynical assessments of the lawmakers' motives. Whatever the flaws of freedmen's legislation, it resulted in a reconstruction policy "within which the rights and interests of Negroes and other citizens could in subsequent years be more fully and effectively protected," he asserts.

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