

“doomed to failure.”

Republicans seem determined to prove that point, according to Caldwell, a senior writer for the conservative *Weekly Standard*. He argues that the GOP is increasingly in thrall to the South, and that its “tradition of putting values—particularly Christian values—at the center of politics” is alienating even conservative voters in other regions. “The Republicans would like to think that Americans are the dupes of a lecherous Arkansas sleazeball, just as the Democrats in the 1980s saw voters as gulled by a senile B-movie warmonger. But Clinton’s success, like Reagan’s, has to do with American

beliefs and the extent to which he embodies them and his opponents do not.” On issues such as gay rights, the environment, and women in the workplace, Caldwell says, “the country has moved leftward.” The GOP may cling to power, but it will not “rule from a place in Americans’ hearts” until it changes.

Clinton-style blending may be a good short-term solution, but in Lilla’s view, “healthy democratic politics” requires a “perceptible distinction between right and left.” This vital divide “will naturally reappear,” he believes, once the political system fully assimilates the two revolutions.

The Proud History of Voter Apathy

“Limits of Political Engagement in Antebellum America: A New Look at the Golden Age of Participatory Democracy” by Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin, in *The Journal of American History* (Dec. 1997), 1125 E. Atwater Ave., Bloomington, Ind. 47401-3701.

As clucks of disapproval about Americans’ political apathy and low voter turnout have grown louder in recent years, many historians have looked back to the decades before the Civil War as a time when Americans (at least the white males eligible to vote) were enthusiastically engaged in politics. In that golden age, citizens immersed themselves in politics, understood “the issues,” flocked to meetings and rallies, and faithfully voted on election days as if taking part in a solemn religious rite. “More than in any subsequent era,” one such historian has written, “political life formed the very essence of the pre-Civil War generation’s experience.”

Not quite, say Altschuler and Blumin, professors of American studies and American history, respectively, at Cornell University. Closely examining political life during the 1840s and ’50s in 16 county seats and small cities, they found that political apathy is hardly a strictly modern phenomenon. In a complaint characteristic of the period, the *Dubuque Daily Times* editorialized in 1859 that the “better portion” of the electorate “retire in disgust from the heat and tur-

moil of political strife. They leave primary meetings, and County, District and State Conventions to political gamblers and party hacks.”

Altschuler and Blumin found that antebellum politics was much like our own: that lawyers and businessmen predominated among the politically active; that local party caucuses and conventions were often thinly attended, even when there were close contests; that interest in campaigns slackened in off-year elections; that “spontaneous” outpourings of support for candidates at major campaign rallies were nearly always



GOP “Wide-Awake” clubs march in Hartford for Lincoln in July 1860. Popular enthusiasm displaced political apathy that year.

pumped up by imported party workers; and that the political parties did not rely on the civic conscience of their supporters to get them to the polls but rather used organizers and treats such as whiskey to make sure they voted.

In short, those people who were deeply committed to political affairs worked hard to influence those who were not, Altschuler and Blumin say. “The very intensity of this ‘partisan imperative’ sug-

gests the magnitude of the task party activists perceived and set out to perform.” The big turnout at the polls during the period reflects their success in this effort more than it does “the broad and deep political conviction” of the electorate, as the dewy-eyed historians would have it. Indeed, write the authors, “American democracy found its greatest validation in the peaceful and apolitical aftermath of the strident political campaign.”

FOREIGN POLICY & DEFENSE

The Phony China Threat

“On the Myth of Chinese Power Projection Capabilities” by Rick Reece, in *Breakthroughs* (Spring 1998), Security Studies Program, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 292 Main St. (E38-603), Cambridge, Mass. 02139.

Is China building up its armed strength to expand its presence in the South China Sea, intimidate its neighbors, and ultimately replace the United States as the dominant power in Asia? Some analysts claim that it is, with the immediate aim of gaining control of the sea-lanes through which Mideast oil is transported to the region. But Reece, a marine lieutenant colonel and 1997–98 Marine Corps Fellow in the Security Studies Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, contends that China has nowhere near the military muscle it would need to do that.

During the last 10 years, China has occupied islands, reefs, and islets throughout the South China Sea, skirmishing with rival claimants such as Vietnam and the Philippines. The resulting tensions in the strategically important area have helped propel an East Asian arms race. But the only place occupied by China that has any military significance is Woody Island, the largest of the Paracel Islands, Reece says, and, at most, it provides an airfield “for limited refuelings and emergency landings, not a forward base for staging assaults in the South China Sea.”

China could airlift two divisions (25,000 troops) to attack a foe beyond its territorial waters, Reece observes, sending reinforcements once it seized a good port. However, it lacks ground-attack aircraft to support operations more than about 300 miles from home. China also “does not practice large-scale amphibious operations or naval gunfire support of landing operations.” At least two years

of hard training would be needed to develop an effective amphibious force, he says.

What about airpower? China has bought 72 Russian SU-27 fighter jets in recent years—the equivalent of one U.S. wing. But while it has also acquired aerial-refueling technology from Iran, the Chinese Air Force currently lacks the skills to use it. So the fighters cannot fly into the southern reaches of the South China Sea. If they did, they would confront “the air forces of Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, all of which possess advanced American or British aircraft and would be operating relatively close to friendly air bases.” Aircraft carriers? China has none. (The United States has 12.)

Beijing would need a “blue water” navy to pursue any larger regional ambitions, Reece notes. But a 1996 study indicates that China could not build or buy a modern regional navy by 2010 “without major assistance,” he says. “China does not possess the power plant, avionics and metallurgy technologies required to manufacture aircraft that can operate from aircraft carriers in any weather. Chinese pilots have little experience flying without ground control.” And Beijing doesn’t have a lot of money to spend. Its military budget is \$32 billion; the U.S. defense budget is \$264 billion.

Without a blue water navy, Reece says, China will be limited to minor excursions and “showing the flag.” As for protection of the sea-lanes on which it depends for imported oil, China, Reece says, is likely to do what Japan does: rely on the United States.