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Abstract
"An impartial history of American statesmanship will give some of its most brilliant chapters to the Whig party from 1830 to 1850," wrote James G. Blaine in his memoirs. This was not, unhappily, because of a great heritage of political achievement in American public life. The work of the Whigs was, as Blaine admitted, negative and restraining rather than constructive. Still, "if their work cannot be traced in the National statute books as prominently as that of their opponents, they will be credited by the discriminating reader of our political annals as the English of to-day credit Charles James Fox and his Whig associates—for the many evils they prevented." If that is true, then we have not had very much in the way of "impartial" histories of American politics since Blaine's day. No major political movement—and a party which elected three presidents and nurtured a fourth over the span of twenty-two years can hardly be put down as minor—has suffered more sheer dismissal, more impatient contempt at the hands of political historians than the American Whigs of 1834 to 1856. This purging of the Whigs from historical respectability really began in Blaine's own lifetime, in the tart push-off made by Henry Adams in his Life of Albert Gallatin (1879), that "Of all the parties that have existed in the United States, the famous Whig party was the most feeble in ideas." Never mind that Adams's grandfather had been one of the founders of the Whigs and one of those rare intellectuals who managed to sit in both Congress and the White House. And it continued into the twentieth century, where the political history of the pre-Civil War years was dominated by the figure of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and his The Age of Jackson (1945), a book whose title deftly managed to identify the era of the Whigs by the name of their great political Satan. At best in these accounts, neither Whigs nor Democrats were distinguished by much which passed for a political philosophy; at worst, the Whigs were the party of old-fogeyism or unburied Federalism. [excerpt]

Keywords
Whig Party, politics, Andrew Jackson, democracy, Abraham Lincoln, president, Civil War

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Review Essay

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"An impartial history of American statesmanship will give some of its most brilliant chapters to the Whig party from 1830 to 1850," wrote James G. Blaine in his memoirs. This was not, unhappily, because of a great heritage of political achievement in American public life. The work of the Whigs was, as Blaine admitted, negative and restraining rather than constructive. Still, "if their work cannot be traced in the National statute books as prominently as that of their opponents, they will be credited by the discriminating reader of our political annals as the English of to-day credit Charles James Fox and his Whig associates—for the many evils they prevented."1 If that is true, then we have not had very much in the way of "impartial" histories of American politics since Blaine’s day. No major political movement—and a party which elected three presidents and nurtured a fourth over the span of twenty-two years can hardly be put down as minor—has suffered more sheer dismissal, more impatient contempt at the hands of political historians than the American Whigs of 1834 to 1856. This purging of the Whigs from historical respectability really began in Blaine’s own lifetime, in the tart push-off made by Henry Adams in his Life of Albert Gallatin (1879), that "Of all the parties that have existed in the United States, the famous Whig party was the most feeble in ideas." Never mind that Adams’s grandfather had been one of the founders of the Whigs and one of those rare intellectuals who managed to sit in both Congress and the White House. And it continued into the twentieth century, where the political history of the pre-Civil War years was dominated by the figure of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and his The Age of Jackson (1945), a book whose title deftly managed to identify the era of the Whigs

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by the name of their great political Satan. At best in these accounts, neither Whigs nor Democrats were distinguished by much which passed for a political philosophy; at worst, the Whigs were the party of old-fogeyism or unburied Federalism.2

Part of the success of Schlesinger’s casting of antebellum America as Jacksonian lay in Schlesinger’s identification of Andrew Jackson and Jackson’s Democratic party with Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal. To this day, one comes away from The Age of Jackson with the clear sense that Jackson and the Jacksonians embodied democracy and championed the interests of the “common man,” while the Whigs were the voice of selfish elite interests, and looked like nothing so much as forecasts of Herbert Hoover and Robert Taft. But this may also explain why, a political generation after Schlesinger, the reputation of the Whigs began to stage a minor recovery. Forty years on from Franklin Roosevelt, the New Deal began to look less and less like the agenda of the “common man,” and more like a smug, elitist strategy of its own, and any association of Jacksonianism with it could only inherit its tarnish. Jackson’s own record on race and on Indian removal further dimmed any interest in drawing parallels to Rooseveltian progressivism. Some political historians, like Ronald Formisano and Lee Benson, abandoned entirely the attempt to explain Jacksonianism as an antebellum New Deal, and turned instead to ethnicity, kinship, or religion rather than political ideology, as the key to understanding the early Republic’s political patterns; still others, moving out of studies of eighteenth-century Revolutionary ideology, hoped to locate the core of pre-Civil War American politics in the long afterwash of classical or liberal republicanism.3 But no matter which direction, the decay of the Roosevelt/Jackson analogy paved the way for a rethinking of the Whigs, and the question arose whether the Whig


complaint against Jacksonian Democracy might have had more
substance to it than it had seemed.

That question rose first in one of the genuinely pathbreaking
works of American political history, Daniel Walker Howe’s *The*
*Political Culture of the American Whigs* (1979). Howe, an elegant and
gifted writer, had already made his mark as a historian in 1970 with
*The Unitarian Conscience: Harvard Moral Philosophy, 1805–1861*, a
book that displayed, among its other virtues, a certain contrarian
panache: not only was Howe’s essay an exercise in intellectual his-
tory when all the vogue in American historical writing was the
“new” social history, but his Harvard Unitarians had long been
dismissed (in terms reminiscent of the Whigs) as “superficial and
irritating,” as “corpse-cold,” and appallingly boring. Yet Howe
stood the Unitarians back up on their feet, and remade them into
a convincing alternative to the campmeeting revivalism which (it
was assumed) was the only exciting version of 1830s American
religion worth considering. From having questioned the accepted
wisdom about American religion, it was only a short step to ques-
tioning the Schlesinger analogy about Jacksonian politics. Howe
reintroduced the Whigs, not as Eastern elitists bent upon wickedly
obstructing the righteous class-leveling justice of Jackson/Roose-
velt, but as the “sober, industrious, thrifty people,” as the party of
the American bourgeoisie, attracting the economic loyalty of small
businesses and small commercial producers, and enlisting the poli-
tical loyalty of those who aspired to transformation. Transforma-
tion was the key concept. It made the Whigs optimistic and seri-
ous at once, since it embraced both the religious moralists and
moral philosophers of the established denominations and colleges
who preached personal and moral transformation as well as the
upwardly mobile professionals who found in the dynamic world
of international commerce the opportunity to escape from rural
isolation and agrarian drudgery. What Howe discovered in the Whigs
was not merely an intellectual history. He had first thought he was
writing a history of Whig political thought, but found that the
mental world of the Whigs was stocked with a far broader array
of assumptions and beliefs than mere issue politics. And so he iden-
tified Whiggery with an entire world-view, or what he called a
political culture.

The three most important components of that political culture
were the Whig commitment to “improvement” (including both self-
transformation as well as national economic improvement), to mo-
rality and duty rather than equality and rights, and to national
unity rather than local diversity. Their opposition to Andrew Jackson and Jacksonian Democracy did not follow the lines of Schlesinger, which pitted progressives who wanted to use an expansive government to help farmers and the victims of robber-baron capitalism against monied exploiters who wanted to keep government small and impotent against their greed. Instead, it was the Whigs who advocated an expansive federal government—but it was a government that would seek to promote a general liberal, middle-class national welfare, promoting norms of Protestant morality and underwriting the expansion of industrial capitalism by means of government-funded transportation projects (to connect people and markets), high protective tariffs for American manufacturing, and a national banking system to regulate and standardize the American economy. Howe’s Whigs were the embodiment of Horatio Alger, of upward striving, of the triumph of reason over passion, of the positive liberal state, and the counterparts of Disraeli’s “one nation” conservatism.

By contrast, Jackson’s Democrats came off as frightened, snarling, and small-mindedly anticapitalist in mentality. Jacksonianism glorified agriculture and defined wealth as landholding, and its interest in the “common man” was limited to building defenses around an agrarian stasis—simple subsistence farming, trade in kind, and no taxes, banks, or corporations—that would never be threatened by the demons of competition or the fluctuations of markets. Linked to this preoccupation with stasis and personal independence was the Jacksonians’ resistance to public declarations of morality. Just as the Jacksonians viewed economic transformation with the same enthusiasm that an octogenarian views a roller-coaster ride, they viewed preachers of moral transformations as a threat to public stability the moment those preachers went public. Thus, allied to economic independence was a Democratic commitment to moral independence. And with that, went yet another commitment, to local independence. Politically, that pushed the Democrats into championing states’ rights. Ethnically, it made them friends of the new waves of immigrants arriving in the United States in the 1840s, since Democrats could appear as opponents of efforts to homogenize immigrants into an American middle-class uniformity.

Howe managed to capture the contrast of the two political mentalities in a single lapidary sentence: “To put things very broadly, the Whigs proposed a society that would be economically diverse but culturally uniform; the Democrats preferred the economic uniformity of a society of small farmers and artisans but were more tolerant of cultural and moral diversity.”

Turning on the hinge of that insight, the Whigs have succeeded in staging a minor comeback in historical reputation. Thomas Brown, in an influential collection of essays, took the Whigs as lonely exemplars of republican statesmanship, devoted ideologically to a civic humanism and political impartiality that contrasted favorably with the herrenvolk democracy of the Jacksonians. Charles Sellers despised the Whigs and everything they stood for, but in 1991 he conceded that they “crystallized a politics that has ever since muffled the contradiction between capitalism and democracy in a mythology of consensual and democratic enterprise.” For Harry Watson, the line of influence that ran from the Whigs to modern conservatism was even more explicit: “In effect, Whigs were defending a version of what today is called the ‘trickle-down’ theory of prosperity: promoting the interests of businessmen promotes the interests of all classes by restoring ‘confidence,’ leading investors to expand their activities, creating new jobs and new opportunities for the poor.”

Even John Ashworth, writing within a generally Marxist framework, is unpredictably sympathetic to the Whigs as “defenders of a merchant-capital-based elitism against the advocates of a racially-flawed, functionally proslavery, egalitarianism.” It remained only to be seen, after Howe, what a genuinely sympathetic historian of the Whigs might do in a comprehensive narrative of America’s forgot-


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ten party. And that bill has now been filled with Michael F. Holt’s 
The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and 
the Onset of the Civil War.

In a remarkable series of books and essays on antebellum politi-
cics over the last twenty-five years, Michael Holt has established 
himself as one of the premier American political historians, and he 
has done it while sailing into the wind of most of the changing 
fashions in American political history writing. Unlike the “ethnic-
cultural” school of Benson and Formisano, who had lost faith in 
political ideology and who looked for explanations for political 
behavior in underlying, collective structures of belief, Holt remain-
ed persuaded that party identities were meaningful and worth-
while representations of conscious political choices. “Unlike other 
historians who have found conflicting sectional ideologies based 
on fundamentally different economic and social structures in the 
North and South at the core of Civil War causation . . . I believe 
that the ideological values that were central were basically politi-
cal, not social, moral, or economic, and that they were shared by 
Americans in both sections,” Holt wrote, with a certain defiant 
fLOURish, in 1978.9 Even more defiant, Holt began to focus on 
the actual mechanics of party functions—voting, organizing, patron-
age—as the keys to understanding political change, rather than 
vague, systemic, and inevitable structures of class, race, or econom-
ics. In an essay on “The Mysterious Disappearance of the Ameri-
can Whig Party,” Holt viewed the demise of the Whigs in the mid-
1850s as the result of some highly localized and very mundane 
causes, such as easy “ballot access” by third parties and the impor-
tance of local elections, where results could be tipped one way 
or the other by the actions and decisions of just a few voters or 
activists.9 He became convinced that “Events mattered”—rather 
than long-term “trends” or the invisible hand of markets or class— 
“they, and not just social structures, economic conditions, fixed 
political contexts, or ideology.” And that conviction hardened as, 
from 1976 onwards, he began work on what he already saw as his magnum opus, a single massive history of the Whig party.

That conviction also explains why The Rise and Fall of the Ameri-
can Whig Party took more than two decades afterwards to write. If

the history of a movement is really a composite of individual choices and contingent events that might just as easily have gone one way or the other—if, in other words, human events do not obey great, mysterious, grand “forces” like the “class struggle” or “the triumph of progress” or some other rationale that helps explain things better than our research does—then the historian has no alternative to a deep and detailed plunge into the most profound and numbing minutiae of those choices and events. And the great contest would be whether, having taken that plunge into the “constant flux” of myriad political decisions, Holt could resurface in one lifetime and wrap it all into a coherent tale. That may be the single greatest professional challenge any historian faces; and with the results in hand, it has to be said that Michael Holt has succeeded beyond the dreams of the most optimistic Whig.

Thinking this way also leaves the historian with no alternative to writing books of alarming length. The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party weighs in at 985 pages of densely printed text (almost twice the words on an ordinary book page get crammed onto one of Holt’s), followed by another two hundred pages of even more minuscule endnotes, plus a bibliography and index. The physical weight of the book comes in, literally, at close to five pounds. And the truth is (by Holt’s own admission), that if the publisher had not persuaded him otherwise, it would have been a third again as long. One has the terrible apprehension that readers who cover the entire distance will become marked in closet whispers as someone “who actually read all of Holt’s book.” If so, then honi soit qui mal y pense. Holt writes well and forcefully; his narrative never drags and never falters; his characters are vivid and their voices emerge with startling clarity and shrewd selection from the massive array of papers, documents, and books that Holt has mined from over two hundred archives and collections. And most impressive of all, he leaves all but the most truculent reader with a sweet taste of regret at the end, in equal parts for the end of the book and for the death of its subject.

Here is Holt’s story of the Whigs, in as compressed a fashion as possible: Rather than being a branch out of the root of Federalism, the Whigs evolved like the Jacksonians from the original Jeffersonian Republicans who triumphed in the “Revolution of 1800.” They were originally an opposition faction to Andrew Jackson in the 1820s, but they detached themselves as a separate organization in 1834 under the leadership of Jackson’s nemesis, Henry Clay of Kentucky, and took the name Whig to underscore their opposition
to Jackson’s high-handed near-dictatorship in the presidency. They cast themselves first as republican antimilitarists. They then added a new layer of related identity as issue-oriented nonpartisans and assumed after that the banner of virtuous public moralists. Finally, after the economic crash of 1837, the Whigs took on the identity that stayed them the longest, as the party of probusiness and prodevelopment policy. Within three years, the Whigs had staked out marked differently political territory from the Democrats. “Broadly put, Democrats were a coalition of those still outside the market economy who feared its spread and those who had experienced and been victimized by market mechanisms. Whigs, in contrast, attracted those who wanted to expand the market sector because they had already enjoyed its benefits or hoped to do so in the future” (115).

The 1837 economic panic also set in place the two principal mechanisms for Whig electoral success, which were (a) to concentrate public attention on the failings of Democratic politics and (b) to scoop up the largest percentage of new voters in every presidential cycle. It is a significant point in Holt’s description of antebellum parties that American voters, once recruited to a party, rarely switched allegiances over time. What was critical in each presidential cycle, then, was to energize the existing Whig voter base by throwing their policy distinctives into sharp contrast to the Democrats’ and by organizing new voters. When the Whigs succeeded in doing this, they scored impressive electoral successes. In the 1840 presidential election, the Whigs ran William Henry Harrison on a pro-business platform against the hapless scapegoat of the 1837 panic, Martin Van Buren, and won crushing victories in the state, congressional, and presidential contests (Harrison carried nineteen of the twenty-six states). Whigs captured three-fifths of the new voters and triumphed, not only across the nation, but across all class, religious, and ethnic divisions.

On the other hand, when the Whigs were unable to keep focused on these strategies, they generally lost, and lost big. The Whigs were always a minority party. Without clear partisan policy distinctions that made clear how awful an opposition victory would be, they discouraged their existing voter base and failed to recruit new voters, something that happened whenever the Whig leadership allowed intraparty quarreling to bubble to the surface, or whenever it made the mistake of relying on charming personalities to head tickets or making generous accommodations with the Democrats on major issues. But keeping such focus steady was an
ideological problem for Whigs. They prided themselves on being a coalition of independent thinkers, unlike (in their imagination) the disciplined faithful of the Democrats, and they did not hesitate to turn on each other with divisive and disheartening abandon. Linked to that, the Whigs valorized the image of themselves as statesmen rather than (like their opposite numbers) party hacks who loved politics only for the power political office conferred. Sacrificing party for the nation, they would join hands with Democrats to serve the nation’s good—and then be punished at the polls afterwards by voters who saw no reason why they should vote Whig rather than Democrat. The most hideous example of this form of self-mutilation occurred immediately after the Whigs’ great triumph in 1840. In a gesture of independent nonpartisanship, the Whigs nominated former Democrat John Tyler as Harrison’s running mate. When Harrison died prematurely in 1841, Tyler assumed the presidency and promptly split the Whig majority in Congress into violently quarreling factions. As a result, disgusted Whig voters stayed home on election days from 1841 to 1848, and the Whigs’ majorities in the states and in Congress ebbed; in the 1842 by-elections they “suffered one of the most staggering reversals in off-year congressional elections ever witnessed in American history” (151).

The Whigs, however, displayed an unusual resiliency. As a minority party, they were not shocked to find themselves outsiders, and they demonstrated a willingness to wait and let the Democrats dig their own graves. Whig candidates staged a comeback in the 1846 congressional elections (the year that Abraham Lincoln won election as a Whig congressman in Illinois), and in 1848, they nominated the artfully ambiguous Zachary Taylor, who distracted attention away from Whig intraparty feuding and managed, almost too late, to get public attention concentrated on a post-Mexican War recession that could be conveniently hung around the necks of the Democrats. By focusing the public on the Democrats’ mistakes, Taylor’s election might have spelled a second great opportunity to establish Whig dominance in the electoral system. Again, the Whigs stumbled on the threshold of victory. Widespread dissatisfaction with the Taylor administration’s well-intentioned effort to rise above partisanship in patronage appointments depressed Whig voter turnout in the 1849 congressional elections, and Whig candidates fell in droves. Taylor’s death in office in 1850 opened the way to more intramural bloodletting among Whigs, and when his successor, Millard Fillmore, joined with congressional Democrats
and endorsed the Compromise of 1850, the seeds were sown for even more lethal quarrels, as Northern Whigs began to suspect that the Whig party had become too beholden to Southern slaveholding interests.

By endorsing the Compromise of 1850, Fillmore believed that he was only playing the appropriate role of disinterested Whig statesman, putting the interests of national unity over the selfish desires of Northern Whig opponents to slavery. What he actually did was to invite Whig voters not to bother voting for Whigs, since the policy results were apparently the same, no matter which candidates they voted for. Fillmore also failed to keep the Whigs from descending into new rounds of internal dissension, this time between Northern and Southern Whigs, rather than on public discontent with Democrats. Knowing full well that this spelled defeat in 1852, anxious Whigs tried to repeat their 1848 triumph by dumping Fillmore and substituting Mexican War hero Winfield Scott, relying on Scott’s personality as a vote-getter. Policies, however, not personalities, were what got Whigs elected. What was worse, Scott was a political malaprop. Accordingly, the Whigs were massacred at the polls, “because they distrusted Scott, expected defeat, or were simply indifferent to the outcome of a personality contest with no clear programmatic differences at issue” (758).

Many Whigs in 1852 expected that, having learned their lesson twice about what kind of campaign did not work, they would need only to wait on the sidelines for new Democratic catastrophes to provide issues and then rally behind another Harrison or Taylor to win a third victory. But by the mid-1850s, the mechanics of American politics had changed. New issues, like slavery, proved divisive rather than unifying for the Whigs; new, and sometimes flukey, political movements (like the Know-Nothings) easily carved into Whig constituencies, first because the Whigs prided themselves on the absence of the party discipline that would have kept those constituencies safe, and then because the 1850s had none of the disincentives for third-party movements (party registrations, qualifications for federal matching funds) that cripple modern third-party efforts. But the most obvious factor that changed the landscape was, simply, Whig defeats. The impact of political loss is cumulative. A party cannot indefinitely spring back anew with a new issue or a new candidate or a new election. Twenty years of defeats had simply worn down the old Whig leadership, many of whom (like Whig national chairman Truman Smith) called it quits on politics.
The onset of the Kansas-Nebraska controversy in 1854 was the death knell of the Whigs, but not necessarily because (as is commonly assumed) Northern and Southern Whigs promptly parted company and fled either to the Democrats or to new fusion parties like the Republicans. (Actually, Southern Whigs were ready to join with Northern Whigs in denouncing Kansas-Nebraska as reckless expansionism until the famous Appeal of the Independent Democrats cast Kansas-Nebraska as a litmus-test issue on one’s loyalty as a Southerner to slavery). A substantial number of both Southern and Northern Whigs tried to keep the party together through 1856. What finished the Whigs was their failures, not over national policy questions, but in the state and congressional elections in 1854 and 1855, where the new parties could get the most ready purchase on the electorate. No longer did Whig voters, galvanized by Democratic awfulness, take their votes to Whig candidates to express their disgust; they could go to the Know-Nothings, to the Free-Soilers, the Republicans, and so on. By 1855, some Whigs went to the desperate length of joining the Know-Nothings in the hope of converting it into a new national Union party; others (like Lincoln) for whom antislavery was the major issue of the day, departed for the Republicans. After the 1856 election, the Whigs were dead as a national organization. Their last presidential nominating convention, in Baltimore in 1856, attracted only 144 delegates, half of them from New York.

Telling over Holt’s story in this fashion does him a tremendous methodological injustice, since (like the political narratives he criticizes the most) it highlights only the presidential elections. Holt’s contention from first to last in this book is that the story of the Whigs as a national party is indissoluble from the story of the Whigs as a local and state party. For one thing, the voice of local politics was the voice of national constituencies, which elected officials disregarded at their peril. “State legislatures and state nominating conventions met while congressional Whigs struggled with” major national problems and “what happened in those legislatures and conventions decisively influenced Whigs’ behavior in Congress, just as developments in Washington shaped how rival Whig factions opposed each other within the states” (460). That influence was underscored by every election of a new United States senator, since senatorial seats were still filled then by votes in the state legislature, and a poor showing by Whigs in local elections would have a domino effect right up to the Senate. Above all, there was the business of patronage. Patronage was the life’s blood of nine-
teenth-century American politics—it was the only reward system for otherwise unrequited faithful party service—and failure to award patronage according to local expectations of desert was the death warrant for any thoughtless national politico. (Lincoln, of course, drops out of Whig political life as a candidate after his disappointment over patronage under the Taylor administration). By far the largest parts of this large book are dedicated to fleshing out these secondary and tertiary stories of Whig state politics and how they intersected with the larger fate of the Whigs as a national party. And these are great stories—the Sewardites and Silver Grays in New York; Howell Cobb, Alexander Stephens, John M. Berrien and the Chivalry in Georgia; the Johnston and anti-Johnston Whigs of Pennsylvania. And Holt clearly revels in the telling of them, in the local cut-and-thrust of politics, of the ill-timed public letter, of the public witticism that gets twisted by skilled opponents around a candidate’s neck for life, of desertions, reconciliations, petty vindications, and even pettier vindictiveness.

Sooner or later, the importance of Abraham Lincoln as a Whig intrudes into any discussion of the rise and fall of the Whig party. Part of what has kept historical interest in the Whigs alive at all has been linked to the recollection that Lincoln was a Whig and a Whig officeholder, and a healthy percentage of Holt’s readership will find the chief appeal of Holt’s book in the possibility of finding a fresh way of situating Lincoln in the context of his early career as a Whig partisan. Like the Whig party in general, our appreciation of Lincoln as a Whig has come comparatively late. The major biographies, from Herndon, through Tarbell and Beveridge, to Oates, give Lincoln’s Whiggism little more than skimming, and it was one of the major disappointments of David Donald’s 1995 *Lincoln* that it treated Lincoln’s Whiggism so slightly. (That last oversight was all the more puzzling, since Donald had been one of the first to resurrect Lincoln’s Whig party allegiance as a critical part of understanding Lincoln’s presidency in his early essay, “Abraham Lincoln: A Whig in the White House” 10). But acknowledgment of the importance of Whiggism for Lincoln has risen as the reputation of Whiggism has staged its return. Daniel Walker Howe devoted an entire chapter to Lincoln in *The Political Culture*

of the American Whigs, which ranks as one of the finest essays ever written on Lincoln’s political life. Joel Silbey’s “‘Always a Whig in Politics’: The Partisan Life of Abraham Lincoln” boldly cast Lincoln as “a partisan Whig ideologist and spokesman for his party’s cause in campaign and legislative debate” whose “Whiggery impinged on everything else he became and did.”

Those who are looking for Holt to do likewise in The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party will experience some measure of disappointment, since Lincoln makes only a dozen fleeting appearances across Holt’s sprawling manuscript. And yet, no one will get a full sense of the context of Lincoln’s Whiggism without Michael Holt’s help. Understanding the need of the Whigs to organize around issues rather than relying on personalities is what makes sense of Lincoln’s comment in 1843 that the cause of the Whig defeats is that “tens of thousands, in the late elections, have not voted at all.”

Who and what are they? is an important question, as respects the future. They can come forward and give us the victory again. That all, or nearly all of them, are whigs, is most apparent. Our opponents, stung to madness by the defeat of 1840, have ever since rallied with more than their usual unanimity. It has not been they that have been staid from the polls. These facts show what the result must be, once the people again rally in their entire strength.

Lincoln’s victory in the Seventh District congressional election of 1846 also has its place in the overall Whig comeback in 1846, as does his disappointed withdrawal from Whig activism after his failure to secure the Land Office appointment from the Taylor administration and his determined clinging to the Whigs until 1856 in the hope that the party could yet surmount even the Kansas-Nebraska debacle to become a party of Union. And, as Donald and Boritt have pointed out long before, much of what became Lincoln’s domestic agenda during the Civil War was really the old

Whig economic program of tariffs, business subsidies, and national banking. Even if Lincoln himself appears personally at only a few points in The Rise and Fall of the American Whigs, the book itself is the shadow that Lincoln’s political life casts.

It also casts some other, longer, shadows. Holt does not hesitate, by the end of the book, to number himself among the “admirers of the Whig party,” and perhaps for that reason he regards their disappearance not only as a political loss, but as a cause of the Civil War. Without the stabilizing effect of two national parties, and even more, without the at-any-cost commitment of the Whigs to national union, the only alternative antislavery Northerners had at the polls in 1860 was the Republicans. But the Republicans were, despite their protests, a sectional rather than a Union party, and the election of a Republican president “provoked Deep South secession and the subsequent war” (981). This forces Holt into endorsing the proposition that the war was avoidable, and perhaps unnecessary, if only the Whigs could have tempered the ferment of secession in 1860 as they had in 1850. (Indeed, the avoidability of the war is almost an inevitable corollary of his belief in the overall contingency of historical events, that one action or one movement can, in the right circumstances, radically alter the course of events). Oddly, no one might have disagreed with that more than Lincoln, the Whig partisan who regarded the war as the necessary collision of two inalterably opposed principles rather than a breakdown in political mechanics. Odder still, Holt’s commitment to contingency forces him to slight the role of the Whig ideology at the expense of the Whig political mechanics in the larger world of Whig politics. There is, surprisingly, very little here on the political ideology of Whiggery. And while that can, perhaps, be excused on the premise that Howe’s work covers that ground well enough, its absence has more than a little to do with Holt’s preference for emphasizing the historically contingent over the historically necessary, since ideology is a function of logical consistency, and the logical consistency of ideas spells precisely the sort of inevitability Holt would prefer to subvert.

But these are small matters, so small that they are raised almost as a sympathetic gesture of Whiggish nonpartisanship than real criticism. The totality of Holt’s work is so enormous, and so revealing of the political world that Lincoln inhabited and then wrote large as the nation’s agenda during the Civil War, that few enough words exist in the scholarly vocabulary to describe the debt we owe to Holt as readers. Lincoln was, as we know, the first Republican
president; Holt makes clear how he may as well be considered the last Whig president. Or perhaps, with more provocative accuracy, Holt's anatomy of the Whig party makes it clear how Lincoln revived the Whig agenda (even its unionism, by converting the Republican party in 1864 into a "National Union" party and, with less happier results, replaying the disaster of 1841 by running with Andrew Johnson, the Tennessee Democrat, as vice president) and, more than Harrison, Taylor, or Fillmore could ever have hoped, installed that agenda as a permanent feature of American political life. It will escape the notice of no attentive reader that the twin mechanisms by which the Whig party assured itself of political success have also been the mechanisms that have won national elections for Lincoln's Republican heirs in the twentieth century, and that much of the Whig political culture lives on (at least in the rhetoric) of twentieth-century Republicanism. Indeed, taken together with Howe, the consistency of the larger psychology of Whigs and Democrats in the nineteenth century bears much more than incidental resemblance to the political psychology of Jefferson's and Lincoln's modern-day descendants. Perhaps the rise and fall of the Whigs, as Holt has lined it out, was not so final a fall as it seemed.