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Fact and Counterfact: The "Second American Revolution" Revisited

Roger L. Ransom

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Fact and Counterfact: The "Second American Revolution" Revisited Roger L. Ransom To be sure the battles and campaigns of the epoch [Civil War] are significant to the military strategist; the tragedy and heroism of the contest furnish inspiration to patriots and romance to the makers of epics. But the core of the vortex lay elsewhere. It was in the flowing substance of things limned by statistical reports on finance, commerce, capital, industry, railways, and agriculture, by provisions of constitutional law, and by pages of statute books—prosaic muniments which show that the so-called civil war was in reality a Second American Revolution. Charles and Mary Beard It has been seventy years since Charles and Mary Beard used the term "Second American Revolution" to describe their interpretation of the American Civil War. Writing at a time when the

debates over reunion and reconciliation had finally subsided; when the construction of monuments to the fallen heroes had been largely completed, and when the pension claims of all but a few surviving veterans had been settled, the Beards felt that the time had come when "the economist and lawyer, looking more calmly on the scene," could discover "that armed conflict had been only one phase of the cataclysm, a transitory phase; that at bottom the so-called Civil War, or the War between the States . . . was a

This paper represents preliminary research and should not be cited or quoted without the consent of the author. I would like to express my appreciation to the numerous scholars who commented on earlier drafts of the paper, including: Richard Bense, Stanley Engler, Eric Foner, Michael Holt, John Hubbell, Bill Johnson, Elizabeth Leonard, Frank Lewis, Rebecca Manes, James McPherson, John Majewski, Kerry Odell, John Neff, Peter Temin, John L. Wakeley, and Gavin Wright. I also received numerous suggestions when the paper was presented to a conference, Economic transitions between Peace and War/War and Peace, sponsored by the AH-UC Group in Economic History, at the University of California, Santa Barbara, Apr. 11-13, 1997. While all of these people added touches of their imaginations to the counterfactual world described in this paper, overall responsibility for determining the itinerary of this flight of fantasy must remain with me.

Civil War History, Vol. xlv No. i © 1999 by The Kent State University Press "SECOND AMERICAN REVOLUTION" REVISITED²⁹

social war, ending in the unquestioned establishment of a new power in the government, making vast changes in the arrangement of classes, in the accumulation and distribution of wealth, in the course of industrial development, and in the Constitution inherited from the Fathers."¹ Over the intervening years the term "Second American Revolution" has undergone numerous reinterpretations, yet it remains a fixture in the vocabulary of historians of the Civil War Era.² The term is most frequently associated with the proposition advanced by the Beards that the Civil War dramatically altered the balance of political power between North and South and greatly accelerated the emergence of industrial capitalism in the years after the war. More recently, historians who see the elimination of slavery and destruction of the slave regime in the South as the revolutionary outcome of the war have referred to the changes in the South after 1865 as the Second American Revolution—albeit an unfinished revolution. A third view is that of the contemporaries who lived through the war; they saw revolutionary aspects in their struggle. Southerners regarded their "rebellion" as a revolution against tyranny—in this case Northern Republicans—and looked for inspiration to the war in which their forefathers had rebelled against King George. Northerners, by contrast, saw the conflict as an effort to hold together the sacred union that was formed out of the rebellion against England. For both sides, the Civil War was a continuation of the struggle for freedom that began in 1776. The Beards were quite specific as to the nature of the changes they called a "revolution." In 1940 Louis Hacker succinctly summarized what subsequently became known as the Hacker-Beard Thesis: The American Civil War turned out to be a revolution indeed. But its striking achievement was the triumph of industrial capitalism. The industrial capitalist, through their political spokesmen, the Republicans, had succeeded...

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Roger L. Ransom

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Charles and Mary Beard

IT HAS BEEN SEVENTY YEARS since Charles and Mary Beard used the term "Second American Revolution" to describe their interpretation of the American Civil War. Writing at a time when the debates over reunion and reconciliation had finally subsided; when the construction of monuments to the fallen heroes had been largely completed, and when the pension claims of all but a few surviving veterans had been settled, the Beards felt that the time had come when "the economist and lawyer, looking more calmly on the scene," could discover "that armed conflict had been only one phase of the cataclysm, a transitory phase; that at bottom the so-called Civil War, or the War between the States . . . was a

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