

War Widows and the Remaking of Political Order in the Postbellum American South

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Thucydides (1920, 151) lamented the devastation that civil war in Corcyra (427 BCE) had wrought on the polity's institutional and moral fabric. It had revealed that the "passions" of human nature were fundamentally "ungovernable"—that "men do not hesitate" in the face of wartime violence "to abrogate...the[ir] common principles." In a similar vein, Hannah Arendt (1970, 56) wrote that mass violence "can destroy power" but "is utterly incapable of creating it." Many political scientists, however, also note that war creates opportunities for different kinds of political order to emerge. International Relations (IR) scholars, in particular, argue that the disruption caused by major wars enable leading great powers to overhaul the international order, although they disagree on the nature and durability of the ensuing orders (e.g., Ikenberry 2001;

Gilpin 1981; Mearsheimer 2019; Lascurettes 2020; Byun and Carson 2025). At the same time, scholars of comparative political economy continue to debate how colonial warfare and foreign conquest affects the long-term development of different states (e.g., Kohli 2004; Olson 1982; Scheve and Stasavage 2012), while scholars of insurgency and revolution debate the conditions under which different orders emerge in the throes of internal war (e.g., Staniland 2012; Stewart 2021).

Political scientists thus widely agree that war may precipitate the rise of new rules, principles, and institutions in a political community, but much remains to be learned on the factors that determine the character of postwar political order.¹ This article sheds new light on this issue by examining how the widows of Confederate soldiers—along with other women whose lives and communities were upended by war—spearheaded the construction of a white supremacist political order in the postbellum American South. Political science as a discipline has taken renewed interest in the American Civil War in recent years, as scholars come to realize that lessons from this period can speak to broader debates on issues as varied as preventive war (Poast 2015), bureaucratic capacity and sovereignty (Suryanarayan and White 2021; Chacón and Jensen 2020; Lee, Zhang, and Herchenröder 2024), and political violence (Hall, Huff, and Kuriwaki 2019; Stewart and Kitchens 2021; Byun and Kwon 2025; Ankorski-Karlinsky 2025). However, no theoretically grounded study has dealt squarely with the fact—known among historians for some time now—that elite cadres of white women who had been afflicted by the war played a central role in revitalizing, amplifying, and perpetuating the white supremacist principles and institutions that came to define the political order of the U.S. South in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (e.g., Whites 1997; Cox 2019 [2003]; Janney 2008). Examining the

¹ We follow Ikenberry (2001, 45) in defining political order as the “basic rules, principles, and institutions” that comprise the “governing arrangements” of a political community. This is consistent with what many scholars of comparative politics and American political development have in mind when discussing the concept of political “regime,” that is, “the institutions and principles governing access to office and the social classes and groups most significant in shaping and benefiting from state policy” (Bateman 2023, 332).

conditions that enabled them to do so can yield valuable insights on why certain kinds of political order arise after major wars.

We couch our arguments in a theoretical framework that highlights war's tendency to create openings for individuals and groups to become *political entrepreneurs*, that is, actors who compete to shape “the direction and flow of politics” (Schneider and Teske 1992, 737). The extent to which some entrepreneurs succeed in promoting their preferred vision of political order over those of their rivals depends on their relative capacity to mobilize social and material resources. In the context of the postbellum American South, we argue that upper- and middle-class women—particularly those who had experienced personal loss during the war—were especially well-positioned to become political entrepreneurs. Emerging from the war with newfound capacities for collective action and shielded by gendered presumptions of political innocuousness, these women led an array of symbolic, educational, and institutional initiatives designed to shore up a political order based on racial hierarchy. Taken together, these claims suggest that (1) areas of the South that experienced marked increases in the number of widows during the war were more likely to become bases for influential women-led white supremacist associations, and that (2) these areas were likely to witness more racial violence as a manifestation of a stronger white supremacist order. We confirm both effects by analyzing how intrawar surges in “female household heads” as found in census records conditioned the prevalence of women-led white supremacist groups and anti-Black lynching across the American South.

Our main contributions are twofold. First, we develop a unique theoretical framework—centered on the role of political entrepreneurs—that offers important takeaways for scholars studying the problem of order in multiple subfields and levels of analysis. The basic setting of our inquiry takes cue from canonical IR works that highlight major wars as key “ordering

moments” for the international system (Ikenberry 2011, 12; see also Gilpin 1981). But as G. John Ikenberry (1998, 148) observes, “the most useful insight” that scholars of political order should keep in mind “might be that both realms of politics—domestic and international—face similar problems in the creation and maintenance of order, and the solutions that emerge are also often quite similar.” We embrace this insight, showing that a conceptual puzzle and framework inspired by IR scholarship offer explanatory purchase for an exceedingly important case of order-building in American political development. At the same time, a focus on political entrepreneurs may help illuminate a wide range of order-building problems in the modern era, including those that arise amid historic shifts in the global balance of power as well as during the “constitutional crises” that have beset some advanced democracies.

Second, our findings contribute to the literature on the relationship between social capital and the strength of democratic political orders. Due to the influence of a handful of classic works, many political scientists continue to treat networks and norms of voluntary civic engagement—often understood in conjunction with terms like “trust,” “spontaneous sociability,” “civil society,” or more frequently “social capital”—as an intrinsic good for modern democracy (e.g., Putnam 1993; Putnam 2000; Fukuyama 1995; Gellner 1996; Gutmann 1998; Nur-tegin 2021; Sawhill 2020).² We add a new angle to the scholarly effort to put such notions to rest (e.g., Berman 1997; Satyanath et al. 2017; Chambers and Kopstein 2001). As we make clear, the civic associations formed by Confederate widows and other elite white women in the early postbellum South were precisely the kinds of civil society groups hailed by the classical theorists as being good for democracy. Not only were they voluntarily and horizontally organized, but their activities were, in important ways, designed to be outward-facing and inclusive of the whole

² Some have extended this logic to the international realm as well, arguing that “generalized trust” among states or “anarchical social capital” facilitates the creation of “a basic system of rules and order in international relations” (Rathbun 2011, 245; see also Dellmuth and Tallberg 2018).

community, including Black Americans. It is also clear that these associations were instrumental for rebuilding the superstructure of white supremacy in the postbellum South and were therefore harmful to the development of a democratic political order. This conclusion yields broader implications insofar as grassroots engagement and activism seem to be on the rise across the American political spectrum (Skocpol and Tervo 2020; Kates et al. 2025).