

solutions, but only vague proposals for peace.

After so richly documenting the magnitude of the threat posed by this movement, Weber leaves unanswered the normative question of whether Lincoln's curtailment of civil liberties was justified. One may infer that she believes so since she describes Lincoln's dealings with the dissidents as "restrained" (p. 217). In any event, her research may spark fresh debate over the enduring problem of bal-

ancing security and freedom in wartime.

JOSEPH R. FORNIERI is associate professor of political science at Rochester Institute of Technology, New York, and consulting academic editor for *Lincoln Lore*, published by the Lincoln Museum, Fort Wayne, Indiana. He is the author of *Abraham Lincoln's Political Faith* (2003) and several edited books on the sixteenth president.



Sold American Consumption and Citizenship, 1890-1945

By Charles F. McGovern

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. Pp. xv, 536. Figures, notes, bibliography, index. Clothbound, \$65.00; paperbound, \$24.95.)

Charles F. McGovern's study of consumerism as public philosophy is the latest addition to the important new literature on the political economy of consumer capitalism. *Sold American* provides a chronological and conceptual bridge between Kathleen Donohue's *Freedom From Want* (2003) and Lizabeth Cohen's *A Consumers' Republic* (2003) and represents a sturdy contribution to our thinking about what is arguably the most important question in contemporary American history: How was it that consumer capitalism succeeded in sweeping aside all challengers?

McGovern's answer is that, in the first half of the twentieth century, Americans embraced "a material nationalism that placed goods and

spending at the center of social life," that they "came to understand spending as a form of citizenship" (p. 3). Americans accepted a definition of the "American way of life" built on an image of consumer plenty, McGovern argues, as if the right to use a Gillette razor were part of the daily fiber of national life and its exercise a civic act, if not an obligation. McGovern rightly sees this consumerist nationalism as a decisive ideological creation that eventually defined national identity. As the economic system spilled forth its cornucopia and Americans chased after its goodies, the terrain of meaningful ideological contention shifted from the old socialist-against-capitalist fight to a debate over the nature of consumption.

McGovern argues that the advertising industry “readily adapted political language and nationalist rhetoric” (p. 62) not just as sales pitches but as part of a project to eliminate those pesky holdovers from the nineteenth century, common-good republicanism and democratic populism. The industry commandeered basic democratic assumptions to argue that every act of consumption was a ballot cast in a great leveling: democracy of consumption was open to all, regardless of class. Women were enfranchised in the consumer republic well before they were voting for presidents; brand names stood like candidates on the national stage; and consumers across the country were urged to forsake the local stiffs for the truly national candidates like Campbell’s Tomato Soup. During wartime, in particular, it was easy to conduct overtly patriotic campaigns that suggested, with no great subtlety, that buying was part of the cause. If World War I generated the first great wave of such corporate ideological claims, World War II provided the chance to clinch the case, this time by positing the consumers’ “American way of life” as the very thing worth fighting for.

Madison Avenue’s ideological opponents were that group of professional social scientists who took it upon themselves to protect consumers from unscrupulous advertisers and worse-than-useless products. Paradoxically, by advocating for the consumer, they elevated consumption to the center of public discourse, shed

the nineteenth-century emphasis on self-reliance through labor, and muted whatever commitments they had made to a radical reordering of America. In defense of the consumer, they made the crucial strategic error of fighting entirely on consumer capitalism’s turf. This line of argument represents McGovern’s most original contribution to the literature of consumer history.

Consumers themselves stood in the middle of this ideological struggle. McGovern provides ample proof that even as ad men courted the public with patriotic allusions to the democratic power of consumer choice, they considered consumers to be, as various industry representatives admitted, “a vast army of half wits” (p. 230) with “incredibly shallow brain pans” (p. 240). Consumer advocates were not much better. They assumed that consumers, especially women, lacked the technical knowledge to evaluate products and the common sense to resist advertisers.

But it remains uncertain how consumer-citizens lined up in this battle between the ad men and the advocates, and they remain the wild cards in our efforts to reconstruct consumerism’s rise to dominance. Just why and how deeply Americans embraced consumption remain elusive questions. It does not help that McGovern, like far too many consumer historians, deploys the doctrine of the social meaning of goods as among the principal reasons why Americans became consumers. For

academics straining to avoid the conclusion that consumers are indeed a vast army of halfwits, it is comforting to think that people create themselves through the goods they buy. But the doctrine's roots run back to limited anthropological claims that cultural studies types subsequently have misunderstood and misapplied to contemporary America.

I am far more persuaded by McGovern's concluding observations that Americans remain uneasy about their comfortable enslavement; that their uneasiness comes to the surface when environmental breakdown, Wal-Mart monopolization, and deindustrialization call into question the social contract of consumer society;

and that when such crises appear, Americans find themselves having surrendered the very ideas that might generate a credible counter-vision of the good society. Such observations might offer the best explanation for why consumer capitalism holds the field against all opponents.

DAVID STEIGERWALD is associate professor of history at Ohio State University, Marion, and is the author of "All Hail the Republic of Choice: Consumer History as Contemporary Thought," *Journal of American History*, 93 (September 2006), 385-403. His latest project is a book on American thought and culture in the age of affluence.



Robber Baron

The Life of Charles Tyson Yerkes

By John Franch

(Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006. Pp. 374. Illustrations, notes, index. \$45.00.)

Anyone who has read about Chicago at the turn of the twentieth century has encountered Charles Tyson Yerkes. Street railway magnate, swindler, philandering husband, freewheeling businessman at a time when few laws prevented corruption, Yerkes would seem to be one of those larger-than-life figures about whom a biography would make scintillating reading.

Born in 1837 to a well-off Quaker Philadelphia family, Yerkes opened his own brokerage firm while in his early twenties. By the time he was

thirty-four he had amassed a great deal of money through a series of shady business maneuvers that landed him in prison for larceny in 1872. Pardoned quickly through political maneuvering, Yerkes began to rebuild his fortune in street railway construction. He left Philadelphia in the mid-1880s to avoid the social scandal of his divorce and remarriage to a much younger woman, and to seek better business opportunities in the rapidly expanding city of Chicago. There he built several traction lines