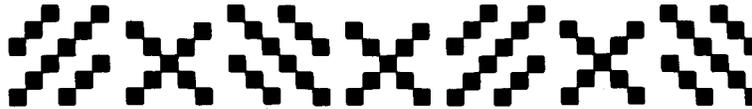


History as Present Politics:
Claude Bowers' *The Tragic Era*

David E. Kyvig*



“I have written a book which will be the most powerful single factor in bringing the South back into line . . . ,” Claude G. Bowers proudly confided to fellow Democrat Jouett Shouse in August, 1929.¹ Bowers referred to his soon to appear history of Reconstruction, *The Tragic Era: The Revolution after Lincoln*, completed in the aftermath of the Alfred E. Smith-Herbert Hoover presidential campaign of 1928. In that election the “Solid South” wavered from its traditional Democratic loyalties for the first time in a half century as seven southern states gave Hoover their electoral votes. Scholars have long suspected that politics motivated Bowers in writing *The Tragic Era*, but—as is often the case in such situations—they have been unable to document their beliefs. The recently discovered letter to Shouse not only confirms that Bowers intended to warn southerners about the dangers of Republicanism, but it also provides a fascinating picture of the composition and promotion of this important work. This letter offers striking evidence of the easy compatibility of historical scholarship and political persuasion in Bowers’ mind. Seldom have the political preferences shaping an historiographically important work been so clearly revealed.

In September, 1929, Houghton Mifflin published Bowers’ vividly written account of the years from Abraham Lincoln’s death to the election of Rutherford B. Hayes. *The Tragic Era* became an immediate best seller. The Literary Guild, then

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¹ Claude G. Bowers to Jouett Shouse, August 26, 1929, Jouett Shouse Papers (University of Kentucky Library, Lexington).



CLAUDE G. BOWERS

Courtesy Lilly Library,
Indiana University, Bloomington.

headed by Mark Van Doren, chose it as a regular selection and took over seventy thousand of an announced first printing of one hundred thousand copies. The hardbound edition went through twelve subsequent printings. The book remains in print today, having been brought out in a paperbound edition by its original publisher in 1962 and having gone through several printings since then.² *The Tragic Era* stands as perhaps the single most widely read history of Reconstruction and therefore a work of considerable influence. When the book first appeared, one academic reviewer somewhat ruefully and probably correctly observed: "it is certain that hundreds of American readers will get their impression of the period from these graphic pages . . . to one who will derive it from the biographies of the professional doctors of philosophy."³

The Tragic Era presented a dramatic picture of post-Civil War American politics: "Never have American public men in responsible positions, directing the destiny of the Nation, been so brutal, hypocritical, and corrupt. The Constitution was treated as a doormat on which politicians and army officers wiped their feet after wading in the muck."⁴ Bowers argued that the Radical Republicans were relieved by Lincoln's death because they rejected the president's conciliatory principles and regarded him as an obstacle to their plans for dealing with the South. The Radicals, led by Thaddeus Stevens, were eager to punish Confederate leaders and to force the South to pay for the war. They were even more concerned, Bowers asserted, about retaining national political power and hoped that by enfranchising southern blacks while suppressing the white aristocracy they would be able to keep southern state governments and electoral votes in Republican hands. They viciously abused Andrew Johnson, a capable, reasonable, and moderate president with roots in the Democratic party, when he sought to substitute mild treatment for the South.

According to Bowers, once the Radicals drove Johnson from office and replaced him with Ulysses S. Grant, they

² Houghton Mifflin Company to David E. Kyvig, May 15, 1969, January 21, 1976.

³ David S. Muzzey, review of *The Tragic Era*, *Current History*, XXXI (November, 1929), 212.

⁴ Claude G. Bowers, *The Tragic Era: The Revolution after Lincoln* (Boston, 1929), v.

gained control of the federal government and exploited the southern states politically and economically through blacks and carpetbaggers. A saturnalia of chaos and corruption resulted. In South Carolina, for example, illiterate black "peanut eaters" dominated the state legislature, engaging in an orgy of drunkenness, graft, and self indulgence at the taxpayer's expense. Carpetbag businessmen looted the old Confederacy through bribery and guile. Bowers concluded that corruption was also the order of the day at the national level: Credit Mobilier, the Whiskey Ring, Jay Gould's attempt to corner the gold market with the unwitting assistance of Grant, and Secretary of War William Belknap's sale of Indian reservation post traderships headed the list of exposed scandals. Increasingly authoritarian measures were required to maintain the Republican hold on the South. As a rising tide of resentment turned southern white voters toward the Democratic party, the Republicans stole the 1876 presidential election through corrupt vote counting in Florida, South Carolina, and Louisiana. Having forged an alliance with industrialists and financiers which would keep the party in power for decades to come, the Republicans could finally, said Bowers, safely relinquish their faltering hold on the South.

Several themes recur throughout *The Tragic Era*. Bowers repeatedly defended the rights of states, even recently rebellious ones, to determine their own affairs without excessive interference from a central government. He characterized Johnson and the postwar Democratic party as defenders of Jeffersonian principles of states rights against Republican advocates of central authority. Bowers also frequently condemned the political and social encouragement which blacks received at Republican hands during Reconstruction. Of course the Negro was not ready for the vote, claimed Bowers; only idleness, promiscuity, drunkenness, arrogant assumptions of equality, and manipulation by carpetbaggers followed the political elevation of the freedman. Furthermore, Bowers argued again and again, the Republicans, intent on rewarding the capitalists, continually ignored the needs and difficulties of the common folk, the farmers and workers of both North and South. The book presented, in sum, an unrelieved picture of Republican venality and flawed judgment in terms the white South was certain to recognize.

Bowers' views of Reconstruction was not new. A series of southern novelists, among them Thomas Nelson Page and Thomas Dixon, Jr., had since the 1880s propagated the "Lost Cause" legend, romanticizing the antebellum South and arguing that superior force rather than superior virtue caused its demise. David Wark Griffith's 1915 film, *The Birth of a Nation*, and the 1907 novel on which it was based, Dixon's *The Clansman*, spread the view that Radical Republicans had badly mistreated the South during Reconstruction. Of more consequence, *The Tragic Era* reflected the interpretive viewpoint of Columbia University historian William A. Dunning and his students. The "Dunning School," in a series of dissertations and monographs which began to appear early in the twentieth century, emphasized the harm done to the South by Radical Reconstruction and challenged earlier pro-Republican histories.⁵ But the works of Dunning and his followers, although critically well received, appealed primarily to other scholars. Bowers' colorful, fast paced, and dramatic writing style, his apparently thorough research, his ability to draw vivid, detailed portraits of important figures, and his skill at weaving into his story brief quotations from contemporary documents produced a narrative which many found both compelling and convincing. *The Tragic Era* became a great popular success, reached an audience immeasurably larger than had the Dunning school, and was taken much more seriously than the earlier fictional accounts.

Reviews generally complimented *The Tragic Era* when it appeared. In part their comments reflected the era's atmosphere of Social Darwinist intellectual racism, in part an acceptance of the Dunning interpretation, and in part an appreciation of Bowers' research and presentation. The greatest praise appeared, significantly, in general circulation journals. Arthur Krock concluded an enthusiastic review in the *New York Times Book Review* by calling *The Tragic Era*

⁵ Works of Dunning and his students cited in Bowers' bibliography included William A. Dunning, *Reconstruction: Political and Economic, 1865-1877* (New York, 1907); Walter Lynwood Fleming, *Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama* (New York, 1905); James W. Garner, *Reconstruction in Mississippi* (New York, 1910); Joseph G. deRoulhac Hamilton, *Reconstruction in North Carolina* (New York, 1914); Charles W. Ramsdell, *Reconstruction in Texas* (New York, 1910); Thomas S. Staples, *Reconstruction in Arkansas* (New York, 1923); and C. Mildred Thompson, *Reconstruction in Georgia* (New York, 1915). An interesting assessment of the Dunning school can be found in Philip R. Muller, "Look Back Without Anger: A Reappraisal of William A. Dunning," *Journal of American History*, LXI (September, 1974), 325-38.

an "immensely important contribution to history."⁶ The *Christian Century* described the book as "absorbing," a "titantic research work," while the *Nation* judged: "There is no history of the sordid epoch better worth reading . . ."⁷

Professional historians were more critical than non-scholars, but not excessively so. Charles R. Lingley, writing in the *American Historical Review*, found Bowers' style "a bit too strident" but concluded: "The central contention of Mr. Bowers is that both in purpose and execution the northern Republican conduct of the southern problem was characterized by abysmal ignorance, precipitous stupidity, flagrant partisanship, and sordid greed. With that conclusion, all judiciously minded will have to agree."⁸ The harshest review of the book appeared in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* where James C. Malin charged Bowers with being too partisan, too one dimensional in his characterizations, and too shallow in his research. Nevertheless Malin concluded: "Even though the presentation does not always give the exact shading and emphasis, or omits vital material at times, it requires a great deal of strong writing to redress the balance in the popular mind, and even in the scholarly mind, saturated as it has been with a half a century of rank prejudice."⁹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., would have preferred an account which stressed the "great impersonal tides in human affairs" rather than dramatic episodes and personalities, but he found *The Tragic Era* generally in tune with other scholarship on the period.¹⁰

When *The Tragic Era* was published, several reviewers noted Bowers' Democratic bias, but none saw this as a reason to reject his version of Reconstruction. A decade later, however, some historians saw only partisanship and no historical merit in the book. Francis B. Simkins, for one, charged: "Less scrupulous writers have so effectively correlated the

⁶ Arthur Krock, "Mr. Bowers Rebuilds the Stormy Reconstruction Period," *New York Times Book Review* (September 8, 1929), 3, 22.

⁷ Edgar DeWitt Jones, review of *The Tragic Era*, *Christian Century*, XLVI (December 4, 1929), 1504; William McDonald, "The Great American Tragedy," *Nation*, CXXIX (September 18, 1929), 306-307.

⁸ Charles R. Lingley, review of *The Tragic Era*, *American Historical Review*, XXXV (January, 1930), 382-83.

⁹ James C. Malin, review of *The Tragic Era*, *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XVI (March, 1930), 561-64.

¹⁰ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., "The Tragic Era," *New Republic*, CX (October 9, 1929), 210-11.

events of Reconstruction with those of their own times that their books have been best sellers. The outstanding example of this is Claude Bowers' *Tragic Era*, in which an attack upon the Republican enemies of Alfred E. Smith in 1928 is veiled behind attacks upon the Republican leaders of 1868, 1872, and 1876."¹¹ By the time the book was thirty years old, it was being dismissed by Bernard Weisberger as a "zestful work of imagination" and by David Donald as "a luridly colored anti-Republican tract." More recently, Larry Kincaid characterized Bowers as "the best, or worst, example" in the late 1920s of "unabashedly partisan historians" who "reduced the politics of Reconstruction to a personal war between an honest, generous, statesmanlike President and dishonest, hateful, partisan 'Radicals'"¹²

As images of the Radical Republicans have been revised, as Johnson's reputation has declined, and as appreciation of the limited role of blacks as well as the significant involvement of native whites in southern politics during Reconstruction has grown, the stature of *The Tragic Era* has fallen.¹³ Nevertheless, Holman Hamilton, at work on a biography of Bowers, recently argued that the author of *The Tragic Era* was no blind partisan, but rather a judicious, well read, established historian presenting views developed over a long span of years and widely accepted by contemporaries.¹⁴

¹¹ Francis B. Simkins, "New Viewpoints of Southern Reconstruction," *Journal of Southern History*, V (February, 1939), 49.

¹² Bernard Weisberger, "The Dark and Bloody Ground of Reconstruction Historiography," *Journal of Southern History*, XXV (November, 1959), 428; James G. Randall and David Donald, *The Civil War and Reconstruction* (2nd ed., Boston, 1961), 776; Larry Kincaid, "Victims of Circumstance: An Interpretation of Changing Attitudes Toward Republican Policy Makers and Reconstruction," *Journal of American History*, LVII (June, 1970), 55-56.

¹³ Many Reconstruction studies of recent years directly challenge Bowers' views. John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction: After the Civil War* (Chicago, 1961), and Kenneth Stampp, *The Era of Reconstruction* (New York, 1965), treat the freedmen sympathetically while discounting their political power. Eric McKittrick, *Andrew Johnson and Reconstruction* (Chicago, 1960), and John and LaWanda Cox, *Politics, Principles and Prejudice, 1865-1866* (New York, 1963), led a growing attack on Johnson's politics and racial attitudes. William R. Brock, *An American Crisis: Congress and Reconstruction, 1865-1867* (New York, 1963), argued that Reconstruction did not go far enough in the direction of reform, and Michael Les Benedict, *A Compromise of Principle: Congressional Republicans and Reconstruction, 1863-1869* (New York, 1974), concluded that Republican moderates, not the Radicals, controlled the Reconstruction Congress.

¹⁴ Holman Hamilton, "Before 'The Tragic Era': Claude Bowers's Earlier Attitudes Toward Reconstruction," *Mid-America*, LV (October, 1973), 235-44.

Thus Bowers is not without his defenders even though in general his reputation as a historian has slipped as interpretations of Reconstruction have changed.

In order to assess *The Tragic Era* as well as to understand the varied opinions which have been expressed about the book, it is necessary to know something about its author.¹⁵ Bowers was a small, frail appearing, but vigorous man who simultaneously fashioned careers as a journalist, historian, and Democratic politician. He grew up in the "overwhelmingly Democratic" small town of Whitestown and in Indianapolis, twenty miles distant, during the 1880s and 1890s. As a child he attended Democratic rallies with his father and met state party leaders. He remembered being "thrilled . . . through and through" in 1896 by the appearance in Indianapolis of William Jennings Bryan.¹⁶ Bowers immersed himself in an investigation of Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson for the Indiana State High School Oratorical Contest in 1898, and although his prize winning oration was titled "Hamilton the Constructionist," he emerged with life long enthusiasm for Jeffersonian Democracy and the study of history. A year later he was writing articles on the Hamilton-Jefferson conflict for the national party magazine, *The Jeffersonian Democrat*, while making a brief, abortive attempt to study law. By 1901 Bowers was writing editorials for the Indianapolis *Sentinel*, and in 1903 he became editorial writer for the *Terre Haute Star*. At the same time he involved himself in politics, giving speeches in the 1900 campaign and running unsuccessfully for Congress in 1904 and 1906. The young journalist caught the eye of 1908 Democratic vice presidential candidate John W. Kern who, when he was elected to the United States Senate from Indiana in 1910, asked Bowers to serve as his secretary. Especially after Kern became Senate majority leader in 1912, Bowers had the opportunity to meet many national figures in the Democratic party.

¹⁵ A full biography of Claude Bowers is yet to be published. Unless otherwise noted the information below is taken from his posthumously published memoir, *My Life* (New York, 1962).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7, 43. Additional information on Bowers' early years can be found in Holman Hamilton and Gayle Thornbrough, eds., *Indianapolis in the "Gay Nineties": High School Diaries of Claude G. Bowers* (Indianapolis, 1964).

After Kern's retirement in 1917, Bowers returned to Indiana as editor of the Fort Wayne *Journal-Gazette*. He remained politically active, chairing the platform committee at the 1918 state Democratic convention and delivering the keynote address at the same meeting two years later. During his rise in the ranks of journalism and politics, Bowers kept his historical interests alive. His first book, *Irish Orators: A History of Ireland's Fight for Freedom*, appeared in 1916, followed two years later by *The Life of John Worth Kern*. In 1922 Bowers attracted a wide audience for the first time when he published an admiring study of Andrew Jackson. *The Party Battles of the Jackson Period* called Bowers to the attention of Frank Cobb, Democratic editor of the New York *World*. Cobb brought Bowers to New York in 1923, installing him as an editorial writer on the New York *Evening World*.

While at the *World*, Bowers kept on with his historical research and writing during lunch hours and evenings. In 1925 he published *Jefferson and Hamilton*. This book cast Jefferson as a masterful leader of men, revolting against an entrenched elite who ignored the rights of states and individuals and initiating the era of popular government. The book summarized Bowers' states rights, libertarian, egalitarian political philosophy. Written in a powerful dramatic style, *Jefferson and Hamilton* became a best seller and earned its author both scholarly and partisan praise.¹⁷

Democrats, still divided by the rural-urban, conservative-progressive intraparty struggles of 1924, could all find something attractive in Bowers' Jefferson. As a result, Bowers found himself repeatedly called upon to address party gatherings to generate harmony and stir enthusiasm. With his background in oratory as well as history, he proved very adept at the task. In January, 1928, when the Democrats' Jackson Day banquet in Washington threatened to become a verbal battle among various presidential contenders, Bowers was asked to give the principal address. Using the Jefferson and Jackson eras as historical examples, he attacked party factionalism and pointed to past glories of a united Democratic party. The speech was so enthusiastically received that Bowers was soon chosen as the keynote speaker for the 1928 Democratic National Convention in Houston.

¹⁷ Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jeffersonian Image in the American Mind* (New York, 1960), 347-53.

Not only was it unusual for a convention keynote speech to be given by a nonofficeholder, but also it was rare for such a speech to attract much attention. Bowers, however, with an eloquent delivery and a message sprinkled with historical references, made a memorable address. He drew a clear distinction between Republicans as Hamiltonian advocates of privilege and Democrats as bearers of a Jefferson-Jackson tradition of concern with common people. The Republicans had abandoned the democratic principles of Lincoln for the aristocratic beliefs of Hamilton, he entoned.

You cannot believe with Lincoln that the principles of Jefferson are "the definitions and the axioms of a free society," and with Hamilton that they are the definitions of anarchy.

You cannot believe with Lincoln in a government "of the people, by the people and for the people," and with Hamilton in a government of the wealthy, by the influential and for the powerful.¹⁸

This forceful, effective speech doubtlessly marked the pinnacle of Bowers' long public career.

A combination of historical study, dramatic style, and partisan commitment, therefore, brought Bowers to his greatest moment. Richard V. Oulahan of the *New York Times* wrote that Bowers "invoked the spirit of democracy in a ringing speech which brought a great shouting of approval from delegates, alternates, and the thousands of spectators who crowded the vast space of Sam Houston Hall."¹⁹ The speech was also heard by a national radio audience. That Bowers enjoyed his Houston triumph is evident in the better than two full pages of his memoirs which he devoted to recalling the favorable reception of the keynote address.²⁰

After the convention Bowers clearly felt a personal stake in the election of 1928, both because he knew and admired the Democratic nominee, Alfred E. Smith, and because of his much publicized keynote speech in which he had "sharply drawn [the line] between the two schools of political thought to permit the electorate to know what fundamental principles were involved."²¹ The results of the balloting deeply disappointed Bowers. He attributed the heavy Democratic defeat

¹⁸ *Official Report of the Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention, 1928* (Indianapolis, 1928), 10.

¹⁹ *New York Times*, June 27, 1928, p. 1.

²⁰ Bowers, *My Life*, 196-99.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 195.

to intolerance toward Smith's Catholicism and felt that religious bigotry had caused many Americans to overlook the substantive issues dividing the parties. The South's abandonment of the Democratic party for the first time since the Civil War did not escape Bowers' notice. The experiences of 1928 were very much on Bowers' mind as he turned once again to historical writing.²²

Ever since finishing *Jefferson and Hamilton* Bowers had been collecting material for a book on Reconstruction. Early in 1929 he began to write *The Tragic Era*. By the summer it was completed.²³ In August, shortly before the book was to appear, he wrote to his friend Jouett Shouse, a former United States congressman and lawyer from Kansas who had been put in charge of the day to day operations of the Democratic National Committee by party chairman John J. Raskob. The letter explained how and why Bowers had prepared what was to be his most important book.

August 26, 1929²⁴

Dear Shouse:—

I am amazed at the idiotic letter of Landon Bell,²⁵ all the more so because he has been in correspondence with me in a most friendly manner, and his "fears" are based on no information whatever.

As a matter of fact I have written a book which will be the most powerful single factor in bringing the South back into line, and I have been so intimately in touch with Southern leaders that every great newspaper in the South is arranging for both elaborate reviews and editorials upon it. It is the true story of the manner in which the Jeffersonian Republic was overthrown through military force in the South during the years 1865 and 1877, and the story of this period during which the Republican party solidified its power by bayonets, and corruption is the most tremendous indictment of that party ever penned in history. Advance copies for review have gone out and from John Stewart Bryan of the Richmond News-Observer I have it that he intends to use the book effectively in the coming contest in Virginia. He is extravagantly enthusiastic about it. From some historians such as Prof. W. E. Dodd of

²² *Ibid.*, 199-204.

²³ *Ibid.*, 208.

²⁴ The punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and spacing of the original typewritten letter have been retained as nearly as possible in this reproduction. Errors which were obviously typographical have been corrected. A few written corrections, presumably in Bowers' handwriting, have been included. In a few instances information or punctuation has been added in brackets to clarify Bowers' meaning. The letter is located in the Jouett Shouse Papers (University of Kentucky Library, Lexington).

²⁵ Landon Bell was a Virginia born and educated lawyer, a lumber and coal company executive, and an organizer of the Hardwood Manufacturers Association and Southern Coal Producers Association. *New York Times*, August 11, 1960, p. 25.

the University of Chicago I have it that "it is the most absorbing story I have ever read" and he is reviewing it for the New York Tribune. Col. E. M. House²⁶ has prepared a statement for publication to the effect that I tell the truth about the persecution of the South by the carpetbaggers backed by bayonets for the first time and do it "brilliantly".

If I do not have the appreciation of the Democratic Party for this work on which I near broke myself down by day and night labor for five years I have written my last line in an attempt to serve it.

House says in a personal letter to me: "You will have the grateful appreciation of the Southern people", and I think I shall.

I had access to the unpublished, hitherto concealed Diary of George W. Julian,²⁷ Radical member of Congress and a leader[,] which has the most damning disclosures concerning the actions of party caucuses, showing the low motives that dominated. Of course as I show, and is generally known by all intelligent people, Lincoln was on the verge of a deadly feud with the Radicals of his own party at the time of his death. I have the proof in the notations of the diary on the day of his [Lincoln's] death[.] He died at 7:30 in the morning. At 2 P.M. there was a party caucus. I quote a few lines:

"I liked the radical tone of the caucus. But in all my experience in Washington I never heard so much profanity and obscenity. It was intolerably disgusting. Every one was bitterly criticising Lincoln for his policy of conciliation and his contemptible cowardice, and the universal expression of all the leaders was that HIS DEATH IS A GOD-SEND TO OUR CAUSE". I give this; also the story of the conference of leaders the next day "to select a new cabinet for Johnson to get rid of the last vestige of Lincolnism". This from the diary of a man who was in the conference. Also the fact that this conference had the effrontery to decide on Ben Butler for Secretary of State.²⁸ Also the conference with Butler three days after Lincoln's death when Butler said that "Johnson must not administer on the estate of Lincoln".

²⁶ "Colonel" Edward M. House (the title was honorary, bestowed by a Texas governor whose campaign House managed) was Woodrow Wilson's closest presidential advisor, his personal emissary to foreign governments on several occasions, and an influential, behind the scenes figure in Democratic politics from 1912 to 1932. *Dictionary of American Biography*, XI, Supplement 2, pp. 319-21.

²⁷ George W. Julian was an Indiana abolitionist, a congressman (Free Soil party, 1849-1851; Republican, 1861-1871), and a leading Radical who served as a member of the Committee on the Conduct of the War and as one of seven House managers for the impeachment trial of Andrew Johnson. He came to oppose the Republican leadership during the first Grant administration, presided at the 1872 Liberal Republican convention, and by 1876 had joined the Democratic party. As a youth in Indianapolis Bowers got to know the elderly Julian before the former congressman's death in 1899. Julian's daughter allowed Bowers to use her father's detailed and frank diary. *Ibid.*, V, 245-46.

²⁸ Benjamin F. Butler of Massachusetts was an antebellum Democrat, a flamboyant Union general, and, from his election in 1866 to his defeat in 1874, one of the most prominent and extreme Radical Republican congressmen. *Ibid.*, II, 357-59.

All this comes in the first few pages, as the book begins with the death of Lincoln and he plays no part in it.

There are a few fools in the South, Josephus Daniels²⁹ has often told me about them, who want us to attack Lincoln. It is assanine. It is a little element that represents not 2 per cent of Southern opinion. This man Bell is from the South and is one of the worst of them. Some of these fools actually wanted me to make a hot defence of Jefferson Davis in the book. Of course it would have no place in a book of this sort in the first place.

I am glad you make it clear to Bell that you were sending me his letter[.] It will make him squirm. Of course I shall not mention it to him at all.

Just today I have a clipping from the Jackson (Mississippi) paper saying the greatest service I have ever rendered is in this book. The Republican papers will be hostile if they dare, though the Tribune here [New York] will have a wholly favorable review. [Franklin D.] Roosevelt has just read it, written me that he was "thrilled by it" and he is preparing a statement for the publishers.³⁰

Since the Literary Guild has taken 70,000 copies for its members³¹ and the first printing is 100,000 copies it will have a great circulation and will do infinite good. It will be dynamite to Hoovers flirtation with the South. I hope you people at headquarter will see the wealth of amunition at a glance. It comes out September 6th.

Thanks for sending the letter.

Regards,
Sincerely,

Hon. Jouett Shouse Claude G. Bowers [signed]
Democratic National Committee
Washington, D.C.

If you hear any more such stuff tell the writer I write history from the records and that any one who undertakes to tell me how to do it may go to hell in an elevator.

²⁹ Josephus Daniels was editor of the Raleigh, North Carolina, *News and Observer* and served as secretary of the navy under Woodrow Wilson from 1913 to 1921. *Ibid.*, [XIII], Supplement 4, pp. 215-18.

³⁰ According to Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jeffersonian Image*, 351-52, Franklin D. Roosevelt never reviewed another book but at Bowers' request reviewed *Jefferson and Hamilton* for the New York *Evening World*. FDR, his esteem for Jeffersonian principles enhanced, praised the book. Bowers reported in his memoirs that after *The Tragic Era* appeared, FDR wrote to him from Warm Springs, Georgia, to say that the book "had a very definite influence" on southern thought. Bowers, *My Life*, 210.

³¹ According to Bowers, Mark Van Doren took *The Tragic Era* for the Literary Guild without having seen the manuscript. Bowers, *My Life*, 152.

As Bowers had hoped, *The Tragic Era* was appreciated by Democrats. One measure of the party's esteem for the author appeared in 1932. Governor Franklin D. Roosevelt of New York, the leading Democratic presidential contender, and his advisors settled on Bowers as the best person to nominate FDR at the convention. Roosevelt extended the invitation to Bowers during a private meeting in Albany. Bowers felt obliged to consult William Randolph Hearst for whose New York *Journal* he worked after the collapse of the *World* in 1931. Hearst, a conservative, isolationist Democrat who backed John Nance Garner for the nomination, indicated his opposition, probably recalling Bowers' ability to stir a convention audience. A bitterly disappointed Bowers declined FDR's offer.³²

Roosevelt continued to hold Bowers in high regard and appointed him ambassador to Spain in 1933. Bowers remained at the sensitive Madrid post for six years and then served as ambassador to Chile until his retirement in 1953. This partisan recognition as well as the relatively light duties of the embassy assured that Bowers had not "written my last line in an attempt to serve . . . [the Democratic party]." Two more laudatory volumes on Jefferson were written during Bowers' foreign assignments.³³ Although many considered a 1932 biography of Indiana Senator Albert J. Beveridge to be Bowers' finest work, none of his efforts after 1929 had the impact of *The Tragic Era*.³⁴

In his letter to Shouse, Bowers acknowledged the partisan purpose of *The Tragic Era* but insisted that the work was a solid, well documented history. Those who disagreed could "go to hell in an elevator." Bowers obviously saw no difference between a Democratic perspective and objective reality. To his way of thinking, pointing out Republican sins to the South was both good politics and good history. It certainly

³² Frank Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Triumph* (Boston, 1956), 293; Bowers, *My Life*, 239-42.

³³ Claude G. Bowers, *Jefferson in Power* (Boston, 1936); and Claude G. Bowers, *The Young Jefferson, 1743-1789* (Boston, 1945).

³⁴ In addition to *Beveridge and the Progressive Era* (Boston, 1932) and the Jefferson volumes, Bowers published after 1929 *The Spanish Adventures of Washington Irving* (Boston, 1940); *Pierre Vergniaud: Voice of the French Revolution* (New York, 1950); *Making Democracy a Reality: Jefferson, Jackson, and Polk* (Memphis, 1954); *My Mission to Spain: Watching the Rehearsal for World War II* (New York, 1954); *Chile through Embassy Windows, 1929-1953* (New York, 1958); and his memoirs.

was good politics, for the South returned to the Democratic fold after the 1928 defection and remained an essential factor in party presidential victories from 1932 through 1964. There is no way of knowing whether *The Tragic Era* directly influenced votes, but its arguments were woven into the rhetoric and rationale of southern Democracy. The book, however, failed the test of time for good history. Subsequent scholarship has demonstrated many serious inadequacies in its conclusions.

Both its political and historical dimensions must finally be taken into account in assessing *The Tragic Era*. The book was, after all, not out of step with the scholarly accounts of the time which dealt with Reconstruction. Furthermore, it brought to light significant material, the Julian diary in particular, which tended to reinforce such interpretations. The book's greatest departure from the Dunning school was its lively, dramatic style which together with its successful marketing produced its great impact. At the same time *The Tragic Era* stands revealed as a book with a clear partisan intent, one which brought appropriate political rewards to its author. Bowers, as he examined primary and secondary material on Reconstruction and then wrote his account, constantly chose to cast Republican behavior in the worst possible light. Scholars certainly cannot block others from writing "history," but they should consider the implications of leaving the writing of exciting, readable, popular accounts to those with special interests to plead or of allowing biased interpretations to stand unchallenged once they appear. In the hands of as talented an author as Claude G. Bowers, such opportunities can register a deep and seriously distorted impression of the past on the public mind.