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Michael Perman, *Pursuit of Liberty: A Political History of the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010, \$35.00). Pp. 408. ISBN 978 0 8078 3324 7.

Dusk is falling on the idea of the American South, as various scholars declare the “end” of southern political history. Time for an owl or two to take wing, one would think, and Michael Perman’s *Pursuit of Liberty* seeks to present southern political history whole, from beginning to, as Perman concludes, end. An ambitious undertaking, particularly as Perman hopes to reach a general, not only scholarly, audience. The resulting synthesis is exceptional in its ability to weave together disparate strands of the South’s history into a clear thematic structure. Recurrent patterns appear in the overall tapestry: the distinctive politics of the mountain regions, the interplay of governance and party competition, the eerily intransigent strategies of the region’s white leaders. Perman’s narrative brings out these patterns across the entire sweep of the South’s political history. Of similar value is Perman’s recasting of familiar national stories (the emergence of the Whig Party; the politics of the Wilson administration) from a southern perspective. Inevitably there are limitations, not all of them minor. Most spring from Perman’s decision to define politics as the competition between organized political parties: party politics, for most of Perman’s period, is not simply the preserve of elite white men but institutionalized white supremacy. Perman is clearly critical of this political project. But he appears, at times, to adopt the rhetorical posture of its protagonists. Perman contrives, for example, to tell the history of Reconstruction without a clear portrait of even one of the 1,500 or so African American office holders of the period. The Republican Party did face a legitimacy crisis in the South in these years, but were its supporters, including black southerners, “in a real sense, outsiders” (127)? Seen from within an elite white project of “unity,” certainly, but Perman’s is a history of this project more than a history of competing visions of the South (thus George Wallace gets ten pages, Fannie Lou Hamer is pictured but does not appear in the text). “Poor white southerners” and the “rural masses” (202–3) are, similarly, taken to be important to early twentieth-century demagoguery. But given the sharply restricted white electorate in this period, just who are these “masses” and how poor were they (relative to nonvoters, or to political elites)? A political history systematically divorced from social history provides few answers. Is there a South, still? Perman thinks not: his South is marked by attempts to avoid or smother partisan competition. The newly competitive South suggests its political leaders have abandoned the pursuit of regional unity. Still, the South remains politically distinctive. Around 40 percent of Congressional Republicans represent a southern district or state, and the South is the only region in which that party holds a substantial Congressional advantage. Is the (white) South simply a minority faction in a minority party once again? Yet Perman is right that the passing of the Solid South marks an essential watershed in southern political history: separating current partisan competition from the evasion of politics pursued by generations of southern political leaders, by means mostly foul. Perman’s substantial achievement is to identify and elaborate this evasion as, in itself, a primary objective and principle of the region’s leadership, a defensive

antipolitics. *Pursuit of Unity* is, therefore, an essential, and supremely accessible, introduction to the region's political history.

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