

*The Cousins' War*, by Kevin Phillips

reviewed by [James D. D. Bratt](#) in the [February 2, 2000](#) issue

The 20th century has ended much as it began, with ethnic hostilities in the Balkans, sectarian violence in China, a change of power in South Africa, "reform" in Russia and economic power in the hands of the U.S. It is therefore fitting that a popular historian wrap things up with an ode to the "Anglo-American century." It's peculiar, though, that the bard in question is Kevin Phillips, the populist scourge of the new economy in the '80s and the architect of the Republican Party's "southern strategy" of 1968. That plan demoted the liberal North, the principal heir of the Puritan spirit wherein Phillips finds the source of the Anglo-American triumph celebrated in *The Cousins' War*. Perhaps Phillips offers this volume to propitiate the gods he has deposed.

This sprawling Victorian tome is really three books in one. The first is a history of 18th-century military campaigns in the Hudson River-Lake Champlain corridor, climaxing in the momentous failure of British General John Burgoyne's 1777 invasion. The second book makes a case for religion, as refracted through ethnicity and culture, as the key predictor of American voting behavior in the 19th century and beyond. The third is an argument for the theory that the English Civil War of the 1640s, the American Revolution of the 1770s and the American Civil War of the 1860s were closely analogous, each precipitated by a Puritan (later, dissenting Protestant) program for religion, politics and economics, which together prepared the way for the English-speaking peoples to gain global dominance.

Phillips's thesis about domestic politics will be familiar to readers acquainted with the ethnocultural interpretation that flourished in the '70s but has come on hard times of late. Having it reasserted by a field-tested strategist like Phillips might restore some of its warrant. His military history is provocative. He hypothesizes that Generals Burgoyne and William Howe conducted their 1777 campaigns with minds fatally infected by Whig sympathies for the American cause. Their roots in dissenting Protestantism thus cost Britain its North American empire, since their defeat in 1777 brought in France--Catholic though it was--on the Patriot side.

But Phillips's volume stands or falls with its theory that the three large conflicts were "cousins' wars." Here the verdict must be mixed. Certainly a rough continuity exists between Puritans, Patriots and Yankees on the one side and Royalists, Loyalists and Confederates on the other. It is helpful to see all three conflicts as civil wars and to trace their important reformist repercussions. But Phillips sounds Whiggish indeed in regarding the three wars as building up to a global destiny. Some facts on the ground trouble his analogies as much as they advance them. Can we adequately explain the American Revolution with so brief a treatment of Virginia as Phillips gives, and American democracy with such meager attention to Jefferson and Jackson? How can the Confederacy be categorized as "high church" and "aristocratic" when it was the most evangelical (and thus dissenting) Protestant of all American regions and self-consciously opposed to a real aristocracy of Northern "capital"?

The American Civil War freed the slaves, but it was even more influential in clearing the way for industrial capitalism. To the latter-day heirs of Puritanism, this was progress, but their progenitors would have demurred. The early Puritans were skeptical of commercial capitalism, as were the more puritanical of the Patriots in the 1770s. The Puritans' destiny, therefore, was more ironic, even tragic, than Phillips sees: they set loose religious passions that were later consummated in commodified exchange; they invoked the edicts of heaven only to set in motion a chase for earthly treasures. The same materialist allure eventually melted the cold war, removing the 20th century's foremost challenger to Anglo-American hegemony and sending people on every continent to their English dictionaries to better compete in the market. Real Puritans would not be any more pleased at the moral or political fallout of the economic chase than was the populist Phillips of the 1980s.

One can hardly fault so energetic a believer as Phillips for seeking some hope in a corrupt, lethargic age or for finding it in a good story. If he has not spun out all his themes correctly, he at least began with important questions and pursued them with a tenacity that has yielded a trove of historical data, political insight and provocative assertions. Professional historians might wish to pay attention; inquisitive readers should pay the money and settle in for a long and hearty disputation.