

Politics and Culture of the Civil War Era: Essays in Honor of Robert W. Johannsen

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Review

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Essays to Honor a Mentor

These fine essays are an extension and reflection of the meticulous, wide-ranging and revelatory scholarship of Robert W. Johannsen, and they bear the earmark of his mentorship. Each is based on solid archival research, and all are characterized by straight forward political narrative, balanced analysis, and judicious arguments that are thoughtful and suggestive. The organization of the collection coheres in such a way that the individual essays both complement one another thematically and extend over time the authors' analyses of changes and continuities in political culture of the Civil War era. The first half of the collection focuses on the transformation of national politics in the antebellum era, and the second half examines the interplay of culture, politics, and war.

Robert D. Sampson and Michael F. Conlin illuminate facets of the protean concept of Manifest Destiny. Sampson demonstrates that the romantic and often bumptious nationalism that characterized John L. O'Sullivan's writings in the 1840s was eclipsed by sectionalism following the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Once anxious to expand the freedoms of white males over space and through time, O'Sullivan became increasingly frustrated by the ascendancy of the slavery extension issue in the national discourse of politics. O'Sullivan's argument for popular sovereignty and its concomitant—sectional accommodation—became increasingly couched in racist terms. Jacksonian ideals about the perfectibility of man did not apply to slaves who did not share and would never share in a destiny that was becoming less manifest.

Michael Conlin convincingly argues that the territorial expansion that issued from it infused the Smithsonian Institution with a “volatile mix of nationalism,

science, and politics" (75). Put in reductive terms, territorial expansion led to an expansion of knowledge in the areas of natural history, astronomy, and the manufacture of scientific instruments. At the same time that expansion revealed the limitations and internal contradictions of Manifest Destiny, it had the adventitious effect of elevating American science to the level of that of Europe. Whereas the territorial question sectionalized politics and blunted the boundlessness of O'Sullivan's "Great Nation of Futurity," the Smithsonian Institution under the leadership of Joseph Henry embraced the nationalism reforming spirit, and expansionist ethos of Manifest Destiny into the 1850s.

James Huston, Willard Carl Klunder, Matthew Norman, and Colin McCoy examine the transformation of political culture in the 1850s and the many ways in which the territorial issue contributed to the fragmentation and sectionalization of the Jacksonian party system. Huston convincingly argues that the ironic and unintended effect of the debates over the Kansas-Nebraska Act was to make race more, not less, salient in the political discourse of the 1850s. Stephen Douglas and others framed their defense of popular sovereignty—and by extension Democratic politics—in racist terms that perforce excluded Blacks. Republicans logically concluded that by definition Douglas's defense of popular sovereignty raised the question of whether free Blacks had natural rights and political rights. "The definition of 'people,'" Huston observes, "was the Achilles heel of Douglas's doctrine" (109). As a consequence, race, which had been largely absent from national politics in the 1840s, became central to political debate in the 1850s.

Where Huston's essay adds a moral dimension to what is often taken for granted as a political and constitutional question, Will Klunder analyzes the manner in which variant concepts of popular sovereignty fragmented the Democratic Party in the late 1850s. In the 1840s through the Compromise of 1850, Lewis Cass and Douglas embraced popular sovereignty as a principled and pragmatic solution to the territorial issue. On the one hand, it was consistent with the Democratic belief in local self-governance; on the other, it was sufficiently ambiguous to appeal to northerners and southerners alike. Both supported the Nebraska bill believing it harmonious with both the principles of the party and the underlying premise of the Compromise of 1850. But neither Jacksonian Democrat realized that by 1854 the territorial issue had transformed the political landscape. Events in Kansas would prove that popular sovereignty was less the basis for middle or common ground between the sections than it was a battleground. While Douglas broke with the Buchanan administration over the

Lecompton constitution arguing it was a travesty of popular sovereignty, Cass supported the president choosing pragmatism of compromise and primacy of party over principle. The Democracy was divided.

Matthew Norman returns to the theme raised in Jim Huston's essay: principled divisions between Democrats and Republicans and more specifically between Douglas and Lincoln. In a parallel to the growing rift between Douglas and Cass over the meaning of popular sovereignty, Norman examines the principled differences between Douglas and Lincoln over the right of revolution. Both supported revolution against tyrannical governments in the abstract, and each endorsed the European revolutions of 1848. Douglas and Lincoln agreed that the United States was a model republic; each revered the work of the founders, especially the Declaration of Independence; and both were more supportive of the struggles of European revolutionaries than with the enslaved at home. But by the late 1850s, the territorial issue had sectionalized that inherited revolutionary political heritage. Although Douglas and Lincoln both sought to perpetuate the Union, their debates in 1858 proved that each believed the other's policies (popular sovereignty and restriction) posed a fundamental threat to its perpetuity. Both opposed secession, however, drawing a distinction between the natural right to revolution and the legal and constitutional abomination of secession.

Colin McCoy extends Norman's analysis by exploring the uncomfortable and tenuous relationship of Jacksonian men to and within the party of Lincoln. Former Whigs and abolitionists who made up one wing of the Republican party attacked slavery and the Confederacy's defense of it on moral grounds. Antislavery Jacksonians dilated on the deleterious effects of the institution on whites. Originally free soil Democrats' allegiance to the party was largely personal. Wish parenting thought, they envisioned Lincoln as Jackson reborn, drawing parallels between the secession crisis and the nullification controversy. Yet they were always suspicious of the president's resolve and the Republican Party's position on slavery and race. Once the common enemy had been put down in 1865, these former Democrats refused to support radical Republicans' Reconstruction policies. Remaining true to their conservative prewar principles, they returned the Democratic Party fold in the 1870s. The Civil War proved to be less a watershed in political alignment than a temporary truce between partisan antagonists.

The essays of Bryon Andresen, David Raney, and Kenneth Noe shift the focus of the collection to the relationship among culture, politics, and war. Andresen parses the Copperhead Christian critique of Lincoln's wartime policies. Standing apart from Christian abolitionist critics, northern evangelical Democrats asserted that Lincoln and Republicans subverted traditional scriptural authority through appeals to a "higher law." As embattled dissenters within their own churches, these Copperhead Christians legitimized their critique by attacking the moral pretensions of super-patriotic ministers and laymen while pointing out the hypocritical behavior of drunken, licentious, and craven Republicans and Union military leaders. Stressing the Christian imperatives of peace and magnanimity, they fashioned an opposition to the war and to a growing alliance between church and state.

David Raney provides a thematic counterpoint to the Copperheads' religious dissent in his examination of the United States Christian Commission's support of the Union war effort. Other civilian philanthropic organizations opposed its endeavors and Union commanders only grudgingly tolerated its effort to provide sustenance to their troops. Yet soldiers and their kin overwhelmingly supported the many and varied activities of the Christian Commission to attend to the physical and spiritual needs of Union combatants.

Kenneth Noe returns to the larger theme of the separation of church and state during war in his essay on the Confederate divine, Isaac Tichenor—"The Fighting Chaplain of Shiloh." Tichenor, who would champion New South industrialization and become the president of what would become Auburn University, was a chaplain in the 17th Alabama. He took an active part in the battle of Shiloh, first rallying his unit against a withering attack by the 50th Illinois then as an active combatant in the Confederate counterattack against Union forces in the Hornet's Nest. Although he celebrated himself and was himself celebrated by the press for his martial exploits, Tichenor soon found himself the subject of a withering fusillade from southern critics who disapproved of behavior "both reckless and contrary to the chaplain's calling" (255). Although Noe claims Tichenor remained a sharpshooter at heart and in his heart, he spent the rest of his public career attempting to reclaim the moral high ground of chaplain.

The final two essays consider Lincoln as wartime commander. Daniel McDonough argues persuasively that the president's choice of Ambrose Burnside to succeed George McClellan was as logical as it was tragic. Lincoln

believed that the new commander of the Army of the Potomac had to come from within, have a proven record of success in the field, and be acceptable to the McClellan wing. Burnside proved acceptable on all accounts. McDonough argues that the fiasco at Fredericksburg resulted from a series of errors in judgment up and down the chain of command from Henry Halleck to Fighting Joe Hooker and other field officers who undermined Burnside's authority within the army. Yet he makes clear that although the campaign was not predestined to fail, Burnside's fecklessness (which Lincoln had mistaken for modesty) and, ironically, his inflexibility proved fatal at Fredericksburg.

Appropriately enough, this festschrift ends with Bruce Tap's essay on presidential politics in the 1864 campaign. Tap examines the somewhat precarious position of Lincoln in that canvass as dissent within the Republican ranks threatened to undermine his reelection prospects. Radicals unhappy with the president's policy for reconstructing the Union and his opposition to the Wade-Davis bill scouted the idea of alternate Republican candidates, including John C. Frémont who was already in the field. Tap painstakingly parses the tangled and largely obscured negotiations that led to Frémont's withdrawal, placing Senator Zachariah Chandler of Michigan at the center of the mystery. Tap persuasively argues that there was no agreement struck between the president and the Pathfinder. Yet the evidence strongly suggests that Chandler negotiated both Frémont's exit from the canvass and the removal of Postmaster Montgomery Blair as the quid pro quo for a united Republican party.

John Hoffmann's first essay in this collection is a fond recollection of Robert Johannsen's career as fledgling graduate student, senior scholar, and a teacher. The portrait that emerges is of an indefatigable researcher, a judicious scholar, a conscientious classroom instructor, a warm, humane mentor, and an absolutely delightful human being. His students who have contributed to this collection have done very well by Professor Johannsen. His many talents and outstanding qualities are everywhere evident in essays that enrich our understanding of the politics and culture of the Civil War era. This is that rare collection of essays whose whole is more than the sum of its parts.

Michael A. Morrison is associate professor of History at Purdue University and the author of Slavery and the American West: The Eclipse of Manifest Destiny and the Coming of the Civil War. He is currently working on a study of the Mexican-American War.