

The Field of Blood: Violence in Congress and the Road to Civil War

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Review

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Freeman, Joanne. *The Field of Blood: Violence in Congress and the Road to Civil War*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$28.00 ISBN 9780374154776

Talented historians can shed new light on familiar stories, sometimes by bringing additional data into the narrative, and sometimes by enlarging the scope and context. In *The Field of Blood*, Joanne Freeman, the author of an earlier study on political violence, *Affairs of Honor*, does both. Historians, for example, have devoted numerous books and articles to Congressman Preston Brooks' brutal caning of Senator Charles Sumner. But it was a revelation, to this reviewer, at least, that the affair led to eight duels or challenges, as the mayhem on the Senate floor rippled across the capital, or that Congressman Laurence Keitt, who kept others from interfering during Brooks' assault, was himself targeted for political violence. As Republicans became determined to protect themselves, both on the streets of Washington and in their chambers, Pennsylvania Congressman Galusha Grow was among those who had grown weary of violence-prone slaveholders. After Grow issued an objection from the Democratic side of the chamber, a tipsy Keitt shouted that Grow should file his objection from his own side of the House. Grow responded that it was a free hall, prompting Keitt to grab the Pennsylvanian by the throat. Grow knocked Keitt's hand away and then punched him hard enough to knock him to the floor. Congressmen from both parties raced toward the melee, overturning desks and unsheathing weapons as they ran. Southerners had long been "under the delusion that Northern men would not fight," a triumphant Grow laughed (240). Now they knew better.

Most historians and lay readers are aware of the occasional duels that marred antebellum political life. But the scale of violence and the fact that in the last three decades before the Civil War, politicians routinely strapped on guns and knives before heading to Congress will come as a surprise. The ever-present threats of violence, Freeman argues, reflected the growing sectionalism across the nation and the breakdown of parliamentary rules of debate within the

capitol building. As the antislavery movement grew in the North, and as the second party system replaced the Era of Good Feelings, southerners responded with threats and physical intimidation within the halls of Congress. Forty percent of all recorded breaches of decorum between 1789 and South Carolina's secession occurred between 1831 and Lincoln's election.

Although southerners had long battled one another—planters in formal duels and working-class frontiersmen in knife fights and eye gougings—the shift into Congress itself was a conscious political tactic on the part of slaveholders. Early on, southerners knew their northern colleagues would refuse a challenge to duel, and so they could safely attempt to intimidate antislavery voices. Just as they demanded the Gag Rule on abolitionist petitions, southern politicians recognized that threats and bluster were simply another method to silence their opponents. When timid northern congressmen rose to speak, southerners routinely responded by stalking across the chamber, muttering threats and pulling back their jackets to reveal weapons. Virginia's Henry Wise, who turned bullying into an art form, rarely found himself bested, and when he was, it was usually by John Quincy Adams, a congressman too old to threaten and too acerbic to intimidate. Instead, Wise fell into the habit of objecting every time Adams rose to speech, attempting to shout him into silence. Adams returned the favor, leaping up so frequently in objection that a *Globe* reporter laughed that Adams was “jumping up and down like the key of a piano” (122).

As Keitt discovered to his misfortune, by the late 1850s a new brand of northern congressman arrived in the capital when Republicans began to push back against southern threats. Some, such as William Fessenden of Maine, charged that it was southerners who were the true “cowards,” as they only bullied men they knew would refuse to fight back on their terms, or who beat senators who were seated and pinned beneath a desk bolted to the floor. If Republicans declined to accept a challenge to duel, they were often prepared to protect themselves. After Charles Van Wyck of New York delivered a fiery antislavery speech, he received both death threats and challenges to meet on the field of honor. Van Wyck scoffed at those, but when he was attacked on the Capitol grounds by three knife-wielding assailants, the New Yorker drew his pistol and shot one in the chest.

Freeman's volume was a good many years in the making, and it is easy to see why. The official annals of deliberations in Congress, the *Register of Debates* and the *Globe*, sought to record speeches rather than deeds. As Freeman observes, too often its reporters described thrown

punches or threats of murder as “sudden sensations” or “unpleasant personal discussions” (290). Using those hints as a starting point, she then turned to the eleven-volume journals of longtime Congressional clerk Benjamin Brown French (partly published by editors Donald Cole and John McDonough in 1989’s *Witness to the Young Republic*), before finally digging into the archives in search of corroborating details. As a result, Freeman’s research, both archival and secondary, is stunning, appearing here in over one hundred small print pages. Two appendices explain her methodology and selection of party affiliations (itself no easy task, as some politicians shifted from Whig to Free Soil to Liberty Party to Republican).

Freeman’s prose is clear and accessible, never descending into the jargon so unfortunately common today in much of academic writing. The author also allows her colorful subjects to speak for themselves. Missouri’s Thomas Hart Benton, himself a duelist in his early days, proves especially quotable. When Henry Foote pulled a pistol on the senator, the barrel-chested Benton dramatically threw open his coat as he walked toward his assailant, bellowing: “I have no pistols! Let him fire! I disdain to carry arms! Stand out of the way, and let the assassin fire!” On occasion, Freeman’s style is a bit too informal for this reader, and modern terms such as “Keystone Cops” and “third rail” pull one out of a past she has so skillfully drawn. That minor caveat, however, hardly diminishes the numerous contributions of this superb volume, which should stand for years as one of the most important books on the antebellum era.

Douglas R. Egerton is Professor of History at Le Moyne College. His books include Thunder At the Gates: The Black Civil War Regiments That Redeemed America, which was the co-winner of the Gilder-Lehrman Lincoln Prize, and the forthcoming Heirs of an Honored Name The Decline of the Adams Family and the Rise of Modern America.