

Blind No More: African American Resistance, Free-Soil Politics, and the Coming of the Civil War

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Review

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Wells, Jonathan Daniel. *Blind No More: African American Resistance, Free-Soil Politics, and the Coming of the Civil War.* The University Press of Georgia, 2019. \$39.95. ISBN 9780820354859

Jonathan Daniel Wells' *Blind No More: African American Resistance, Free-Soil Politics, and the Coming of the Civil War* is based on the Eugenia Dorothy Blount Lamar Lectures that Wells delivered in October 2017 at Mercer University in Georgia. Wells declares that his goal in this volume is to resolve the ongoing "struggle" in the United States to appreciate the role African Americans played in the sectional conflict that preceded the Civil War. By positioning African Americans at the "center of Civil War causation," Wells believes he can achieve his goal and grant African Americans, slave and free, their rightful place in the American story.

Wells argues that African Americans played this central role in the coming of the Civil War by escaping to freedom and then resisting numerous attempts by southern slaveholders to kidnap them and return them to slavery. By these acts of what Wells correctly labels self-emancipation, African Americans intensified southern fears for the future of slavery and radicalized northerners who were made to feel complicit in an institution they had thought should only be a concern of the South.

Wells makes a valuable contribution simply by detailing many important incidents of southern kidnappings. There is no question that these events were, as he argues, crucial in awakening northerners to their own involvement in the institution of slavery. Wells is also right to remind us that northern violations of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 caused southerners to question the durability of the constitutional guarantees they believed the founders had given them. Additionally, northern mass resistance to these instances of southern kidnappings or attempted kidnappings certainly did exacerbate sectional tensions. It is indeed hard to imagine the Civil War without the dangerous and courageous work the slaves themselves did to bring about these changes in attitude—North and South.

However, as valuable as these insights are, Wells' other arguments are less convincing and are open to question. At one point, for example, Wells claims that from the perspective of African Americans northern limitations on black civil rights "blurred the line between slave and free states." (6) In making this argument, Wells is essentially adopting the proslavery, southern response to northern racism, which claimed that slavery was simply a matter of degree, existing only in different forms in the North and in the South. This view was decidedly rejected by the slave population, which demonstrated its view of the significance of sectional differences by fleeing the South for the North by the tens of thousands.

What is also difficult to accept is Wells' insistence that northerners who supported the Compromise of 1850 were governed by a "Unionist hegemony" that required support for the constitutional compact that defended slavery. Those who fought against the fugitive law were somehow motivated by opposition to a Union, which they saw as "fatally flawed," and to a Constitution that they viewed as a "deeply flawed" proslavery document. (6, 89) He contends that northerners who fought for fugitive slaves were "defying" the "hegemony of Unionism." Wells, who regards the Union as "Frankensteinian" for attempting to bring slavery and freedom together in one nation, even argues that anger over the Fugitive Slave Law "fueled a resentment among white northerners regarding the feasibility and desirability of preserving the Union." (133, 91)

Wells maintains that the Constitution was proslavery and argues that this was the view of northern antislavery activists, but nothing could be further from the truth. William Lloyd Garrison and a limited number of other abolitionists did maintain that position, but that was not at all the view of the vast majority of northern opponents of slavery, and especially not of the Free Soilers and their political abolitionist allies. As Eric Foner argued long ago and as Sean Wilentz has made clear more recently, antislavery northerners were convinced that the Constitution was antislavery at its core. The Constitution's designation of slavery as a local institution, they believed, marked it as a profoundly antislavery document. Such prominent northern antislavery leaders as Salmon Chase and William Seward emphatically believed that the Constitution's treatment of slavery as local condemned it forever to exclusion from the national domain.

Rather than being anti-Union, these leaders and their followers believed that the Union, the Constitution, and the concepts of majority rule and freedom national upon which they were

based, were the instruments that could be used to end slavery. It is troubling to see Wells refer to those who supported the Compromise and the Fugitive Slave Law as “Unionists” when the overwhelming majority of those who opposed the capture of runaways and led the fight against the Compromise were just as solidly committed to the Union. So strongly dedicated were northerners to the Union that they simply could not believe any American—North or South—would leave it. When secession finally came the same northerners who had opposed the Fugitive Slave Law and had mobilized to block its implementation, reacted initially with disbelief and then maintained that a simple policy of “masterly inactivity” would bring the South back to its senses and to its underlying love for a perpetual Union that northerners believed all Americans shared.

Still, despite these weaknesses, Wells’ fundamental insight remains of great value. He conclusively demonstrates that by challenging slavery and by emancipating themselves, African Americans forced northerners to confront the meaning of freedom and the role they played in denying it to others. Eventually, northerners would decide that it was time to set slavery on the road to ultimate extinction.

Stephen E. Maizlish is an associate professor at the University of Texas at Arlington. His most recent book is *Strife of Tongues: The Compromise of 1850 and the Ideological Foundations of the American Civil War*. He is currently working on a book entitled, *Slavery Expansion: The History of an Idea*.