

most northerners had achieved through their realignments of the 1850s. Whether this theory has wider applicability will only be determined by intensive investigations of political developments during the 1850s in other southern states. Evitts has provided a fine model for such studies.

The Problem of Civil War Causation

Long before David Potter died in 1971, historians had impatiently awaited his volume on the coming of the Civil War for the New American Nation Series. Widely admired for the sagacity of his judgments, the clarity of his mind, and his awesome ability to dissect and simplify complex problems, Potter was without peer in the historical profession as a pure logician. He had devoted more than a decade of reading and reflection to the preparation of this study. Now, five years after his death, edited and ably completed by his colleague at Stanford University, Don E. Fehrenbacher, the product of that effort has finally appeared, and we can all be grateful. *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861*, is the fairest and most intelligent history of the antebellum period yet to appear in print. Because it both synthesizes and comments upon a vast body of scholarship and because it is literally crammed with penetrating insights and perceptive judgments about a host of events and controversies, it should be the first place that one looks henceforth for an assessment of those troubled years.

At the outset, Potter shrewdly evaluates the lengthy historiographical debate over the nature of the sectional conflict and clearly stakes out where he stands. Though that debate has gone in cycles, essentially there have been two sides. Fundamentalists argued that basic and irresolvable

This essay originally appeared as a long review of David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861*, completed and edited by Don E. Fehrenbacher (New York, 1976). Page references to this book will appear in the text.

ideological, economic, and cultural differences between North and South produced the conflict that led to war. Though they have disagreed among themselves, most have insisted that slavery was the crucial issue. Opposing revisionist historians insist that neither the slavery issue nor economic and cultural differences were sufficiently serious to cause war. Instead, they blame the mistakes of political leaders and the agitation of sectional extremists for blowing inherently manageable problems out of proportion. Recently, neofundamentalists like Eugene Genovese and Eric Foner have reasserted the importance of slavery in generating antithetical cultures, economies, and ideologies in the North and South. Unlike earlier fundamentalists like James Ford Rhodes and Dwight L. Dumond, however, they have not attributed the war to disagreement over slavery's morality or immediate pressures for its abolition.¹ Rather, they have argued that because each section viewed the extension of the other's civilization to the West as a threat to its own, the sections went to war over the question of slavery extension.

Since the publication of his *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis* in 1942, David Potter has normally been consigned to the revisionist side of this debate, but here he emphatically embraces fundamentalism, and the older version at that. He flatly rejects the notion that slavery was not basic to all other sectional differences. Echoing Rhodes and Dumond, moreover, he insists that a profound disagreement over the morality of slavery was the core of the sectional conflict. "A conflict of values, rather than a conflict of interests or a conflict of cultures, lay at the root of the sectional schism" (46). Potter admits that the main political goal of the North was prevention of slavery expansion, not abolition, and that many northerners were racists. Still, he explicitly rejects the arguments recently advanced by historians like Eugene Berwanger, James A. Rawley, Chaplain Morrison, and others that these facts indicated that overt dedication to white supremacy in the West and antipathy toward white slaveholders, not sympathy for black slaves, impelled northerners. Instead, he endorses the old argument of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., that

1. Eugene Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery* (New York, 1965); Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York, 1970); James Ford Rhodes, *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850* (7 vols.; New York, 1892-1906); Dwight L. Dumond, *The Antislavery Origins of the Civil War* (Ann Arbor, 1938).

because northerners venerated the Constitution, they felt powerless to attack slavery within southern states no matter how much they despised it.² The emergence of the territorial issue in 1846, however, unleashed their genuine "moral indignation" from its constitutional restraints.

Although Potter resurrects the earliest fundamentalist belief about the crux of the sectional conflict, he wisely rejects the corollary assumption of historians like Rhodes that such a value conflict made war inevitable. Moral differences over slavery had long existed, he correctly recognizes, and their presence alone did not produce war. The central question concerning the coming of the Civil War is not what caused sectional conflict but why that conflict became so disruptive in the 1850s when it had not been earlier. The key to the war's coming, he insists, was the process by which sectional conflict became politicized. Only when it did so could it rend the nation. Thus *The Impending Crisis* is primarily an analysis of political developments from the outbreak of the Mexican War to the firing on Fort Sumter, and his most important contributions come as insights into particular events along the way.

For one thing, Potter provides perhaps the best account of the last years of the Polk administration we will have until the third volume of Charles Sellers' biography of Polk is published. His handling of the stalemate over the disposition of slavery in western territories during the late 1840s is especially adept. Here he makes the brilliant point that extension of the Missouri Compromise line to the coast was potentially a better compromise solution than popular sovereignty until the separate organization of Oregon in 1848 destroyed its utility. By reducing the area north of 36°30', the Oregon bill rendered extension of the line too advantageous to the South to be acceptable any longer in the North. Thus the Democrats resorted to the dangerously ambiguous popular sovereignty formula as a middle ground between the Wilmot Proviso and the Calhounite position of unlimited expansion.

2. David M. Potter, *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis* (New Haven, 1942); Eugene H. Berwanger, *The Frontier Against Slavery: Western Anti-Negro Prejudice and the Slavery Expansion Controversy* (Urbana, Ill., 1967); Chaplain W. Morrison, *Democratic Politics and Sectionalism: The Wilmot Proviso Controversy* (Chapel Hill, 1967); James A. Rawley, *Race & Politics: "Bleeding Kansas" and the Coming of the Civil War* (Philadelphia, 1969); Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "The Causes of the Civil War: A Note on Historical Sentimentalism," *Partisan Review*, XVI (1949), 969-81.

Potter follows Holman Hamilton in arguing that Democratic votes and leadership were more important than Whig oratory in securing the passage of the Compromise of 1850. Yet, anticipating the arguments of recent historians like Robert F. Dalzell, Jr., he insists that there really was no compromise between the opposing sections; the measures of that year constituted an armistice at best. Potter breaks sharply with the revisionist orthodoxy as to what the compromise actually said concerning slavery in Utah and New Mexico Territories, however. Disagreeing with Robert Russell and Hamilton, he argues that the laws did not explicitly give territorial legislatures the authority to rule on slavery during the territorial stage. Here I think Potter would have benefited from Robert Johannsen's biography of Stephen A. Douglas, which appeared after his death. Douglas was the chief manager of the legislation in the final stages, and Johannsen presents impressive evidence that explicit popular sovereignty was indeed incorporated in the territorial laws.³

Johannsen's biography also probably would have forced a reworking of Potter's chapter on the Kansas-Nebraska Act, surely the most curious in the book. Ignoring the political pressures that contributed to the framing of the law and that are stressed by both Johannsen and Roy F. Nichols, Potter once again returns to a much older interpretation.⁴ Douglas' chief goal, he asserts, was building a Pacific railroad on a central route, and he agreed to the overthrow of the Missouri Compromise ban on slavery in Nebraska as part of a logrolling operation to win southern votes for the railroad scheme he favored. Where Potter does accept Nichols is in his insistence that once Douglas introduced the bill, he lost control of events and was forced beyond his initial concessions by southern pressure. Johannsen argues compellingly, however, that Douglas from the first intended to apply popular sovereignty in the territorial stage to the Nebraska bill; he wasn't forced to. He makes clear as well that while Douglas was genuinely interested in western development, he was equally interested in using that program, not to forward his presidential candidacy in 1856, as

3. Holman Hamilton, *Prologue to Conflict: The Crisis and Compromise of 1850* (Lexington, Ky., 1964); Robert F. Dalzell, Jr., *Daniel Webster and the Trial of American Nationalism, 1843-1852* (Boston, 1973); Robert Russell, "What Was the Compromise of 1850?" *Journal of Southern History*, XXII (1956), 292-309; Robert W. Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas* (New York, 1973).

4. Roy F. Nichols, "The Kansas-Nebraska Act: A Century of Historiography," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, XLIII (1956), 187-212.

some historians charge, but as a way to reunite the disintegrating Democratic party in 1854. The political purposes of the bill were just as important to Douglas as the program itself.

If Potter's account of the framing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act is questionable, his succinct analysis of events in "Bleeding Kansas" is the finest brief treatment I have ever read. Agreeing with revisionists that conflicting attitudes toward slavery did not produce the strife among settlers in the territory, he brilliantly shows how the politicization of the slavery issue was crucial "in structuring and intensifying the friction." Sectional conflict outside of Kansas worked "to polarize and organize all the diffused and random antagonisms, which might otherwise have remained merely individual and local" (203-204).

Similarly, Potter's chapter on the political realignment of the 1850s is generally first-rate. Here again he focuses on exactly the right question—why the northern Whig party disappeared after 1854 rather than benefiting from the renewed antislavery sentiment sparked by the Nebraska Act. As Potter notes, other historians have insufficiently appreciated the critical difference between the sectional rupture in the national Whig party caused by slavery and the disintegration of state Whig parties in the North after 1852 even when they tried to exploit the slavery issue against the Democrats. Logically, antislavery sentiment alone cannot account for the death of the Whigs. Utilizing recent scholarship, Potter argues that the surge of anti-Catholic, nativist, and prohibitionist sentiment reflected in the phenomenal rise of the Know Nothing movement in the mid-1850s is what really gutted the Whig party in the North and later contributed significantly to the triumph of the Republicans. Potter calls the Republicans' merger with the nativists in 1856 the most critical event in the history of the party. More than the sudden salience of ethnocultural issues produced the Whig collapse, but Potter's sophisticated account marks a great advance over simplistic theories that the slavery issue alone destroyed the Whig party and shaped the realignment from which the Republican party emerged.

Potter's chapters on the Dred Scott decision, the Lincoln-Douglas debates, and John Brown's raid are also gems, but because Potter was one of the foremost students of the elusive problem of southern identity, his judgments about the impulse behind secession especially merit attention. He argues cogently that secession did not result from a preexisting south-

ern nationalism based on cultural affinities and common values—in short, on a distinct southern identity. “The Civil War did far more to produce a southern nationalism which flourished in the cult of the Lost Cause than southern nationalism did to produce the war” (469). Fear of the North, not some positive affirmation of culture, produced secession. Potter, however, rejects the notion advanced by Genovese and iterated since Potter’s death by William L. Barney that what the South feared was that the Republicans would successfully prevent slavery’s extension, which southerners by 1860 regarded as a social, economic, political, and racial necessity. Instead, Potter argues in the vein of Stephen Channing that the South seceded because it was terrified that Republican propaganda and Republican toleration of the circulation of abolitionist literature in the South would provoke slave insurrection.⁵ By 1860, southerners were not united culturally, but they “were united by a sense of terrible danger. They were united, also, in a determination to defend slavery, to resist abolitionism, and to force the Yankees to recognize not only their rights but also their status as perfectly decent, respectable human beings” (478).

It would be an injustice to end this summary without including the final two chapters on the secession crisis written by Professor Fehrenbacher. They sustain the same high literary and interpretative quality that graces the rest of the book. Particularly noteworthy is Fehrenbacher’s stunning insight that secession, the Deep South’s refusal to tolerate Lincoln’s election, abruptly transformed the entire sectional issue and ensured that the North would be much more united in resisting the South than it ever had been before. “Here is the key to understanding why many Republicans seemed to become more intractable as the danger of disunion became more palpable. . . . The main problem at hand was no longer the expansion of slavery, but the survival of the United States, and the most pressing moral issue was not now slavery, but majority rule” (527). What motivated northerners during the ultimate crisis, in short, was not moral antipathy to slavery but determination to preserve the principles and existence of republican government itself.

These and many other thoughtful insights evoke profound admiration from a reader, yet upon concluding the book one still has a vague

sense of disappointment and incompleteness. The sum of its parts seems stronger than the whole. In part, this uneasiness stems from Potter’s failure to answer conclusively the questions he does ask. With all its extraordinary wisdom and learning, the book tells more about *how* the Civil War came than about *why* it came. It raises disturbing doubts whether any such broad-scale synthesis can ever satisfactorily unravel the greatest puzzle in American history—exactly what caused the Civil War? In part, however, disappointment arises because the book is almost defiantly old-fashioned. It is largely shaped and restricted by questions historians have been debating for almost a hundred years. One wishes Potter had gone beyond the traditional issues, broken new ground, and charted new approaches to the antebellum period. Only with fresh perspectives can we gain new insight into what caused the war in April, 1861.

Potter’s traditionalism is perhaps best exemplified in his treatment of antebellum politics. In recent years, several political historians have argued that grass-roots voters were normally unconcerned with the great national issues that have dominated previous interpretations of politics. These studies of the 1850s and other periods vary in quality, but their central message is that one cannot possibly get an accurate picture of political development by focusing only on national politics—congressional debates, presidential elections, and so forth. Potter exploited these studies in his account of the realignment of the 1850s, but he is distressingly ambiguous on the crucial question of how much people really cared about national, slavery-related events. The series editors properly say that Potter recognized that slavery did not monopolize the politics of the period (xiv), and Potter himself argues that most people did not “have any fixation on the issue of slavery” (145). Yet elsewhere he seems to take precisely the opposite position. After 1846, he argues, “the slavery question would grow to dominate national politics, and Congress would become for fifteen years the arena of a continuous battle watched by millions of aroused sectional partisans. No other issue in American history has so monopolized the political scene” (49). Throughout the book, he stresses that “public attention was focused intently on events in Congress” (73, 320). Neither Potter nor any other historian has proved that millions of Americans were “aroused sectional partisans,” but in that belief he devotes the book almost exclusively to national-level politics. Although he correctly notes that “state government rather than federal government symbolized

5. William L. Barney, *The Secessionist Impulse: Alabama and Mississippi in 1860* (Princeton, 1974); Stephen Channing, *A Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina* (New York, 1970).

public authority for most citizens" in the nineteenth century (52), he ignores the state level of politics except to deal with local responses to the national slavery issue. But the slavery issue was not the major concern of state governments, and state-level political developments exclusive of slavery did as much to shape the political transformation that led to war as did the national events on which Potter focuses. Finally, Potter reflects the rather dismal state of political historiography when he does examine the voting realignment and political reorganization of the decade. Like most other historians, he deals almost exclusively with the North; we learn very little about what happened in southern politics between 1852 and 1860. One can argue, however, that the differing political experiences of southern states in those years helped determine which slave states seceded and which did not in response to Lincoln's election. It is difficult to fault Potter for this lapse, for with the exception of an excellent study of Maryland, which appeared after his death, we simply have no modern studies of southern politics in the 1850s. One might say, indeed, that it is unfair to fault Potter at all for his treatment of politics, for the real focus of the book is the escalation of sectional conflict between 1848 and 1861.

Yet it is fair to examine how cogently he answers the crucial question he raises at the beginning of the book—why the long-standing sectional conflict over slavery became so disruptive in the 1850s. Potter never provides an explicit answer to this question. One must infer what he thinks from the book as a whole. He does make clear from the beginning that the North and South were profoundly divided over slavery. Northerners condemned it as immoral, and southerners feared any antislavery agitation that might produce abolition or provoke slave revolt. What Potter seems to argue is that events between 1846 and 1861 intensified those basic emotions in both sections until they engendered the triumph of the antislavery Republican party in 1860 and southern secession in response to it. The problem is that he is again ambiguous or inconsistent about exactly what emotions were intensified. Put another way, it is unclear how the slavery issue was politicized, why it had the resonance with the northern electorate he claims it had. At places, he reasserts that moral antagonism was heightened by events, yet elsewhere he admits that northern propaganda about the Nebraska Act, Bleeding Kansas, and the Dred Scott decision focused on the iniquity of slaveholders, not slavery, and shrilly warned of the Slave Power's plot to subvert republican values of liberty,

equality, and self-rule. Even Lincoln depended upon such rhetoric in his debates with Douglas. Such accusations, he correctly states, had much more impact in the North than denunciations of slavery itself would have had (163–64). The distinction is absolutely critical, for Republican propaganda did not appeal to the moral concern for the Negro slave Potter says was the fundamental emotion. I think, in fact, that Potter is more accurate about the nature of Republican rhetoric than about the northern mind, but even then it is unclear exactly what the North was bothered about.

There are two alternative interpretations of northern sentiment, as inferred from Republican rhetoric, that seem more persuasive than Potter's contention that northerners "accepted [the] doctrine that slavery was morally intolerable" and sincerely "opposed the oppression of a racial minority" (143, 251). Most simply, one can argue that the evidence supports the hypothesis Potter rejects. The basic northern sentiment may have been anti-southernism, opposition to white slaveholders, not sympathy for black slaves. Sheer hatred of the arrogance and aggressiveness of the Slave Power mobilized northerners.

It is possible, however, to extend Professor Fehrenbacher's brilliant observation about the secession crisis to the entire period covered in the book to arrive at a more complete understanding of the northern mind that incorporates its undoubted hostility to the Slave Power. From the northern point of view, what may have been at stake in the entire sectional conflict was not the moral wrong of Negro slavery but the continued viability of republican government itself, a much more basic issue. Since the Revolution, Americans in both sections had been obsessed with the fragility of republics, with the danger power in any form posed to liberty, and with the susceptibility of republican self-government to usurping conspiracies and plots. Thus the numerous accusations about tyranny-threatening plots and conspiracies that pervaded northern and southern rhetoric in the 1850s may have represented, not as Potter asserts, "the psychological tendency to interpret the behavior of the opposition in conspiratorial terms" (287), but the real and basic fears of Americans in both sections that powerful groups in the other section meant to subvert true republican government, to strip them of liberty and equality, and to make them figuratively slaves to the other's domination. As Bernard Bailyn has pointed out, the word *slavery* had a definite political meaning in the eigh-

teenth century that had little to do with the institution of Negro slavery.⁶ It implied subjugation to another's power; it meant the absence of liberty; it was the antithesis of republicanism. The rhetoric of the 1850s suggests the possibility that the politicization of the slavery issue in this abstract sense best explains why the sectional conflict became more disruptive in the 1850s than it ever had been before. The basic issue, in sum, may have been the fear of white slavery, not the reality of Negro slavery.

If so, the task for historians is to look beyond the escalating sectional conflict itself to discover why fears for the security of the republic were more widespread and intense in the 1850s than at any time since the 1790s. To do that is precisely why one must look below the national level of politics when examining the antebellum period. What may have brought the sectional conflict to a point of crisis in 1861, in other words, was not simply the series of events that aggravated it but the development of a popular mood that made northerners and southerners much more responsive to sectional propaganda about threats to republicanism than they had previously been.

6. Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967).

Abraham Lincoln and the Politics of Union

One of the most stimulating analyses of Civil War politics ever written is a brilliant essay by Eric McKittrick called "Party Politics and the Union and Confederate War Efforts."¹ In it, McKittrick argues that the North had a decisive advantage over the South because it continued to have two-party rivalry during the war whereas the Confederacy did not. The presence of the Democratic party forced Republicans of all kinds to rally behind the policies of the Republican government to win elections. As a result, the North remained more united during the long ordeal than the division-plagued Confederacy.

According to McKittrick, party politics also made Abraham Lincoln a more effective presidential leader than his Confederate counterpart, Jefferson Davis. The organization and partisan needs of the Republican party provided Lincoln with guidelines, first to select and then to reshuffle his cabinet, with ways to ensure the loyalty of his vice presidents, with incentives to gain the cooperation of state governors, and with sanctions to punish political opponents both inside and outside his own party. In contrast, the hapless Davis lacked party lines to separate friends from foes and to generate institutional loyalty to his administration. Hence he could not control his cabinet, Vice President Alexander Stephens, obstreperous governors like Joe Brown of Georgia and Zeb Vance of North Carolina,

1. Eric McKittrick, "Party Politics and the Union and Confederate War Efforts," in *The American Party Systems: Stages of Political Development*, ed. William N. Chambers and Walter Dean Burnham (New York, 1967), 117-51.

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For Adam, Erin, and Annie