The Field of Blood: Violence in Congress and the Road to Civil War by Joanne B. Freeman (review)

Gunja SenGupta

Journal of Southern History, Volume 86, Number 1, February 2020, pp. 156-158 (Review)

Published by The Southern Historical Association
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/soh.2020.0024*

African Americans' right to vote in several states and the antislavery position of many of the Framers.

Supreme Injustice accomplishes its primary goal by exposing how each justice furthered the interests of slavery. It also introduces readers to freed persons, slaveholders, governors, kidnappers, and abolitionists to exemplify the human cost of Supreme Court rulings. General readers, college students, and professional historians will gain a deeper understanding of the Court and the crisis over slavery. Yet the book is not without shortcomings. Finkelman never fully explains how the justices, especially the slave owners, could have drawn antislavery conclusions from a proslavery Constitution. Additionally, conclusions about Story's views of Virginians and his transformation from an antislavery to a proslavery position are less than satisfying. In the chapter dedicated to Story, Finkelman determines that Story's nationalism and fears over disunion instigated the justice's proslavery rulings after the Nullification Crisis of 1832–1833. However, in the book's coda, Finkelman questions the validity of a similar interpretation offered by a leading biographer of Story. These flaws do not diminish the book's contributions. *Supreme Injustice* is readable, well-documented, and amply researched scholarship that offers a fresh look at the nineteenth-century Supreme Court, with an impressive chronology of cases, annotations, and references that will encourage further research.

East Tennessee State University DINAH MAYO

The Field of Blood: Violence in Congress and the Road to Civil War. By Joanne B. Freeman. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018. Pp. xviii, 450. $28.00, ISBN 978-0-374-15477-6.)

Joanne B. Freeman's richly contextualized portrait of violence in Congress in the decades leading up to the Civil War is a book for the times in which we live. Polarized politics; clashing cultural values; a Congress defined as much by human failings as by lofty idealism; the workings of emotion; the complicated relationships among politicians, the press, and popular opinion; new technologies for spreading information; and the debates over free speech that helped launch a crisis of union in the nineteenth century—all resonate powerfully in the public sphere that present-day Americans inhabit. Weaving together these threads of public discourse and technological development into a deadly brew in the antebellum United States was violence: slights and slurs, brawls and riots, mobbing, caning, dueling, and killing. Violent encounters extended from the murderous landscapes of Indian removal and the lynch mobs that targeted abolitionists, black people, and immigrants, through bowie-knife-happy statehouses, all the way to Congress.

As the author notes at the outset, her subject poses a methodological quandary. The Washington, D.C., press, beholden to the government for printing contracts, was inclined to suppress news that cast lawmakers in a negative light. At the same time, newspapers outside the nation's capital tended sometimes to sensationalize and bend the truth. How then to unveil the hidden true histories of violence in Congress? Freeman skillfully deploys the art of historical detection to expose the full scale of the unsavory underbelly of

governance during an age of mounting sectionalism. Scattered references to conflicts with colleagues in congressmen's letters and diaries offer personal, intimate, and emotional glimpses of incidents that Freeman fleshes out and corroborates by cross-referencing the *Congressional Globe* and a range of newspapers representing different times, places, interests, and politics. Most of all, she relies on the testimony of a reliable eyewitness to the episodes that she describes: Benjamin Brown French, who was elected House Clerk in 1845 and kept a prolific diary, totaling eleven volumes and over 3,700 pages, from 1828 to 1870.

Freeman's choice of French as informant is astute. The political evolution of this "congressional insider" who was nevertheless "not too far inside," from a New Hampshire Jacksonian Democrat to a Republican indignant about southern violation of the North's constitutional freedoms, made him a bellwether for the growing alienation of the sections in the 1850s (p. 7). Significantly, this House Clerk's Jacksonian perspectives did not translate into the sort of radical politics of producers' rights and free soil of which the historian Jonathan H. Earle has written. In the beginning, far from proceeding from the traditional Democratic suspicion of a grasping "Money Power" to avowed opposition to an imperial "Slave Power" bent on colonizing the West, French denounced abolitionism as a threat to the stability of the Union. Freeman carefully tracks the trajectory of French's observations and emotions set forth in his diaries through successive confrontations—from the Gag Rule debate through the Compromise of 1850 to the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act—to illustrate how concern for southern abuses of northern rights turned him gradually into a moderate Republican.

Early chapters establish the physical setting—from the inchoate city of Washington to the tobacco-stained floors of the Capitol—where the action unfolded. Freeman offers a graphic portrayal on a granular level of the sights, the sounds, the smells, the emotions, and the length and cadences of the speeches that filled the halls of Congress. Readers meet a cavalcade of men who passed through its revolving doors, the first generation to be memorialized in photographs. And readers learn that congressmen resorted to violence not only because it vindicated their manhood, but also because it paid political dividends with the constituents in their districts.

In this context, one of Freeman's most original insights consists in her argument that sectional differences defined fighting styles in the nation's capital. Southern customs sanctioned a highly performative approach to violent confrontation in defense of the section and its so-called peculiar institution. Northern men eschewed gunplay in favor of resorting to the rules of Congress. The Gag Rule debate, however, shifted constituents' expectations of these forms of retaliation. It highlighted the disproportionate influence of slaveholders' power in Washington and their wholesale assault on northerners' "fundamental rights of petition, representation, and free speech" (p. 137). Northern voters demanded that their representatives in Congress fight back with fiery speech rather than "fists and weapons" (p. 137). The debate over slavery thus fused free speech and violence. Culminating in outrages like the caning of Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner by South Carolina representative Preston Brooks, it precipitated a "crisis of communication" because northerners were fighting the Slave Power with "dangerous words," and proslavery southerners were trying to suppress those words with violence (p. 232).

In the 1850s, independent presses freed from the shackles of congressional sanction amplified the sectional animosities playing out on Capitol Hill. The press sharpened congressmen's accountability to their electorates back home, who expected their representatives to uphold sectional rights. Revolutions in communications—rotary printing presses, railroads, and the telegraph—quickly relayed controversies in Washington to far corners of the nation, while New York City–based newspapers sought to make money through sensational reporting. Goings-on in Congress thus pumped into the public sphere the raw emotion that made compromise impossible. But, as Freeman hastens to point out, such emotion was animated by valid grievances and gross injustices, rather than the overreactions of a so-called blundering generation.

Combining prodigious research with a wonderful eye for detail and a feel for sensory perception, Freeman has produced a work that offers an immediate and palpable sense of the coming of the Civil War.

Brooklyn College, City University of New York GUNJA SENGUPTA

Lady First: The World of First Lady Sarah Polk. By Amy S. Greenberg. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2019. Pp. xxiv, 369. $30.00, ISBN 978-0-385-35413-4.)

In this engaging biography, Amy S. Greenberg brings to life "the first politically effective partisan First Lady" (p. xiii). Framing the study are two 1848 events: the U.S.-Mexican War and the Seneca Falls Convention. As Greenberg's careful research reveals, Sarah Childress Polk championed the former but had no use for the latter, despite the many ways she herself deployed power.

In her youth, Sarah Childress was interested in learning, books, and politics. She knew Andrew Jackson and other powerful Democrats, including up-and-coming politician James K. Polk. After their 1824 marriage, she relished parlor politics and assisted in her husband's political rise, which saw James Polk elected first as a U.S. congressman and then as governor of Tennessee. In her capacity as what Greenberg terms "communications director," Sarah Polk wielded power but always under the guise of deference (p. 65). As First Lady, she presented herself as a model of thrifty Jacksonian anti-elite values and of Christian womanhood; aware of the value of appearance, she refused to dance at the inaugural ball. Americans wrote to her with requests for favors, implicitly acknowledging the power she held. And she was powerful: she once banished Martin Van Buren's son from White House social events.

After James K. Polk's premature death, the young widow lived long after the Civil War, which the debate over the fate of slavery during the U.S.-Mexican War had foreshadowed. During the Civil War, Sarah Polk continued to use her position as a lady—and a former First Lady at that—to claim neutrality and special favors from Abraham Lincoln. She met with Union officers who were eager to hold on to her allegiance—while she concealed Confederate property on the "neutral ground" of Polk Place, her Tennessee plantation (p. 217). After the war, she continued to wield power, working to uphold her husband's reputation and being courted by Frances Willard for support of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union.

Sarah Polk, Greenberg asserts, was "a true believer in Manifest Destiny" (p. 141). She was also a firm supporter of slavery. Though apparently averse to separating