

Congress and the Crisis of the 1850s

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Review

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Finkelman, Paul (ed.) and Kennon, Donald R.. *Congress and the Crisis of the 1850s*. Ohio University Press, \$49.94 ISBN 978-0-8214-1977-9

Navigating Troubled Waters

Pundits and journalists are often quick to despair of America's legislative branch when they perceive that partisanship or deep-seated ideological differences stymie congressional efficiency. Such alarmist assertions rest on the assumption that a golden age once existed in which Congress did not suffer from partisanship, intransigent opposition, and divisive issues. Historians know better. *Congress and the Crisis of the 1850s*, edited by Paul Finkelman and Donald R. Kennon, reveals that the 1850s congresses are only the leading examples of the partisanship, stalemate, and perhaps even dysfunction that have been historical constants for the United States Congress. Yet, while underscoring these important continuities, this collection of essays also emphasizes that the haplessness of Congress in the 1850s derived primarily from slavery, a uniquely insoluble issue that exacerbated Congress's difficulties and ultimately led to war.

This volume revisits the familiar events of this busy decade, beginning with the Compromise of 1850 and moving forward through the disasters of the Buchanan administration. The work draws together scholarship from different fields, and the interdisciplinary approach provides a variety of ways for thinking about the role of Congress. Individual congressmen receive attention, as does public policy formulation, rhetoric, and partisan maneuvering. The contributors also place Congress in its larger context, whether of economics, foreign policy, or political culture. African Americans, for example, are present in Spencer R. Crew's essay as political actors who engaged Congress. Crew explores their efforts to frustrate one of the era's signature pieces of legislation—the Fugitive Slave Act. African Americans radicalized white abolitionists and legitimized resistance, even violent, to this singularly obnoxious law. The variety of scholarly approaches proves that there are still new ways of appreciating the part

of Congress in the sectional crisis.

Several of the essays wrestle with the Compromise of 1850 and its aftermath, and the treatment of this episode sets the tone of the work. Finkelman discards the notion of compromise, labeling it the “Appeasement of 1850.” According to his reappraisal, the slave states derived all the benefits from what was a fundamentally proslavery legislative package. Michael F. Holt, in contrast, presents a nuanced view of the complex congressional negotiations behind the Compromise. His detailed analysis suggests just how difficult it is to cast the legislative process in sectional terms, as “each party split along sectional lines, yet each section’s congressional delegation split along party lines” (23). The byzantine quarreling among factions over patronage and the hardly straightforward interplay between state party politics and federal policy belie any simple notion of the Compromise as a confrontation between proslavery and antislavery politicians. Matthew Glassman similarly discusses the often acrimonious admission of new states as a complex process that entailed more than an effort to balance the number of free and slave states, further questioning the zero-sum game which Finkelman’s use of the term “appeasement” implies.

Most of the essays follow Finkelman’s lead in prioritizing disputes over slavery, especially fugitive slaves and territorial slavery, as the driving force behind the conflicts of the period, and, for this reason, Holt’s findings are an outlier in this collection. Holt presents a settlement more akin to an actual compromise in which diverse interests came together and pushed through an elaborate package that could placate Whig and Democrat, North and South. Finkelman rejects this idea and even goes beyond David M. Potter’s classic characterization of the Compromise as the “Armistice of 1850” in *The Impending Crisis*. An armistice is not a compromise, as neither side really cedes anything, but Finkelman sees one side giving up almost everything to the slave states. Moving from armistice to appeasement might be too simple and seems to buy into the rhetoric of the Slave Power conspiracy theorists of antebellum politics. The historiographical point, however, is clear: contrary to the “claim that there were many issues troubling Congress, there was, with one minor exception, just a single issue: slavery” (38).

Reappraising such exhaustively chronicled turning points—the Compromise, debates over the territorial expansion of slavery, the *Dred Scott* decision, the partisan realignment, and the caning of Charles Sumner—places a heavy burden of originality, whether in terms of analysis or sources, on

historians of the 1850s. Most of the essays clearly meet this challenge. Holt's contribution exemplifies his usual rigorous standards of argumentation and research. Martin J. Hershock presents a compelling portrait of a little-known congressman, Kinsley S. Bingham, and recounts how his antislavery scruples led him from the Democratic to the new Republican party in 1854. This pithy essay, one of the best in the volume, does more to convey the true meaning of the 1850s partisan realignment and the politics of sectionalism, by asking what the realignment meant for one man, than any rehashing of a more familiar event could. Amy S. Greenberg, by attending to the gendered rhetoric of congressional debates over filibustering and territorial aggrandizement, reminds historians that what congressmen said actually matters. Her detailed examination of congressional speeches proves that even seemingly "traditional" political history and its stalwart sources such as the *Congressional Globe* can yield riches, especially when open to new approaches.

Jenny Wahl offers a provocative thesis that the Panic of 1857 stemmed from the bursting of a speculative bubble in western lands and railroads when free-soil northerners no longer wanted to go west after *Dred Scott* opened federal territories to slavery. While she marshals impressive economic data to demonstrate how the distinctively sectional dimensions of the financial crisis emboldened the South, she provides no evidence that northerners consciously made the calculation to forego western development due to slavery's potential spread. Brooks D. Simpson's account of "Bleeding Sumner" is an approachable overview of an episode that has been hit upon by historians almost as much as the senator himself. While his well-written retelling does not interpret the significance of the affair in a new way, it does allow the drama of the event to speak for itself.

This volume, overall, does not offer fundamentally new ways to think about Congress in the last antebellum decade. Rather, it exemplifies leading historiographical trends and uses Congress as an arena for reiterating a crucial point that, although widely accepted, is still worth repeating—that slavery was central to the politics of the 1850s and the coming of the Civil War. Some essays, in their creative approach, bring new aspects of sectional politics to light and testify to the complicated and overlooked ways in which sectionalism and contention over slavery manifested themselves. This collection illustrates that slavery defied legislative reckoning, whether from a dearth of congressional leadership, the intractability of the issue itself, or, as is most likely, a combination of the two.

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