

### Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865

Scott Nesbit

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Nesbit, Scott (2013) "Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.15.1.29

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol15/iss1/28>

## Review

Nesbit, Scott

Winter 2013

**Oakes, James** *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865*. W. W. Norton & Company, \$29.95 ISBN 978-0-393-06531-2

### Traversing the Intersection of Slavery and Constitutional Law

James Oakes' *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865* will leave a lasting imprint on studies of the end of slavery in the United States. Its clear argumentation and straightforward narrative style allows the book to bear its five hundred pages lightly. Oakes, a professor of history at the City University of New York Graduate Center and an author best known for his history of slaveholders, *The Ruling Race* (1982) and his prize-winning *The Radical and the Republican* (2008), gives us the clearest narrative history yet written about the policies ending slavery in the United States.

This narrative locates the origins of emancipation in the core of Republican policy, set in stone by 1860. Republicans, building on antislavery thought and activism from the 1830s on, were firmly committed to making freedom national, implementing policies that assumed liberty to be a natural right enshrined by the U.S. constitution. Republicans believed that by withdrawing all federal support for slavery—repealing the Fugitive Slave act of 1850, abolishing slavery in the territories, on the high seas, and in the District of Columbia, forbidding it in U.S. military installations, and even regulating the interstate slave trade—they could erode the value of slaves in the U.S. and push southern states toward abolition. If, Oakes argues, insurrections broke out in the South during this process of tightening federal controls on slavery, Republicans were committed to military intervention and with it, emancipation. Everywhere the federal government and its agents would go, Republicans believed, they would carry freedom.

Once northern voters elected Abraham Lincoln to the presidency and his party to a majority in the House and Senate, slavery's days were numbered. Fire-eating secessionists were actually acting quite rationally, in this account,

because the Republican legislative majority was determined to end slavery through ordinary, constitutionally ordained means and via extraordinary, military ones. When war broke out, the ruling party was firmly committed to the end of slavery.

Republicans, in this narrative, presented a united front in their progressively ambitious attack on slavery, voting nearly unanimously to limit and then end the institution during the Civil War. They pursued both constitutionally sound limits on federal support for slavery and aggressive military emancipation simultaneously from the beginning of the war, intensifying their assault on the peculiar institution as the war progressed and as slavery's intransigence and resilience became evident. By the first anniversary of Bull Run, the President and his allies in Congress were firmly committed to a policy of emancipation in all areas of the Confederacy and a policy of crippling slavery in the border states. Republicans, Oakes convinces us, were no reluctant emancipators. *Freedom National* supplies a very different narrative than the ones we are accustomed to reading and telling. There is no important ideological change over the course of the war, no movement from a war about restoring the Union to a war for the end of slavery. It was always a war to end slavery—all the talk about war 'purpose' may have been technically true but was also cover for an attack all Republicans intended to be the fatal blow against slavery.

Oakes is at his best when closely analyzing the texts of official edicts, teasing out the nuanced difference between bills as they moved through committees and the subtle meanings of military proclamations as commanders implemented them across the South. These close readings allow him to argue that there was no shift in Republican consensus from a war for Union to a war for emancipation. The publicly stated purpose of the war was always to restore the Union, but Republicans had always also seen the war as an opportunity to implement policies they hoped would end human bondage in the United States. Oakes supplies creative glosses of episodes that seem to cut against such an interpretation, glosses that will strike many readers as novel and perhaps controversial. The Corwin amendment to the constitution, which if passed would have forever prohibited federal interference in slavery in the states, was superfluous in this telling, because it did nothing to stop the principle of "freedom national" and gave no additional support to slavery. Its prohibition was against the active abolition of slavery in the states, an act that Republicans already believed unconstitutional. Their plans for ending slavery would strangle it without recourse to such blunt means. Thus the substantial Republican vote for

the Corwin amendment said nothing about their commitment to destroying slavery in the American South. Oakes argues that Abraham Lincoln was spouting “nonsense” during the Second Inaugural address, when he stated that neither the North nor South “anticipated that the cause of the conflict might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease” since, according to Oakes, he intended to destroy slavery in the war and, with his allies in Congress, had the means to do so. The president’s claim not to have controlled events was a “famously misleading” bit of mythmaking (338). Republicans had the end of slavery in mind all along and were firmly in control of the process. When put together, interpretations such as these make for a remarkably coherent account of the end of slavery, one that may make the process and Republicans’ intentions seem more coherent than they actually were.

The clarity resulting from a tight focus on the antislavery goals of Republicans comes at the price of potentially undervaluing the roles other actors played in what Oakes, following Frederick Douglass, calls “the great movement” to end slavery. Though he forswears any interest in well-worn debates over agency in emancipation, Oakes’ narrative decisively shifts the focus of emancipation studies from the fields of the South to the halls of Congress. While *Freedom National* lauds self-emancipation—in which enslaved men and women ran to Union lines at the earliest opportunity—as an important development in the end of slavery, it was less a surprising, pivotal act that redirected the meaning of the war than it was part of a scenario Republican congressmen had already imagined and incorporated into their program for the wartime destruction of slavery.

The field is undoubtedly better for the insights found in *Freedom National*. If, in its focus on the Republican Party’s antislavery agenda, the book obscures the multiple roots of emancipation and the multiple, competing agendas of Republican lawmakers, these are flaws in a most useful, exciting new book. No other text so clearly explains the policies that abolished racial slavery in the United States.

*Scott Nesbit is the Associate Director of the Digital Scholarship Lab at the University of Richmond and a Ph.D. candidate in History at the University of Virginia. He is the co-director of Visualizing Emancipation, a new map of the end of slavery, <http://dsl.richmond.edu/emancipation>. You may contact him at [snesbit@richmond.edu](mailto:snesbit@richmond.edu).*