

### The Revolution of 1861: The American Civil War in the Age of Nationalist Conflict.

Frank Towers

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## Review

Towers, Frank

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**Fleche, Andre M.** *The Revolution of 1861: The American Civil War in the Age of Nationalist Conflict..* University of North Carolina Press, \$39.95 ISBN 978-0-8078-3523-4

### Understanding the Civil War in a Broader Context

Andre Fleche adds to the burgeoning literature on the international dimensions of the Civil War in this valuable study of American nationalism in a transatlantic context. Contrary to dominant popular narratives of the Civil War as a purely domestic conflict, Europe's 1848 revolutions had a profound influence on northern and southern conceptions of the nation state. Viewed in this framework, the Civil War fits into a broader pattern of revolution wherein the fledgling concept of the nation state matured into the form that guided it through the next century of modern history.

Although 1860s Americans paid attention to other revolutionary precedents, especially their own against Great Britain, Fleche argues that the most influential were the failed nationalist revolutions of 1848 in Europe, a series of revolts against the monarchies that took control of the continent after Napoleon's defeat in 1815. These uprisings lived in the recent memory of Americans and through the efforts of thousands of European radicals who fled to the United States in the 1850s where they agitated for national liberation and democratic self-government in their home countries. Demonstrating this influence, in 1861, both Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis claimed to represent the spirit of 1848.

Fleche shows how Unionist worries about European intervention in the war led Lincoln to reformulate the meaning of America's revolutionary heritage. Instead of blindly endorsing the principle of nationalist revolution, a stand that would aid the Confederates, he had to "balance the 'right of revolution' . . . with the necessity of national self-preservation which the country now faced" (66).

That necessity informed Lincoln's opposition to emancipation at the start of the war and his rejection of Italian nationalist Giuseppe Garibaldi's offer to serve in the Union military but only if it fought to end slavery. Both actions eased British and French fears of Lincoln's radicalism and reinforced the case made by Union diplomats that the war was about national integrity first and foremost.

To resolve the paradox of a nation founded in one revolution suppressing another one, Unionists like Orestes Brownson argued that it was liberty rather than rebellion that defined American nationality and that the Union now had to survive intact in order to preserve liberty. This understanding of the Union's cause gained force with Lincoln's 1863 Emancipation Proclamation. Fleche argues that the overlooked European comparative context in which Unionists operated led them to connect the fight against slavery to a broader struggle for the rights of labor against all forms of oppression, an idea that had affinities with both Karl Marx's critique of western European capitalism and eastern European reformers' battles against serfdom.

In the South, Confederates embraced 1848's theme of national self-determination and compared their struggle against the North with that of nationalists in Ireland, Hungary, and Poland who fought against foreign monarchs. In addition to the obvious problems of championing Irish freedom while seeking British aid, Confederates like Henry Hotze, a Swiss-born Alabama journalist who edited a pro-Confederate newspaper in London, also had to grapple with the problem of revolutionary radicalism. Opposed to not only emancipation but also feminism, agrarianism, and anti-clericalism, Confederate thinkers defined their revolution as a battle for "white republicanism" against the "red" and "black" variants of the concept that went too far in tearing down traditional social hierarchies.

In 1865 the Union's vision of the nation triumphed, but Fleche views that victory as short-lived. Without going into the details of Reconstruction, he says that the turn to imperialism and social Darwinism in the late-nineteenth century meant that the "boundaries between northern and southern ideas about nationalism began to blur" (156).

*The Revolution of 1861* builds on histories of German and Irish immigrants and the Civil War and takes forward the story of American interest in 1848 explored by Timothy Roberts, whose 2009 study stopped with the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Like other works in this genre, Fleche offers new insights

for long-running debates about Union and Confederate nationalisms.

He sides with scholars such as Eric Foner, Phillip Shaw Paludan, and James Oakes who argue that emancipation and the principle of equal rights moved to the forefront of Union nationalism by 1863. Recent dissents from this view include books by Paul Escott and Gary Gallagher. Fleche's emphasis on political rhetoric yields a more optimistic view of free-labor Union nationalism than have social histories of that topic. David Montgomery's classic study of labor and the Republican Party found divisions over practical questions like shorter working hours and the right to organize trade unions. More recently, Rebecca Scott showed how the more expansive victories won by the former slaves in Cuba highlighted the weakness of the Union's commitment to labor's rights well before 1865.

In reference to the Confederacy, Fleche joins Don Doyle, Robert Bonner, Paul Quigley, and Brian Schoen in finding international influences on southern nationalism. This approach helps explain Confederate gambits for foreign intervention and their understanding of slavery as part of a progressive future of democratic nation states.

*The Revolution of 1861* is a well-written, compact book that sticks to its main argument with admirable clarity. This brevity means that, despite occasional claims to global history, the topic is better understood in a transatlantic dialog that leaves out contemporaneous civil wars in China and South America. Within the transatlantic framework, Fleche might have used more space to address ethnic nationalism as a Confederate borrowing from Europe; consider immigrants such as the draft resisters in New York and New Orleans who wanted no part of nationalist revolutions in the New World; and explore the relationship between racism and antislavery by looking beyond well-known abolitionists like Frederick Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison to consider interactions between southern blacks and the 48ers. Although those elements of the story are missing, Fleche has made an important contribution to the historiography of the Civil War that deserves a wide audience.

*Frank Towers is the author of The Urban South and the Coming of the Civil War (2004) and co-editor of The Old South's modern Worlds: Slavery, Region and Nation in the Age of Progress (2011).*