The Scorpion's Sting: Antislavery and the Coming of the Civil War

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Review

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Oakes, James *The Scorpion's Sting: Antislavery and the Coming of the Civil War*. W.W. Norton, \$23.95 ISBN 978-0-393-23993-5

The Importance of Antislavery Political Strategy

If the devil is in the details, then *The Scorpion's Sting* is on the side of the angels. In four brief chapters, James Oakes distills the ideas at the heart of his award-winning *Freedom National* (2013) and presents them in a compact book ideal for assigning to undergraduates. Striving to close what Oakes sees as an artificial gap dug by historians between abolitionism and anti-slavery politics, *The Scorpion's Sting* argues boldly for a Republican party deeply committed to the destruction of slavery in the United States through a coherent policy of withdrawal of federal support for the institution, a policy whose insufficiency for ending slavery we ought not to mistake for insincerity. Moreover, Oakes would like us to dial back a bit on our loud denunciations of Republican policy's failings, claiming not only that it was more radical than military emancipation, but also that it was just as important as military emancipation in ending slavery, even if not in precisely the manner its architects envisioned. The book challenges readers to take Republican policy seriously, and to abandon easy notions of abolition's inevitability.

The first three chapters explicate the distinct Republican anti-slavery policy described by the metaphor "the scorpion's sting." Republicans believed that slavery could be abolished without war and without direct attack by the federal government (which everyone agreed the Constitution did not allow) by withdrawing all federal support for slavery. Stop promoting slavery's spread, the argument went. Stop allowing it to flourish in federal places like territories, the District of Columbia and U.S. military installations. Stop committing federal resources to individual slaveholders' recapture of runaways. Stop coddling slaveholders and start surrounding slave states with free ones "as a cordon of fire," lawmakers insisted, and "slavery, like a scorpion, would sting itself to

death" (p. 20) via state-by-state emancipation, starting with the Border States and working down.

It was a nice idea that didn't work, but not, Oakes urges, because Republicans were reluctant for it to work. It didn't work because while there might be enough venom in a scorpion to kill a scorpion, there is probably not enough to kill a gigantic elephant, and slavery turned out to be elephant-sized rather than scorpion-sized. And so the war came. Even then, Republicans tried to enact key parts of their policy by abolishing slavery in the District of Columbia and encouraging state emancipation, with varying degrees of success, in the Border States.

Once war came, Republicans also linked their scorpion-sting approach to military emancipation –the subject of the fourth chapter -- which Oakes sees as immediately adopted, but much less remarkable. Waving toward examples of slaves freed in other wars, Oakes takes an "it happens all the time" approach to the undeniable truth that it took armies, not policies, to crush the beast. It is in this chapter that Oakes' sweeping style is most likely to elide rather than illuminate important steps in the process of destroying slavery, for while armies in world history had liberated slaves, Americans had typically *opposed* such liberation, a point made at length by John Witt in *Lincoln's Code* (2012). Trying to explain away bitter fights between the British and Americans after both the Revolution and the War of 1812 on this very point puts Oakes in the awkward position of characterizing Secretary of State John Quincy Adams' comparatively civil arguments with Britain in 1816 as "the single most extreme argument against military emancipation made by any American statesman before the Civil War" (p. 139), a puzzling characterization on two counts. First, Adams himself made the same point in much stronger language four years *later* when as Secretary of State he argued that military emancipation was no more valid than "the right of putting to death all prisoners in cold blood . . . or the right to use poisoned weapons, or to assassinate." Second, given that Adams at exactly the same time that he wrote those words was expressing his personal hatred of slavery in private letters and diary, it seems less likely that Adams was expressing an extreme and aberrant view on military emancipation, and more likely that he was simply serving as mouthpiece for the widespread and commonplace view. The chapter also conflates three things --arming slaves, freeing slaves, and ending slavery—that were simply too distinct from each other to be lumped together. Oakes is absolutely right that armies appropriating or freeing the slaves of enemies in wartime had happened many times before in

human history, but prior wartime liberations had often been temporary and reversible, and they had not ended the institution of slavery. That U.S. military emancipation –itself less a predictable gameplan than a wary collaboration between pragmatic soldiers and determined refugees from slavery-- would permanently end the institution was and is a much bigger surprise than chapter four of *The Scorpion's Sting* quite credits.

In the end, *The Scorpion's Sting* helps us understand a lot about Republican policy, and less about the war, for while the book is persuasive about how Republican policy looked from inside the heads and hearts of its adherents, I suspect the relationship between policy and the actual end of slavery was less clear to most of the human beings living through the war, especially those emancipated. To be sure, Oakes concedes that things did not go as planned, and one of the book's great strengths is its insistence that there was nothing inevitable about the destruction of slavery, despite Republicans' fondest vision. But in the pages of *The Scorpion's Sting*, the "not-as-planned" is the aberration, to be brushed aside, whereas for another school of thought (most readily associated with the *Freedom: A Documentary History* series) the not-as-planned is the *real* story, with official policy and action only amounting to so much distraction. We still await an account that can attend seriously to the tension and interplay between the planned and not-as-planned, which is where the heart of the story is most likely to be. Until then, readers will benefit from this lucid, passionate explication of Republican strategy for encircling slavery with a "cordon of freedom" until it "stung itself to death," and they will also benefit from grappling with the realization, from which Oakes never flinches, that policy alone was not "enough to destroy slavery," (20). Such a realization reminds us that slavery was an elephant-sized, not scorpion-sized, part of United States.

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