

The Election of 1860 Reconsidered

Matt Mason

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

Recommended Citation

Mason, Matt (2013) "The Election of 1860 Reconsidered," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 15 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.15.3.24

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol15/iss3/23>

Review

Mason, Matt

Summer 2013

Fuller, A. James *The Election of 1860 Reconsidered*. Kent State University Press, \$49.95 ISBN 978-1-60635-148-2

Exploring the Election of 1860 from Many Angles

Dedicated to the Civil War Study Group and coming out of a 2010 meeting thereof, this volume is largely a regional effort. Most of the contributing scholars teach at Indiana universities, and thus it is not surprising that Indiana gets more than its share of press here. It is also heavily the production of Editor A. James Fuller, who contributed four essays and even took upon himself the weight of making the book interdisciplinary by producing an essay meant to appeal to political scientists.

There is much to like about this collection. Perhaps most importantly, it breaks with much of the relevant literature by giving an expansive view of the election “as more than Lincoln’s victory and Douglas’s loss” (2). Its chapters give full attention to all four major candidates, to the perspectives of Frederick Douglass and Europeans on the election, and to theoretical questions of voter turnout and partisan realignment. Fuller’s political biographies of John C. Breckinridge and John Bell show the benefits of taking these sometimes-forgotten candidates seriously. He clearly connects Breckinridge’s conception of Southern honor to his assessment that his candidate was the pursuit of “a forlorn hope” (69). And he shows that Bell’s call for compromise was very much in the tradition of Whig statesmen like Henry Clay rather than simply “equivocation and avoiding the issues” (105).

The essays are almost uniformly well-researched, and at times offer excellent insights. Michael S. Green, for instance, offers a useful reading of Abraham Lincoln’s success as a candidate, persuasively arguing that it was based on his superior “experience in organizing campaigns for elective office” (10). James L. Huston offers a particularly thought-provoking essay. Focusing on Stephen A. Douglas’ campaign swing through the South, he makes it clear

that "Southerners should have realized that the North would unite against secession" (30) based on his firm Unionist stance. He magnifies the usefulness of this point by complicating it. Douglas' forthright stare-down of potential secessionists was unusual, for the complexities of electoral strategy kept both Northern Republicans and Democrats from fully discussing their proposed reactions to secession. "Thus Northerners did not openly confront what their actions might be in the event of attempted state separation until after the presidential election" (43), when presented with the accomplished fact of secession.

While this collection offers little to disagree with, many of its contributors repeatedly exaggerate its interpretive novelty. Fuller, for instance, prefaces his political biographies of candidates with the unsubstantiated complaint that this is "a genre no longer fashionable among academic historians" (2). He also unaccountably advertises as "new" (5) the essays' attention to political ideology and political culture. The claim that the ideology and values connected to republicanism represents a fresh take is especially dubious. But even more surprising given the venerable literature on Southern honor is his assertion that his chapter on Breckinridge, by "using the lens of honor," for the first time "affords us an opportunity truly to come to terms with the context in which Southerners operated" (96). Other contributors follow Green's lead. Thomas E. Rodgers echoes Fuller when he claims that his exploration of voters' concerns to preserve republicanism represents "a new element" (165) in studies of the election of 1860, despite recognizing later in the essay that republicanism has driven scholarship on late antebellum voter behavior since the 1970s (177). And Green sets up a man with at least a bit of straw in him by suggesting that "many of us" (8) are reluctant to recognize Lincoln's political savvy. That may remain true for many lay readers, but scholars seem to me to be much more comfortable recognizing Lincoln's skills as a politician (as a quote from Richard Carwardine on page 25 in Green's own essay suggests).

Scholars of the political history of the Civil War Era, then, will not find this volume to be as innovative as its authors and editor claim it to be. But neither they nor general readers will have much else to complain about here. This collection provides a solid, wide-ranging treatment of the most important election in American history.

Matthew Mason (matthew_mason@byu.edu) is an associate professor of history at Brigham Young University. He is the author of Slavery and Politics in

the *Early American Republic (2006)*, and the co-editor, with *John Craig Hammond*, of *Contesting Slavery: The Politics of Bondage and Freedom in the New American Nation (2011)*. He is currently working on a political biography of *Edward Everett*.