

### A Disease in the Public Mind: A New Understanding of Why We Fought the Civil War

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## Review

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**Fleming, Thomas** *A Disease in the Public Mind: A New Understanding of Why We Fought the Civil War*. Da Capo Press, \$26.99 ISBN 978-0-306-82126-4

### A Study of Who Pushed the Nation to War

Thomas Fleming, a novelist and historian who is the author of a number of books on the era of the American Revolution, has produced a sweeping work, which argues that the North-South sectional conflict of the nineteenth century was the result of what he styles the public mind becoming irrationally disordered and distorted. This occurred as the result of the agitation of compromise-averse, fanatical New England abolitionists, whose work caused already simmering fears of race war in the minds of white Southerners to boil over and led to secession and Civil War. Fleming consciously models his argument on those of nineteenth century figures like James Buchanan who deplored both abolitionists and secessionists, and who he approvingly quotes in his preface.

The author traces the rise of the slavery issue from the American Revolution through the Civil War in a number of fast-paced chapters which are generally quite well-executed in a literary sense, and are based on secondary sources that will be familiar to historians of the era. He provides brief but lively summaries of the evolving views on slavery of Thomas Jefferson and George Washington, the Haitian Revolution, the War of 1812 and the Hartford Convention, the Missouri Crisis, and the Nat Turner Rebellion. His argument really begins to take shape as he discusses the rise of the militant abolitionist movement and its spiritual leader William Lloyd Garrison in the 1830s. Fleming chastises Garrison for "a flaw that permeated the New England view of the rest of America: an almost total lack of empathy" (107). Specifically, he faults Garrison and the abolitionists for being unsympathetic to the fears of white Southerners following the Turner uprising.

The book's large cast of characters also includes Theodore Weld, the charismatic abolitionist who ultimately withdrew from the movement, feeling

that its arguments had become too harshly critical of slaveowners. Fleming contends that with Weld's departure, "abolitionism lost its strongest voice" (132). He then goes on to trace the "raging final stage of the abolitionist disease in the public mind" (179) through the 1840s and 1850s, with their agitation correspondingly increasing fears of catastrophic race war in the minds of white Southerners. John Brown and his 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry are treated extensively, with the author coming down hard on Brown as a vicious, cold-blooded terrorist with a poor understanding of Christian principles. Brown's "spurious sainthood" (247), as he sees it, was based on deliberate falsehood and propaganda. And since Brown "had reignited ... [the] nightmare of a race war" (253) for white Southerners, the election of an antislavery Republican president the following year brought about an otherwise avoidable conflict.

The author's arguments have a certain logic to them, if rather a one-sided one, almost totally unsympathetic to the idealistic, humanitarian motivations of the abolitionists, who he denounces for their lack of sympathy for southern slaveowners. However calling the work, as the subtitle proclaims, "a new understanding" of the causes of the Civil War when it harkens so strongly back to the "needless war" arguments of the Revisionists of the 1920s and 1930s seem like a bit much to claim.

*Michael Thomas Smith is an Associate Professor of History at McNeese State University. He is the author of The Enemy Within: Fears of Corruption in the Civil War North (2011) and co-editor of This Distracted and Anarchical People: New Answers for Old Questions about the Civil War-Era North (2013).*