

Broken Glass: Caleb Cushing and the Shattering of the Union

Beverly Wilson Palmer

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

Recommended Citation

Palmer, Beverly Wilson (2006) "Broken Glass: Caleb Cushing and the Shattering of the Union," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 3 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol8/iss3/5>

Review

Palmer, Beverly Wilson

Fall 2006

Belohlavek, John *Broken Glass: Caleb Cushing and the Shattering of the Union*. Kent State University Press, \$65.00 ISBN 8773388410

Erudite and Able

A Tortuous Political Path

John Belohlavek's life of Caleb Cushing—lawyer, scholar, congressman, soldier, cabinet minister, and diplomat—covers many of the nineteenth century's crucial events. As a Massachusetts congressman in the 1830s, Cushing straddled the anti-slavery issue; as minister to China in 1843, he sought to improve trade relations; as a general, he led a regiment in the Mexican War; as attorney general in the Pierce administration, he served as strategist for the weak president; as chairman of the 1860 Democrat conventions in Charleston and Baltimore, he tried to unify his splintering party; as Buchanan's envoy, he traveled to Charleston in 1861 on a desperate mission to prevent South Carolina's secession. Because of his Southern proclivities, this Massachusetts native sat out the Civil War. Afterward, however, he undertook an assignment to Colombia to explore the acquisition of the Isthmus of Panama, and, while serving on a mission to Spain, he even aided in the capture of the notorious William "Boss" Tweed.

Although vilified because he switched parties from Whig to Democrat to Republican, Cushing remained consistent in his devotion to the Union. On page 371 Belohlavek writes, "while Cushing's intellect amazed and stupefied his peers, his politics confounded and troubled them. Beyond a strong stand for expansion, the Constitution, and the Union, which he articulated with predictable regularity throughout his life, neither issue nor party held him for the long term."

Adopting the standard chronological approach, this well-written biography analyzes the stages of Cushing's life at the beginning or ending of almost every chapter. In demonstrating the importance of Cushing to American history, Belohlavek presents a well-balanced portrayal of this complicated figure. He

criticizes Cushing's ponderous speeches, his inability to interact informally with his peers, his conservative views on a woman's place (despite his fascination with witty and intelligent women throughout his long widowhood), his inept military service, and his evolving views on race.

The latter were particularly crucial to Cushing's political aspirations. As a twenty-one-year-old he published an article on Haiti, arguing that African Americans had the potential to govern themselves. But as Belohlavek concludes on page 13, Cushing "approached the institution with more reason than passion." Later, during the 1850s, he supported the Fugitive Slave Law and the 1857 Dred Scott decision; he blamed Northern abolitionists (whom he saw as "mindless zealots," writes Belohlavek) for the potential disruption of the United States. Ultimately, as the Union's dissolution became more likely, Cushing delivered speeches blaming the North for its "'sentimental solicitude'" for the black race, and, echoing his friend and fellow cabinet member Jefferson Davis, declared that African Americans had neither the "'sufficient force of character or intelligence . . . to try their hands in the responsible business of life among men of their own race.'

Belohlavek devotes considerable space to Cushing's relationships with and views of women, frequently quoting women's opinions of both Cushing and the times. Left a widower after a relatively brief marriage (1824-1832) to Caroline Wilde, Cushing spent a good part of his life either courting or seeking the company of the female sex. As Belohlavek writes on page 189, Cushing's stiffness and aloofness appears to have prevented his marrying again, despite numerous attempts: "His intelligence, experience, travels, wealth, reputation, and influence won him numerous introductions and initial screenings by potential mates. But they invariably wearied of his all-knowing, relentless efforts to inform and uplift and concurrent inability to make small talk."

Cushing had firm and in this case consistent opinions about women's roles, writing two major articles for the *North American Review* in 1828 and 1836, and later speaking on the subject. Women should be educated, he maintained, but their contribution to society was limited to the domestic sphere. He stated that the women's rights movement in the 1850s was a threat to the "'foundations of all society"; most of its leaders were "'perverted persons.'

Summing up Cushing's attitude to all reform movements, Belohlavek writes on page 374, "[m]oral crusades, however, whether prisons, temperance, women's rights, or antislavery, never gripped Cushing's soul."

The voluminous collection of Cushing papers at the Library of Congress allows Belohlavek to chronicle almost every aspect (except for religion, see below) of Cushing's seventy-nine year life. He states on page xi, "Cushing, with a penchant for saving every scrap of paper, presented scholars with a treasure trove of information on all aspects of his private and public lives." Thus Belohlavek can quote Cushing's occasional love poems, tell us about his diet and his clothing. To round out his interpretation of Cushing, Belohlavek also makes use of the many manuscript and printed primary sources available, quoting from such diverse sources as John Quincy Adams's diary, the correspondence of R. M. T. Hunter, and the papers of Frederick Douglass.

Given the thoroughness with which Belohlavek covers Cushing's life, a striking omission is any extensive treatment of Cushing's religious views. On page 29 we are told that Cushing was a "freethinker" in favor of religious tolerance. Two paragraphs on pages 60 and 97 about his 1834 lectures on "Civilization and the Social State of Christendom" and an 1838 lecture on "The Social Influence of Christianity" describe only briefly Cushing's contention that Christianity is the basis for civilization. Newburyport's First Presbyterian Church, which Cushing had attended, is noted as the site for his funeral. Was Cushing a faithful member of that church or any other? Did he ascribe to Presbyterian doctrine? Was religion only a peripheral aspect of his life? Nowhere does Belohlavek consider Cushing's religious beliefs and how they may, or may not, have affected his political and moral views.

Despite this one lapse, in **Broken Glass** Belohlavek succeeds in arguing that, because of his varied accomplishments, his tortuous political path, his shifting views on many of the major issues of his times, Cushing merits the serious attention of historians. Belohlavek's concluding statement on page 383 persuasively characterizes this erudite, able, yet difficult leader: "His vices—racism, sexism, cultural superiority, and militarism—have rivaled his virtues—a passion for learning, a lifetime of public service, and the fervent dedication to the preservation of the Constitution and the Union."

Beverly Wilson Palmer is coordinator of the writing program at Pomona College and is the editor of The Selected Letters of Charles Sumner (Northeastern University Press, ISBN 1555530788, \$200.00 hardcover), The Selected Papers of Thaddeus Stevens (University of Pittsburgh Press, ISBN 082293972X (vol. 1), ISBN 0822940523 (vol. 2), \$55.00 hardcover) and the

Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott (*University of Illinois Press, ISBN 0252026748, \$55.00 hardcover*).