

Storm Over Texas: The Annexation Controversy and the Road to Civil War

Stephen E. Maizlish

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

Recommended Citation

Maizlish, Stephen E. (2007) "Storm Over Texas: The Annexation Controversy and the Road to Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 9 : Iss. 2 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol9/iss2/18>

Review

Maizlish, Stephen E.

Spring 2007

Silbey, Joel H. *Storm over Texas: The Annexation Controversy and the Road to Civil War*. Oxford University Press, \$15.95 softcover ISBN 978019513944

Annexation and Sectionalism in the West

The Texas Controversy

Storm over Texas offers a superb account of the political road to disunion and Civil War. Author Joel Silbey, one of the deans of antebellum political history, tells the familiar story of the controversy surrounding the annexation of Texas and the disruptive aftermath of its admission to the Union. He argues that the conflict over annexation . . . *and*, most particularly, the political fallout from it should be seen as the *the* critical base point on which the rest of the crisis of the Union grew (xvii). But more crucial to Silbey, ever the political historian, Texas was key to the ultimate shifting of the dynamics of American politics from a partisan alignment to a sectional political dynamic (xviii).

Silbey focuses on Martin Van Buren, the subject of his recent biography, and the New Yorker's Barnburner faction of the Democratic Party. Their developing disenchantment with a party they increasingly came to see as dominated by southerners and no longer committed to balance and reciprocity between its various factions lies at the heart of his story (109). Throughout the telling, Silbey is particularly sensitive to the interplay between party and principle as partisans negotiated the complex path through policy differences and party needs.

But Silbey's greatest contribution is his acute awareness of the gradual maturation of the sectional forces he identifies. Sectionalism did not burst onto the political scene with Texas and, Silbey correctly concludes, it did not suddenly overwhelm all other political commitments. The triumph of sectionalism was a process that began in earnest with the Texas dispute, but only over time completed its dominance of the political landscape. As bitter as the

divisions over Texas were in 1844, party loyalties held as the dispute was still largely seen through partisan perspectives. Polk's victory, Silbey argues, was a Democratic Party victory, as the Shrine of Party Silbey has so often written about retained the loyalties of most Americans. Sectionalism was a force, but not yet the central one it would become.

The election year 1848 marked a major landmark in the growing ascendancy of sectional politics. With the creation of the Free Soil Party, Silbey concludes that the consequences of the decision to annex Texas, and the fallout from doing so, had reached their denouement (139). For the first time, he argues, sectional differences were hardening into enduring confrontation (142). Still, Silbey rightly insists, partisan realities remained a counterweight to sectional impulses (145). A sectional compromise was indeed reached in 1850, though Congress did not pull together to pass it as Silbey claims, but rather voted along sectional lines on each element of Henry Clay's omnibus bill (149).

Silbey recognizes that sectionalism did not subside for long. He carries his story of the national divide forward and describes the return in full force of sectional issues in the Kansas-Nebraska controversy of the mid-1850s. In this phase of the conflict, Silbey suggests that nativism played only a supporting role, aiding party disintegration rather than serving as its source. The real origin of the sectional clash was Texas. It set the stage for the opening of Pandora's Box, releasing sectional passions that previously had been controlled by party allegiance (177).

Citing Abraham Lincoln's House Divided speech, Silbey explains that the Slave Power Conspiracy became the lens through which northerners saw southern actions largely and primarily because of their experience in the Texas annexation controversy. Texas, northerners believed, was the first act in the grand conspiracy of the South. From 1844 on, the nation endured many sectional disputes, but Texas seemed to have first suggested the course the south was intent on taking. Silbey convincingly demonstrates that it was Texas that, crystallized, focused, structured, and then anchored what had previously been inchoate and ephemeral (180). He never claims that the war was inevitable. In fact, he insists on the importance of contingency in the events that led to the conflict. But we should be grateful to him for showing so clearly the role Texas played in bringing about the war that did eventually take place.

Stephen E. Maizlish, Associate Professor, The University of Texas at Arlington, is author of The Triumph of Sectionalism, the Transformation of Ohio Politics, 1844-1856 and Salmon P. Chase: The Roots of Ambition and the Origins of Reform.