

The Missouri Compromise and Its Aftermath: Slavery and the Meaning of America

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Review

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Forbes, Robert Pierce *The Missouri Compromise and Its Aftermath: Slavery and the Meaning of America*. University of North Carolina Press, \$45.00 hardcover ISBN 9780807831052

Slavery and the Coming of the Civil War: The Missouri Controversy

In 1819-21, Congress devoted considerable attention to the controversy over the proposal that Missouri should not be admitted to the Union unless slavery there was consigned to eventual extinction. Robert Pierce Forbes promises the first full-length account of the Missouri Controversy in half a century, but it is at once less and more than that. It is less in the sense that only slightly under half of his volume is concerned with the controversy itself, while it is more in that, as the subtitle suggests, it follows controversy over slavery up to its end in the 1860s.

The first version of this volume was a 1994 Ph.D. dissertation entitled simply *Slavery and the Meaning of America*. From this, one learns that Forbes follows a long line of Puritan divines and left social reformers in thinking of America as having a meaning, as being either the stage on which God's Providence will be enacted or the secular City on a Hill to which men elsewhere in the world of course will look for their models — and which has its purpose in projects such as the enfranchisement of Afghan women. This means that in Forbes's account of the nineteenth century, he consistently sympathizes with bygone figures who sought to remake society to conform to their utopian ideals, and never mind the consequences.

Among the villains of his account, then, are Union-loving moderates such as Martin Van Buren (whom he characterizes as having essentially no political principles) and Daniel Webster (whose disposition in favor of the Union led him to compromise northern demands concerning the western territories over radicals' protests). Van Buren's lack of principle is hard to square with his opposition to Monroe's nationalism — an opposition perfectly consistent with his

biographers' notion of him as a Jeffersonian determined to create a states rights party and to virtually all signs of nationalism thereafter. Webster, too, seems more reasonable than Forbes makes him when one counts the ultimate costs of the posture Forbes prefers: 650,000 dead and the complete remaking of the formerly federal U.S. Constitution. Non-neo-abolitionism had its price, and one might think that both Van Buren and Webster had been right to fear it.

On the other hand, Forbes's account of the Missouri Controversy itself really shines in his portrait of the hitherto largely underrated performance of James Monroe as president. If Forbes is right, Monroe resembles Dwight D. Eisenhower in having accepted that he could obtain results he wanted by operating mainly behind the scenes, and in therefore having received little credit for his substantial achievements. Monroe, Forbes thinks, intended to hedge in slavery, to push it down the road to future extinction, in working out the elements of the first Missouri Compromise, and Monroe wins Forbes's admiration for that.

The most significant statute in American history, one cannot help but conclude from the second half of Forbes's study, was the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, and so its architect, Stephen Douglas of Illinois, was among American history's most destructive statesmen. How obtuse he was in not recognizing what Forbes calls the moral element of the slavery controversy, which Forbes describes as pitting the South against the nation. That moral element, of course, had nothing to do with the right of local self-government. Forbes has essentially no patience for any argument that the United States Constitution created a federal, not a national union of the states, and he discounts any principled devotion to limited government (in the careers of Nathaniel Macon, John Randolph, John Taylor, John Calhoun, Douglas, Thomas Jefferson, et al.) throughout. Here, I must offer the contrary argument I make at book length in *Virginia's American Revolution: From Dominion to Republic, 1776-1840* (Lexington Books, 2007), besides the articles listed in that study's bibliography. It is simply wrong to assert that devotion to states rights was always a more respectable way of defending slavery.

Besides his somewhat persuasive reappraisal of President Monroe, Forbes's most interesting discoveries are that Thomas Ritchie was not the only major newspaper editor with whom Van Buren laid the ground for the Democratic Party and that Andrew Jackson wrote what Forbes calls a previously unknown letter urging the nomination of James K. Polk over the incumbent President Van

Buren for president in 1840. (313, n. 27; 344, n. 83) He also strains semi-effectively to demonstrate that after the Missouri Controversy, the slavery issue never really ceased to shape federal politics in significant ways.

In general, *The Missouri Controversy and Its Aftermath: Slavery and the Meaning of America* provides another neo-abolitionist account of antebellum politics, this one with 1819 as a jumping-off point, which is of a piece with the current leading works in the field. The book is peppered with frequent unexplained references to obscure events and ideas, so it obviously is not intended for a general audience. Perhaps it will repay a reading, then, for graduate students.

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