

Lincoln's Pathfinder: John C. Fremont And The Violent Election Of 1856

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Recommended Citation

Engle, Stephen D. (2017) "Lincoln's Pathfinder: John C. Fremont And The Violent Election Of 1856," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.19.4.14

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol19/iss4/9>

Review

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Fall 2017

Bicknell, John *Lincoln's Pathfinder: John C. Fremont and the Violent Election of 1856*. Chicago Review Press, \$26.99 ISBN 1613737971

1856: Moment of Change

The famed historian David Potter once wrote that if John Calhoun had been alive to witness the election of 1856, he might have observed “a further snapping of the cords of the Union.” “The Whig cord had snapped between 1852 and 1856,” he argued “and the Democratic cord was drawn very taut by the sectional distortion of the party’s geographical equilibrium.” According to Potter, the Republican party “claimed to be the only one that asserted national principles, but it was totally sectional in its constituency, with no pretense to bi-sectionalism, and it could not be regarded as a cord of the Union at all.”¹ He was right on all accounts, and John Bicknell captures the essence of this dramatic political contest that epitomized the struggle of a nation divided over slavery.

To be sure, the election of 1856 marked a turning point in the republic’s political culture, if for no other reason than it signaled significant change on the democratic horizon. It had been more than two decades since the last time the word Republican had been used in a political contest, and the character of the party had fundamentally changed. In this new work, Bicknell offers a narrative history that helps explain how politics took center stage amid the sectional strife of the 1850s, and how it intensified the political struggle to maintain the Union. By the mid-1850s, slavery, and the threat of disunion posed by it, was escalating beyond repair. Although some contemporaries hailed the Compromise of 1850 as a victory that prevented civil war, settlers moving into the new territory in Kansas and Nebraska came to test the permeability of those resolutions. Congress continued to wrestle with slavery’s future within an ever-expanding Union, and change would need to come from the ballot box.

Amid the backdrop of the “Bleeding Kansas” violence resulting from the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the sack of Lawrence, and the retaliation by John Brown’s

band at Pottawatomie Creek, as well as the beating of abolitionist Charles Sumner at the hands of pro-slavery South Carolina congressman Preston Brooks, political canvassing took place for the 1856 election. The Whigs and Democrats, already divided by the Compromise of 1850 into pro-and anti-slavery factions, contended with Republicans, a new party, and John C. Frémont, the charismatic path-finding leader whose wife Jessie helped him blaze a path to the nomination. Bicknell explores how previously scattered abolitionist and anti-slavery factions managed to achieve a degree of unity in the formation of the new party that offered the first serious challenge to the status quo that had allowed slavery to expand westward with the unfolding republic. He examines how anti-slavery politicians such as New Yorkers Thurlow Weed and William Seward, Missouri's Francis Preston Blair, and Ohioans Salmon P. Chase and John McLean played a role in the creation of the new political party. Members of the Democratic Party tried to keep the union together by compromise and by seeking to appease the slaveholding interests. Franklin Pierce the "doughface" president who presided over these turbulent years, gave way to a colorful and determined group of political party leaders including James Buchanan, Stephen Douglas, Howell Cobb and Alexander Stephens, Millard Fillmore, and Thomas Hart Benton determined to carry on the prominence of the slave power. The end result was a three-way contest between American party candidate Millard Fillmore and Pennsylvania doughface Buchanan in the South, and Buchanan and Frémont in the North. Democrats had the advantage of a sizeable campaign chest and organization, and managed a comfortable victory in the Electoral College. Yet, the Republicans could see victory in the future in the defeat of 1856, and it frightened Democrats.

In the end, the election of 1856 reflected the precarious nature of the times, and Bicknell aptly chronicles how Frémont epitomized the romance of the unique campaign and its evangelical nature that heightened the underlying principle of the Free-Soil movement. In doing so, he has given us another illuminating account of the man and the hour who in losing the election of 1856 helped propel the anti-expansion of slavery movement forward.

Stephen D. Engle is the author of Gathering to Save a Nation.

¹ David Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-186* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 265.

