

The Election Of 1860: A Campaign Fraught With Consequences

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Review

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Politics of Consequence: The Many Campaigns of 1860

The election of 1860 has garnered an enormous amount of attention from scholars because of its weighty implications. Historians of the Civil War era invariably earmark this political contest as America's most important presidential election in classroom lectures and in one monograph after another for good reason. The outcome of the election triggered the secession of seven Lower South states, invoked a turbulent political battle between fire-eaters and unionists in the eight remaining slaveholding states, and led directly to the mighty conflict that saw the destruction of slavery and the death of some 750,000 American soldiers. In the last decade alone, Douglas S. Egerton and Michael S. Green have produced fine studies of the four man race, while a host of prolific scholars contributed essays on the election in a 2013 volume edited by A. James Fuller. Despite his admitted initial misgivings about being able to add anything of significance to the story of the Republican triumph in 1860, Michael F. Holt has once again rewarded readers with *The Election of 1860: "A Campaign Fraught with Consequences"*, the latest addition to the University Press of Kansas's American Presidential Elections series. With his skillful analysis, numerous penetrating insights, and multiple thought-provoking conclusions, Holt offers up a fresh account that challenges some old assumptions about this landmark contest.

Abraham Lincoln and the victorious Republicans rightfully have enthralled many scholars of the 1860 contest, but Holt worries that the giant shadow cast by the Railsplitter candidate has left some aspects of the election ignored and unexplored. To remedy this historiographical shortcoming, Holt devotes equal consideration to the other political organizations and candidates and treats the embryonic Constitutional Union Party – which some writers have dismissed as

nothing more than a stopgap measure concocted by desperate Upper South conservatives – as a serious contender with historical roots dating back to the 1850 crisis of the Union. Over eight topical chapters Holt provides a brief primer of each of the parties, carries readers to the raucous summertime conventions where politicians traded favors and debated candidates and platforms, opens a window on the exciting campaign efforts of each organization, and carefully scrutinizes the outcome of the contest. Three appendices include vital statistical data, election returns, each party's finalized national platform, and a transcript of Lincoln's March 4, 1861 inaugural address.

In order to provide an evenhanded discussion of the contest and in an effort to prevent an overreliance on major newspapers like the *New York Tribune*, Holt sifted through rather obscure sheets like the *Milledgeville, Georgia Southern Recorder* and the *Bangor Whig and Courier*. Such an approach provides Holt with a diverse cross-section of American voters' concerns, desires, and needs, and provides balance to the oft-quoted voices of major New York-based editors like Henry J. Raymond and James Gordon Bennett.

Probing this wide swath of newspapers led Holt to the conclusion that the main issue at play in the election of 1860 was the fate of the Union rather than the imbroglio over slavery's extension into the territories. Moreover, he finds that the Republicans and the Constitutional Unionists consistently stressed the corruption and malfeasance of Democrat James Buchanan's administration when reaching out to voters. Holt contends that with the defeat of the Lecompton Constitution, Republicans realized that slavery could not realistically spread to any of the remaining western territories and therefore party bosses emphasized other matters in the campaign to attract voters, especially those in the Lower North. Republican leaders therefore played up Democratic graft, marginalized the influence of the opponents of nativism like William Seward, and spun the Chicago Platform's ambiguous statement on trade policy into an endorsement of higher tariff rates in order to convert Lower North moderates, especially in the battleground state of Pennsylvania, to their standard. Much of this crucial voting bloc had gone for American Party candidate Millard Fillmore in 1856 and on the eve of the contest in 1860 stood ready to vote for someone other than the Republicans, whom they perceived as dangerous sectional radicals whose policies would rend the Union. By soft-pedaling the slavery extension issue, the Republicans won the election. Holt insists that only southern Democrats sought to make slavery's extension the paramount issue during the campaign and he disagrees with James Oakes's recent contention that by 1860 most Republicans

not only wanted to restrict slavery's spread, but also ensure its abolition in the southern states.

One of the major strengths of this book is the way in which Holt ties together the campaigns of the Democrats, Constitutional Unionists, and Republicans. He reminds us that these parties did not operate within a vacuum. Rather, party leaders were quite in tune to the decisions of their opponents, and this influenced their own choices about platforms and candidates. He expertly traces the developments at the national party conventions during the spring and summer of 1860 and shows how the breakup of the Democratic Party impacted the other political organizations. For instance, some leaders of the Constitutional Union Party, whose national convention met a week prior to the Republicans' Chicago meeting, initially operated under the assumption that a unified Democratic Party would place Stephen Douglas at the top of its ticket. These Constitutional Unionists hoped to bolster their chances to defeat the Democrats and force the hand of the Republicans by nominating a moderate candidate that the delegates to the Chicago Convention also would place on their ticket. By the time the Constitutional Unionists met, however, the Democratic smashup had occurred at Charleston and it seemed a real possibility that Douglas would not win his party's nomination when it once again gathered later in June. With this in mind, Constitutional Unionists believed it easier to attract the support of the moderate followers of the Little Giant and therefore abandoned any attempt to work with the Republicans. However unlikely the possibility of a fusion between Constitutional Unionists and Republicans seems in hindsight, Holt convincingly demonstrates that prior to the fracturing of the Democratic Party during the summer of 1860 some politicians believe such a scenario might come to fruition.

Although Holt shows throughout the book the many ways in which the disparate parties emphasized considerations other than slavery's extension into the western territories, the explosive issue always lurks in the background of his narrative and at times bursts to the forefront of his discussion. This suggests that many contemporaries probably found it much more difficult to compartmentalize or differentiate concerns about preservation of the Union and slavery than does the twenty-first century historian. The great lengths to which the Republicans went to downplay the slavery extension issue indicates that party leaders understood it was never far from the mind of the American voter. Northern moderates who cast their ballots for the Republicans surely realized that in 1860 they now supported a party devoted to cleaning up Democratic corruption and dedicated to free soil in the West. As Holt astutely points out, the Constitutional

Union Party wished “to bury the slavery issue” and keep it out of future political discussion (76-77). One could argue, however, that all four organizations hoped that their respective responses to slavery’s extension would permanently put the issue to bed. Whether advocating popular sovereignty, calling for a territorial slave code, or adhering to a call for free soil, leaders of each organization surmised they advocated the only solution to end political agitation on the subject and in turn, preserve the Union.

In this book Holt has once again proven his masterful understanding of nineteenth-century American politics and his intrinsic ability to craft a lively, insightful, and entertaining narrative. Readers who pick up *The Election of 1860* may not agree with all of Holt’s conclusions, but they will surely come away with an enhanced understanding of the dynamics of the American political system on the eve of the Civil War.

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