

# The Stormy Present: Conservatism and the Problem of Slavery in Northern Politics, 1846-1865

Austin Allen

*University of Houston, Downtown*, [allena@uhd.edu](mailto:allena@uhd.edu)

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## Review

Allen, Austin

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**Smith, Adam I. P.** *The Stormy Present: Conservatism and the Problem of Slavery in Northern Politics, 1846-1865*. University of North Carolina Press, \$45.00 ISBN 9781469633893

A conservative consensus dominated the politics of the antebellum North. So argues Adam I. P. Smith, a senior lecturer at the University College of London, in *The Stormy Present*. Smith has produced an admirable study of how self-defined northern conservatives—who appeared across the partisan spectrum—wrestled with the problem of slavery. Drawing mainly on newspaper editorials and the personal papers of politicians, Smith explores a network of “conservative” assumptions that underlay political argument in the North and provided a level of unity as the region’s leaders confronted the unrelenting demands of the South.

Smith defines conservatism as more an attitude of discipline and restraint than a coherent set of specific ideas. Several assumptions gave the attitude its shape. These included a faith in institutions, a willingness to compromise, and sense that conservatives remained in touch with public opinion. Northern conservatives also viewed the absence of slavery as a key component of their region’s prosperity and the Union as the bulwark of their political liberty. Beneath all of this lay a sense of intense anxiety that the Union was in crisis. Rapid change from urbanization, immigration, and expansion raised the specter of violence and social disorder, which could either lead to mob rule or despotism. Over the course of the 1850s, however, the South’s incessant demands for the protection of slavery convinced Northerners that the primary threat to their way of life came from the Slave Power, and they resolved to stop it. Although they reached a consensus as to the threat they faced, Northerners disagreed starkly about the best way to stop it. And that disagreement shaped Northern politics throughout the 1850s and 1860s.

Smith’s narrative covers familiar ground. Northerners accepted a compromise in 1850 that contained the controversial Fugitive Slave Law, which felt as if the North had to enforce the South’s law. But they endured it. Then came Kansas-Nebraska and the demand to repeal the Missouri Compromise, then the violence of Bleeding Kansas both in the territory and in Congress, then the sham of the Lecompton Constitution, and finally the demand for a territorial slave code. Each incident alienated more and more Northerners, convincing them that breaking Southern political power was their central task. That resistance ultimately manifested itself in the election of Abraham Lincoln, war, and emancipation.

What makes Smith’s account distinctive, however, is the way in which he depicts Northerners’ response to these developments as fundamentally conservative—that is, as an effort to preserve free labor, the Union, and, if possible, the potential for compromise. But southern

intransigence ultimately rendered the terms of compromise unacceptably narrow. Northern political leaders thus found themselves forced to choose among undesirable options, including ones—like civil war or emancipation—that seemed radical a few years before. Much of the political debate in the North centered on choosing option least likely to result in violence or disorder. Would the positions advocated by Lincoln and the Republicans truly restore slavery to the path of ultimate extinction (as they claimed the founders had intended) and remove the source of sectional discord? Or would those positions, as Stephen Douglas and his supporters among the Northern Democrats contended, result in consolidation and war between the sections? Was popular sovereignty a way to keep slavery out of the territories—through some combination of local sentiment and natural limits—or was it, as Lincoln claimed, a sham that enabled the expansion of slavery into free territory?

Smith notes that Lincoln and Douglas had fundamental disagreements. They split sharply over whether the Declaration of Independence applied to all races or just to whites, and Douglas and his supporters severely underestimated the irrepressibility of sectional conflict. But Lincoln, Douglas, and the vast majority of Northern political leaders, also held much in common. They all believed that slavery, on some level, was wrong, that its absence from the North was a good thing, and that the South's demands for its protection had limits. They simply did not agree where those limits were. They also believed that American liberty required the Union to be preserved, even if they were at loggerheads about the best way to do so. And it was this desire to preserve the Union and the free labor system that led a significant number of Northern voters and politicians to resist disunion by force and ultimately to end slavery.

This account of slavery's demise, as Smith notes toward the end of his book, contrasts sharply with that offered recently by James Oakes in *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery, 1861-1865* (New York: Norton, 2012). Oakes contends that the Republicans came to power intending to end slavery and that the conflict never shifted from a war to preserve the Union to a war to end slavery. It was always about ending slavery. Smith agrees that purpose of the war never shifted, but, for him, the war was always about preserving the Union. Ending slavery merely helped achieve that goal. And the Republicans came into office not to effect radical change, but to preserve the Northern social order. That said, *The Stormy Present* and *Freedom National* are not directly comparable. Oakes provides detailed analysis of the war years while Smith's work focuses heavily on the 1850s. Much more work needs to be done if one intends to challenge the thesis of *Freedom National*.

Although Smith's *Stormy Present* makes a good start, the book has a significant flaw: its definition of conservatism is exceedingly broad. Smith claims (on page 6) to employ a nonessentialist definition of conservatism, but in practice his definition essentially encompasses any political figure who is 1) from the North, 2) thinks slavery is wrong for any reason, 3) supports the Union, and 4) is worried about violence or social disorder. That casts a wide net, and by this definition, almost every major political figure in the North—from Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas, to the Constitutional Unionists, to the Copperheads—was conservative. Few people fall outside this definition. Abolitionist do (because they rejected Union with slaveholders). So does New York Democrat and supporter of John C. Breckinridge, Charles O'Conner, who advocated unqualified support for slavery. James Buchanan and his rump of

supporters in 1860 may also fall outside the definition. They believed that saving the Union required constant acquiescence to Southern demands.

Yet in the context of *The Stormy Present*, this broad definition has merit. It permits Smith to produce an analysis that takes Republicans, Democrats, Constitutional Unionists and others seriously. And he presents their concerns as plausible responses to the uncertainty produced by sectional crisis. Historians hoping to build on this study—and I hope they will—may well conclude that this definition of conservatism explains too much and revise it. That said, this is a fine book. Smith's emphasis on the common ground among Northern political antagonists provides a nuanced account of the dimensions of antislavery politics as antebellum Americans worked their way through a crisis whose conclusion they could not foresee and whose implications they feared.

*Austin Allen is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Houston – Downtown. He wrote Origins of the Dred Scott Case: Jacksonian Jurisprudence and the Supreme Court, 1836-1860 (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2006). He is currently at work on a study on themes of self-government and self-control in the antebellum U.S.*