

Making an Antislavery Nation: Lincoln, Douglas, and the Battle over Freedom

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Interview

Making an Antislavery Nation: Lincoln, Douglas, and the Battle over Freedom

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Interview by: Tom Barber

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Today the Civil War Book Review is pleased to speak with Graham Peck Professor of History at Saint Xavier University and the author of several articles, which include “How Moderate Were the Moderates? Reconsidering the Origins of the Republican Party in Illinois” and “Abraham Lincoln and the Triumph of an Antislavery Nationalism.” Today we are here to talk with him about his new book, *Making an Antislavery Nation: Lincoln, Douglas, and the Battle over Freedom*. Professor Peck, thank you for joining us today.

Graham Peck (GP): Thank you very much for inviting me.

CWBR: It's great to have you. As your publications and the book's title suggest, you've been thinking about antislavery politics for some time. What are the major features of an antislavery nation? And how did this idea become embedded in American constitutionalism and political principles?

GP: Well as I see it, the concept of an antislavery nation is essentially the marriage of the idea of antislavery to American nationalism, and that was something that was by no means preordained, because had those ideas been conjoined at the founding it would have made it impossible to create a constitution to join all the newly created states into a long lasting federation, and so that's the core precept behind that concept, which I think later becomes so central to antislavery politics to justify a huge movement to destroy slavery it was required for those politicians to say "This antislavery movement is in the interest of the nation." And I think it becomes embedded in the constitutional structure only during the Civil War, which is really beyond the time period that I have written about, so the Civil War amendments are critical in creating a truly free nation and altering original compact, which I think did have proslavery provisions essentially because the Southern delegates were, some of them especially, very concerned to preserve their property and the economic basis for the prosperity of the people who lived in their state. I do think that prior to the Civil War there were constitutional debates over those clauses that were of enormous significance which is precisely why the Republicans, once they had the power, sought to eradicate those provisions.

Just to pull out one example, John Quincy Adams was very concerned with the power of the slaveholders in the 1830s, as he began the antislavery aspect of his storied career. And at that time, he was the one that articulated the idea that the war powers provision in the Constitution

could be used to destroy slavery. And he built that ideal off his prior diplomatic experience negotiating for the United States when he realized that the treaty making power that Congress held by definition had to cover slavery, so in treaties the United States government could clearly touch slavery in all sorts of ways, and likewise the war powers had a very similar character, so I think that there were constitutional aspects that would touch on this idea of nationalism but the full power of an antislavery nationalism wouldn't be expressed until Republicans were able to control American politics during the Civil War.

CWBR: Right, and as you said in the book, they had to make a party that "cleaved" toward freedom at its base because neither the Whigs nor the Democrats seemingly offered that—there was too much compromise with the notion of slavery. In your introduction you mention James Oakes's book *Freedom National*, which underscores the role abolitionists played in transforming their moral outrage over slavery into constitutional principles that protected individual rights. How does your book diverge from Oakes's conclusions, and what is missing from the current historical discussion of antislavery politics?

GP: I'm not so sure my book diverges from Oakes as it is doing a complimentary kind of analysis. So, Oakes has one chapter on the origins of antislavery politics. Before it, he's got a very close analysis of the politics of emancipation and abolition in the Civil War era. So, I'm really focusing an entire book on what was for Oakes one chapter, and I have a much broader framework of issues that I consider. Not surprisingly, given I have many more pages to study the same subject, and my focus is more political than I think constitutional in his case, and also moves well beyond the abolition's contribution to the trajectory of antislavery politics and really much more heavily emphasizes the patterns of American party politics from the 1820s, especially, through 1860, Abraham Lincoln's election, which is when my book ends.

So, to carry that analysis forward, I end up focusing on one state predominately and I bookend my analysis of that state—Illinois—by looking at the founding period constitutional convention in the introduction and then again in the conclusion of my book I push out the implications of the study to the nation itself. Looking at the implications of the actions that were taken by Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas specifically in the 1850s and the broader ideas that they represented and the political supporters that they cultivated. I look at how all of those combinations, politically, have national implications.

So, my study is though in all the substantive chapters focused on the state of Illinois and that allows me to do a number of things that I think that other historians of antislavery politics haven't been able to do in one book. The first is to study the emergence of antislavery politics over a much longer timespan so I'm really interested in the whole period from the Northwest Ordinance through 1860, whereas most of the most influential work on antislavery politics have focused on either the 1850s or the 1840s and 1850s, so that's one I think contribution that the book makes. And the second is to tie economic policy, and to a less intensive extent social history, to the politics, both party politics in the Jacksonian period and in the Civil War period, and I'm particularly interested in how the push for economic opportunity that was so central to national expansion—how that really helped to precipitate an antislavery nationalism. So that's a second major contribution, in addition to expanding the chronology of antislavery politics, I'm trying to root it in American economic history, rather than purely in abolitionist beliefs, or

developments of constitutional ideology. And I would say that the third big thing I'm doing that is different than many other works is that I'm study pretty much all the political parties through time. So, I'm not just studying the antislavery trajectory of abolitionists, through Free Soilers, through the Republican party, but rather I'm equally interested in looking at their opponents who are typically Democratic politicians, and why those Democrats made the choices they did over the course of the antebellum decades. And in particular I'm interested in the Democrats because I think the role of centrists has been understudied in the path to civil war. So, the extremes are often perceived as crushing the means, that is to say, eventually the Fire- Eaters manage to inflect Southern politics with their perspectives and likewise the abolitionist ideas, if Oakes is to be believed, end up being very important to the Republican party and once those very strong opposing positions come into conflict, it is like David Potter argued many years ago, you have cutting shears and the abolitionists and the Fire-Eaters are each one part of the shears and then they can cut apart national politics and the nation. While I don't disagree with that general insight, I do think that the focus on the extremes as really obscured the degree to which the centrists played a critical role in polarizing American politics and particularly I think Stephen A. Douglas and the Kansas-Nebraska Act were central to that process, and I wanted to understand why he did what he did because the abolitionists and the Fire-Eaters couldn't force him to do what he did. He had more power than they did and he made a decision that epically changed American politics.

CWBR: And so, did how did the centrists, having a majority in early Illinois' politics shape this battle between freedom and slavery? What was the outcome? Did Illinois begin as strongly antislavery, or did, slavery have a controlling element in early politics in Illinois?

GP: I think that is a great question and let me reframe it a little bit. So, the way I think of slavery in both Illinois politics and national politics was that it was an interest whose power had to be respected. And so, early national politicians, even antislavery ones, realized that they couldn't create an antislavery nation because Southerners would never agree to that—the interests of slavery were just too powerful—so that meant that they nation was always facing a battle over slavery and freedom. So, unless Southerners volunteered to emancipate their slaves, at some point there was going to have to be a conflict between slavery and freedom. It wasn't evident at the very beginning that that would necessarily occur, many of the Founders hoped precisely the reverse: that slavery would slowly die away and that this battle could be put off and then would never happen. So, if they didn't have the battle at the Constitutional Convention, that was best because they wanted to found a nation and let subsequent generations deal with the problem as they saw fit and hopefully it would be a lot easier problem to resolve. That logic, as it turned out, did not hold and the evidence of that was everywhere, but Illinois is one good example of this national story.

So, Illinois, because of the battle over slavery and freedom had been dedicated to freedom by the Northwest Ordinance, which Northerners had urged in the early republic and Southerners had consented to. We don't know too much about the details of that congressional act because the records are sketchy, but it seems pretty clear that this was something that had a kind of Northern antislavery flavor. And yet, on the ground, Southerners were the first to settle Illinois because they settled it from Kentucky down the Ohio River. They hopped off their boats in Southern Illinois and then they migrated north. So, Illinois, like Indiana and Ohio, had this

very strong Southern influence and these Southerners took their slaves with them and most of the powerful politicians, as in the South, were slaveholders. So this meant that from the beginning these slaveholders were butting up against the national ordinance that said Illinois should be free and, when Illinois was first settled it was actually part of Indiana territory and therefore Indiana of course part of the Northwest Ordinance, or subject to the Northwest Ordinance as well, therefore the same problem faced those first settlers in Illinois that would face Illinois settlers once Illinois became a territory of its own in 1809 and from 1809 until Illinois statehood in 1818, slavery essentially was legal through indentured servitude with the laws being put in place by pro-slavery politicians. And when the state came into the Union, probably only the Northwest Ordinance prevented the state from becoming a slave state because those politicians were aware Congress might not approve statehood if the constitution was overtly proslavery, but after statehood many of those same politicians attempted to create a proslavery state by pushing for a constitutional convention, which would create the opportunity to overturn the antislavery provisions of the state constitution. And in this protracted political battle that followed from that effort on the proslavery side to change the constitution, the divisions over slavery in early Illinois became very readily apparent. And I argue that Illinois only maintained its status as a free state because antislavery settlers had migrated into the state between 1818 and 1824, when the key vote was taken on this vote for a constitutional conventional. And it was this new cadre of antislavery settlers who carried the vote for the antislavery side.

So in a sense we can see how Illinois shows just how deeply divided the nation was because slavery was so deeply embedded into the economic and social practices of slaveholders, and many Southerners, that it was a perfectly logical expectation that they would take their slaves into territories and create slave states that protected their property and this same kind of conflict was of course the one that bedeviled the nation, except on a much larger framework, and far less easy to resolve because the nation essentially was divided under many sovereignties while any given territory or state could have one set of laws that had to be either free or slave. So, I think that gives us a sense of the division in Illinois and that division would continue all the way until 1860 and in some sense the division would persist after 1860 because Illinois was a divided state during the Civil War years and there was considerable political struggle over things like emancipation and abolition in the state even though I don't write about that in my book.

CWBR: Eventually the settlers you are talking about, whether Northern or Southern, join parties and they become Democrats or Whigs in the state, and so partisanship over the national bank, slavery, and expansion plays a vital role in your book. How did the appearance of partisanship, and sometimes its absence, affect antislavery sentiment?

GP: So that's another really penetrating question. As I think a bunch of other scholars have argued, the Jacksonian Party system tended by and large to subordinate conflict over slavery, and that was clearly the intention of many of the major politicians in both the Whig and Democratic parties. So, the parties themselves in order to be cross-sectional, that is to say in order to have both Southerners and Northerners supporting the party at a national level, couldn't agitate the slavery question; and so, members of either party who did that, tended to get marginalized and typically those were Northerners who were agitating for antislavery policy and they would tend to get pushed to the margins of their party. Although to be fair, Southern parties

had a similar character and if there were extremists who really were pushing for proslavery policy, definitely more centrist Southerners would push back in certain instances.

So that same tension held in Illinois, as it did in the nation. And the kind of difficulty the parties with the slavery question was well illustrated in 1837, just to take one of many examples, when Elijah Lovejoy was murdered by a proslavery mob in Alton, Illinois, a very famous episode in the history of abolitionism, and it was striking because on the one hand his murders got away scot-free, which showed the power of slavery and racial ideology in Illinois, sort of protecting the national union. And the state legislature was also pretty supportive essentially of anti-abolitionism as a general practice, but Lincoln protested, along with a man named Dan Stone, protested the support that the Illinois legislature provided for the concept that slavery was essentially sacred to the Southern states, which was a provision that the state legislature passed at the request of Southern state legislatures and Lincoln's position gives us insight into the conflict that antislavery Northerners had in the party system because he had to literally protest what the party system was doing. Yet, of course, he was a leading Whig politician and he cared deeply for the Union, as other Northern nationalists and unionists always had from the Founders through John Quincy Adams through many others. And so, he was not looking to destroy the Union, he wanted the slavery issue to somehow go away slowly just as the Founders had wanted it to go away, and ultimately therefore his commitment to the Union plus his commitment to his party, which was a cross-sectional party, muted his antislavery impulses, as a general measure aside from protests like that.

But ultimately, the party system helped to kick off disputes over slavery. I think centrally because the party system did promise to promote the liberty of its partisans. It said: "We will help you gain land; gain liberty; rise in stature." And to do that, it will be this Jeffersonian approach where we will acquire cheap land on the frontier. And that really was a driving aspect of Illinois politics from its inception, literally from the territorial period where Indians are being cleared off in the War of 1812 so prior to Illinois being a state the combination of between taking land and settlers growing in wealth through the acquisition of that land was central to Illinois politics, that continues for literally four decades, and never stops. And in the 1840s, the Northern Democrats become the greatest advocates of Manifest Destiny. They link up with Southern Democrats and say "Let's grab more land. It's great for the people we represent and it's great for the country also. The country gains power and our voters gain land and gain wealth." And that, however, is a real problem because it raised issues that could not be adjudicated within one state. It forced the question of whether slavery would predominate in a given territory that was recently acquired and that particular issue kind of breaks apart the party because once politicians are faced with that issue, someone like Lincoln says "No, I've got to vote for the Wilmot Proviso. My antislavery inclinations, my belief in America's nationalism and America's exceptionalism, means I need to take a stand in favor of an antislavery nation." And so that's the way that I think the parties help fracture the kind of political structure that keeps antislavery politics at bay. Because the party system did that until it invited antislavery dissent through the acquisition of new land because that new land could not be easily adjudicated within the party system.

CWBR: So, let's talk about the other side of that which is Stephen Douglas who gets sucked into this Manifest Destiny based off of land and popular sovereignty, and rightly Douglas receives a lot of attention in your book, importantly. So, would you talk a little bit about how

Douglas's political calculus developed and why his relationship with Southerners soured so quickly even after he had tried and promised this particular section a great many things?

GP: So, Douglas really represents perfectly the Northern Democrat that wants expansion and is profoundly committed to it. He's one of America's greatest expansionists in the history of the country. He didn't just want western expansion; he wanted to take Cuba; he wanted to take land in the Caribbean. He was as much an expansionist as the most proslavery Southerner you can find. And this ardent nationalism, along with the conviction, that the nation's interests lay in expanding and claiming as much territory as possible, that we would be this North American, and ideally South American, colossus in the world meant that the acquisition of territory was going to be first and foremost, and that he would deal with any other problems subsequently.

So that mentality led him to advocate Manifest Destiny in the 1840s, led him to support popular sovereignty in 1848 as a solution to the question of how to deal with slavery in national territory—that is let national settlers in a given territory decide the fate of the territory—and that underlaid also his brilliant maneuvering in 1850 when the Union's stability was at stake and he helped push a series of bills through Congress, many of which he wrote himself, and at the core of that compromise was again popular sovereignty—that let's let these territories we've acquired from Mexico be organized according to how the settlers want to organize those territories; we don't need to adjudicate it in Congress, was his central message.

So, this idea was that the nation can keep expanding as long as we find a way of resolving how to deal with that precise problem slavery creates. How can we prevent antislavery politics from entering the political system when we acquire land? And the solution was let's get a national principle that says: "No one other than the settlers in those territories have a right to decide that issue." Congress may have the power, but whether or not it has the power, which of course was a disputed between Northerners and Southerners but even if it did, we shouldn't use it because we need to be committed nationalists."

So, all of this leads him simultaneously to be tightly tied to Southerners politically because he is willing for slavery to be expanded in a way many other Northern politicians were more resistant. And he doesn't see slavery as antithetical to American nationalism in the way that ultimately the Republicans would. So, he says in his debates with Lincoln, "Why not slavery and freedom exist in perpetuity? That's the way the Founders made the country. Why can't it continue that way? It's only because of extremists like you, and extremists on the Southern side, that create huge problems for the rest of us centrists that this is even an issue threatening the nation. If you all would just be quiet and keep your thoughts to yourself and let the territory's settlers deal with this problem the nation could go on without conflict." So that explains his politics and why he is willing in 1854 to push for the Kansas-Nebraska Act which of course was so explosive because it opened up territory that had been preserved for freedom under the Missouri Compromise and it opened up that territory, potentially at least, to slavery through popular sovereignty and that just creates rage in the North, there is no other word. People are incensed because it seems to them that the principle of slavery now has achieved much greater stature in American history and in American political philosophy, so now there is sort of claim that slavery should have equal standing in the nation.

So, Douglas now has a problem in 1854 because the Kansas-Nebraska Act leads to the rise of a massive antislavery political movement, much larger than anything that had preceded it in American history, he has to somehow tamp down that storm in the North. And that means he can't just take an openly proslavery line, even if he was willing to, because he would just get defeated in elections and so would the Northern Democratic party, and this is the rub with the South. So since he now has to hedge on the proslavery side because of his own constituency, and the constituency of other Northern Democrats, it pits him in conflict with Southern politicians who need to be more overtly more proslavery to satisfy their constituents, so ironically his own actions as a centrist where he imagined the possibilities of sort splitting the difference over slavery, of letting slavery and freedom perpetually expand—that seemed a great solution—ironically it destabilized his own Democratic party and made it harder for him to work with Southerners that he sympathized with, and that ultimately is why his relationship with them sours because he couldn't tow the proslavery line as far as they wanted him to. And so, for instance, when they finally say: "Look, the Constitution essentially legalizes slavery in all American territories," he (Douglas) says: "No, that's going too far," and he won't endorse the Dred Scot decision as Chief Justice Taney understood the decision; he claims to support Taney's decision, but actually has his own reading of it that justifies sort of an antislavery dissent. It is very different from Lincoln's dissent, but it is hardly a wholesale proslavery response that endorses proslavery constitutional interpretation.

CWBR: Let's go to—what I really liked about the book—the final chapters, one talks about Douglas, the other talks about Lincoln and in reading them and thinking about the broader idea of centrism in antebellum politics. How was Lincoln able to engineer—bring this vision of an antislavery nation to light, nationally?

GP: Okay, again, I can segue perfectly from the prior question. So, we've seen that Douglas, as you say, had something of a conservative argument that we could preserve the nation through this idea of popular sovereignty. And you're right, Lincoln proposes something that also sounds conservative, he says "We need to preserve the nation through antislavery policy." So how is it that he gets to this conservative position? As you pointed out, Douglas articulates a conservative vision, that the country can be preserved indefinitely into the future if popular sovereignty allows both Northerners and Southerners to be able to expand their social systems into the West, or the South. Yet, Lincoln is also going to argue that the country can be preserved and should be preserved, yet he does it through an antislavery argument; and he says that the country's freedom can only be maintained if Republicans will endorse the Founder's antislavery principles that were enshrined he says in the Northwest Ordinance. And he claims that the antislavery impulses that gave rise to the—let me restate that—he claims that the idea of equality that was in the Declaration of Independence, and that gave rise to freedom, is an intrinsically an antislavery policy; and, that the antislavery character of the nation, is at its core, and yet is now being threatened not merely by Southerners and their desire to expand slavery, but also by Stephen Douglas's attempts to conciliate them through popular sovereignty. And so, Lincoln tells Northerners, "Look I'm the conservative; the Republicans are actually the conservatives because we are preserving what the Founders actually believed."

Now this idea, I think, was a very careful political crafting, that was successful in drawing out a percentage of quiet conservative Northerners to the Republican standard, sort of

pulling them away either from Douglas or from a nonpartisan position; and Lincoln and the Republicans needed all of those votes in the deeply contested states like Indiana, like Ohio, like Pennsylvania. They needed a certain number of conservatives to tip the scales of Northern politics toward the Republican party, and yet, I think that Lincoln's articulation of the country's founding is a bit misleading because I think the Founders were actually much more divided than he gives them credit for. So, in fact, there were Southern Founders who were proslavery. You think of the ones from Georgia and South Carolina at the Constitutional Convention, they were not antislavery Founders who were looking forward to creating an antislavery nation. Had that idea been espoused then, they'd have walked about from the Constitutional Convention and said, "Forget this union, it's a bad idea" and likewise the most antislavery members of the Constitution Convention knew that they couldn't articulate a doctrine like that, even if they had wanted to. So, the founding, I think, was a time where you had these nationalists trying to gather together to create a basis for a republic that would preserve and provide security for the members of the republic and the people in the republic, but in later years there is a debate over what that legacy was and what was at the origins. And so, Southerners say "Ah, there were proslavery origins to America's nation state." And Lincoln says "No, there were antislavery origins to America's nation state." And in both cases, they can make calls to conservatism, to say we are representing the origins of the country.

So that's how Lincoln makes this argument, and it was brilliant masterstroke because it turned the perception of antislavery politics on its head. For almost all of American history, antislavery politics was perceived as radical; as something that will destroy the republic. And this was of course what the Unionists had always said about antislavery, from the Constitution Convention onwards: "You propose an antislavery policy. You are going to threaten the Union." And those kinds of arguments by Northern moderates were buttressed by Southern threats to leave the Union, which the Southern politicians routinely made these threats, especially the most extreme ones said "Hey, you are talking about antislavery again. Guess what? We are going to pick up our marbles and go home, if you try to create an antislavery union." So, that was always the trump card of Northern moderates was saying "Hey, to preserve this country, we have to shield Southern from antislavery sentiment." And now Lincoln is saying "No, to protect the country, we actually have to get back to its founding principles." And I think that these ideas were incredibly powerful in justifying antislavery politics to a Northern population that had been conditioned for a long time to believe that antislavery politics was really the work of radicals, fanatics, and cranks. People like Elijah Lovejoy who literally get murdered in 1837 for making abolitionist arguments. They are shot down in the streets—in this case like a dog—and no one is even prosecuted—well, or I shouldn't say that no one is convicted. And now in 1860, only twenty-three years later, a large majority of Northern voters support Abraham Lincoln's vision, and the Republican party's vision, of an antislavery nation. Not that they are going to abolish slavery right way, or even that they have the power to do it, but that the core meaning of the nation is antislavery; that the doctrine of liberty is by definition is antislavery. And the only question is how to get to that future and how long it will take. And that's just a very different perspective than the one articulated by Douglas or by of course proslavery Southerners.

CWBR: Absolutely, and it was a question, as you said, at the end of your book, one that could only be answered through war. Professor Peck I appreciate you taking the time to sit and

discuss your most recent work *Making an Antislavery Nation: Lincoln, Douglas, and the Battle over Freedom*.