

The F Street Mess: How Southern Senators Rewrote the Kansas-Nebraska Act

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Recommended Citation

Miller, Randall M. (2019) "The F Street Mess: How Southern Senators Rewrote the Kansas-Nebraska Act," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.21.2.09

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol21/iss2/9>

Review

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Spring 2019

Malavasic, Alice Elizabeth. *The F Street Mess: How Southern Senators Rewrote the Kansas-Nebraska Act.* University of North Carolina Press, \$90.00 ISBN 9781469635521

In her first book, Alice Elizabeth Malavasic argues that four southern senators who made up the F Street mess from 1853 to 1856 constituted the “most powerful bloc in the U.S. Senate.” (p. 8) During the 1850s, as self-proclaimed heirs of John C. Calhoun’s constitutional ideas and proslavery strategy, these senators used their positions as chairmen of critical senatorial committees to push slavery’s interests vigorously. In Malavasic’s accounting, the friendship and group dynamic of the four Democratic messmates – David Rice Atchison of Missouri, Andrew P. Butler of South Carolina, Robert M.T. Hunter of Virginia, and James M. Mason of Virginia – reinforced their institutional power to give them almost dictatorial control over key legislation. In the most significant demonstration of such power, Malavasic concludes, the junta of four messmates conspired to force an explicit repeal of the Missouri Compromise in drafting the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 as a condition of supporting the bill and persuaded a reluctant President Franklin Pierce to endorse the bill. In so doing, the messmates gained the short-term “victory” for slavery’s advance but in the end crippled Senator Stephen Douglas’s presidential prospects, shattered what was left of the second party system, and spurred the rise of the Republican party. The influence of this cohort encouraged a growing conviction among northerners that a “slave power conspiracy” threatened their vital interests, and called into question their own strategy and power as civil war broke out in Kansas and aggressive proslavery actions such as the *Dred Scott* decision and trying to force support for the proslavery Lecompton constitution cost northern Democrats many seats and eventually the Democrats’ control of the Congress.

Malavasic sets up her chapters on the messmates shaping of the Kansas-Nebraska Act with deep background on their interests and allegiances. She tracks John C. Calhoun’s political

and ideological evolution through from the 1820s, through the nullification crisis, his break with Andrew Jackson, and his final move from a partisan Democrat with presidential ambitions to an advocate for a sectional southern party and suggests how all this bequeathed to the messmates their own proslavery priorities. She also follows the careers of the messmates and the formation of the mess – first with Butler, Hunter, and Mason, and then with Atchison joining them at the house they shared by 1853 – and the ways the messmates bonded not only ideologically and politically, but also through friendships that extended to taking holidays together. Malavasic uses correspondence creatively to reveal such bonding, but lacks sources to show how the messmates actually worked out legislative priorities and strategies among themselves, whether over meals or alcohol. Lacking such sources, she can only infer the group dynamics rather than demonstrate them, and she cannot – or does not – show how the more radical Atchison and Butler won over the more moderate Hunter and Mason to their ways. And she over-reaches in asserting that Atchison, who initially did not support the junta’s proposed organizing of the Nebraska territory due to his struggles with Thomas Hart Benton in Missouri, came around to the other messmates’ position supposedly to relieve his internal psychological strains in being out of step with them.

Malavasic devotes most of her attention to the machinations in and out of the Senate that led to the Kansas-Nebraska bill that repealed the Missouri Compromise and opened the territories to slavery through the instrument of popular sovereignty. She provides insightful examinations of the details and dynamics of drafting the bill, especially with her close reading of the *Congressional Globe*. More than any previous scholar, she calibrates every interest, tracks the threats to Democrats who oppose the junta, reveals the messmates’ mastery of parliamentary and Senate rules, and gives detailed accounts of the speeches that captivated the public and provided the rationales for the bold assertion of “slave power” in the Kansas-Nebraska Act. In doing so, she uses the old-school method of determining ideology and interest by taking the debates on the Senate floor seriously. If her extensive re-telling and review of each speech sometimes becomes redundant, her approach has the cumulative effect of showing how the junta and its supporters pulled together to get a bill on their terms. At the same time, the junta exerted its power with behind-the-scenes maneuvers that got Douglas to sign on with their proposals rather than lose his committee chairmanship when he balked on the issue of the repeal, and caused others to fall into line accordingly. In her presentation she also gives Free Soilers and

other northern opposition their due, especially by relating Charles Sumner's and Salmon Chase's speeches. The result is a "you-are-there" effect in watching the legislation unfold.

Malavasic concludes her work with discussions of the junta's demise as a collective power, though noting that Hunter had legislative success in leading the way to significant reductions in the tariff. In her epilogue she briefly recounts the roles each of the four messmates had in the secession crisis and during and after the Civil War. How they understood and assessed their place in bringing on secession and the war by their radicalism and even hubris in dictating proslavery legislation Malavasic does not say.

In sum, Malavasic has written a compelling work that shows that a real "slave power conspiracy" did exist, at least in the Senate, and more so that understanding the friendships and private associations of legislators can reveal much about the direction and dynamics of making law and exercising power. She overstates the significance of the junta overall by casting the story largely in terms of what happened in the Senate, thereby leaving House deliberations in the margins, but her work thus invites other close-in studies of the ways that the informal aspects of interests and power, as in friendships, shaped the institutional ones. Scholars who do so venture would do well to follow her lead.

Randall M. Miller is the William Dirk Warren '50 Sesquicentennial Chair & Professor of History at Saint Joseph's University and the author or editor of numerous books, including (with Paul Cimbala as co-author) The Northern Home Front during the Civil War (Praeger, 2017), (with Judith Giesberg as co-editor), Women and the American Civil War: North-South Counterpoints (Kent State University Press, 2018), and (with Michael Birkner and John Quist as co-editor) The Worlds of James Buchanan and Thaddeus Stevens: Place, Personality, and Politics in the Civil War Era (Louisiana State University Press, 2019).