

A Strife of Tongues: The Compromise of 1850 and the Ideological Foundations of the American Civil War

Joshua A. Lynn

Eastern Kentucky University, joshua.lynn@eku.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Lynn, Joshua A. (2019) "A Strife of Tongues: The Compromise of 1850 and the Ideological Foundations of the American Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 21 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.21.3.19

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol21/iss3/19>

Review

Lynn, Joshua A.

Summer 2019

Maizlish, Stephen E. *A Strife of Tongues: The Compromise of 1850 and the Ideological Foundations of the American Civil War.* University of Virginia Press, 2018 \$45.00 ISBN 9780813941196

Antebellum politicians knew that words mattered. In 1856 Louisianan Judah P. Benjamin complained in the Senate that remarks made by antislavery colleague William H. Seward “will be spread through the machinery of the federal post office. It is printed in your [Congressional] Globe. It will be read, probably, by millions of people.” “No such faint voice as mine,” Benjamin whined, “can follow it to every village, to every hamlet, to every cottage to which it has spread.”¹ The prospect of antislavery sentiment invading southern villages, hamlets, and cottages worried this slaveholding politician. Years after the Compromise of 1850 had supposedly achieved “finality,” political disputes over slavery had not ceased and the acrimonious language of the Compromise debate still shaped how Americans thought about slavery, race, and sectionalism. In *A Strife of Tongues: The Compromise of 1850 and the Ideological Foundations of the American Civil War*, Stephen E. Maizlish explains why words alarmed. In this extensively researched work of political, intellectual, and cultural history, Maizlish recounts how the Compromise debate, far from mollifying sectionalism, only sharpened divisions between slave states and free states and established an ideological framework in which the ensuing sectional crisis would unfold.

Northern and southern congressmen used the Compromise debate to contrast their sections. They jostled over more than the Texas-New Mexico border or popular sovereignty in Utah. Congressmen mounted sophisticated defenses of their respective societies and critiqued the other section’s culture and economy. Maizlish listens to their wide-ranging speeches in order to recreate their sectional worldviews. This is not a history of legislative wrangling or partisan

¹Judah P. Benjamin, *Speech of Hon. J. P. Benjamin, of Louisiana, on the Kansas Question. Delivered in the Senate, May 3, 1856* (Washington, DC: Union, 1856), 9.

jockeying. Rather, Maizlish moves thematically through northern and southern attitudes toward slavery, constitutionalism, socioeconomic order, race, gender, and historical memory. He weaves these themes together to capture the sectional self-understanding of white northerners and white southerners.

Rhetoric gave voice to preexisting sectional differences and, in turn, conditioned perceptions of those differences. The nine-month debate exacerbated a schism already opened by slavery. Maizlish reiterates what historians sometimes need to be reminded of: Politicians' words evinced deeply held beliefs. Politicians also listened to one another. Sectionalism was reinforced when congressmen endured attacks, especially from sectional hardliners who occupy a more important role in Maizlish's retelling than conciliators like Henry Clay. When southerners heard hostility toward slavery's extension, with some northerners hoping for its ultimate extinction, they only became more convinced that expansion was necessary for the survival of slavery and of white southern society itself. Maizlish conveys the sincerity of political rhetoric by putting congressional speeches in dialogue with a staggering number of congressmen's manuscript collections. The consonance between public utterances and private writings, including letters from back home, reveals that congressmen believed what they said and that what they said was also what their constituents believed.

Although attuned to diversity within each section, Maizlish concludes that North and South each possessed an underlying consensus regarding slavery's spread. This was not an abstract question—both sides realized that slavery could and would take root in new territories. Northerners' refusal to countenance extension animated proposals ranging from the Wilmot Proviso to Democrats' less confrontational popular sovereignty. Moral opposition to slavery inspired some white northerners, while the white supremacist desire for racially pure territories informed others. All united, however, on the lowest common denominator of non-extension. White southerners, meanwhile, while varying in their commitment to slavery as a positive good, were unwavering in wanting the territories open to their peculiar institution. In asserting each section's consensus, Maizlish subordinates partisanship to sectionalism, occasionally downplaying important partisan differences. Maizlish, for instance, minimizes northern Democrats' dedication to states' rights, which often made them sound akin to their fellow partisans in the South, in order to fit them into a northern consensus on constitutionalism shared by Whigs and Free Soilers.

The argument for sectional consensus is nonetheless convincing and historiographically compelling. Maizlish acknowledges political diversity within a fundamentalist approach to Civil War causation. This is not a reductionist narrative of a monolithic North against a monolithic South. Indeed, partisanship only fortified sectionalism as parties competed to further their section's consensus. What historians have long recognized as the "politics of slavery," whereby southern parties engaged in brinksmanship over who was more proslavery, had a corollary in the North as partisans vied to outdo one another in thwarting expansion. There were, Maizlish shows, multiple ways to be antislavery. He balances a spectrum of opinion within each section with an increasingly intractable sectional divide predicated on slavery. His is a nuanced, flexible fundamentalism. Congressmen thought within a sectional framework, albeit one that permitted short-term politics and contingency to play out over the subsequent decade. The Compromise debate did not make war inevitable, but Maizlish agrees with many of the debate's participants that their deliberations led to greater sectional self-awareness.

The debate demonstrated that white northerners and white southerners, although sharing many values, came to see themselves as distinct. Congressional rhetoric, according to Maizlish, revealed "highly articulated, comprehensive worldviews composed of strong commitments to specific methods of social and economic organization, deeply felt racial prejudices, and intensely held political and constitutional theories, all frequently reflected in strikingly gendered language and emotionally filtered memories" (5). One of his most significant contributions is the recognition that the debate encompassed more than the abstract question of slavery or arid constitutional rights because it touched on congressmen's self-conceptions of their race and gender. Southerners understood the violation of their idea of constitutional state equality, for example, as imperiling their status as white men. Their raced and gendered rhetoric registered genuine fears over racial and gender disorder at home.

Maizlish's work is a model for political historians of how to bridge "traditional" political history with culture. The Compromise debate occurred in the most rarified realm of "high" politics—congressmen talking to one another in the Capitol. But they were also speaking to the rest of the nation, and Americans, including women, talked back. They debated legislation, party ideology, and constitutionalism, but also race, gender, and memory. Maizlish reinterprets sources that have been ransacked for generations and proves that politics was not cordoned off from other arenas of life. This is evident in Maizlish's sparkling discussion of gender. It is

commendable that the book contains chapters on constitutionalism *and* on race and gender. Congressmen spoke about political issues in gendered language. In a move atypical of studies of partisan politics, moreover, Maizlish not only employs gender as a category of analysis but treats women as political actors. Women were present in the Senate. Women also wrote their husbands in Congress, sometimes disagreeing over the Compromise measures. Readers will wish this investigation of women and gender were longer and integrated throughout other chapters.

A Strife of Tongues shows that competing visions of the Good Society characterized politics. Debating slavery's expansion, congressmen tussled over social, gender, and racial order. Maizlish reaffirms that, regardless of the issue, slavery was the source of difference. The stakes of policy debates were raised when congressmen sparred over their respective societies, a phenomenon that would continue into the 1850s when legislative questions morphed into sectional showdowns. Sectional rhetoric was not the purview of inflammatory and irresponsible fanatics, but became the common idiom of antebellum politics for the next decade owing to an ideological framework forged in 1850.

Joshua A. Lynn is Assistant Professor of History at Eastern Kentucky University. He is the author of *Preserving the White Man's Republic: Jacksonian Democracy, Race, and the Transformation of American Conservatism* (University of Virginia Press, 2019). He won the Richards Prize for the best article published in *Journal of the Civil War Era* in 2018. He previously taught at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Yale University. His current book project, "*The Black Douglass and the White Douglas*," uses the relationship between Frederick Douglass and Stephen A. Douglas to explore race, manhood, and democratic citizenship in Civil War America.