

The Stormy Present: Conservatism and the Problem of Slavery in Northern Politics

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Recommended Citation

Esh, Christian R. (2021) "The Stormy Present: Conservatism and the Problem of Slavery in Northern Politics," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 23 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.23.1.18

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol23/iss1/18>

Review

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Winter 2021

Smith, Adam I. P. *The Stormy Present: Conservatism and the Problem of Slavery in Northern Politics*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2020 (reissue). PAPERBACK. \$29.95 ISBN 9781469659084 pp. 344

In *The Stormy Present*, Adam I. P. Smith re-examines the crisis of Union and Slavery in the North as being essentially conservative in its nature. Much of the vast literature on the coming of the Civil War emphasizes the influence of northern anti-slavery radicalism and southern traditionalism as the two poles of the sectional conflict. According to Smith, this approach obscures the true sentiments of most Northerners (Democrats, Whigs, and moderate Republicans) who sought to secure “the Union as it was.” Conservatism, as defined by Smith, is “a disposition” (5) rather than an ideology. Shaped by the desire to preserve a free and open society bequeathed to them by the Founding, conservatives were confronted by twin social revolutions beyond their control: a transition to a modern technological society and the onrush of democracy unleashed by the age of revolution. The sectional crisis complicated this struggle still further. Northerners also sought to preserve their tradition of personal liberty and economic progress against Southern insistence that their own system of property rights in human beings had a higher constitutional status. While Smith treats the crisis over slavery with great seriousness, conservatism for him is much larger than appeals to white supremacy.

The main arc of the story will be familiar to readers, but the stress on the North’s conservative principles will make it fresh. It begins with an analysis of the Astor Palace Riot (1849) between Democratic theater fans of Edwin Forrest and the Whig patrons of the English thespian William Charles Macready. Smith uses the street violence to establish conservatism’s love of order as being more foundational than the North’s opposition to slavery. Smith lays out how the following struggles (over the Kansas-Nebraska Act, *Dred Scott*, the election of 1860, and the secession crisis) convinced conservatives that the South had broken its covenant with the

North. Northern Democrats and Republicans came to disagree sharply on their preferred partisan response to the South (whether popular sovereignty or “House Divided” rhetoric), but they shared a determination that slavery would not be allowed to further expand. Secession then briefly unified the North, convincing them that the “slave power” was the grave threat that Lincoln had prophesied. Here Smith’s analysis is both subtle and persuasive. Northern conservatives were not primarily motivated by abolition or human rights for the slave. The war convinced them that the slaveholding aristocracy must be destroyed to ensure the survival of the Union. Conservatives grew outraged at Lincoln, the draft, the burgeoning debt, and the centralization of power, but most remained united in the conviction that the South was a greater danger than Lincoln. In their victory in 1865, “most Northerners thought the war was a triumphant vindication of their society and their values.” (220)

A particular strength of Smith’s account is that, while not placing slavery at the center of conservatives’ self-identity, it places the struggle over slavery at the center of the sectional crisis. Northerners reacted with horror at the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 because it deprived them of their long-established local control of their laws. Smith is especially sensitive to the way that the reaction to the removal of fugitive slaves like Anthony Burns cut across partisan lines. Former Whigs were affronted at the threat to “freedom national” while Jacksonian Democrats chafed at the insult to “Northern honor and manliness.” If northerners were willing to compromise on slavery for the sake of the Union, they nevertheless felt compelled by the debate over Kansas to defend free soil as their way of life. Smith repeatedly stressed that Northern conservatives were willing to allow the South to enjoy their Constitutional liberty in the South. The North, however, would not renounce “freedom national;” they identified in the repeal of the Missouri Compromise and the *Dred Scott* decision a design to expand slavery that would threaten their way of life.

The re-definition of conservatism here contains both a strength and a weakness. At its best, Smith’s argument (the Edward Osborn professor at Oxford) portrays conservatism against the backdrop of rapidly liberalizing Western empires. Americans like Fisher or Hawthorne were American Victorians who strove to navigate “the stress of modernity” between the threats of lawless Democratic mobs, a slaveholding aristocracy, and a utopian set of radicals inspired by the recent failed liberal revolutions of 1848 in Europe. Indeed, this attention to international context will make the book enjoyable reading for even the most seasoned of Civil War students;

I was delighted to learn that John Van Buren was derided as “the prince” because he had once danced with Queen Victoria! The difficulty is that Smith’s demarcation of conservatism is so sweeping as to encompass nearly the entire breadth of Northern Society. He incorporates the rich literary records of Sidney George Fisher and Nathaniel Hawthorne, the artist Samuel F. B. Morse, Free Soil politician John Dix, the populist democrats of the Astor Place Riots, and the Democratic elder statesman James Buchanan to demonstrate a disposition toward the preservation of Northern values. My only critique of this approach is that it incorporates everything but the radical abolitionist tinge as conservative. He dismisses abolitionists as not quite American in their Jacobin fanaticism for social change at any price. One group that seems to be entirely absent from his analysis is the non-conservative millennial evangelical reformers like Theodore Weld and Charles Finney. As a whole, the work contains an essential and lively corrective to a much-neglected element of Civil War scholarship. Students, scholars, and armchair generals alike will be enriched by this engaging re-interpretation of a *conservative* North.

Christian R. Esh is an associate professor of history at Houghton College in the beautiful Genesee Valley of Upstate New York. His present book project explores the debate over state rights and the Union in the antebellum North.