

The Republic of Violence: The Tormented Rise of Abolition in Andrew Jackson's America

Scott Gac
Trinity College, scott.gac@trincoll.edu

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Recommended Citation

Gac, Scott (2022) "The Republic of Violence: The Tormented Rise of Abolition in Andrew Jackson's America," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.24.4.10

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol24/iss4/10>

Review

Gac, Scott

Fall 2022

Dickey, J. D. *The Republic of Violence: The Tormented Rise of Abolition in Andrew Jackson's America*. Pegasus Books, 2022. HARDCOVER. \$29.95 ISBN 9781643139289 pp. 376.

Removed from their more traditional roles as unpleasant sideshows, slavery and colonization are recognized by modern scholars as foundations for the study of the American past. Indigenous lands were central to the development of the North American slave economy. This economy, which transformed between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, served as a bridge between British and American government. Without the occupation of Indigenous lands, there was no land on which White settlers could force enslaved persons to work. In settler colonialism and racialized human enslavement, a violent dispossession of land and labor formed the early United States into a settler-slave society. Violence is thus a central factor for United States historians. Recent publications in the field grapple with the ramifications of understanding the nation as, in J. D. Dickey's words, a "Republic of Violence."

Dickey has written popular works on Sherman's March and the Great Awakening. In this book, he focuses on American abolitionists and their activism in the antebellum era. The violence highlighted in the work's title most often refers to the actions of private and government leaders who directed the physical repression of antislavery activists. (The author notes, too, the violence of early American democracy where, for example, in New York City "the only thing" required of a voter "was to be a white man with a strong spine," (38). In the 1830s and 1840s, attacks on these activists—and, at times, the violent pushback against such attacks—are the center of attention.

The first three chapters in *The Republic of Violence* reframe early American abolitionism into four camps: the conservative, racist approach to antislavery supported by members of the American Colonization Society, such as founders Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, and Francis Scott Key; the wealthy, White ally approach, a mix of paternalism, elitism, and racism, offered by the likes of Arthur and Lewis Tappan; the less elite White ally approach, often encumbered by a

White paternalism, as represented by William Lloyd Garrison; and the Black activist approach as noted through the efforts of David Ruggles. Too often reduced to the work of Garrison and Frederick Douglass, American antislavery in this book is nuanced and complex. It is refreshing to see this vibrant world restored for a wider audience.

Formed in 1816, the American Colonization Society (ACS) and its brand of antislavery was grounded in racism. Whites and Blacks are too different to live together peaceably, ACS supporters argued, and the “racial problems” were those fostered by the superiority of White persons and the inferiority of Black persons (xi). To send Black people “back” to Africa (and later to sites in Central and South America) was the key ACS project. Such logic ignored the fact that many enslaved and free Blacks by this time had been born in North America. ACS leaders also paired African American colonization with a supposed need to Christianize Indigenous populations in Africa. Framed as a religious mission, Black removal from the United States was offered as part of a movement for global moral uplift.

Though there were a few Black supporters of the ACS, individuals who shared hopes of living in a more equal and just society outside of the United States, there were many others who stood outraged by the idea from the start. Here, in Black anti-colonization protest, Dickey locates the origins of activism against slavery in the 1820s. These Black men and women, predominantly free Black men and women, refuted the notion of Black removal, clamored for the acceptance of birthright citizenship, and openly voiced solidarity with “the slave population of the country” (xii).

That anti-Black colonization protests fostered the ideological basis for so-called *immediate* approaches to antislavery is widely accepted. In the 1780s and 1790s, White northern lawmakers had proceeded with *gradual* abolition in several northern states. The post-nati abolition measures (measures passed after the American Revolution) acknowledged that there was a new system of political rights in place. But the end of slavery in northern places stretched the process of abolition over many years. In Connecticut, for example, children born after March 1, 1784, to an enslaved mother were required to be freed by the age of twenty-five. The act did not free the child’s relatives, or anyone born earlier than the stipulated date. Gradual abolition measures catered to the interests of Northern enslavers and their claims to property and labor in human beings.

Though the mission of the ACS was also a gradual process of emancipation, its threat of Black removal helped cultivate urgent responses. Indeed, anti-colonizationists responded to the ACS with an urgency that spilled over into the formation of radical possibilities for ending slavery in the United States. Black activists soon spread calls for immediate emancipation. The White antislavery reformer William Lloyd Garrison was but one person, for example, who learned and internalized immediatism from the Black advocates with whom he worked.

In this book, Dickey details how supporters of the ACS soon turned a movement for Black removal into a broader crusade that targeted Black communities and Black advancement in the North. An 1833 campaign in Connecticut against a school opened for Black girls by Prudence Crandall, a White activist, and the 1834 anti-Black violence in New York City are two examples highlighted by the author. Whites intimidated and detained Crandall's Black students and, eventually, a White mob ruined the school and smashed the windows of Crandall's home. In New York, a White mob targeted antislavery activists (such as Arthur and Lewis Tappan), their businesses, and any Black persons it could find. The mob "was on the attack because it hated abolitionists and Black people," writes Dickey (54). To answer how such racial hate transformed into violence, Dickey offers a top-down explanation. "An epidemic of violence was consuming America, and it started at the top," he states. "Andrew Jackson's empowerment of white working men had uplifted them in voting rights and economic mobility, but it also tacitly gave them license to attack any minorities they despised" (88).

To place an enslaver and Indian killer, President Andrew Jackson, at the head of an "epidemic of violence" is understandable. Jackson's election in 1832, powered by the expansion of the White male electorate in the United States, is undeniably a pivotal moment in the history of American violence. But readers of this book miss out on something important: a system of anti-Black policy and violence then being developed in the United States. By the time of Jackson's election, the Black male right to vote had been curbed in nearly all the older, northern states. In states created after 1800, only Maine allowed for Black men to vote. There was nothing tacit about Black disenfranchisement and White enfranchisement in the North. Northern places, as Dickey attests to in his book, proved just as capable of fostering violent expressions of White supremacy as those in the South. While there was a fierce debate over the boundaries of White supremacy embedded in the conflict between slave and free labor, many Whites in both regions coalesced around ideas that sustained notions of the superiority of White people.

The Republic of Violence underscores the many facets of Whiteness in the antebellum United States but fails to address the broader consequences. This is one result of centering a book on older generations of scholarship. Dickey's bibliography is weighted far more to pieces published before 2000 than those published after. Instead of understanding Whiteness as a system constructed in the North and South in the antebellum era, it appears more as a matter of fact—a violent condition summoned by leaders at the top of the political spectrum.

Dickey also deploys a top-down approach in his exploration of American antislavery. Focused on the battles among the various leaders of important antislavery organizations, he fails to extend his complex view to embrace the full vibrancy of antislavery in the North. In the 1830s, American antislavery, a term that encompasses the many different organizations and communities committed to the cause, was sustained and furthered by an exciting world of literature, music, theater, and print. This movement culture, a groundswell of antislavery activism that surged in the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s, is precisely what the anti-abolitionist Harrison Gray Otis detested. Otis bemoaned “the ‘sewing clubs’ and Sunday schools that promote abolition,” states Dickey, “because these were people and places where the ideas he hated were being taught” (128). In Boston, the hometown of Otis, such ideas prevailed in many spaces.

Much more of a problem, though, is the author's lack of engagement with violence. If the United States was a *Republic of Violence*, readers of the book fail to learn much about it. Dickey is unconcerned with economic and emotional forms of violence, seemingly unaware of anything other than physically violent actions. And even in his focus on physical violence there are concerns. When recounting the violence of the 1834 anti-Black and anti-abolitionist mob, the author states, “ultimately, nothing like this level of violence had ever been seen in New York.” This is a statement readily proven untrue. In 1741, for example, leading New Yorkers responded to a supposed slave conspiracy by arresting about 150 people—after a trial, 30 Black individuals and 4 poor White people were publicly executed. In addition, about eighty persons (mostly Black persons) were exiled from the city.

A similar tendency to exaggerate marks the author's writing about the peril faced by William Lloyd Garrison. After noting how a mob brutishly tortured, killed, and desecrated the corpse of a southern man because of his possession of the antislavery newspaper, *The Liberator*,

Dickey states, “Garrison could expect worse if he were ever caught” (94). A discerning reader must ask, what is worse than torture, death, and corpse desecration?

“The end must come,” says Theodore Dwight Weld in the closing pages of this book (273). For Dickey, the “republic of violence” started in antislavery activism and ended in the 1890s, when the last members of the antislavery generation died. In this framing, the author offers a clear beginning and end to racialized, anti-activist violence in the United States. It is slavery and the end of slavery that explain the crucible of nineteenth-century American violence.

Though this framework provides for a neat and clean narrative structure, it does not well match the reality of nineteenth century America. Slavery was a violent institution, among the most violent in the American past. That the violence of enslavement is largely assumed in a book on *The Republic of Violence* is a curious choice. But to isolate it, remove its connection to Indigenous colonization, another system believed to end in the 1890s, misunderstands the relationship of race, labor, violence, and authority in the United States. To claim an end to the “republic of violence” in the same decade in which the lynching of African American individuals peaked is to ignore vital facets of the violent republic. In lynching (and in industrial-era Indigenous colonization) new forms of violence announced new expressions of White supremacy. These forms were at once tied to older institutions and traditions but pointed to new conceptions of race, segregation, violence, and hate.

Scott Gac is an Associate Professor of American Studies and History at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, where he serves as the Undergraduate and Graduate Director of American Studies. His new book Born in American Blood: Mobilized Government, Armed Civilians, and the Violent Nation They Made is due out in 2023 with Cambridge University Press. His email address is scott.gac@trincoll.edu.