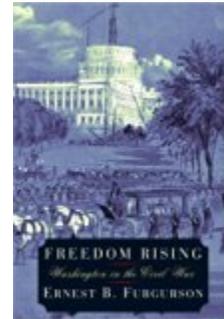


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ernest B. Furgurson. *Freedom Rising: Washington in the Civil War*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004. xi + 463 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-375-40454-2.

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Washington Goes To War

Compared to the annual torrent of books published about the American Civil War, the number of works about Washington that examine the city in detail during the conflict is surprisingly sparse. Since Washington was so much caught up in the “war for the capitals” that raged between 1861 and 1865, one would think that the city would be the keystone for Civil War scholarship. Alas, the capital infrequently gets the attention its history deserves. Only general accounts of the city’s history like Constance McLaughlin Green’s two-volume study, *Washington*, or Alan Lessoff’s *The Nation and Its City: Politics, “Corruption,” and Progress in Washington, D.C., 1861-1902* convey any sense of the crisis that prevailed in the capital during those war-torn years.

The one exception to this observation over time has been the masterful and still-vibrant *Reveille in Washington, 1860-1865*, published in 1941 and winner of the 1942 Pulitzer Prize in history. Some have suggested that Margaret Leech’s sheer brilliance and eloquence of style may have intimidated writers who were seeking to understand and write about the capital during the “War between the States.” Certainly she set a high standard for any study of a city at war in the nineteenth century or the present age.

Thus we are indeed fortunate that Ernest Furgurson has come forth with a new book about the nation’s capital during the Civil War. In every respect, Furgurson matches Leech’s high standards for breadth of vision, insight, and understanding of those titanic forces of war that changed Washington from a dusty Potomac outpost

of the plantation South into a federal military juggernaut.

In *Freedom Rising*, Furgurson brings to his work insights into politics and drives of egotism that could only be honed from a career in newspapers, where writers constantly rub up against the mighty as well as the powerless. Such insights are often distressingly absent in many academic histories of the Civil War.

As Furgurson notes, the crisis confronting the Union in 1861 was far graver than anything encountered since, and it was in Washington that the gravest threat to the nation’s political survival was confronted and defeated. Even today, the ghosts of that conflict swirl about the capital, reminders of the frailty of democracy in wartime.

Even many Civil War buffs do not realize how much of the war was fought in the halls and homes of Washington in addition to the battlefield. The great work of racial emancipation was inspired by the thousands of blacks who swarmed to the capital in wartime and by a free Negro community championed by leaders like Henry Highland Garnet of the 15th Street Presbyterian Church. Yes, freedom was affirmed at Antietam and Cold Harbor with blood. But it was also affirmed on the streets of Washington with Sojourner Truth boldly integrating the street-cars of the city and the dedicated flocks of female nurses who ministered to the throngs of wounded soldiers, rebel and Union alike, while the city stank of amputated limbs and death.

In *Freedom Rising*, Lincoln occupies center stage—a beleaguered president in a city besieged by doubt, mil-

itary incompetence, and internal treason. Throughout those trying first days we see Lincoln trying to accommodate a relentless horde of office-seekers, soothe the egotistical feathers of overblown cabinet officials, and struggle vainly to prevent the states from seceding. All the while both his so-called friends and enemies dismissed him as a dunce, a primitive Illinois jokester fit only to be shot or kidnapped and held hostage to a peace agreement that would ratify the disunion. For most of the war it seemed that would-be assassins of the president were legion. John Wilkes Booth, an arrogant actor who hated the North, merely put into practice what many people wished. Yet in those stormy, violent times Lincoln uttered the inaugural words “We must not be enemies” and concluded with the fervent wish that peace would prevail if only every American could be touched by what he called “the better angels of our nature.”

Within a month of his inauguration, Lincoln showed how his presidency was made of sterner stuff than James Buchanan’s. By April 1861 Lincoln had issued a general call to arms to suppress treason at the South and suspended the writ of habeas corpus along the railway line from Washington to Philadelphia.

Early in this book, the reader is entranced by Furgurson’s rich insights that blend the crisis of the Union with the more mundane affairs of everyday life in Washington: the sounds of boots scraping at a bar; hoarse whiskey voices; African-American candy-sellers in the street; troops confused and lost in Washington’s summer heat; the scurrying of a planter’s daughter, Anna Ella Carroll of Maryland, valiantly trying to persuade newspaper editors to rally round the president.

Freedom Rising contains portraits of many significant and insignificant Americans in wartime Washington. We see Walt Whitman ministering to the sick in hospitals and ardently pursuing a male lover who worked on the streetcar line. There is the arch swindler Jim Fiske, who made a fortune selling shoddy goods to the federal government and earned his place in history with the quip: “You can sell anything to the government at almost any price you’ve got the guts to ask.” Here in the city we see Elizabeth Keckley, a seamstress of high fashion, at once a worldly wise ex-slave who earned her own freedom and a sympathetic confidante of Mrs. Lincoln; the Jefferson Davis family; and the small, tenuous free black community of Washington. We see the ego-bloated Secretary of the Treasury, Salmon P. Chase, who in his own mind

thought he deserved the presidency. And we see young Thad Lincoln surreptitiously throwing orange peels behind a curtain at a White House reception.

There is so much to like in this book! Furgurson’s account of Thomas U. Walter’s heroic efforts to complete the Capitol Dome and install the Statue of Freedom on top while the war raged is a classic. Walter, the Architect of the Capitol, had a personal life riven with all the stresses of the North-South conflict. A patriotic union man, Walter had a son in the rebel army. Certainly the sexual life of Washington was lively, ranging from high- and low-class prostitution involving thousands of morale-enhancing ladies of the evening to women who proffered their bodies to the embraces of Spenser M. Clark, the Superintendent of the Division of Printing and Engraving, in exchange for low-paying jobs. Small gems like these enliven the book and give this history an earthy sense of human perspective.

Although Furgurson avoids the complexities of strategy and battlefield life, he does offer an intriguing account of Jubal Early’s raid on Washington and credits General Lew Wallace’s stand at Monocacy with saving the city from rebel capture.

Nevertheless, the absence of any sustained analysis of what happened to the antislavery cause in Washington during the Civil War is puzzling. Perhaps the crisis of nursing, feeding, and maintaining an army diverted more radical temperaments from crusading for black freedom? After emancipation, the fate of the District’s black residents became more of a matter for the military and the president than for white abolitionists. However, since blacks obtained the right to vote in the District in 1867 and James Cook, a black Washingtonian, was named chairman of the city’s Republican Party that same year, the ferment of racial progress that took place in the city during the war deserves more scrutiny.

Finally, how does *Freedom Rising* stack up against *Reveille in Washington*? I think Furgurson looks less into the passions of the human heart than Margaret Leech did. However, Furgurson is certainly the more intellectual observer than Leech was.

Freedom Rising is a book for the present time of political uncertainty and its wisdom speaks to us from across the divide of long years passed. Meanwhile Washington endures, itself a monument to racial emancipation and democracy.

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