

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Frederick J. Blue. *No Taint of Compromise: Crusaders in Antislavery Politics*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005. xiv + 301 pp. \$54.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2976-0; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8071-3205-0.

Reviewed by Clayton Jewett (Department of History, Austin Community College)  
Published on H-CivWar (June, 2007)



## Northern Voices for Equality

The antislavery movement in America was nothing short of a political, economic, and social revolution. It led to the temporary destruction of a nation, partially toppled a distinctive and powerful ruling class, and shaped the concept of acceptable labor relations; it shook the very foundation of American society. How in the world could something like this happen? Frederick J. Blue, in *No Taint of Compromise: Crusaders in Antislavery Politics*, provides the answer by exposing the nuances and inherent complexity of the antislavery movement in northern society. Much of the previous scholarship on the antislavery movement focuses on famous abolitionists who worked outside the mainstream political system, such as William Lloyd Garrison. Blue's monograph, however, provides the reader with ten short biographies on individuals who worked within the political system to attack slavery. For these individuals (Alvan Stewart, John G. Whittier, Charles Langston, Owen Lovejoy, Sherman M. Booth, Jane Swisshelm, George W. Julian, David Wilmot, Benjamin Wade, Edward Wade, and Jessie B. Fremont), political action was born out of the belief that the northern pro-slavery contingent controlled both political parties. In the mind of many antislavery crusaders, this group more than the pro-slavery southern forces was the main enemy. The author's examination of these political crusaders reveals a plethora of motives and approaches behind the northern antislavery movement, unified by a belief in the political party system as the best recourse to ending the institution of slavery. The adherence to the political party system is not to suggest that the movement was monolithic, it was anything but; instead, it

fused together the disparate strands of antislavery politics into a cogent force.

Blue breaks down these lesser known antislavery agitators according to their entrance into the political system. He provides three points of entrance: those involved with the Liberty Party from 1840-48, those involved with the Free Soil Party, and those who joined the Republican Party. According to Blue, individuals who entered the political antislavery movement in its earliest stage represent the more radical voices of the crusade, with those joining the Republican Party representing the more conservative aspect of the movement. In the end, with the vast majority of Blue's characters entering the political system in the 1840s and attaching themselves to the Liberty Party, the author paints the antislavery crusade as a radical movement within the political party system.

The true success of this book though is not found in any grand proclamations about the political system, but rather in the detailed biographies that expose the fine distinctions of the political antislavery movement. It is here that Blue is at his best, making the reader more aware of the numerous motives that influenced one toward political action. For some, such as Alvan Stewart and John G. Whittier, religion proved the motivating factor. For many others, violence played a role since many of these crusaders, especially the more radical who entered the political system at its earliest stage, witnessed anti-abolitionist violence first hand. This was especially true for Owen

Lovejoy. The death of his brother Elijah at the hands of an anti-abolition mob fueled his political abolitionism. Other motivating factors included the temperance movement, gender and racial equality, and for David Wilmot it was a matter of personal political interest. Though Blue makes no judgment regarding the motives of his characters, it becomes quite obvious that as one moves across the spectrum to the conservative end, the more a crusader is driven by political concerns and gain than by the morality of slavery or the personal welfare of African Americans. This is made abundantly clear in the author's depiction of David Wilmot and Jessie Benton Fremont. For Wilmot, slavery was not a moral issue, but rather one of private property ownership for white small farmers and ultimately political gain for himself. Even his own party members viewed Wilmot as "an idle schemer" and "a disrupter of the party" (p. 194). For Jessie Fremont, she did not become involved in the movement until her husband, John Fremont, was nominated for president in 1856. Although she broke the gender barrier in terms of political activism, her participation was primarily born out of political concern for her husband. Nevertheless, Blue provides a fascinating discussion of her influence and the troubles she caused for many military and political leaders. In addition to motive, the crusaders' view of the Constitution also appears as a common thread in the story. These anti-slavery characters all viewed the Constitution as an antislavery document. This was especially true of Alvan Stewart, who believed that slaves were protected by the Fifth Amendment's due process clause, a cutting-edge view at the time.

One of the strengths of this book is that Blue does an excellent job of placing each individual within the context of the era, shedding light on the significance of events that directly or indirectly held an influence on the nation and the issue of slavery. For example, he is good at revealing the importance of the war with Mexico and how it changed the shape of the debate from antislavery to free soil by tackling the issue of new territory. Furthermore, he explains the relationship between antislavery politics and religion. The Liberty Party, for example, appears strongest in those areas with a Congregational Church, due to the nature of its organizational structure. Quakerism influenced many crusaders and general evangelism emanating from the Great Awakening motivated others. In fact, it would be the more radical contingent of the movement that came to believe slavery a moral issue, while the more conservative elements of the movement clung to slavery as an issue of property rights. Blue also reveals that states' rights were a northern concern. This

was most apparent in the wrangling over the Fugitive Slave Act in Wisconsin. In short, Wisconsin sought to prevent enforcement of the act, claiming it was an issue for the state to decide such matters. Nevertheless, the Taney Supreme Court ruling of *Abelman v. Booth* shot down the right of Wisconsin not to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act, and reversed many state court decisions on this matter.

The author also exposes the role of gender in the antislavery crusade, not only as it related to the activists, but also the slaves. This is best seen in his depiction of Jane Swisshelm, whose political activism sprang from her concern over the treatment of women and the sanctity of the family. Swisshelm supported the free soil movement against cries that she was abandoning the Liberty Party, in an attempt to force Whigs into a coalition with the Free Soil Party. Swisshelm actively sought to "cause the demise of the Democratic Party," which she referred to as "one of the great pro-slavery parties of the Nation" (p. 144). The author also exposes the fear of conspiracy known to have existed in the North, revealing that its complexity went well beyond "Bleeding Kansas" and "Bleeding Sumner" to include the public domain and free land for poor whites. Thus, the "fear of conspiracy" contained a political, racial, and class component. Finally, for those interested in politics, Blue provides an engaging tale on the influence of the Free Soilers and David Wilmot in the battle over choosing a Speaker of the House. While many of these matters are not new to historians, it is Blue's ability to weave each of these issues together into the fabric of the antislavery movement, through biographies, that will leave the reader well pleased.

While no monograph is perfect, there are two conspicuous omissions that might concern the reader—the Whig and the Know Nothing Party. Regarding the omission of the Whig Party, Blue addresses this in the words of George Washington Julian: "By failing to attack slavery, it 'becomes the practical foe of the anti-slavery cause'" (p. 172). While failure to mention the Whig party in any significant manner might be irksome to some, a more evident neglect of the book is the omission of the Know Nothing Party. Many antislavery crusaders, such as Owen Lovejoy, were also anti-Catholic, which leaves one wondering about the connection between nativism and antislavery, and the role of northern Know Nothings in the antislavery movement.

These quibbles aside, if Blue is correct in his assessment of antislavery politics, then it begs the question, was the South right to secede from the Union? If there

truly was “no taint of compromise” and the political antislavery movement was more radical than conservative, then perhaps the Southern fear concerning abolition was not so misplaced. Moreover, the author inadvertently reveals that the crisis in American democracy perhaps was not as deep as previous historians have claimed. With so many individuals committed to the political system through the antislavery crusade, or opposition to it, the reader is left to ponder the deeper causes of that decade’s “political breakdown” and the larger issue of democracy in American society.

Frederick J. Blue’s well-written, engaging book greatly adds to our understanding of the antislavery movement in American society and the scholarship regarding the demise of the Democratic Party and the breakdown of the political system in the North. In doing so, it raises more questions than it answers and is a must read for anyone interested in slavery, antislavery, and the political party system. The bibliography is organized according to biography, which the reader will find useful. Finally, teachers should also find the book valuable for general undergraduate history courses and specialty courses on the era.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

**Citation:** Clayton Jewett. Review of Blue, Frederick J., *No Taint of Compromise: Crusaders in Antislavery Politics*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. June, 2007.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13295>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).