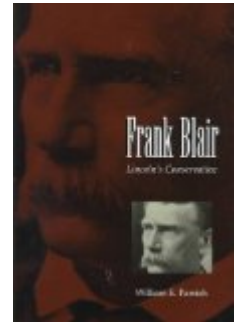


**William E. Parrish.** *Frank Blair: Lincoln's Conservative*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998. xv + 318 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8262-1156-9.



**Reviewed by** Frank Towers

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William E. Parrish's *Frank Blair* throws light on the conservative wing of the Republican party and border state unionists, and is a valuable addition to the literature on Civil War era politics. Parrish skillfully shows how ambition, family loyalty, and racial prejudice informed Blair's career, which included service in the U.S. Senate, a command in the Union army, and an unsuccessful run for the vice-presidency in 1868. While Parrish strives to make Blair sympathetic, given the context of his times, readers may find Blair an unsavory political operator whose dedication to protecting white freedom at the expense of black rights won out, even though his quest for national office failed.

Frank Blair belonged to a prominent political family. His father, Francis Preston Blair, edited the pro-Jackson *Washington Globe* and advised Democratic presidents from Andrew Jackson onwards. His brother, Montgomery, prospered in Maryland politics and served as Abraham Lincoln's postmaster general. Trained by his father for a public career, Frank Blair attended school with Martin Van Buren's sons, and, after a stormy

college experience, he followed Montgomery to St. Louis, where he opened a law practice as a stepping-stone to elective office.

In his account of Blair's youthful adventure in the West in 1846, Parrish illustrates the influence of ambition, family connections and racial animus. Uncertain about an impending engagement to his cousin, Appoline Alexander, Blair took a trip with a distant relation, Charles Bent, who ran a store on the Santa Fe trail. Blair joined a handful of Americans in Santa Fe in furthering the war against Mexico, which had broken out after his journey began. The U.S. Army appointed Bent New Mexico's territorial governor, and Bent, in turn, made Blair a prosecuting attorney. Believing "Indians and Mexicans...a lying thieving, treacherous, cowardly, bragging, and depraved race of people," Blair provoked fights with Santa Fe residents and secured death sentences for fifteen Mexican civilians who battled the military government (p. 20).

In 1856, Blair used another family friend, Thomas Hart Benton, a Jacksonian leader in the west, to promote his election from a St. Louis dis-

strict to the U.S. House of Representatives. In the 1850s, Benton, Blair, and B. Gratz Brown, a cousin and college friend, led the free soil wing of the Missouri Democrats. Unwilling to bolt his life-long party, Benton did not join Blair and Brown in organizing the state Republican party later in the decade. Missouri's pre-war Republicans coalesced the range of anti-slavery opinion in western politics. Conservatives like Blair opposed slavery's extension because it put white men into competition with black labor. Liberals like Brown drew on humanitarian arguments against slavery and favored its immediate abolition everywhere. The Republicans formalized the split within the Democratic party over slavery and helped push both sides toward the sectional extremes of 1860-61. In the spring of 1861, Blair acted aggressively in support of the Union, most notably by helping General Nathaniel Lyon arrest St. Louis secessionists at Camp Jackson. Parrish argues that Blair's impulsiveness at Camp Jackson needlessly exacerbated tensions in the Upper South.

When war broke out, the slavery issue fractured Missouri Republicans and pushed Blair to promote Lincoln's policy of quick reconciliation. Blair's distance from the radical wing of the Republican party manifested itself in his efforts to remove John C. Fremont from command of the Department of the West. Fremont offended Blair by opposing the latter's patronage recommendations and by supporting immediate emancipation. The battle became personal when Fremont's wife, Jessie, traveled to Washington to lobby for Blair's arrest. Ultimately, Blair ousted Fremont from office on grounds of corruption and ineffectiveness. In his 1850s electoral victories, Blair relied on votes from St. Louis' large German immigrant population, which included 1848 political refugees like Carl Schurz. After 1861, German liberals pressed for stronger measures against Confederates and sought progress on black liberty. Fremont's fall angered Germans who favored his

stand on emancipation and benefited from his distribution of patronage.

Blair narrowly won re-election in 1862 amid charges of fraud. Worried about personal debt, his eroding political base, and the need to gain a military reputation, Blair secured a commission as a major general and commanded Missouri troops in the Vicksburg campaign. For a political appointment, Blair was an able officer. Military service gave him a veteran's credentials and allowed Blair to forge a political friendship with William T. Sherman.

In Reconstruction, Blair's differences with radical Republicans resulted in his return to the Democratic party. Blair and his family objected to radical measures like the ironclad loyalty oath, and took personal offense at radical opposition to the administrations of Lincoln and Johnson, both of whom were family friends. In 1867, Blair invested in a southern plantation. The business failed, and Blair attributed some of the problems to radical policies and what he perceived as black indolence. Defeated by the Republicans for the Senate in 1867, Blair sought the Democratic presidential nomination in 1868. The Democracy chose ex-New York governor Horatio Seymour as their candidate, but offered Blair second place on the ticket. As in 1861, Blair deepened partisan divisions with hyperbolic criticism of Reconstruction as "Negro domination" and "unconstitutional" (p. 251). Although Ulysses S. Grant trounced Seymour, the election and Blair's role in it shaped the Democrats "new departure" strategy of accepting the South's defeat and attacking Republican corruption, a tact that appealed to liberal Republicans and helped undo the radical program. In 1871, resurgent Missouri Democrats sent Blair to the Senate, where he fought radical policies like the investigations of the Ku Klux Klan. A smoker and heavy drinker, Blair suffered from migraine headaches, and an 1872 stroke further deteriorated his health. Blair's consuming interest in politics

kept him active and a candidate for office until his death in 1875.

This book will appeal to general readers interested in the Civil War and to scholars of that conflict, mid-nineteenth century politics, and the history of Missouri. As a western leader related to a prominent Washington family, Blair's life allows Parrish to explore the connections between local, regional, and national politics. Parrish writes with sympathy for Blair, but does so with restraint and gives full attention to his subject's faults. Grounded in archival sources, Parrish's analysis benefits from his detailed knowledge of Missouri's political history, the topic of other books by the author. The book is an excellent political biography that succeeds in integrating an individual life with the larger history of the times.

Parrish's adept treatment of Blair's life prompts more questions about his subject's relationship to the political world around him. What was the correspondence between Blair's ascent as a racist free-soil politician and the sentiments of voters? How did elite political leaders like Blair work with the ward-level operatives in St. Louis who turned out his electoral majorities, sometimes with tactics that bent the law? As a transplant from the inner circle of Washington politics, how did Blair come to stand for a segment of border-state political opinion? Perhaps one of the greatest strengths of Parrish's study is its implicit argument for the salience of elites in determining political outcomes, a point sometimes lost in studies of political culture.

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