

Reinhard O. Johnson. *The Liberty Party, 1840-1848: Antislavery Third-Party Politics in the United States*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009. x + 500 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-3393-4.

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Published on H-CivWar (February, 2010)
Commissioned by Hugh F. Dubrulle



The Question Is Not About the Ends But the Means

For those of us who teach the U.S. history survey, the Liberty Party is usually covered as a blip on the road to Ripon, Wisconsin. Over its short history, it seldom managed to gain over 5 percent of any state's popular vote in a presidential election. It was not until Liberty Party followers joined the Free Soil Party that they obtained any significant percentage of the popular vote. Yet Reinhard O. Johnson makes a compelling argument that we need to take the Liberty Party seriously and understand it across all of the northern states. To that end, Johnson has written a comprehensive study of the Liberty Party from its origins in 1840 until its merger into the Free Soil Party in 1848.

Johnson argues that although the Liberty Party failed to win voters with its moral condemnation of slavery and its call for immediate restriction on slavery outside of the original slave states, the party offered a vehicle of protest against slavery for those committed to electoral politics. The party also became a political training ground for antislavery political activists who would take this experience first into the Free Soil Party and later the Republican Party.

But before he gets us to that point, Johnson provides a thorough and detailed look at the party and its main activists across the North. In doing so, Johnson also analyzes the various conflicts within the party and between party activists and other abolitionists. This history complicates and adds much to our understanding of aboli-

tionism, especially political abolitionism. Johnson shows us the diversity of the Liberty Party around the country. Indeed, a very different vision of the Liberty Party emerges if one looks at it in New Hampshire or Ohio rather than in, say, New York. Johnson also demonstrates that although evangelicals were very much part of the Liberty Party movement, the party was much more than just a political expression of evangelical antislavery.

From its earliest days, the Liberty Party struggled with whether it was a movement, a protest vehicle, or a formal institutional political party. Was the party a means of registering a moral protest to slavery or was it a means of gaining power to effect political change? And if it was about gaining power, ought it not broaden its platform to attract more voters as well as limit its abolitionist demands? These conflicts dominated most state parties. But despite the conflicts within the movement, leading figures were usually able to join together at election time and rally to the candidate who offered the clearest or most attractive voice against slavery.

These are the issues Johnson explores while also looking at the different states' Liberty Party organizations, their weaknesses, strengths, and leading activists. In the process, Johnson demonstrates that one of the difficulties facing the Liberty Party was its relationship to issues beyond slavery. Within the party, the pressure to expand to issues beyond slavery to broaden the party's base and increase outreach continued to build. Initially, many

Liberty Party activists were defectors from the Whigs, a party not as closely tied to the South and one that had a strong base among evangelicals. Where the Whig Party candidates took antislavery positions, Liberty Party supporters tended to flow back to their old party. But this loss was often made up for by defections from the Democratic Party as it became more closely allied with the slave South. But if the Liberty Party steered too close to non-slavery Democratic Party issues, it risked losing even more ex-Whigs. Not having patronage positions to hand out to supporters, the Liberty Party depended on loyal activists committed to the principle of antislavery. Johnson shows us that at the state and local levels, the Liberty Party had some areas of considerable strength, but nationally the party remained structurally weak. This weakness hindered the ability of the party to create a long lasting base beyond its small core of committed followers. Reading Johnson's work gives one a renewed appreciation of the difficulty facing the Liberty Party.

This work will long remain a standard reference on the Liberty Party. It is comprehensive, solidly researched, and well argued. Yet it is not without its problems. It would have been an easier read if he had been a little less comprehensive and put a little more life into the story. Johnson also makes too much of the conflict be-

tween the Liberty Party and the Garrisonians. Many rallied to the American Anti-slavery Society (AAS) who disagreed with William Lloyd Garrison on a number of issues including participating in the Liberty Party. Some supported the party but felt that the AAS should stay out of electoral politics. Others supported the AAS despite its refusal to endorse the Liberty Party. Not all antislavery folk saw the Liberty Party as the one true road to abolitionism, but that does not mean they were opposed to the party. In the heat of conflict, leaders tend to polarize issues beyond where the rank and file stand. As historians, we should be careful not to let the positions of certain leaders become more important than they were to the party's voters. During the later days of the civil rights movement, some leaders endorsed Black Power while others denounced the Black Power strategy. Reading the movement only from the pronouncements of the leaders might blind one to the overlapping grassroots support for both groups of leaders and a commitment to the larger goal no matter what the strategy. A more comprehensive view of the antislavery movement still needs to be written, but that is not Johnson's project. His project was to tell a comprehensive history of the Liberty Party from its founding to its merger into the Free Soil Party and in doing so to demonstrate the diversity and complexity of the party. In this he succeeded.

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Citation: John T. Cumbler. Review of Johnson, Reinhard O., *The Liberty Party, 1840-1848: Antislavery Third-Party Politics in the United States*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. February, 2010.

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