

Jeremy J. Tewell. *A Self-Evident Lie: Southern Slavery and the Threat to American Freedom.* American Abolitionism and Antislavery Series. Kent: Kent State University Press, 2013. vii + 168 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-60635-225-0.



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Scholars have long reached a consensus that the Confederate states seceded to preserve slavery, but what role did the institution play in the North's Civil War motivations? Some historians assert that antislavery sentiment inspired many Union soldiers, insisting that large numbers fought not just to preserve the Union but also to make it a Union worth saving. Others argue that most soldiers were motivated foremost by the desire to preserve the Union, only coming to embrace emancipation as a means of winning the war. Then there are those historians who believe the distinction between a war for Union and a war against slavery is dubious, insisting that the two were always intertwined because it was the Republican Party's aggressive antislavery agenda that caused the secession that threatened the Union. Jeremy J. Tewell steps into this debate (intentionally or not) with *A Self-Evident Lie: Southern Slavery and the Threat to American Freedom*, an impressive blending of political, social, cultural, and intellectual history that reveals that many Northerners insisted that the perpetuation of slav-

ery was a threat to the personal liberty of everyone.

The book's title comes from the 1854 senate speech by John Pettit in which he insisted that the concept of universal liberty apparently embraced in the Declaration of Independence was a "self-evident lie." The senator was a Northern Democrat, but Tewell demonstrates that much of the South's defense of slavery hinged on a rejection of universal liberty. In response, many Republicans argued that the logic used to justify slavery could be employed to enslave anyone, regardless of skin color.

Tewell demonstrates that there was more to antislavery warnings about a "Slave Power conspiracy" than just an insistence that if Southerners took more control of Congress they might nationalize the institution, or that its westward spread would economically threaten free labor. Abolitionists and radical Republicans (Tewell argues that there was little difference between the two) insisted that Slave Power dominance could mean the enslavement of all, particularly work-

ing-class laborers. Lest anyone believe that race would protect them from such a fate, emancipationists pointed out that defenders of slavery did not base their arguments primarily on skin color. (The South's belief in the "Curse of Ham" complicates Tewell's point in this regard, and while he does address it, he does not do so effectively.) Radicals maintained that one only needed to note the many enslaved mulattos in the South to see that the institution threatened even those with whiter skin. Tewell insists that such warnings were not a product of irrational paranoia and propaganda; they were the result of legitimate fears generated in response to proslavery rationales.

To support the assertion that the warnings were not illogical, Tewell explores the major tenets used in defense of slavery, showing how radical Republican opponents responded to each by insisting that proslavery logic could justify the enslavement of anyone. For example, when slavery defenders justified the institution based on the then generally accepted belief in African American inferiority, some Northerners wondered if this could not also justify the enslavement of the physically weaker or the less educated. When Southerners insisted that slaves were better off than white laborers in the North, many Republicans pointed to this as proof that the South advocated enslavement based on class: should not all newly arrived immigrants, the poor, or laborers in general be afraid of such dogma? When the South pointed to slavery in the Bible as justification, many Republicans argued that biblical slavery involved the enslavement of whites. When the South insisted that all superior civilizations had been slave-based, opponents again maintained that most of those slaves had also been white. And so on.

These chapters are Tewell's strongest, useful even apart from the author's larger thesis. Of particular note is his mini-biography of George Fitzhugh, stressing the Virginia slaveholder's importance in creating and shaping the proslavery

argument that emerged in reaction to abolitionism. Of course Fitzhugh denied that his ideas supported the enslavement of white labor, but Tewell shows that his denials were logically convoluted and inconsistent, and at odds with his insistence that capital's ownership of labor was a superior system.

Tewell further notes that radical Republicans used familiar abolitionist tropes to warn Northerners about the personality traits the institution fostered in Southern leaders, insisting that a world filled with masters and slaves created tyrants and aristocrats who had contempt for universal human rights. Southern leaders cared little about the misery of others, sought to dominate their perceived inferiors, and were intolerant of dissent to their rule. Further, slavery made masters lazy and desirous to live off the work of others. If such people continued to gain more power in Congress, Republicans warned, all free labor was in danger.

Tewell focuses his last chapters on sectional disagreement over the concept of universal liberty, utilizing more narrative flow as he explores the events of the late 1850s. The author reveals that slaveholders outspokenly rejected the Declaration's decree that "all men are created equal," denying that the Founding Fathers accepted the belief. (One unique way he demonstrates this is by discussing the artwork on many Southern banknotes that depicted the Founders alongside slaves.) When the Dred Scott decision gave legal support to the South's rejection of universal liberty by maintaining that African Americans had no natural rights, Republicans argued that if it was not true that all men are born free, those in power could decide who possessed rights and who did not. Thus, leaders could deem anyone as an inferior or worthy of enslavement.

Tewell demonstrates that Northerners were also divided over the "self-evident lie," as reflected in the political fighting between Republicans and Democrats. To sustain a national coalition,

most Democrats embraced the South's interpretation of the Founders' beliefs on universal liberty. In doing so, they faced eloquent opposition from Republicans. Tewell shows that during the 1860 election campaign, Lincoln and his party emphasized this disagreement over the concept of universal liberty, insisting that if Democrat and Southern views on the issue were triumphant, all men faced possible enslavement.

At this point, *A Self Evident Lie* abruptly and frustratingly ends. The Republicans won the election of 1860 while standing firm on their antislavery platform, and thus the book seems to need at least one more chapter exploring whether the victory was in some ways a triumph for the concept of universal liberty. How well did the Republican stance on the issue resonate with the electorate, and what, if any, role did it play in their 1860 vote? Further, did the Republican message that slavery threatened the freedom of all also help to motivate Union soldiers? Indeed, the book's biggest weakness is that little is done to explore diaries, letters, memoirs, and constituent letters to discover to what degree everyday Northerners and soldiers accepted and were motivated by the Republican insistence that the perpetuation of slavery threatened all with enslavement.

Still, it is perhaps unfair to criticize a book for what one wishes it to do, rather than focusing on what it seeks to do. Tewell makes it clear that he is not proposing that historians have fundamentally misunderstood the Republican message, acknowledging that previous works have touched on his themes before. His goal is to emphasize and to more fully develop the Republican insistence that slavery threatened the freedom of all, and in this *A Self Evident Lie* succeeds. Tewell forcefully presents his thesis, supporting it with contemporary newspapers, proslavery and abolitionist polemics, speeches, congressional debates, and the collected works of leading politicians.

The ultimate value of *A Self-Evident Lie* is that

Tewell impressively provides us with another reminder that Abraham Lincoln's party was a strongly antislavery organization that resisted the institution on more than just economic grounds. We should not slight or ignore this fact when assessing the Republican Party's 1860 election triumph and Northern motivations in the Civil War.

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