

LeeAnna Keith. *When It Was Grand: The Radical Republican History of the Civil War.* New York: Hill and Wang, 2019. 352 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8090-8031-1.

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When Republicans Were Radicals

When It Was Grand: The Radical Republican History of the Civil War focuses on the emergence of the Republican Party from the 1850s through the brief triumph of Reconstruction, with particular emphasis on its Radical faction and their determination to bring an end to slavery. The Radicals, LeeAnna Keith contends, dominated the Republican Party in its early years, transforming the American polity in the process: “The Radicals were culture warriors, committed to a nearly mystical vision of representative government based on free labor. Prizing equal opportunity and expansion, they championed government spending for education and transportation infrastructure.... These Republicans appealed to populism without demonizing capital” (p. 4). This is a stirring narrative, with much emphasis on armed conflict and political intrigue. But some of the broader facets of this radicalism are eclipsed by the focus on what was indisputably the major issue of the day. Keith notes the important role of women’s suffrage advocates in the movement and the insistence of many (by no means all) Radicals on full racial equality, not simply an end to the institution of slavery. But while slavery was certainly the central issue, the struggle for its abolition was part of a larger social ferment that saw the formation of utopian colonies, the emergence of unions, and

movements for religious and social reform. Indeed, as it was moving from the Whigs to the Republicans, the *New York Tribune* published a series of articles praising Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s mutualism and gave Karl Marx a regular column that ran for a decade.

The political system was already in crisis when debates over the expansion of slavery forced the long-suppressed issue to the fore. Keith suggest that Stephen Douglas was (inadvertently) “the founding father of the Republican Party” through his 1854 Kansas-Nebraska bill, which overturned the Missouri Compromise in an effort to appease increasingly aggressive southern slaveholders (p. 10). But the two-party system was already in tatters. Never a stable political formation, the Whigs had been united primarily by their opposition to Andrew Jackson and their commitment to building infrastructure to promote commerce and industry. Democrats and Whigs shared a common commitment to preserving the status quo on slavery, if only because the South’s electoral strength made it difficult to win national elections without carrying at least some southern states. But the status quo was not sustainable. Southern politicians saw westward expansion as an existential threat to their political dominance

and so demanded the extension of slavery to the new territories—something that was both economically untenable and an intolerable affront to the growing numbers appalled by slavery. Ultimately, this dispute shattered both parties. Western Democrats like John Wentworth originally condemned abolitionists as fanatics, but could tolerate neither the expansion of slavery nor their party's increasingly implacable opposition to internal improvements. (Wentworth correctly saw Chicago's future as inextricably bound up with the development of canals and railroads.) In 1848 he opposed the new Free Soil Party on the grounds that it threatened to deliver Illinois's electoral votes to the Whigs he still despised (noting in his *Chicago Democrat* that Whig presidential nominee Zachary Taylor was a slave owner). Free Soilers, Know-Nothings, Anti-Nebraska Democrats (such as Wentworth), and the remnants of the Whigs ultimately coalesced under the Republican Party banner, united by little else but their opposition to slavery's expansion.

Keith discusses the coalescing of these forces and the early battle (political and military) for Free Kansas as a struggle that drew abolitionists and homesteaders alike to fight the slave interests for control of the new territory. Both preachers and abolitionists embraced the need for force, portraying rifles as religious weapons in the cause of moral purification. Struggles against the Fugitive Slave Act were equally militant, and brought the reality of slavery home to communities that previously experienced it as a distant tragedy. But slaveholders, too, were enraged by the changing politics, accustomed to deference from the national government and seeing the source of their wealth under siege. As the federal government stepped up to enforce slavery, the Radical (and even many moderate) Republicans were reinforced in their fervor, forced to choose between allowing African Americans to be taken into captivity in their hometowns and resistance. The slave catchers were armed and often supported by local law enforcement, so perforce their oppo-

nents must take up arms as well. Hundreds of rescues across the northern states fostered a spirit of resistance to injustice that Keith argues became part of the "genetic code" of the emerging Republican Party. When Sherman Booth faced trial for his part in a Milwaukee uprising that smashed down a courthouse door to free an alleged slave, he proclaimed that "I would prefer to see every federal officer in Wisconsin hanged on a gallows" than to abide the Fugitive Slave Law (p. 36).

Many government officials sided with resisters, though Keith sometimes confuses political expedience for conviction. For example, she suggests that Judge Benjamin Curtis "was silently aligned with the liberators" when he presided over the trial of seven Bostonians charged with attempting to liberate a fugitive slave from federal custody. But the evidence she offers (pp. 39-41) suggests rather the opposite. Curtis encouraged the grand jury to indict, denounced "organized disobedience [as] rebellion," and dismissed the charges only as the defense was about to launch its case. In doing so, Curtis denied them the opportunity they coveted to use the courtroom as a platform and avoided the danger of a jury acquittal that would have further undermined the Fugitive Slave Law. As resistance mounted, Democrats relied on their control of the federal government, particularly the Supreme Court, to hold back the tide. Their victory in the 1856 election and the 1857 Dred Scott decision made it clear that a radical break was needed. There was no role for moderation under the circumstances, and so the Radical Republicans' history of extralegal action proved attractive to many. Even many moderates supported John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry, rhetorically and financially. Back in Chicago, Wentworth's newspaper, which just a couple of years earlier had vehemently denounced abolitionists as fanatics, devoted several columns to praising Brown's heroism. Radical Republicans advocated full citizenship rights for African Americans as well as integrated public facilities, and used their growing control of northern states to openly support fugit-

ives in their flight to freedom—even hosting one in the New York State capitol building. In Ohio, an integrated force of five hundred armed abolitionists freed John Price from the slavers and the federal marshal who had captured him.

So the Radical Republicans were a real force, and their rhetoric and their agitation played a significant role in hastening the inevitable conflict. And yet it is not true that they “dominated their party,” even if they may have “transformed the nature of government to achieve their goals” (p. 6). The need to eventually wage all-out war and then reconstruct the South certainly led to a stronger federal government, both absolutely and in relation to the states. Yet the Radicals were but one of several factions in the party. Leading Republicans like Abraham Lincoln carefully navigated these currents, avoiding talk of abolition or equality and trying to rein in those (like Wentworth) who were less circumspect. Moderate Republicans opposed the expansion of slavery into new territories, sometimes hinted at gradual emancipation, and professed to believe that absent active federal government support slavery would succumb to natural extinction. But they were politicians first and foremost, wary of frightening more conservative voters by advocating active resistance to what even the most timid among them recognized as a monstrous evil.

Even so, the attack on Harpers Ferry was undertaken with the financial support of many eminently respectable men, and its defeat badly frightened leading Republicans. Though some feared being implicated, more were concerned that it would drive away moderate voters. Nonetheless, Radicals like Henry David Thoreau rallied to the cause, and many Radicals soon found the courage to join in. Here, as elsewhere, Keith tells a stirring tale, giving a lively rendition of the plotting and the subsequent scramble to frame the failed uprising. Plots and intrigue are Keith’s forte; *When It Was Grand* is less about ideas and social factors than the maneuvers of politicians and gen-

erals, although, as she makes clear, many of the most radical experiments (such as arming battalions of former slaves or confiscating plantations) arose more out of the expedience of the hour than out of a grand vision. Indeed, as she notes in her conclusion, few Republicans had close relationships with African Americans or were willing to embrace them as equals.

Along with LeeAnna Keith’s previous book about the end of Reconstruction (*The Colfax Massacre: The Untold Story of Black Power, White Terror, and the Death of Reconstruction*, 2008), and her work in a number of archival collections, the notes to *When It Was Grand* indicate a deep familiarity with the literature. It is a book well worth reading, even if its conclusion simultaneously attributes too much power to the Radicals and accordingly too much venality to the party’s abandonment of the freed slaves and of Reconstruction: “Achieving victory, [Radicals] stood astride what they called conquered provinces, intent on creating a revolutionary new social order. Their aims were not pure, and even during the Civil War the Radicals manifested a venality and love of power that coexisted uneasily with their humanitarian goals” (pp. 290-91). Keith attributes the abandonment of the crusade for racial justice to Radical Republicans’ becoming conservatives, and certainly some did. But the Republicans’ subsequent alignment with big business and conservative social values is less shocking if one realizes that it never was, nor sought to be, a revolutionary party. The Radicals were always on the political margins, and slavery was for many part of a broader emancipatory vision. But events—coupled with the Radicals’ determination to confront the slave power when more “prudent” politicians sought accommodation—forced the party’s hand, leading to an all-too-brief window in which it seemed a more egalitarian nation might be at hand. Other historians—notably Eric Foner in several volumes, including *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution* (revised edition 2014), but also a number of local histories such as Douglas

Egerton's *The Wars of Reconstruction* (2014)—have done a better job of analyzing that moment and the reasons why the Radical vision did not prevail.

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