

Joanne Freeman. *The Field of Blood: Violence in Congress and the Road to Civil War.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018. 384 pp. \$28.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-374-15477-6.

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Congress appears broken. Recent episodes of congressional gridlock, government shutdowns, and vitriol spewed at opposing party members has deepened Americans' skepticism about the legislative branch's efficacy and capacity to govern. Congress's dysfunction may leave some yearning for the halcyon days of antebellum America when distinguished representatives behaved civilly, championed the "greater good," and bestowed a sense of gravitas to the important work being conducted in Congress.

In *The Field of Blood: Violence in Congress and the Road to the Civil War*, Joanne B. Freeman dismantles this romanticized and myopic vision of Congress. The debates, discussions, and conferring undertaken by representatives occurred alongside "belligerence, violence, and drunken swaggering" (p. 30). From the 1830s until the Civil War, congressmen regularly brandished knives and firearms, challenged opponents to duels, and engaged in drunken and disorderly behavior. This pattern of violence makes perhaps the most infamous episode of congressional violence—the caning of Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner by South Carolina representative Preston Brooks in 1856—as less an aberration and more commonplace. In presenting a more "human" Congress, Freeman stresses an important but oft-forgotten fact: "congressmen were bound to the folks back

home in purpose and feeling" (p. 11). And because congressmen were (and are) elected by their constituents, voters demanded that their representatives "fight for their rights" (p. 11). With an increasing number of independent newspapers and the telegraph providing details of a congressman's words and actions, constituents learned whether their representatives had defended their rights. Failing to protect those rights meant shame, humiliation, and defeat for the congressmen, his state, and his region. Such high stakes, Freeman argues, precipitated congressional violence, intensified the ongoing sectional battle, and ultimately "framed the opening of the war" (p. 268).

The violent and chaotic Congress Freeman presents looks little like the mundane transcriptions found in the *Congressional Globe*. To locate and analyze the emotional conflict of congressional violence, Freeman uses newspapers, the correspondence and diaries of congressmen, and the voluminous diary of Benjamin Brown French, a Democratic newspaper editor from New Hampshire who worked in Congress in various capacities throughout the antebellum era. Freeman's close reading of this evidence strengthens her argument that representatives "practiced a kind of *performative representation*" (p. 106; emphasis in original). Such performances were evident during the gag rule debate. Southerners and their free-

state allies hoped that tabling antislavery petitions would stymie antislavery sentiment, but their attempts instead strengthened Northern resistance and resolve. Two outspoken opponents of the gag rule, Ohio representative Joshua Giddings and Massachusetts representative and former president John Quincy Adams, incurred Southerners' verbal and physical assaults but both congressmen "seized such moments to put the Slave Power brutality on display" (p. 115). The "image of screaming, stomping, threatening slaveholders" provided greater evidence of a domineering Slave Power that sought to silence Northern congressmen and their constituents (p. 120). Though Congress censured Giddings in 1842, his constituents praised him and overwhelmingly reelected him. The gag rule debate "rous[ed] the Northern public to demand their rights ... and to elect congressmen who shared their convictions" (p. 139). This episode underscores Freeman's argument that political acts possessed tremendous emotional and personal weight, as constituents insisted that their representatives defend the rights of their region, state, and themselves.

Freeman emphasizes the impact of the communication revolution on congressmen's performative representation. Though the telegraph and independent newspapers encouraged transparency and accountability, they also "complicate[d] national politics" (p. 170). With greater public scrutiny and congressmen unable to control the narrative emanating from Washington, political conflicts took on greater urgency. A "cycle of stridency" developed as the media depicted Congress as "a place of sectional conflict waged by sectional champions" where compromise on slavery appeared increasingly remote (p. 184). The Republican Party's emergence deepened the sectional conflict, as the "fear of Southern dominance, anger at Northern degradation, [and] the horror at the brutal realities of slavery" fueled the Northern party's rise (p. 228). Southern congressmen, accustomed to defending the rights, honors, and interests of their region and constituents, refused

to live under Republican Party governance following the 1860 election and threatened to secede. Decades of Southerners' threats, however, had inured Republicans, with many dismissing Southern threats of secession as empty rhetoric. This "crisis of communication," though, became manifest as Southern congressmen acted in accord with their respective states and "seceded" from Congress in 1860-61, the final performative act of representation practiced by these Southerners (p. 232).

The relevancy and currency of Freeman's book shine clearly throughout as she depicts a nation threatened by the rise of new communication technologies, representatives elected to aggressively defend their constituents' rights, and the disappearance of civility and consensus. Such historical resonance should remind Americans that Congress mirrors voters' tempers and demands, and that congressional dysfunction can often be traced to voters' expectations. During the Civil War era, these expectations played out violently, with Congress as the nexus of raw emotions and politics. One wonders, therefore, how the antebellum Congress managed to pass legislation given the chaotic nature on Capitol Hill. Further, Freeman presents new forms of communication as negatively impacting the national discourse, but could this new technology also have worked to create new national networks that could have defused the sectional crisis? Freeman's important new book serves as an important reminder that, at its core, the Civil War was truly a people's contest.

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