

Review

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Adam I. P. Smith. *The Stormy Present: Conservatism and the Problem of Slavery in Northern Politics, 1846–1865*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017. Pp. 331.

Do actions speak louder than words? The answer is hotly contested among scholars of antebellum and Civil War-era Northern politics. Historians such as Manisha Sinha, Paul Finkelman, Leonard Richards, and James Oakes argue that the rhetoric and public utterances of politicians and politicians should not be taken at face value. Instead, they believe that actions, deeds, and votes are the true indicator of principle, and thus they have been critical of Unionists and so-called moderates who supported pro-slavery policies. On the other side, many scholars of the 1850s–60s, including Sean Wilentz, Jean Baker, and Martin Quitt, assert that words and ideas should be given equal, if not more, weight than actions; that rhetoric can be cited as honest exhortation of principle. While the action-oriented camp focuses on votes, party mechanics, and policy implementation, the rhetoric-centric group prefers to avoid the logistics of partisanship and analyze oratory, published editorials, symbols, and culture. *The Stormy Present* places Adam I. P. Smith firmly in the latter category.

The Stormy Present is a monograph with a central question: What pushed Northerners into an anti-slavery posture in the 1850s but not far enough to become abolitionists? Smith's answer is simple: conservatism. An intellectual commitment to conservative principles of Unionism, moderation, and compromise caused the Northern electorate to become fearful of the Slave Power but kept them from embracing emancipation and black rights. To support his conclusion, Smith employs two complementary tactics: a meticulous study of conservative rhetoric in the 1850s–60s; and the rehabilitation of Northern Democrats who have been overtly criticized by action-oriented scholars for their votes on and implementation of pro-slavery policies. To accomplish these dual objectives, Smith provides a sweeping classification of conservatism (defined vaguely as an anti-ideological, pragmatic "middle"), and rejects the pro-slavery / anti-slavery binary

by which historians typically divide Northerners. Rather, according to Smith, the vast swath of the Northern electorate was anti-slavery—a “silent majority,” borrowing a phrase from Richard Nixon, between the fringe radical groups of abolitionists and secessionists (3). In Smith’s telling, Northern Democrats were little different from Whigs and Republicans on the issue of slavery, all sharing anti-slavery sentiment and free soil values. This similarity, he asserts, accounts for all of the partisan wrangling of the greater Civil War era: demise of the Whigs, rise and fall of the Know Nothings, rise of the Republicans, the flash of the Constitutional Unionists, and the wartime Union Parties. Free state voters changed, created, and combined parties easily and quickly because they were essentially all the same: “The overriding issue in Northern politics,” Smith explains in his introduction, “was not whether slavery was right or wrong but in what respect it was a threat” (18). Or, later: “Many of the underlying assumptions of the mainstream of Northern Democrats and Republicans were the same” (101).

Smith’s conflation of antebellum parties and partisanship into a relatively homogeneous conservative majority is a striking rejection of decades of scholarship and the overwhelming evidence of deep social and political divides over a host of policies and issues, not the least of which was slavery. Moreover, his portrayal of abolitionists as a dangerous, destabilizing sect harkens back to the pro-Southern scholarship of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, wherein compromisers with slavery were the heroes, and abolitionists the villains. Hence, Smith’s *The Stormy Present* is both a bold departure from current scholarship, and a return to an older framework made famous by Avery Craven and Allan Nevins.

For this reason alone, *The Stormy Present* is an important contribution to the field. But there is far more to the book than just an intellectual about-face. Smith’s focus on the nuances of conservatism provides a distinctive approach to a familiar topic. Rather than recount the main events of the 1850s–60s, he dwells in the realm of ideas and emotions, effectively divorcing politics from partisanship. His opening chapter provides the framework for virtually the entire book. Through the lens of an astute analysis of the Astor Place Riot of 1849 in New York City (where a violent mob of ruffians protested a well-to-do theatrical production, and the mayor sent in troops to preserve order), Smith reveals the essential tension at the heart of mid-19th century American conservatism: order versus violence. On one hand, conservatives adored the American Revolution and believed in the people’s right to defend liberty. On the other, conservatives were obsessed with “law

and order" and abhorred the mob. For Smith, this central tension is at the heart of the sectional crisis. He sees genuine conservative continuity from the 1840s through the 1860s, despite the political and social upheavals of those decades. Thus, in 1849 as in 1861, conservatives endorsed the use of force by the state to put down a threat to social stability. "In the years from Astor Place to Appomattox," he concludes, "the frames of reference and the language deployed in the free states remained largely constant even while . . . circumstances changed" (214).

It is in his meticulous analysis of "frames of reference" and "the language deployed" where Smith truly shines. As he moves from the antebellum era to the war years, he demonstrates that all parties adopted conservative rhetoric and symbolism. For instance, both defenders and attackers of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 utilized "the language of conservatism" (44). The same goes for the opposing sides of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. His analysis of the "freedom national" versus "popular sovereignty" debate is particularly insightful. While action-oriented scholars have condemned popular sovereignty as a thin guise crafted by enslavers to spread slavery and pushed through Congress by "doughfaces" (pro-slavery Northerners), Smith defends the policy as genuinely neutral on the peculiar institution. Both concepts, freedom national and popular sovereignty, Smith argues, were fundamentally alike: they were both free soil policies. Their difference lay in where power was to be placed. Should territorial settlers decide on the fate of slavery, or should Congress decide for them? Either way, slavery could be prevented. The resulting bloodshed in Kansas once again exposed the conservative struggle between the desire for law and order and believing in the right of the people to make their own decisions.

Likewise, Smith's in-depth exploration of conservative reactions to the secession winter is one of his best sections. Once again, the "silent majority" was confronted with the choice between devotion to social stability (Union) and the rights of the people (secession). "Secession exposed the tension in antebellum political culture," Smith writes in a typically perceptive passage, "between confidence that popular government was the wave of the future and the anxiety that it was inherently fragile" (167). A Richard Hofstadter-like "status anxiety" permeates Smith's portrayal of conservatives, especially since almost all of his sources were monied and influential with much to lose from social upheaval. Whether it was the crisis of 1850, the secession winter, or emancipation, conservatives experienced never-ending nervousness about the fate of the Union, republican government, and social

order. It was this perpetual anxiety that drove Northerners into opposition to slavery and secession. And during the bloodshed, the majority of both Democrats and Republicans believed a war to preserve the Union was fundamentally *conservative*.

Smith's examination of the war years also challenges recent scholarship by casting Democrats as "naturally and inherently the defenders of liberty," rather than as treasonous racists plotting with Confederates to disrupt voting, spread white supremacist propaganda, and engage in domestic terrorism (204). Critics of the Lincoln administration, in Smith's assessment, were good conservatives fighting a real "Reign of Terror" emanating from Washington, D.C. (203). But, of course, the author also portrays Lincoln as a deep conservative. In this way, notorious Copperhead Clement Vallandigham and Republican President Lincoln were of the same intellectual stripe: they were both consistent conservatives who differed only on the method of their conservatism. Smith's chapters on the war follow closely the work of Gary Gallagher, who has defended the veracity of claims made by Lincoln's critics, and offer a repudiation of James Oakes and Jennifer Weber, who have been far less generous toward Copperheads and conservatives.

Despite its intellectual strengths and novel approach to a familiar narrative, *The Stormy Present* stumbles when it ventures into the nuts and bolts of partisanship. Readers looking for a comprehensive treatment of politics will be disappointed, as Smith makes chronological jumps, avoids policy, and never really explains how things happened. He is not interested in what politicians and parties actually did, only how conservatives viewed them. Moreover, almost all of the rhetoric and oratory of Smith's conservatives are taken at face-value, with no acknowledgement that politicians seeking office, patronage, or favors may embellish their declarations to suit their audience. For Smith, all politicians were honest men who always spoke (or wrote) honestly about what they believed. Though he draws on an impressive number of Northern thinkers, memoirists, and politicians, he rarely investigates their careers or explains any possible personal or professional motivation. Men who cast crucial Northern votes for the spread of slavery, such as Lewis Cass, Daniel Dickinson, and Stephen Douglas, are treated purely as conservative thinkers and not practical politicians. Douglas is a perfect example: Smith focuses almost entirely on his public rhetoric while ignoring that Douglas owned slaves, championed legislation that spread slavery, and hoped to benefit politically from his catering to slave state grandees. (He sought the Democratic presidential nomination, which required a two-thirds vote, in 1848, 1852, 1856, and 1860.) Part of the problem may be sources. Smith relies

heavily on either biographers who gushed over their subjects, or old, discredited works, such as Roy Nichols's *The Disruption of American Democracy*, which was published in 1948.

Though it reads more like a collection of essays, with such chapter titles as "The Problem of Order" and "The Problem of Violence," *The Stormy Present* is powerfully written. Smith's prose is precise and clear. It is a serious, scholarly work for serious scholars. The volume requires a prior knowledge of Civil War era politics and a ready familiarity with the historiography (Smith takes on historians by name), so its usefulness in the classroom is limited, and it is hard to imagine an easy reception by the general public. Overall, it is a passionate, persuasive narrative that will surprise and challenge many readers. The author fittingly concludes his book by quoting from William F. Buckley, who would have been quite pleased with Smith's defense of conservatism.