Review

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Michael E. Woods. *Arguing until Doomsday: Stephen Douglas, Jefferson Davis, and the Struggle for American Democracy*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020. Pp. 338.

Stephen A. Douglas and Jefferson Davis had intertwined and profoundly consequential careers. Both were born in the early 19th century and made their mark in booming frontier states that lined the Mississippi River. Both found their way into politics, where each became a colossus of the Democratic Party in their respective states and in the nation. Douglas became an advocate of the Great West in Illinois, representing the frontier settler, and Davis an advocate of the Cotton South in Mississippi, representing the planter class. Both were ardent advocates of national expansion, and in the mid-1840s each entered the House of Representatives. In 1847, both rose into the U.S. Senate, each becoming a distinguished orator and influential figure during the tumultuous decade of the 1850s. In the thick of the tumult, both wanted to use the Democratic Party to preserve the Union, and both pushed their health to the breaking point to realize their vision. Seemingly, there was much reason for them to have been close allies, working together to advance the interests of the Democratic Party and the nation.

Instead, they became bitter rivals. Each disliked the other, personally and politically, and for over a decade they crossed swords in congressional debate. The passage of years deepened their differences, and by 1860 they battled for control of the Democratic Party and the nation's future. Douglas adhered fiercely to popular sovereignty, a policy authorizing territorial settlers to exclude slavery from their midst, while Davis demanded a federal slave code, insisting that territorial legislatures had no constitutional power to strip slaveholders of their property rights. Slavery's status in the nation's territories had divided northern and southern Democrats since the mid-1840s. In 1860, it precipitated the party's collapse. Shortly thereafter northern voters elevated Illinois's Abraham Lincoln to the presidency, a Republican Party politician who had urged slavery's "ultimate extinction." Neither Davis nor his southern Democratic constituency would

Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association, Vol. 42, No. 2, 2021
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tolerate that outcome. The Cotton South seceded, Davis soon became president of the Confederacy, and Douglas joined Lincoln to defend the Union after Davis authorized the bombardment of Fort Sumter. Although Douglas died two months later, his feud with Davis never ceased. Shortly before Davis died in 1889, he penned a brief autobiography that blamed Douglas for the Democratic Party's destruction.

Their colorful and consequential rivalry is the subject of *Arguing until Doomsday*, Michael E. Woods's excellent and engaging new study. Excavating the histories of these two men with prodigious manuscript research and wide reading in the secondary sources, Woods reinterprets the antebellum Democratic Party. In his view, "a deep-rooted conflict between guardians of slaveholders' property rights and champions of white men's majority rule created an irrepressible conflict within the Democratic Party." (8) In Woods's telling, Davis stood sentinel over slavery while Douglas defended democracy. Their feud was the party's feud, and their fate was that of the nation. Skillfully and creatively, Woods "uses a biographical lens to explore more fundamental sectional conflicts" (235, n.17).

The argument is crisply presented. Woods first explores the economic and social characteristics of frontier Illinois and Mississippi, tracing how Douglas and Davis rose to prominence in "divergent societies" (12). Correspondingly, as Democrats, they developed competing regional creeds in a "fragile party" (54). Douglas pursued "western development" by combining "territorial aggrandizement" and "infrastructure policies," while Davis sought to protect slavery with an "aggressive proslavery agenda" inherited in part from Senator John C. Calhoun of South Carolina (61, 65). Douglas's and Davis's respective devotion to the Great West and the Cotton South reflected their powerful regional loyalties and prefigured immense sectional strain.

The strain emerged in tandem with national expansion, which brought conflicts between northern democrats and southern planters sharply into view. Douglas and Davis both thought control of the West was essential to their respective regional visions, and hence they tussled over the land taken from Mexico in 1848. Following Calhoun, Davis claimed "the equal right of the south with the north in the territory held as the common property of the United States," and insisted that Congress protect slave property in the territories (89). Douglas instead endorsed popular sovereignty, leaving territorial settlers free to legalize or prohibit slavery. Douglas prevailed, and in 1850 the Mexican Cession was organized in accord with his wishes. But Douglas did not enjoy such success in organizing the rest of the West. The election of Democrat Franklin Pierce in 1852 strengthened

the hand of southerners in national politics, with Davis ascendant as the new Secretary of War. When Douglas sought to organize Nebraska Territory in 1854, southerners demanded that his territorial bill explicitly repeal the antislavery provisions of the Missouri Compromise. Portentously, Douglas elected to use southern votes to drive what became the Kansas-Nebraska Act through Congress. Outrage against Douglas and the Democrats erupted throughout the North, and Woods aptly describes the consequences for Douglas as "less a Pyrrhic victory than a cyanide pill" (129). Like many scholars, Woods interprets the Kansas-Nebraska Act as a decisive turning point for the Democratic Party and the nation. "Its origins," he writes, "like its bloody epilogue, aggravated conflicts over property and democracy and ravaged the Democracy and the Union" (132).

The protracted and painful denouement shivered the party into fragments. Years of bloodshed in Kansas sowed dismay and distrust amongst both southern and northern Democrats, compelling Douglas and Davis to tack politically toward their constituents' preferences. Douglas's subsequent refusal to support passage of Kansas's proslavery Lecompton Constitution in Congress especially embittered southerners, but his partisan logic was unerring: he could not sacrifice popular sovereignty to slaveholders' property rights without dismembering the northern Democracy. Davis and other southern Democrats therefore watched in fury as Douglas collaborated with congressional Republicans to defeat passage of that constitution in 1858. To Woods, this momentous sundering of the party precipitated a "convergence between northern Democrats and Republicans" and a "parallel merger between southern Democrats and fire-eaters" (166). Sectional polarization, already well advanced, deepened further, and was then exacerbated by two years of additional fratricide, including sharp exchanges between Douglas and Davis in the Senate, leading Senator Alfred Iverson of Georgia to complain that they were arguing "until doomsday" (1). The Democratic Party's rupture in 1860 thus reflected its intractable divisions. At root, Woods writes, the "party could stand for white men's democracy or white masters' property, but not both" (178).

On its own terms, *Arguing until Doomsday* is highly persuasive. Woods's research demonstrates that both Douglas and Davis represented the central perspectives of their regional partisans. Neither man wished to destroy the Democratic Party and the Union, but both contributed handsomely to the calamity because slavery created "relentless internal conflict" in the party (8). From its inception, in Woods's account, the party harbored a deadly conflict within itself.

This framing of the problem contributes to a growing literature on property rights and the coming of the Civil War. As sectional conflict mounted, southerners increasingly demanded national protection of slave property, a progression highly evident in Davis's career. Despite a frequent reliance on strict construction of the Constitution, which he turned against western internal improvement projects, Davis repeatedly demanded that the federal government exert itself in favor of slavery to protect property rights (72–73, 106, 127, 155). Correspondingly, his proslavery politics were sustained and unapologetic. Soon after entering the Senate, he declared that slavery was a positive good, and thereafter he labored to make the Democratic Party as proslavery as possible (85). In 1852 he wrote that proslavery southerners should "sustain a sound party at the north to extract whatever we can from party organization for the security of our constitutional rights" (118). This was not exactly a national view of the party, and his willingness to endorse secession should southerners not control national politics highlights the profound connection between slave property and the origins of the war. Unquestionably, Douglas and his fellow northern Democrats had their hands full with their southern allies. Douglas was an unshakable Unionist. By contrast, Davis was a traitor-in-waiting, frequently waving the southern radicals' quasi-American flag of conditional unionism.

Despite its many merits, the book's focus on Douglas and Davis does obscure the critically important role of antislavery reformers and Republicans. Throughout the book, they are kept to the margins. This is understandable, but regrettable. After all, southerners did not secede because of Douglas's election, but because of Lincoln's. Similarly, southerners did not break up the Democratic Party because they feared northern Democrats, but because they feared Republicans. One way to conceptualize the problem is to imagine a political environment without Republicans, where the only debate was between Douglas and Davis, between majoritarian democracy and property rights in slaves. In such a circumstance, the clash between popular sovereignty and a slave code never would have seen the light of day. This is evident in Woods's own analysis. In 1848, President Polk recommended an extension of the Missouri Compromise line to resolve the nation's dispute over the Mexican Cession. "Douglas and Davis," Woods writes, "voted with a Senate majority for such a measure, but antislavery northerners, determined to stop slavery's expansion, defeated it in the House" (90). In the midst of the secession crisis 13 years later, Senator John J. Crittenden proposed a similar adjustment, which Douglas accepted and Davis apparently would have if Republican senators

had concurred (218–219). But the Republican senators voted it down. Bolstered by a letter from President-elect Lincoln, Republican congressmen refused to compromise on slavery's expansion. They were not being especially obdurate, but merely sustaining the political will of their constituents. After all, the 1860 Republican Party platform denied that either Congress or territorial legislatures could "give legal existence to slavery in any territory of the United States." This stance was in stark contrast to Douglas, who supported not only slavery's perpetuity, but also its expansion wherever white men desired it. In keeping with this perspective, the Democratic Party platform in 1860 encouraged "the acquisition of the Island of Cuba on such terms as shall be honorable to ourselves and just to Spain." Freed from the Republicans, Douglas and Davis likely would have come to a *modus vivendi*.

Neither Douglas, nor the Democratic Party's rupture, nor the origins of the Civil War can be fully understood without addressing the influence of the antislavery movement. Woods presents Douglas as pragmatic, and, like virtually all politicians, he did have a pragmatic side. But of all his pragmatic decisions, adopting popular sovereignty in the late 1840s very likely tops the list. He did not do it because of a philosophical commitment to majoritarian democracy, but because organizing national territories and preserving his party seemed to require it. His decision reflected the disruptions produced by an emerging political antislavery movement focused on halting the spread of slavery. That movement had its origins in hostility to slavery. The hostility was by no means equally distributed across the northern population, but it was unquestionably growing by the 1840s and had forced its way into national politics after little more than a decade of agitation. It showed no signs of slowing. Calhoun knew this, as did Davis. Both feared it profoundly and acted accordingly. Hence, although it is true that a collision between majoritarian democracy and property rights in slaves bedeviled the Democratic Party, there was a broader conflict in America between southern defenders of property rights in slaves and northerners who believed that there should be no property rights in slaves at all. That broader conflict precipitated the conflict within the Democratic Party by shaping the decisions of both Douglas and Davis and their peers. *Arguing until Doomsday* does not tell that important story, but it tells an impressively good one as it is.