

Lincoln Love

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DEMOCRACY AND DESPOTISM
WILLIAM W. FREEHLING'S
ROAD TO DISUNION:
SECESSIONISTS AT BAY (CONTINUED)
by Matthew Noah Vosmeier

The core of Freehling's argument in the second half of *Road to Disunion* concerns the "politics of loyalty." Using "mere words," Southern extremists could arouse "cultural anxieties" about slavery and could "bludgeon" their lukewarm Southern colleagues into submission by attempting to brand them



Sale of Estates, Pictures and Slaves in the Rotunda, New Orleans

Courtesy of the Lilly Library Indiana University, Bloomington

The Rotunda of the St. Louis Hotel in New Orleans' French Quarter as it was depicted in British traveler J. S. Buckingham's *The Slave States in America*. At the time of his visit, Buckingham wrote, "there were half a dozen auctioneers, each endeavouring to drown every voice but his own, and all straining their lungs, and distorting their countenances in a hideous manner. One was selling pictures, and dwelling on their merits; another was disposing of ground-lots in embryo cities, and expatiating on their capacities; and another was disposing of some slaves." Buckingham explained that he had "witnessed this painful scene in the old times of the West Indies, and in several countries of the East," but noted, as other travelers had, that "it appeared, indeed, more revolting here, in contrast with the republican institutions of America." [J. S. Buckingham, *The Slave States in America* 2 vols. (London, 1842), pp. 333-335.]

as disloyal to slavery (pp. 303, 287). This style of politics became important in the twenty-five years before the Civil War, explains Professor Freehling, and aroused several major sectional controversies, including the Gag Rule Controversy of 1835-1836, Texas Annexation, the Compromise of 1850, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Following from his argument in the first half of his book, which focuses on southern diversity and the development of southern (particularly South Carolinian) extremism, Freehling discusses how differences in northern and southern perceptions of "egalitarian republicanism" became apparent as proslavery extremists revealed their despotic traits:

Both the Slavepower's demands for legislative protection and the way the minority pushed demands through majoritarian processes violated northern senses of democratic government. When issues changed from black slavery to white republicanism, from an unfortunate institution on the other section's turf to unacceptable ultimatums about a common democratic government, Yankees stiffened into anti-southern postures (p. viii).

Representative of how such "politics of loyalty" worked is the story of the "Gag Rule Controversy" of 1835-1836. Freehling sees this controversy as an ominous signpost on the road to disunion, the "Pearl Harbor of the slavery controversy," for in it, "the slavery issue momentarily showed its potential to wrench everything national out of shape.... [prefiguring] all reasons why slavery contentions were so dangerous." In it, too, was first "nurtured the northern conception of a Great Slavepower Conspiracy" (pp. 308, 334, 313).

When, in December 1835, northern abolitionists began to mail petitions to Congress asking to end slavery in the District of Columbia, South Carolina extremists — Congressmen James Hammond and Francis Pickens, and Senator John C. Calhoun — expressed anger at the perceived insult to the South, and moved that the House not even receive them. However, wishing to preserve the forms of republican government while appeasing the South and saving the Democratic party, James Buchanan suggested that the Senate receive the petitions, but then immediately reject them. This proposal passed, once again keeping the extremists "at bay": "Their boon had been stolen, along with a sold-out South, by the Northern Democrats' new would-be prince" (pp. 311-312, 324-327).

Meanwhile, Democratic presidential hopeful Martin Van Buren, whose proslavery credentials were questionable, undermined the extremists in the House by convincing South Carolinian Henry L. Pinckney to take a stand that appeared to be more moderate. Using carefully chosen "mere words," Pinckney stated that Congress should receive the petitions, but refer them to a select committee

instructed to report that Congress "ought not" abolish slavery in Washington. He hoped to offer a firm gag rule that would not alienate pro-southern Northerners, and thus "protect the political status quo." In the debates that followed, "Southern Democrats pleaded with Northern Democrats for a more uncompromising gag rule," but failed to halt the passage of Pinckney's proposal, and extremist South Carolinians again "suffered a loser's dismay" (pp. 329-331, 336, 337).

According to Freehling, the Gag Rule controversy "pre-figured" Buchanan's and Van Buren's later actions as Presidents. Van Buren, whose concessions to Southerners "were more limited and begrudging," eventually ran as a free-soiler in 1848, while Buchanan "would make appeasement of the South the hallmark of his administration in the Lecompton Controversy of 1858." Thus, "like most politicians of their generation, [they] were destined to stay on the trail they chose when the Gag Rule Controversy first forced their choice" (p. 328).

Freehling is at his best when he unravels complex stories of political maneuvering. The story of Texas annexation, for example, is "the largest turning point on the road to disunion," but "too much of it [is] unknown" and "all of it [is] replete with zany characters and weird happenings" (p. 353).

Although independent, a weak Texas still sought protection from Mexico, preferably through United States annexation. That appeared unlikely until John Tyler, William Henry Harrison's successor, began to wonder whether annexation would enliven a pro-southern political movement, perhaps within a revived southern Whiggery. Yet, in 1843, with an American presidential election looming, Texas President Sam Houston knew that the cautious Tyler would not act, and decided "to test alternative Manifest Destinies" by approaching England for protection, thereby coaxing the American President into action (pp. 367-370).

It is here that Freehling recounts the story of unlikely characters who wittingly or unwittingly propelled Texas' admission to the Union. Stephen Pearl Andrews was a Houston lawyer who believed that slavery was responsible for discouraging immigration to the new republic, and in 1843, began to travel about Texas hoping to convince slaveholders to emancipate their slaves. Run out of Galveston and fearing angry mobs, Andrews was about to give up when British Captain Charles Elliot arrived as England's *Chargé d'Affaires* to Texas. Freehling describes Elliot as "a minor bureaucrat who made a historic career of sticking his mitts in places a flunky's hands in no way belonged," and Elliot encouraged Andrews to journey to London to raise antislavery support. Andrews would offer English abolitionists Texas lands to buy or to use as collateral for loans

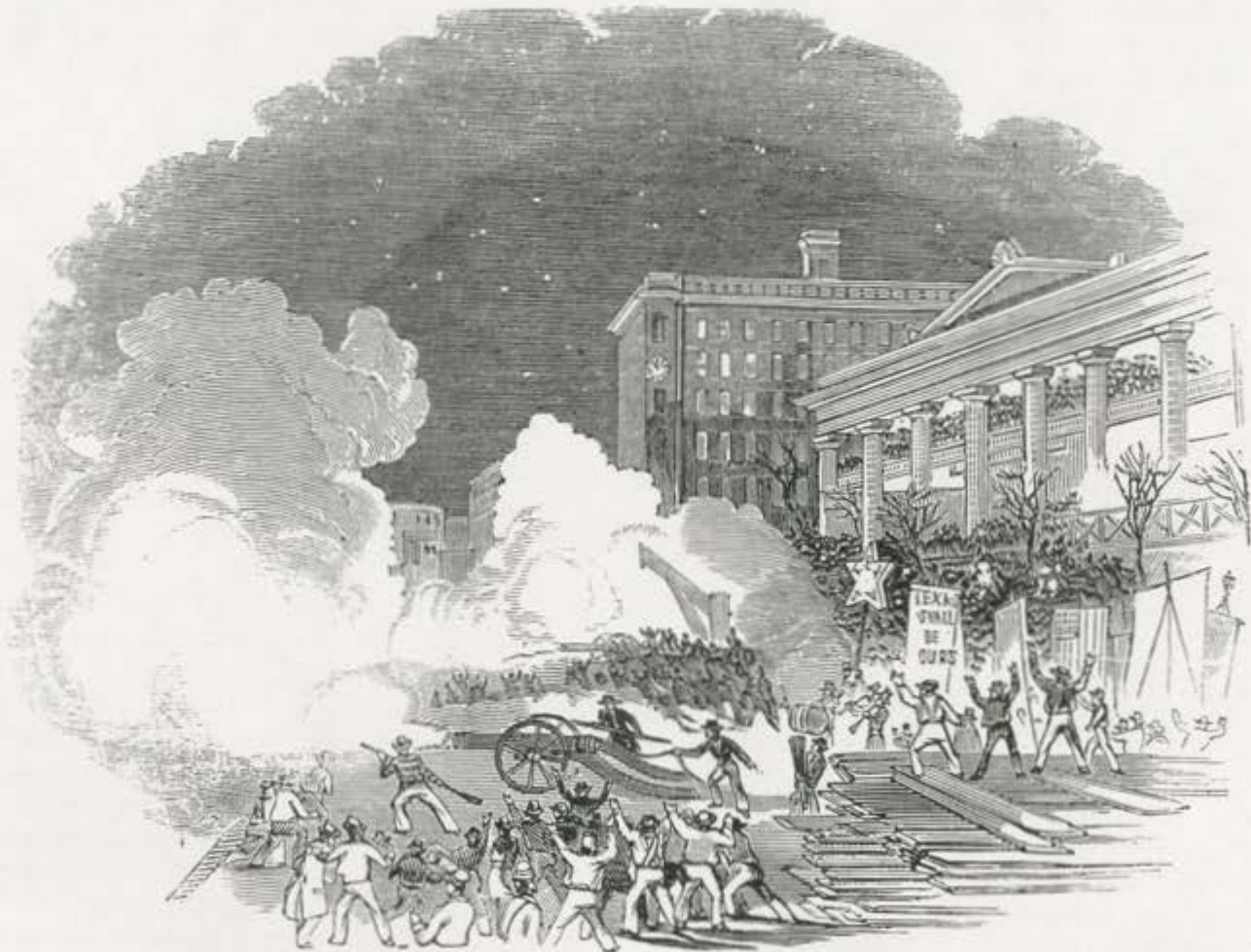
that could compensate slaveholders for emancipating their slaves (pp. 372-379).

In New York, Andrews serendipitously met other American abolitionists leaving to attend the World Antislavery Convention in London. In Britain, Andrews was sent by the convention to meet with Foreign Secretary Aberdeen, who left him with the mistaken notion that England would support his cause. Such news horrified Ashbel Smith, Texas' Minister to England, and Duff Green, the proslavery editor of the *United States Telegraph*, both of whom excitedly informed the Tyler administration of Andrews' plans. Although Lord Aberdeen had actually made no promises to Andrews, he nevertheless confirmed such ideas by explaining to Smith that Britain might be prepared to offer compensation to slaveholders. (pp. 382-387, 395).

At first unwilling to believe these rumors, Secretary of State Abel Upshur was not convinced that annexation

would protect slavery. Upshur conjectured that Texas' vast lands would invite slaveholders west, diffusing their strength in the Old South and actually helping the opponents of slavery. Yet, when Lord Aberdeen sent a Chargé d'Affaires to Mexico, offering to negotiate abolition in Texas ("a greater triumph, and more honorable to Mexico, than the retention of any Sovereignty merely nominal" over Texas) and when the House of Lords discussed such a possibility as well, Tyler and Upshur decided the time had come for annexation (pp. 392, 396-398).

Freehling shows how the politics of loyalty again came into play when support for annexation was not solid. Northern Whigs, including their presidential candidate from Kentucky, Henry Clay, would not support this seemingly proslavery treaty, and Northern Democrats, led by Van Buren, suggested leaving annexation for some future date. In the South, however, various arguments were used to con-



TEXAS DEMONSTRATION, JERSEY CITY.

From the Indiana University Library, Bloomington

A demonstration held February 24, 1845 in Jersey City, New Jersey, "where, at the instigation of the Polk and Dallas Club, one hundred guns were fired in favour of immediate Annexation of Texas." From the March 22, 1845 issue of *The London Illustrated News*.

vince a diverse lot of Southerners of the wisdom of annexation (pp. 412, 416-420).

Southern Democrats now worried that, unless they chose a presidential candidate as firm on annexation as Tyler was, they would lose the coming presidential election in 1844. At the Democratic Convention, Southerners refused to give Van Buren the two-thirds majority he needed, and instead supported James Polk. He was acceptable to both sections of the Democracy because he supported annexation, but for nationalistic, rather than proslavery, reasons. The Whig Henry Clay, interested more in economic issues, announced that he would not stand in the way of annexation. As a result, he alienated antislavery northerners and failed to convince the southern swing vote of his loyalty to slavery (pp. 429-430, 435-436).

Divisive congressional debates over Texas' annexation followed Polk's victory, but in the end, Texas was offered admission and agreed to come into the Union with its slaves. Freehling concludes that this sectional controversy, like that over the Kansas-Nebraska Act a decade later, is another of the "illuminating causes of the Civil War," in that it follows the trend he notes throughout his book:

Once again, as with the congressional debates in the District of Columbia, Southerners worried about outside attack on a spot, this time pre-annexation Texas, where slavery was relatively lightly spread. Once again an Old South reactionary who condemned white egalitarian republicanism, this time Abel P. Upshur, provoked the controversy in order to save slavery the elitist way. Once again Van Buren tried to compromise the white egalitarian way....

Once again Calhoun's followers and a few Whigs ... pressured Southern Democrats to wring concessions from northern allies. Just enough Northern Democrats again whispered an ever more resentful You win. Northern Whigs issued an ever more thundering How undemocratic ... (p. 451).

By the time of the Kansas-Nebraska controversy, concluded Freehling, such politics of slavery "eventually drowned out pre-slavery issues." This style of politics left the Whig party unable to hold its middle ground, for it "never could" compromise on slavery, and it strained the Democratic party's national organization as well. With this heightened tension, "southern crusaders" would now attempt to erase differences within the South through an enlivened proslavery ideology, for it was "high-time — past time — to make a South" (pp. 562, 564).

While not interpretively groundbreaking, *The Road to Disunion* is useful in showing that out of a rich and diverse southern society, in which slavery existed beside republican government, distinctive styles of political behavior developed that increased sectional tension and suspicion.

Because this is a work focused on developments in the antebellum South, Abraham Lincoln is mentioned only briefly, as in Freehling's discussion of the aftermath of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, when Lincoln returned to politics to become a "leader of the burgeoning anti-Nebraska movement" in Illinois. However, a theme of his subsequent volume will be "the most secessionist South's fears that Abraham Lincoln would build a Republican party in the least secessionist South" (pp. 563, ix).

In *The Road to Disunion*, Professor Freehling seeks "to show that the narrative literary form ... remains invaluable to humanize how a collision of abstractions helped produce the crisis of a people." To do so, he has enlivened this seventy-eight year story of the Old South with colorful descriptions, anecdotes, and short biographical sketches. Freehling's narrative style is lively, but it is at times too sensational and too casual for an historical work of this type and scope. For example, a less-graphic description of Andrew Jackson's last days would have sufficed. Also, referring to John C. Calhoun as "Mr. South Carolina," or explaining that Theodore Dwight Weld "briefly vied with William Lloyd Garrison for the title of Mr. Abolitionist" is distracting, and perhaps more appropriate for a lecture than for a book (pp. ix, 415, 282, 290).

Despite these caveats, William Freehling's *Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay* successfully brings together recent scholarly interpretations in southern social and political history and shows connections between life in a slave society, attitudes toward the institution of slavery, and antebellum political behavior in general.



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