Did Religious Fanaticism Cause the Civil War?

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Stephen M. Klugewicz

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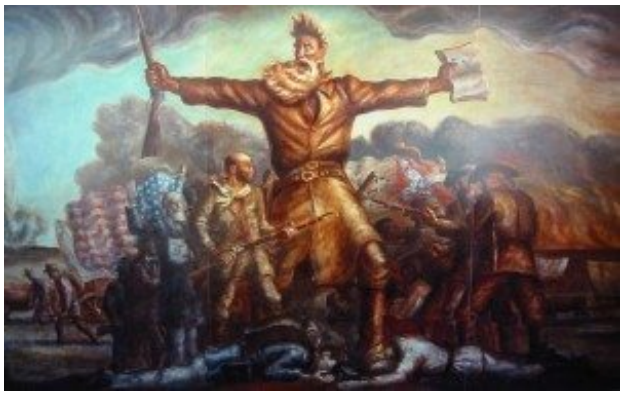
A Disease in the Public Mind: A New Understanding of Why We Fought the Civil War, by Thomas Fleming (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2013)



The title of this engaging analysis of the cause of the American Civil War comes from James Buchanan's reaction to John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, which the president claimed stemmed from "an incurable disease in the public mind." Historian Thomas Fleming agrees with Buchanan that it was hysteria over the issue of slavery, generated by wild-eyed, intolerant, and impractical Yankee abolitionists, that sparked the tragic conflict between North and South. Pointing to the peaceful end of slavery in the British West Indies, Cuba, and Brazil, Mr. Fleming seeks to explain why America did not find a more reasonable way to put an end to the "peculiar institution."

Mr. Fleming denounces the mingling of religion and politics that was intrinsic to the abolitionist cause. The separation of church and state, he claims, was the central idea of America's Founding, and thus the abolitionists' religious view of slavery as an unpardonable sin, rather than a regrettable reality, amounted to an overturning of the Founding itself. If slavery was a sin, then Southern slaveowners were sinners, who deserved scorn and indeed punishment.

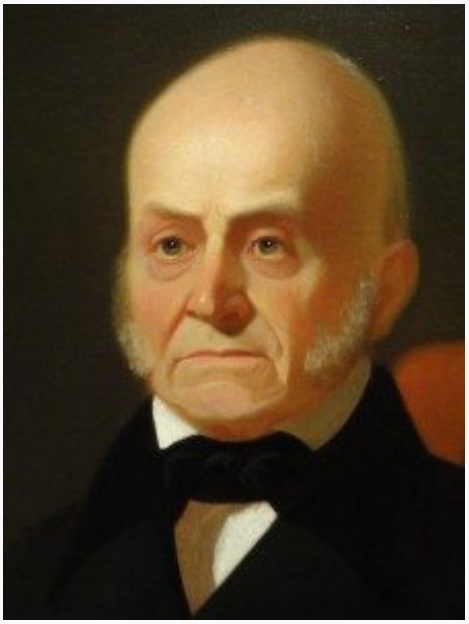
The abolitionist dream of a slave-less society in turn sparked Southern nightmares of a race war. Nightly slave patrols in the South by armed men were a constant reminder of how easily the power relationship between whites and blacks might be turned on its head. Abolitionist agitation, Southerners feared, might inspire servile revolts, or worse, culminate in the realization of the abolitionist dream of immediatism, the total and immediate freeing of all slaves through the mechanism of government power. Slave revolts like Nat Turner's Rebellion and the Stono Rebellion, coupled with the slaughter inflicted by ex-slaves upon whites in Santo Domingo (Haiti), showed that Southerners had good reason to fear uprisings among their enslaved populations.

John Brown's raid of 1859, an account of which opens Mr. Fleming's book, was the realization of the worst nightmare of Southerners: the indiscriminate murder of those "guilty" of participating in the "sin" of slavery, prompted by the religious fanaticism of abolitionism and financed by sympathetic, wealthy Northern philanthropists (Brown brought letters signed by Northern backers with him on his raid). Mr. Fleming pointedly notes that the first victim of John Brown's raid was a black man, and that Brown's band also killed Harper's Ferry's unarmed mayor, who was known in the town for his sympathy towards blacks. The author delights in recounting Brown's hypocrisy in appealing to the Bible during his trial as justification for his murderous actions and then dismissing it as worthless after his conviction when it was pointed out to him that St. Paul instructs slaves to obey their masters.

Warning that "a passionate minority seized by the noble desire to achieve some great moral goal may be abysmally wrong" (xiii), Mr. Fleming's harshest characterizations are indeed reserved for anti-slavery radicals like Brown, who took direct action to end the institution. Mr. Fleming mocks the fanaticism of Brown's supporters, particularly the Transcendentalist authors Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who declared Brown to be a saint, perhaps even Jesus Himself. Another villain in this tale is William Lloyd Garrison, founder of *The Liberator*. In Mr. Fleming's view, Garrison displayed "an almost total lack of empathy" for Southern slaveholders, which encouraged violence on the part of his fellow antislavery agitators. Garrison's attitude of moral superiority, Mr. Fleming charges, reflected a hubris common among New Englanders, who considered themselves, in the

words of a Boston editorialist, to “excel every other people that existed in the world.” (103).

A program of compensated emancipation–under which slaveowners would receive fair value for the freeing of their slaves–was anathema to radicals like Garrison, who derided the Constitution itself, in its tacit approval of slavery, as “a covenant with death, and agreement with Hell.” Though it is Southerners who are most often remembered for placing their cause above that of Union, Mr. Fleming shows that Northern antislavery radicals like Garrison were willing, even eager, to sacrifice the Union on the altar of abolition. Mr. Fleming laments that the moderate plans of compensated emancipation advocated by such men as Colonel John Laurens of the Continental Army and Thomas Jefferson Randolph (the grandson of the third president) were not adopted as the first steps of a comprehensive solution to the problem of slavery.



John Quincy Adams

The supreme tragic figure of Mr. Fleming’s story is, quite unexpectedly, John Quincy Adams. After losing his bid for a second term as president, Adams became a back-benching Congressman who seized upon the slavery issue as a hobby-horse to ride to renewed fame and political influence. “Of all the victims of this disease of the public mind that distorted the noble cause of antislavery,” Mr. Fleming laments, “John Quincy Adams is the saddest, most regrettable story.” Eschewing the more reasonable course of compensated, gradual emancipation, the son of the second President of the United States instead chose to become “another snarling Southerner-hating New England voice of disunity” (175).

Dovetailing with the abolitionists’ desire to cleanse the land of slavery were the racist sympathies of most Northerners, who wished to cleanse the country of blacks altogether. The Wilmot Proviso of 1846, which proposed prohibiting slavery in territory gained from Mexico in the war that began that year, was called by its author, Congressman David Wilmot of Pennsylvania, “the White Man’s Proviso.” “I want to have nothing to do either with the free Negro or the slave Negro,” Wilmot proclaimed. “We wish to settle the territories with free white men” (172). Mr. Fleming shows that the ideology of Abraham Lincoln’s new Republican party in the 1850s reflected Wilmot’s view; the Republicans were dedicated to providing free soil out West for free *white* men. Freed slaves were to be deported back to Africa or to the Caribbean; indeed, Lincoln himself held out hope for the colonization of black Americans until his dying day.

But Lincoln is far from a villain in Mr. Fleming’s story. Though he opposed slavery, Lincoln was no abolitionist; though inflexible in his resolve to enforce the Constitution throughout the country by force (even rebuffing, in a face-to-face meeting, the efforts of former President John Tyler to seek an eleventh-hour compromise to the secession crisis), he pursued a policy of leniency towards the South as the war came to an end. As to this latter point, Mr. Fleming has a rather unique view about Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation (though scholar Lerone Bennett has made a similar point), seeing it as a conservative measure in its placing control over the end of slavery in the executive’s hands, at the expense of radicals in and out of Congress: “Lincoln had rescued the noble side of the abolitionists’ crusade, their hatred of slavery, and separated it from its ruinous side, their hatred of southern white men. That left him free to deal with the defeated South on his own terms” (300).

In many ways, despite its subtitle, Mr. Fleming’s interpretation is not new at all: In assigning blame for the war to the abolitionists, Fleming echoes not only the arguments of contemporary Southerners but also those of later historians of the South, like Avery Craven and Frank L. Owlsey. In proposing that compensated emancipation was the great road not taken by Americans, Mr. Fleming echoes the analysis of other writers, including Jeffrey Rogers Hummel. Unlike Mr. Hummel, however, Mr. Fleming is more accurate in suggesting that compensated emancipation was already a dead letter by the time that John Quincy Adams began challenging “the Slave Power” on the floor of Congress in 1836. The abolitionists had already won. There would be no compromise with evil. The South would have to be destroyed in the fires of war in order for the country to be purified.

Mr. Fleming concludes that the Civil War was both a triumph and tragedy. Though it brought an end to slavery, it did so at the expense of some of 850,000 American lives–an unnecessary and regrettable sacrifice for which a small band of religious fanatics was ultimately responsible.

Books on the topic of this essay may be found in The Imaginative Conservative Bookstore.