

No Taint of Compromise
Crusaders in Antislavery Politics

By Frederick J. Blue

(Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 2005. Pp. xiv, 301. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$54.95.)

In *No Taint of Compromise*, Frederick J. Blue applies a prosopographic analysis to antislavery politics in the antebellum era. Blue presents eleven portraits of antislavery political leaders, ranging from well-known figures, like John Greenleaf Whittier and David Wilmot, to such lesser-known activists as Alvan Stewart and Sherman M. Booth. The subjects are well-chosen and diverse, representing different regional, religious, and partisan backgrounds. Of special interest to readers of this journal may be Blue's chapter on George Washington Julian, the Quaker congressman from Indiana who was a member of the Free Soil party and a leader of the Radical Republicans from 1861-1871. *No Taint of Compromise* also includes two women among its portraits (Jane Grey Swisshelm and Jessie Benton Frémont), as well as a black political leader (Charles Henry Langston). Their biographies challenge narrow assumptions about who participated in antebellum politics. Overall, Blue portrays individuals who have been the subject of little historical attention. By eschewing Lincoln and Sumner for Booth and Swisshelm, Blue guarantees that the book will make a contribution to the field.

The portraits are arranged according to the subjects' roles in the evolution of antislavery politics, from the

initial organization of the abolitionist Liberty Party in 1840, through the formation of the anti-slavery-expansion Free Soil party in 1848, to the political realignment that produced the Republican party in the mid-1850s. Blue's purpose is to demonstrate that antislavery politics did not constitute a compromised antislavery effort. Ever since William Lloyd Garrison's decisive turn against politics in the mid-1830s, political antislavery has been viewed suspiciously. But Garrison's bias, Blue suggests, has been adopted by historians without good cause. By looking closely at the lives of antislavery political leaders, Blue hopes to demonstrate that—in the words of George Washington Julian—their antislavery politics had “no taint of compromise.” At some point, each of his subjects made an unswerving commitment to attack slavery through politics.

Readers may question whether a persistent political commitment is equivalent to an uncompromised ethical position. After all, compromise is the very stuff of politics. Blue's organization of his portraits makes the tension in his argument obvious. By ordering his subjects from Liberty Party members through Free Soilers to Republicans, Blue cannot help but reproduce the declension narrative of antislavery politics: that antislavery

politicians who first joined the unpopular abolitionist Liberty Party, later migrated into the merely restrictionist Free Soil party in order to gain votes. His subjects may not have compromised their commitments to politics, but they certainly compromised their commitments to antislavery. Blue compounds this impression throughout by qualifying his subjects' politics with words such as "radical," "moderate," and "conservative." Because of the prosopographic form of his narrative, perhaps, Blue chooses not to pursue a more complete redefinition of these terms—a redefinition that might have shown Free Soilers and pre-Civil War Republicans in a less-compromised light.

Prosopography also offers its advantages. *No Taint of Compromise* is a pleasure to read. Blue brings decades of experience to the subject and the genre; he is the author of an award-winning biography of the anti-

slavery political leader Salmon P. Chase, as well as of another biography of the Conscience Whig, Charles Sumner, and a history of the Free Soil Party. The brief biographies he offers in *No Taint of Compromise* are humane, compelling, and enlightening. This text should work well for an undergraduate course on the antebellum era. By bringing to light the stories of his eleven intriguing political antislavery leaders, Blue has enriched our understanding of that very diverse movement, and persuasively demonstrated that it cannot be simply characterized.

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*Calculating the Value of the Union
Slavery, Property Rights, and the Economic Origins of the Civil War*
By James L. Huston

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003. Pp. xvii, 394. Tables, illustrations, appendices, notes, sources, index. \$45.00.)

James L. Huston has written a smart book explaining why the Civil War could not be avoided. Looking closely at speeches (especially in congressional debates) and at correspondence, Huston works with the actual words of the southern leaders who finally calculated that the union was less valuable to them than their

slaves, and who, fearing that the union would someday in some way cost them their slaves, then assailed it in a war that cost them those slaves.

Southern slaveowners, Huston argues, always understood property differently from northerners and westerners; he redundantly demonstrates from the very words of political lead-