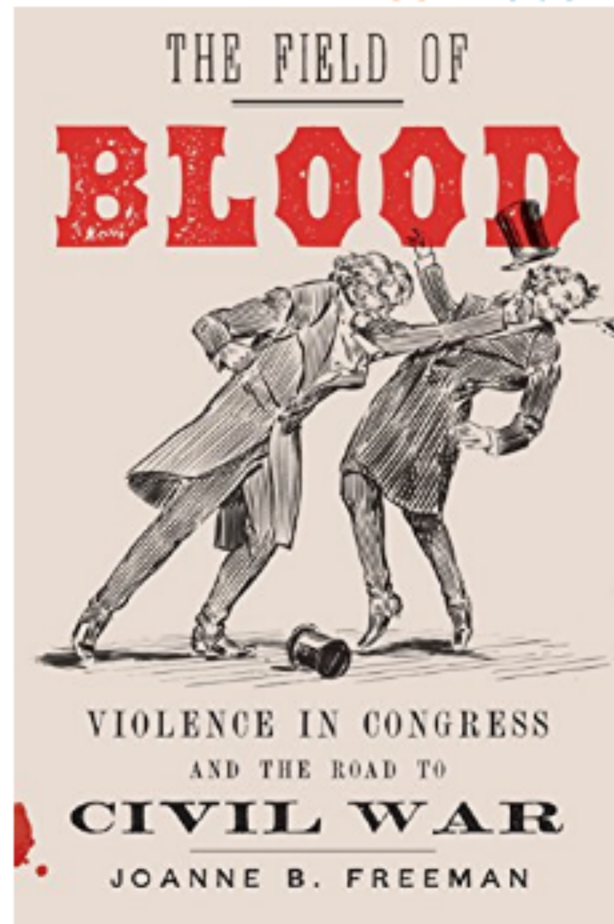
Look inside



The *Patriot* was voicing a popular notion that seemed readily apparent in the mix of men in Congress: many a Southerner or Southern-born Westerner was what French called "a hard customer."[130] They talked big and blustered. ("[B]ombastical heroics," French called it.)[131] They strutted and swaggered. They met challengers with fist-clenched or pistol-gripping or knife-wielding defiance; armed and ready, they flaunted their willingness to fight.[132]

Take for example the frequent weapon wielder John Dawson (D-LA). It's hard to tell what Dawson was like in the Louisiana legislature. Maybe he had more self-control. Maybe not; this was a violent age of aggressive manhood, and Louisiana in the 1840s had some rough edges, as did Dawson, a self-described man of "malignant hatred" who had a penchant for fighting duels with the aptly named cut-and-thrust sword.[133] Given his relative obscurity on the national stage, it's also hard to tell how others judged him, though there are clues. John Quincy Adams summed him up as a "drunken bully," and thanks to his 1842 threat to cut a colleague's throat "from ear to ear," he became something of a byword for bullying on the floor. Threats were sometimes met with a mocking "Are you going to cut my throat from ear to ear?"[134] All in all, it's entirely possible that Dawson was a blade-wielding charmer wherever he happened to be; when he died in 1845, even his congressional eulogists couldn't avoid mentioning unnamed "grave faults."[135]

But what's most telling about the congressional Dawson are his literal and figurative trigger points. In one way or another, it was opposition to slavery that galled him enough to wave a weapon. His throat-cutting victim, a Whig Southerner, had been defending John Quincy Adams's right to speak during a ruckus over antislavery petitions. The outspoken Joshua Giddings was honored by Dawsonian ire

more than once. In the midst of an antislavery speech by Giddings in 1843, Dawson shoved him and threatened him with a knife. ("I take it, Mr. Speaker, that it was not an attempt to cut his throat from ear to ear," Adams joked darkly.)[136] Two years later, during another Giddings antislavery speech, in what may rank as the all-time greatest display of firepower on the floor, Dawson, clearly agitated, vowed that he would kill Giddings and cocked his pistol, bringing four armed Southern Democrats to his side, which prompted four Whigs to position themselves around Giddings, several of them armed as well. After a few minutes, most of the pistoleers sat down.[137] Dawson may or may not have been a troublemaker in the Louisiana legislature, but he was one in Congress for one central reason: face-to-face attacks on slavery.

In the South, most Southerners didn't confront open opposition to slavery in their everyday lives. Even in *print* it was beyond the pale; a flood of abolitionist tracts mailed south in 1835 prompted panic, mass protest rallies, vigilante violence, and bonfire burnings of sacks of mail.[138] It's not surprising then that confrontational antislavery talk in Congress was a challenge that some Southerners handled better than others; many took it as a personal affront that they felt bound to avenge. As John C. Calhoun said in 1836, there were only two ways to respond to the insults proffered in antislavery petitions: submit to them or "as a man of honor, knock the calumniator down."[139] Many slaveholders chose the path of most resistance, even on the House and Senate floors.

In part, this was a matter of custom. Such man-to-man encounters were semi-sanctioned in the South; authorities rarely intervened.[140] Southerners were accustomed to mastery in more ways than one. Indeed, their lives depended on it. By definition, a slave regime was violent and imperiled; the chance of a slave revolt inspired a wary defensiveness on the part of slaveholders, making them prone to flaunt their power and quick to take violent action.[141] When it came to leadership, violent men—sometimes *very* violent men—had a popular advantage. Robert Potter (J-NC) was elected to his state legislature after his release from jail for castrating two men he suspected of committing adultery with his wife; when he committed the crime, he was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives. William Lowndes Yancey (D-AL) was elected to the Alabama House and then the U.S. House of Representatives after killing an unarmed man by shooting

him in the chest, pistol-whipping his head, and stabbing him with a sword cane.[142]

Appearances mattered in such a world; authority and power were contained in a man's person as well as his property. Thus the public-minded nature of Southern violence and its notorious brutality. It was meant to impress.[143] Honor culture was of a piece with this world. A man was only as honorable as others thought him to be.[144] Duels were more about parading manhood and showing coolness under fire than they were about killing. Cower before a duel challenge and you were no man at all.[145]

Northern violence was different. This isn't to say that Northerners couldn't be savagely violent or that they were immune to the power of honor culture. The "Yankee code of honor," as French called it, had its own logic and power.[146] Less grounded in gunplay, it was no less centered on manhood.[147] Canings were common in the North, as were ritualistic "postings"—printed insult-filled public attacks on offenders who refused to defend or take back their offensive words. After a particularly heated congressional election, two of French's Maine friends in Congress posted each other.[148] Mainers were New England's frequent fighters, partly a product of the young state's frontier spirit; it had achieved statehood as recently as 1820.

Yet as belligerent as Northerners could be, many were slower to fight than Southerners and quicker to call in the law. In the North, when assaults went too far or rioting erupted, authorities often imposed order. Most casualties in Northern riots were killed by authorities trying to rein people in; in contrast, Southern rioters tended to kill one another.[149] Thus the Northern response to violent displays in Congress; more often than not, Northerners turned to the Speaker or chair to enforce the rules. John Quincy Adams dubbed their pleas "lamentation speeches."[150]

Not surprisingly, the most radical members of this new party were the most confrontational.[10] John Parker Hale, Zachariah Chandler, Benjamin Wade, Elihu Washburne, Henry Wilson, Owen Lovejoy, John Covode, James Lane, Galusha Grow, John Potter, William Fessenden, and, of course, the ever fight-ready Joshua Giddings were essentially Northern fighting men, hoping to radicalize their party and galvanize the public by displaying the emotional power of Northern aggression. They accomplished their purpose with a potent blend of extreme rhetoric and—in some cases—an apparent willingness to defend their principles with their fists. Their bold antislavery talk, the kind that had subjected Giddings to at least seven physical assaults, was virtually guaranteed to provoke a Southern backlash.

These fights served a more complex purpose than past imbroglios sparked by men such as Giddings, Adams, and Hale to denigrate slavery by putting slaveholder savagery on display. Republicans were trying to do something concrete; their numbers were large enough to affect and possibly effect policy and the balance of power in the Union. They also were a nascent party that desperately needed widespread public support. And the core agenda of that party—mentioned in countless petitions and resolves from their constituents—was combating the Slave Power plot to dominate the federal government and spread slavery throughout the Union. Republican aggression in Congress and the Southern belligerence that it provoked served the Republican agenda; in a sense, it was campaigning. By promoting their cause in the face of raging threats, or by provoking those threats, Republicans weren't just proving a point. They were engaging in party politics.

Admittedly, by 1855 the threshold of fight-worthy offenses for congressional slavery supporters was low and getting lower all the time. They, too, believed that they were fighting a powerful foe: Northern aggression was threatening to strangle if not extinguish the South's hold on the Union, and perhaps even to infiltrate the South.[11] By Southern

logic, their interests and honor required forceful action, and fight Southerners did. By threatening, insulting, and even assaulting their foes, they, too, were promoting their cause and drumming up support. For both North and South, violence was politics.

Which brings us to the most dramatic innovation in congressional violence after 1855: Northerners fought back.[12] When confronted by screaming slaveholders wielding weapons, Republicans stood firm, often exchanging blow for blow, sometimes with weapons, often with numbers. More than once, when a Republican drove Southerners into a fury, brother Republicans rushed to the rescue, armed and ready to fight.

These men stood their ground deliberately, aggressively, defiantly. They did so knowing that the simple fact of their resistance sent a powerful message. It revealed the presence of a united North willing to fight for its interests and rights. The very act of speaking in the face of howling resistance was a declaration of Northern rights, because it asserted the right of free speech on the floor, a right long violated by Southerners.

The Republican war for free speech wasn't purely symbolic. To promote their party, to get things done, to serve their constituents, to fully represent the North, and to fulfill the pledges that had won them office, Republican congressmen had to say their piece; they had to confront and demand and accuse. Pledged to combat the Slave Power's hold on the federal government, they were pledged to fight bullying Southerners as best they could.

Southerners were equally bound to resist Northern aggression, and Republicans were Northern aggression personified, as well as a fount of dangerous words; to Southern slaveholders, Republican antislavery rhetoric was personally insulting, sectionally degrading, and a threat to the security and stability of the South that had to be silenced. Most congressional clashes between 1855 and 1861 centered on this core dynamic. Republicans propounded their cause; slaveholders tried to gag them with threats and violence; and Republicans fought back. The arrival of a Northern opposition in Congress marked the start of a death struggle over free speech on the floor, which was in truth a fight for control of Congress, and thereby for the fate of the nation.