



# Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War

*Eric Foner*

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Since its publication twenty-five years ago, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men* has been recognized as a classic, an indispensable contribution to our understanding of the causes of the American Civil War. A key work in establishing political ideology as a major concern of modern American historians, it remains the only full-scale evaluation of the ideas of the early Republican party. Now with a new introduction, Eric Foner puts his argument into the context of contemporary scholarship, reassessing the concept of free labor in the light of the last twenty-five years of writing on such issues as work, gender, economic change, and political thought.

A significant reevaluation of the causes of the Civil War, Foner's study looks beyond the North's opposition to slavery and its emphasis upon preserving the Union to determine the broader grounds of its willingness to undertake a war against the South in 1861. Its search is for those social concepts the North accepted as vital to its way of life, finding these concepts most clearly expressed in the ideology of the growing Republican party in the decade before the war's start. Through a careful analysis of the attitudes of leading factions in the party's formation (northern Whigs, former Democrats, and political abolitionists) Foner is able to show what each contributed to Republican ideology. He also shows how northern ideas of human rights--in particular a man's right to work where and how he wanted, and to accumulate property in his own name--and the goals of American society were implicit in that ideology. This was the ideology that permeated the North in the period directly before the Civil War, led to the election of Abraham Lincoln, and led, almost immediately, to the Civil War itself. At the heart of the controversy over the extension of slavery, he argues, is the issue of whether the northern or southern form of society would take root in the West, whose development would determine the nation's destiny.

In his new introductory essay, Foner presents a greatly altered view of the subject. Only entrepreneurs and farmers were actually "free men" in the sense used in the ideology of the period. Actually, by the time the Civil War was initiated, half the workers in the North were wage-earners, not independent workers. And this did not account for women and blacks, who had little freedom in choosing what work they did. He goes onto show that even after the Civil War these guarantees for "free soil, free labor, free men" did not really apply for most Americans, and especially not for blacks.

Demonstrating the profoundly successful fusion of value and interest within Republican ideology prior to the Civil War, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men* remains a classic of modern American historical writing. Eloquent and influential, it shows how this ideology provided the moral consensus which allowed the North, for the first time in history, to mobilize an entire society in modern warfare.

## **Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War Details**

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## **From Reader Review Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War for online ebook**

### **Robert Owen says**

In “Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men”, Eric Foner discusses the various political and social constituencies that merged under the banner of “anti-slavery” to form the Republican party in the years immediately preceding the Civil War. The book is, in a sense, a companion to Eugene Genovese’s “The Political Economy of Slavery”, in which Genovese explains the extent to which ante-bellum southern society had embraced the institution of slavery as a unique, deeply held world-view, and how the preservation of slavery became an ideology so dear to them that they would sooner abandon the Union than part with it. In Foner’s book, he essentially makes the same case about the anti-slavery worldview that emerged over the same period in the North. In essence, both Foner and Genovese resuscitate the Beardian theory of “irrepressible conflict” as the cause of the civil war, yet unlike Charles and Mary Beard, lay the source of that conflict squarely on competing worldviews over slavery.

While various groups united as Republicans under a banner of “anti-slavery”, these various anti-slavery constituencies were each motivated by different, often competing, ideological impulses – only a minority of which actually held slavery to be wrong because blacks were equal to whites. On the far extreme were abolitionists for whom slavery was a moral wrong, and who held that its abolition was the only moral response to sin. On the opposite extreme were nativist Know-Nothings whose anti-immigrant fervor made them the natural enemies of the Democratic Party; a Party that, in the North, was strongly supported by recently arrived immigrants – in other words, the Know-Nothing anti-slavery position had nothing whatsoever to do with a sense of right or wrong with respect to slaves, but rather, was a poke in the eye at a political rival. Between these two poles were radical, moderate and conservative variants anti-slavery Whigs and anti-slavery Democrats, each of whom were wary of the consolidation of political power by the slave south, and further, saw slavery as antithetical to their free labor view of a democratic America. What is fascinating is that each of these constituencies united into a cohesive political party dedicated to anti-slavery while, at the same time, never abandoning their respective fundamental ideologies that had made them abolitionists, Whigs, Democrats or nativists in the first place. To quote Foner “....the fundamental achievement of the Republican party before the Civil was [was] the creation and articulation of an ideology which blended personal and sectional interest with morality so perfectly that it became the most potent political force in the nation.”

I found this book fascinating, and highly recommend it. As I read, I found myself thinking about the political economy of my own time, and wondering whether there might not, indeed, be an opportunity to again "blend personal and sectional interest with morality" in a positive, constructive way that seems, at present, to escape everyone.

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### **Tracie Sneed says**

Not for everyone, but a must read in preparation in understanding the precursors to the Civil war.

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## Mike Hankins says

Popular culture today often harbors severe oversimplifications of the antebellum period and the Civil War. Many tend to view the North as a united front of strictly anti-slavery “good guys” in opposition to a pro-slavery South. Historians often espouse less extreme simplifications as well, such as the economic conception of the war’s origins found in the works of Charles Beard, or views of the war’s commencement as solely outrage over the slavery issue. Eric Foner’s magnificent work, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men* seeks to remedy these views by examining the origins and ideological foundations of the Republican Party in all their complexity. He asserts that the party was essentially a coalition of radicals, alienated former democrats, and moderate conservatives, united by the concept of “free labor.” This concept was in direct opposition to slavery as an institution. He concludes that the various values of these groups combined to transform antislavery from a vague sentiment into a politically viable platform. This exacerbated sectionalism to such a degree that the actions of each side – secession by the Confederacy, and the refusal to allow secession by the Union – were the only logical, intellectually consistent actions available to each group.

Foner is an intellectual powerhouse. Referred to by *Reviews in American History* as the leading historian of the Reconstruction era, his works have earned the Pulitzer Prize, the Lincoln Prize, and multiple Bancroft Prizes. His expertise has contributed to sources as diverse as the *Washington Post* and Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show*. In *Free Soil*, Foner displays his mastery of the secondary literature, heavily employing archival primary sources to fill gaps and correct inaccuracies in the historiography.

The work begins by defining the “free soil” ideology that marked the emerging Republican Party. For free labor advocates, social mobility and the ability to better one’s self through work was a cornerstone of American society and personhood itself. Contrary to some popular beliefs, these ideas were stronger in rural areas, which were plentiful in the North. The concept of free labor was also interwoven with religious and moral concepts of self-improvement. These ideas were absolutely antithetical to slavery as a concept. Yet this opposition was not simplistic – although free laborers argued that slavery was inefficient, they also contended that it eroded the dignity of free labor. This was partly because it undermined the lofty ideal of free labor, but also because free laborers were tinged with racism that opposed the possibility that blacks and whites could work side by side.

Foner then examines each of the various elements of the diverse Republican Party in turn. He recognizes that the radicals were a small but vocal minority who became a political force in response to the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854. Some radicals went as far as to advocate northern secession, although many realized that their views would have to be tempered in order to gain support for their ideas. Many ex-democrats were drawn to the party by a sense of revenge for the perceived coup of the Democratic Party by John Calhoun and the “slave power.” Viewing themselves as the true heirs of Jackson, the dissolution of financial debates surrounding the tariff, banks, and currency issues allowed these former democrats to support the fledgling republicans, although many would fly back to their former party after the war. Conservative moderates made up the third wing of the party. Antislavery was not the most important platform for them, although it was a consequence of their true goals. These conservatives longed for internal improvements, a powerful Homestead Act, and economic development that would propel the nation forward in their eyes. While abolishing slavery was not high on their list of improvements, the peculiar institution and the political power it represented formed a block to their desired reforms. Thus, antislavery was a necessary component for achieving their goals. These various groups found common ground to unite, and chose Abraham Lincoln to

represent them, not because he was the best advocate of any of their specific views, but because he best accommodated all of them. Thus, Lincoln was, in the words of one of his supporters, “the second choice of everybody” (p. 213).

The Republican Party is not presented here as a morally good force fighting to free the slaves. Rather, Foner highlights the complexities of the party by including chapters on the influence of nativism and racism to the party’s ideology. While nativism, usually under the banner of know-nothingism, crumbled in the late 1850s under the weight of the slavery issue, it was a strong enough force to split northern votes and bestow the 1856 election to James Buchanan, and forced many republicans to attempt to form coalitions with nativist activists. Foner emphasizes that most republicans were comfortable with nativism as a cultural force and opposed it only when it manifested itself politically. Racism however, proved much more influential to the new party. Republicans avoided accusations of being pro-black by claiming that abolition would keep the races further separated than slavery did. Many republicans also supported colonization. Debate did emerge regarding the rights to be given to free blacks. Foner argues that a consensus formed among republicans that advocated equal legal rights to blacks, such as equality in the justice system, but this liberty did not include equal social and civil rights. Many republicans expressed that blacks should have the same opportunity for social mobility as white free laborers, but they also believed the stereotypes that claimed most blacks would not rise to the occasion and take advantage of these opportunities.

Ultimately, Foner’s in-depth study of primary archival material allows him to weave a careful thread through the historiography, creating a rich picture of republican ideology as a coalition of radicals, ex-democrats, and conservative moderates, united though a common desire to make antislavery attitudes politically viable. The various pieces of this ideology included hatred of southern political power, antislavery, preservation of the union, free labor, racial prejudice, and preservation of the northern social order. All these pieces had to have been present, and just as the removal of any of these made the party less cohesive, these ideas cannot be fully understood in isolation from each other. These attitudes contributed to the southern perception that staying in the Union meant the eventual eradication of slavery, and at least a tacit admission that slavery was morally wrong. Thus, in Foner’s conception, secession was the only logical option that was consistent with southern ideology, and the refusal to allow secession was perfectly logical from the northern perspective. Although these arguments are complex, Foner’s brilliant prose keeps them always clear, and his research renders them credible. Familiarity with this book is not only a pleasurable experience, but essential to a modern understanding of the antebellum period and the origins of the Civil War.

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### **Yunis Esa says**

The many factors that lead to the panic

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### **Eric says**

So many grotesque, Flannery O’Connor-ish names in this! Real people were helplessly christened, or intentionally styled themselves E. Rockwood Hoar, Abijah Mann, Hannibal Hamlin, Thurlow Weed, Orestes Brownson, Azariah Flagg, Galusha Grow, Ichabod Codding and, my personal and everlasting favorite, Godlove Orth. Say that in a seductive tone. *Godlove*. And when you step back, “Abraham Lincoln” is mighty strange too, that nineteenth century joining of an Old Testament patriarch or holy warrior to a humble

Anglo-Saxon surname (the houses were of logs, the shirts of homespun fiber, but the English was of the finest weave, the product of meager, roughly-printed, but essentially Olympian Bard-and-Bible libraries, little windowsills of classics). *I, Macabeeus Bradley, do solemnly swear...*

This book is dryly titled and written but it tells a thrilling story: the radicalization of a people. Foner details the slow fusion of Northern antislavery constituencies into an effective organization, the Republican Party. The party's "fundamental achievement" in the pre-war years was

*the creation and articulation of an ideology which blended personal and sectional interest with morality so perfectly that it became the most potent political force in the nation.*

Grant's *Personal Memoirs*, a superb command history of the war, is also, upon reflection, a testament of the working of that "potent political force" among the *sentimentally* but not yet *politically* antislavery North. Grant was one of the millions who had for years subordinated their discomfort with slavery to national unity and party harmony, but who were drawn to the Republicans as they began to see that unity and harmony would mean little if slaveholders dominated the government and polluted the vast Western reaches with an institution whose political economy and social system were radically repugnant to their own idea of America's future. Grant, a border state resident with slaveholding in-laws (and who briefly owned a slave himself), went from voting Democratic in 1856, to forestall secession, to supporting Lincoln in 1860, and acting as drillmaster to the Republicans' torchlight-parading semi-militia, the "Wide Awakes."

It fits Grant's modest style that in memoirs written as a former president and commander of a conquering host he should figure as the cautious Everyman, a latecomer to revolution, a mote of the diverse mass mobilized under the Republican banner. There were *the radicals*, whose strident moralism and belief in an actively anti-slavery federal government had kept them wandering in the wilderness of third party schemes since the 1840s; the *moderates*, with Lincoln the typical specimen, a motley of ex-Whigs and disaffected Democrats who abhorred slavery but had believed in the possibility of sectional compromise until the Kansas-Nebraska controversy revealed southern interests profoundly contemptuous of the democratic process and bent on expansion into the west; and the *conservatives* from southern portions of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Iowa, Grant's prewar milieu, areas marked by the racism of emigrants from the slave states—and then the Old Line Whigs and former Know-Nothings in the east who in last minutes before their absorption had sought to defuse the national obsession with slavery and unite the sections through immigrant bashing and a war on liquor.

That's quite a mixed bag. And who knows what difficulties they would have had governing in peacetime, without the unifier of war. Still, Republican control of the national government was a repudiation of the southern way of life as a basis for America's development, and a pronouncement of doom upon slavery, however long emancipation took. Interference with slavery in the states where it already existed wasn't even on the table, but, Foner says, that didn't—couldn't—mollify the slave-owners, for "to agree to the containment of slavery, the South would have had to abandon its whole ideology, which had come to view the institution as a positive good, the basis of an enlightened form of social organization." The abolitionist

Elizur Wright prophesied, "Woe to the slave power under a Republican President if it strikes the first blow," and I've always thought the Secessionists pretty stupid for shooting first, a treason which opened the way to what they most feared, emancipation by executive fiat, and which radicalized the strongly unionist Republican conservatives and Northern Democrats—who had opposed anti-slavery agitation as disunity. But Foner's analysis of the expansionism and religiosity, of the giddily prospective imperial designs inherent in both free soil and slave power ideology made vivid the passions involved, made it understandable that the slaveholders would seek to redress a political reverse by other means, in war. Grant called secession "plainly suicidal"--which is something to think about.

The rebels wagered and lost, but were invited into American nostalgia. As Rebecca Solnit wrote about the tamed Indians in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, those America vanquishes are consoled with incorporation into the national myth. The Indians and the Rebels figure as the Noble Foes whose scrappy, individualistic valor resisted a phalanx of federal robots, whose Simpler Way of Life the urbanized, debt-ridden wage slaves fantasize about in darkened theaters. My girlfriend's brother-in-law is an officer in the Marines. We drink and he tells his stories. One of his men, not white, and a very recent immigrant, just got a tattoo—a bulldog waving the Confederate battle flag, the stars-and-bars. Questioned, this drone of the leviathan state, of the empire whose consolidation required the defeat of the South, admitted he wasn't entirely sure what the flag meant, but knew it was tough-looking, the sign of *a rebel*.

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### **Jay Perkins says**

Eric Foner asks in the last chapter of this book: "The decision for civil war in 1860-61 can be resolved into two questions--why did the South secede, and why did the North refuse to let the South secede?" (pg. 316) Neither question can be fully developed unless one understands the rise of the Republican party in the late 1850s. This new party was not bound together by economic concerns that had so afflicted the nation in the 1830s and early 1840s. They were instead a coalition of diverse politicians and lawmakers who held to an ideology of free soil and free men. Politicians who were once free trade, hard money, Jacksonian Democrats, integrated with men who were pro-tariff, bank promoting, Clay-loving Whigs. Radicals who supported African American civil rights and politicians who wanted to ship freed slaves out of the country allied in an antislavery cause. Despite their divergent views on economics and race, they all believed in the preeminence of free labor and insisted that slavery be barred from the new territories. This party was a coalition of Northern and Mid-Western men who wanted to put a stop to slavery's further expansion and monopoly on American government. Hatred of slavery however, didn't always mean a concern for racial equality, but it did despise the effect of slavery upon labor and the American character. To many northern American's, free labor was what would make America great. The ability for a man to move west and have his own farm and create his own industry was the engine that would build a powerful middle class. The introduction of slavery into the new territories would destroy this ideal. Foner's book is a classic and one that cannot be ignored when trying to understand the causes of the Civil War. His level of research is breath taking. Thousands of archives and primary source material were consulted for this book (he admits that some was left out in his bibliography). This book is a must read for anyone wanting to understand Civil War causation.

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## Will says

Foner walks us through the rise of the Republican Party in the 1850s. It makes for very interesting reading. I will list the interesting facts that I gleaned from it:

I am a cynic, and my interpretation is this. The north went to heroic lengths to assuage the south with the compromise of 1850, and the south thanked them with the Bleeding Kansas debacle and the Dred Scott ruling. The Democratic Party was functioning as a *de facto* regional power, blatantly subservient to the Slave Power. The situation was clearly untenable, and the old Whig party was becoming marginalized and irrelevant as its southern members abandoned it. The northern Democrats of the Stephen Douglas variety were unpopular and increasingly irrelevant to their party's leadership.

Northern elites were understandably disturbed, and strove to build a regional party of their own. However, there were few issues on which the disparate populations of New England and the west could agree. The old Whig economic program had never been able to win elections, and defecting northern Democrats insisted on hanging on to a hatred of banking, tariffs, and fiat currency as part of their Jacksonian heritage. So that wouldn't do; the new party was silent on economic policy. Laws making life difficult for immigrants were wildly popular among New Englanders and many native westerners, but they didn't play well with the German immigrants whose support the Republicans needed to win elections in some states. So the party was largely silent on immigration. Many New Englanders wanted to unite around Temperance laws, but smarter folks saw that this was a non-starter.

They ended up emphasizing the slavery issue because a vague, cautious opposition to slavery didn't piss anyone in the north off. Hardly anyone in the north owned slaves by the 1850s. So unlike a tariff or an immigration restriction or a temperance law, it wouldn't put anybody in the north at a disadvantage.

The content of this anti-slavery position varied widely. In some cases it went along with a fully egalitarian support for the rights of black people as Americans (as we moderns desire of the period's heroes). But it was also fully compatible with racist ideology, in some cases as vicious as anything coming out of the south. The early Republicans presented slavery as degrading the standing of free labor: Foner points out that they were often ambiguous about whether this was because the slave was enslaved, or because he was black. On the whole it seems that the Republicans' anti-southern orientation pushed most of them to a more humane and decent position on the issue, but that this commitment was also rather shallow. No wonder that it eroded when Reconstruction proved difficult.

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## Captain Nemo says

Fantastically written, and included many magnificent statements and passages. Would recommend.

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## Zippergirl says

The roots of the Civil War reach back to the birth of the nation. The Founders agreed to disagree on the issue of slavery in order to form a 'more perfect Union.' By the 1860s the nation was at war with itself. Why did the South secede, and why did the North take up arms to prevent its secession? (316) In *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War*, the first of Eric Foner's many

influential books, he examines the two decades running up to the 1860 presidential election by taking a close look at the ideology of the Republican Party. In a time of rancorous sectional division, during which the Democratic Party was sundered north and south, with each section nominating its own presidential candidate, the Republicans drew anti-slavery Whigs and Democrats together under one banner. The party members shared a resentment of Southern political power, a devotion to the Union, moral revulsion to the peculiar institution, and a commitment to the northern social order and its development and expansion. (310-314)

During the 1850s, respected historians agree, the government of President Buchanan was under the complete control of the South which threatened the essence of the Republican view of democracy--which was majority rule. (100) "The domination of both the South and the federal government by the Slave Power violated this basic democratic belief." (101) Repeated attempts by the southern Slave Power to establish slavery in the western territories brought the sectional conflict to a crisis. The North and South represented two incompatible social systems, and expansion of the decadent South, as Seward warned, might lead to "entirely a slave-holding nation."

Several critical chapters of Foner's book delineate the radical, conservative and moderate elements within the newly-formed Republican party, and include the northern Democratic-Republicans who were alienated by the slaveocracy which by then controlled their party. The former Democrats found their party no longer a "champion of popular rights." (177) The radicals battle cry was, "Liberty and Union." This small but powerful minority was influential within the party, and brooked no compromise with the South, believing that the Founders intended that slavery would eventually cease to exist in the nation. (139-144) The conservatives wanted to preserve the Union at any cost, and were willing to make concessions to the South in order to do so. It was the moderates, including Lincoln, who "refused to abandon either of their twin goals--free soil and the Union," and drew the line at expansion of slavery into the new states. (219) It was not the moral imperative of the abolitionists which drew together the radicals and conservatives, the Whigs and Democrats, and the former Liberty, Free Soil and Know-Nothings. It was the political anti-slavery, Free Labor ideology which "blended personal and sectional interest with morality so perfectly that it became the most potent political force in the nation." (309)

Foner is the DeWitt Clinton Professor of History at Columbia University whose interest in the antebellum period started in college in the 1960s. Foner has authored more than a dozen books on American political history and race relations, including his latest *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction*; published in 2005. *Free Soil* began as his doctoral dissertation under Pulitzer prizewinner, Richard Hofstadter. This scholar's scholar assumes a substantial familiarity with 19th century American history, leaving the reader to fill in the essential details of the various acts, provisos, compromises and constitutions; likewise, biographical material on important players in the antebellum milieu, like Stephen A. Douglas and William H. Seward, is also given short shrift. An introductory essay written on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of *Free Soil* calls on recent historiography to explore the concept of "free labor" in the 19th century, a time when half of Northern Americans were wage-earners.

*Free Soil* is now nearly forty years old, yet remains a worthwhile read for anyone with a more than superficial interest in the Civil War and its causes. The reader comes away with a greater understanding of the role of the Republican Party in shaping the anti-slavery movement during the antebellum period.

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**Josh Liller says**

This was assigned reading for my Civil War university class.

This book is a somewhat interesting, but not fun. This is the second book I have read by Foner (after "Reconstruction") and I found them similar: good information but a slow read. I think he is simply a dry writer. He also doesn't present history chronologically which can make it difficult to relate all the parts correctly. This book is at times more political theory than history; I usually love to read history, but find political theory a chore.

The newer edition of this book adds a 39 page introduction which was an even more difficult read than the rest of the book and I did not finish that part. I did read the rest, which is broken into almost essay-like categorical chapters rather than a chronological recap of the Republican's formation and rise to power. The book covers northern and southern society; the party's relation with nativism, race, and slavery; and the various factions that made up the Republicans (radicals & abolitionists, free soilers, Whigs, and disgruntled Democrats).

Foner questions how much the Republicans had actually moderated themselves by 1860. Voting results and quotes from the public are mentioned, but the focus really seems to be how the Republican politicians not the "free men" they were championing.

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### **Chris says**

Important book.

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### **Phillip says**

Okay - so I want to say this is a "heavy" book, but it's not overly academic. I will say you have to be super-interested in the topic of 1840/50s American politics and slavery. If that is something you are interested - this is the book for you. It analyzes the nascent Republican Party's various views of slavery (the *raison d'être* for the party's creation) -- I like that it dedicates chapters to the folks who made up the Party, e.g., radicals, conservative, ex-Democrats. It also looks at the various ways slavery was criticized - in the 21st Century, we take a moralist approach. But the political actors and citizens who were fervent viewed it economically, politically, and socially -- in other words, the die-hard abolitionists were the minority.

My nitpick with the book (other than it can be somewhat plodding, but, like I said, you have to be interested in the subject) is that it assumes you come to this with certain knowledge. There's not a lot of explanation of who certain people are - if you don't know who William Seward is, you'll just have to figure it out as you go along. So this is a recommend for folks who want to see the diverse (as in viewpoints and approaches) anti-slavery coalition came together in the guise of a new political party and, in their second presidential race, managed to get their candidate elected.

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### **David Withun says**

This is the best intellectual history of the Antebellum period that I have yet read. Foner does a wonderful job of examining the emergent ideology of both the Republican Party, which would become the ideology of

modern America, as well as the ideology of the slave-holding aristocrats of the South. In a nutshell, this is the history of how the United States became bourgeois. I recommend this book to anyone interested in American history, in examining the underlying causes of the Civil War, and in the intellectual history of the modern world.

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### **Aaron Arnold says**

All the more impressive for having been initially released as a PhD dissertation, this is one of the most comprehensive and insightful treatments of a specific ideology that I've read. While it requires some fairly advanced knowledge of the issues of the antebellum political system (issues like the Wilmot Proviso, party factions like Barnburner Democrats, and key figures like Horace Greeley get dropped into the analysis with cursory to no effort made to explain their context), Foner manages to pull together a large amount of primary source material to explain just what ideological positions and political tactics took the Republican Party from marginal upstarts to the nation's dominant political party in less than a decade. While his decision to structure the book one theme at a time instead of purely chronologically means that the narrative jumps around a bit, ultimately it's a highly effective way to tie together all the threads of thought from the various movements and issues that dominated the national agenda in the 1840s and 50s - how the country would expand, who would get to settle in the new territories, and what kind of life they would be able to live.

My copy begins with a fascinating essay written by Foner for the book's 25th anniversary that delves more deeply than the original book did into how the free labor plank of the Republican platform related to industrial capitalism and the beliefs of the Founding Fathers. Catchphrases like "Free labor" have always meant different things to different people (he mentions the modern Orwellianism of "right to work" laws), but at the time of the Republican ascendancy, when the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution were making it clearer than ever that the US had broken decisively with its agrarian origins, the slogan implied to many people that the American promise of labor freedom meant working with and through industrial capitalism instead of against it. Instead of Thomas Jefferson's ideal of "every man a yeoman farmer", "every man a shopkeeper or factory laborer" was a much more attractive vision for the rapidly growing population of the North. Foner discusses the limitations of the ideal - the "freedom" to engage in wage labor often meant settling for dangerous, degrading, and poorly remunerated factory jobs; women were excluded almost entirely; arguments that white laborers shouldn't have to compete with black slave labor were often extremely racist - but in an era where the democratic, egalitarian, populist sentiments of Jacksonian democracy still remained powerful, "free labor" was quite congenial to the white working majority. He doesn't mention Karl Marx's "Address from the International Workingmen's Association" correspondence with Lincoln through Ambassador Charles Francis Adams, but even a socialist like Marx saw "free labor" as a powerful tool to help emancipate the working class from oppression.

The heart of the book is the sections where Foner traces the genesis of the party to the inability of existing parties to address the question of slavery. The Democrats were particularly wracked by the issue, even going so far as to split in two for the 1860 Presidential election and remain the underdog for most of the rest of the 19th century, but parties like the Whigs withered completely as other issues of the day like economic development were subordinated to the larger questions of abolition and national unity. The Republican Party that competed in unsuccessfully in 1856, more successfully in 1858, and triumphantly in 1860 was composed of several heterogenous groups of political refugees, and Foner constructs ideological and organizational genealogies for each:

- the Free Soil Party (an extremely influential single-issue anti-slavery party focused on slavery's negative economic impact on white workers, they invented the eponymous slogan of the book)

- the Liberty Party (a related but much smaller single-issue party that focused more on the immorality of slavery than its economic effects)
- many Whig Party members (the Henry Clay-led stereotypically pro-industry, pro-banking, pro-tariff "big government" party that broke up over its inability to unify on the slavery issue, Lincoln and many other Republican leaders were originally Whigs)
- the Know-Nothing Party (AKA the American Party, an anti-immigrant pro-WASP racist party that was officially neutral on slavery, but the anti-slavery wing liked how abolition helped white workers by reducing competition from slave labor)
- disaffected Northern Democrats (they hated how plantation aristocrats dominated the Southern wing of the party and were uneasy at slavery's relationship to their supposed Jacksonian ideals, even if they weren't quite comfortable with how Whig-dominated the Republicans were)

Each of these groups brought something different to the table, and it's interesting watching the Republican leadership trying to cobble together a coherent party platform out of all these antagonistic blocs. By far the most vigorous and essential to the Republicans' success were the radical abolitionists, and by far the best weapons in their arsenal were abolition and Unionism. Then as now, the American public had an almost religious reverence for what they believed the "will of the Founding Fathers" to be, and one successful tactic the Republicans hit on was to claim that the Constitution was actually completely neutral on the subject of slavery, yet was being hijacked by the Slave Power to pass things like the Fugitive Slave Act or get slavery extended to the Western territories. In contrast to people like William Lloyd Garrison who claimed that the Constitution was a "pact with hell" for either mostly punting on the question of federal involvement with the "peculiar institution" or actively abetting it, and who therefore remained fringe figures, Republicans figured out that it was much easier to convince people that the Constitution was perfectly fine as is and that all they were trying to do was restore its original vision.

Southerners played right into their hands by forcing repeated showdowns over how to deal with each new territorial acquisition, using the Kansas-Nebraska Act to renege on the Missouri Compromise, or trying to get federal judges to overturn Northern "personal liberty" emancipation laws for escaped slaves via terrible Supreme Court decisions such as Dred Scott. Much like with "free labor", "free soil" was a powerful rallying cry for Northerners who were tired of the increasingly frequent standoffs forced by the delicate balance of power in the Senate between free and slave states, and hoped to use the newly acquired territories to break the political stalemate. However, even given the advantage of those provocations, the Republicans still had to fight off defectors within their ranks who started to flirt with states' rights from the opposite direction. Many otherwise orthodox Republicans gave extremely impassioned speeches in the 1850s about the rights of free states to nullify pro-slavery federal laws like the Fugitive Slave Act, only to change their tune when, thanks to the influence of the more moderate and conservative factions, they discovered that abolition and pro-Unionism was a better sell in most of the North.

To that end, Foner does go into the demographic aspect of who in the North supported abolition and who didn't, in slightly greater detail than James McPherson did in his otherwise peerless *Battle Cry of Freedom*. The parts of Northern states that were settled by Germans or Yankees (generally the northern parts - even to this day many downstate or rural areas of the Northern states are culturally and demographically similar to the South) hated slavery, while big cities were mostly apathetic. Small towns were often the most fervently Republican, while cities remained more Democratic thanks to their efforts to appeal to immigrants. The nativist and temperance movements, previously powerful and independent, eventually became subsumed into the broader Republican coalition, much to their chagrin. There were forceful debates over exactly how far to entrench opposition to slavery in the party platform - was endorsing popular sovereignty sufficient, or was the risk of allowing slavery in the territories too great, and therefore outright abolitionism the only acceptable option? Once the Republicans had recaptured control of the government from the Slave Power, could it

confine slavery to the South and allow it to wither away somehow, or would more extreme measures be needed?

The radical faction was helped once again by the South's intransigence and threats of secession, and though its preferred candidates like Salmon Chase or William Seward proved unacceptable to the party at large, a moderate former Whig like Abraham Lincoln had to endorse radical principles like slavery's "ultimate extinction" sufficiently in speeches like the famous "House Divided" one to gain the 1860 Presidential nomination. Different arguments were used to support the Republican message in different parts of the North, and one of Lincoln's hidden strengths was that as "everyone's second choice" his candidacy could be rendered palatable to just about every Northern demographic, particularly given his unrelenting emphasis on keeping the Union together at all costs. The Republicans' emphasis on national unity, the evils of slavery, and the power of free labor to help the workingman gave them a greater and greater advantage in the North, and in 1860, Lincoln and the Republican Party won convincingly in the Senate, House, and Presidential races.

It's important to keep in mind that the rhetoric about "free men" was directed more at white Americans than blacks - even Lincoln was forced to claim in his debates with Douglas that he wasn't in favor of making blacks socially or politically equal: "I agree with Judge Douglas he is not my equal in many respects - certainly not in color, perhaps not in moral or intellectual endowment. But in the right to eat the bread, without the leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns, he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man." (This distinction between natural rights and social or civil rights would cause free blacks many problems in later years, from the famous Reconstruction-era Slaughterhouse cases and Plessy v. Ferguson all the way until the civil rights acts and cases of the 1960s). Though many Republicans abhorred the idea of living alongside blacks, and opposed black suffrage or allowing blacks to serve on juries, they made many converts by arguing that the institution of slavery drove down wages for white workers, as well as encouraging undesirable patterns of aristocratic government in Southern states that harmed poor blacks and whites alike. While most Americans agreed that whether settlement in the new Western territories would be slave or free was of vital importance, many "racially progressive" politicians openly hoped that blacks would be excluded from the new lands altogether, or perhaps colonized in Africa or Latin America as a further tentacle of Manifest Destiny. Often the question of who's on the side of progress means picking the lesser of two evils, and Southerners could see that whatever their Northern counterparts agreed with them on in regards to racial superiority, the Republicans' fundamental opposition to slavery meant that ultimately no compromise was possible.

In contrast to his discussion of pre-war Northern Republicans, Foner talks much less about the ideological currents of the South or the Democrats, or about how the Republican ideology survived past the war into Reconstruction and the Gilded Age. This is a pity for several reasons. There's a lot to be said about how much of Southern opposition to the North was due to their conception of themselves as a unique region of the country, with their own ethnic heritage and distinct culture, and how with the South out of the government during the war, many important initiatives were passed - good ones like the Morrill Land Grant College Act, the Homestead Act, and the National Banking Act, along with more mixed ones like the Pacific Railroad Act. Additionally, I would have liked for more info on how the Democratic Party managed to survive splitting in two in 1860 and remaining the usually weaker party for the next few decades instead of simply dissolving. Finally, further discussion on how the "free labor" plank of their platform endured the increasing amount of labor violence in the later part of the 19th century would be very interesting, since labor biographies such as Ray Ginger's *The Bending Cross* focus more on key characters like Eugene Debs than the philosophical systems they were fighting. All told, however, this is an excellent survey of its topic.

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### **Dan Gorman says**

The language is dated now, but the argument holds up well. Foner shows in exhaustive detail the factions and arguments within the new Republican Party of the 1850s. By the Civil War, the Republican party, even with its Radical, moderate-to-conservative, and Democratic-Republican blocs, agreed on an economically activist government with tariffs, infrastructure, and homesteading in the West. Above all, a commitment to the end of slavery united the party, although Foner shows how this desire to end slavery took racist as well as egalitarian forms.

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