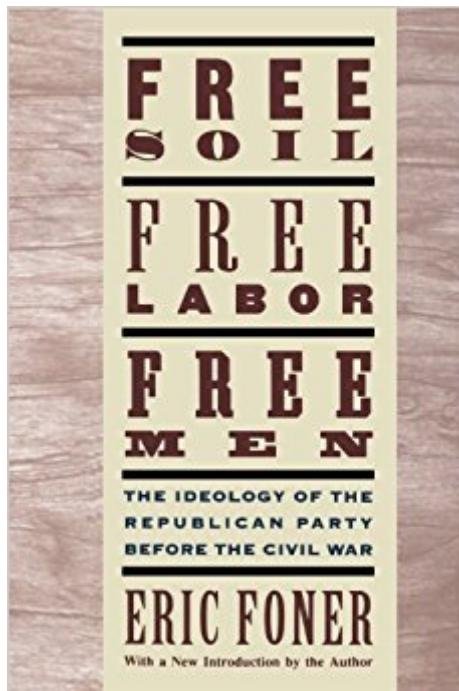


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Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology Of The Republican Party Before The Civil War



Synopsis

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.

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Customer Reviews

The Civil War era is surely one of the most complex, controversial, and tumultuous periods in our nation's history and one of the most difficult to capture. "Free Soil, Free Labor, ..." is a sterling effort to provide insight into the social philosophies of the time that almost inevitably led to the breakup of the Union. While ostensibly concerned with the ideology of the Republican Party leading up to the Civil War, the author clearly shows that the Republicans also both reflected and advanced the belief system that came to permeate much of the North. A key component of Northern thinking emphasized a free labor and producer ethic, which extolled the virtues of free, independent, and propertied working men. Dependency was eschewed as evidence of personal shortcoming. But the institution of slavery violated that ethic in every way. Not only were slaves not free, but also Southern aristocratic society degraded free labor. To be a free laborer in the South was to be a member of a lower class. These diametrically opposed views of labor were the basis of an ongoing controversy dating from the Missouri Compromise over the issue of permitting slavery in newly obtained territories or newly admitted states. The Northern and Republican position was one of "free soil," for free laborers. Though not emphasizing the chronological history of the Republican Party, the author traces the assimilation into the party of members or adherents of the Abolitionists, the Liberty Party, the Free Soil Party, anti-slavery Democrats and Whigs, the Know-Nothings, and the so-called radical Republicans. A good sampling of the pronouncements of the leading Northern political figures of the era as well as the positions of key newspaper publishers is quite illuminating.

The issues with slavery in America reached all the way back to the birth of the nation. The Founding Fathers agreed to a compromise on slavery when the Constitution was written. Basically nothing was done about the institution except to leave it to later generations to deal with. Mr. Foner explains some of the attitudes and actions taken by the northern Republicans in the twenty years prior to the U.S. Civil War. The party of the South became the Democrats, once known as the Jacksonian Democrats, and the Whigs in the North were replaced by the conservative Republicans. In the North a person could improve his social standing with hard work. The Republicans major belief was in the idea of free labor. The belief in free labor was contrary to the society in the South. Slaves and poor whites were for the most part unable to advance socially and economically. Foner quoted the New York Times of the day as printing: "Our Paupers today, thanks to free labor, are our yeoman and merchants of tomorrow. (p.16) Basically the Republicans believed if a man applied himself and worked very hard he could improve both his financial and social condition. The Republicans believed that the slaves in the South were lazy and ignorant and would never better themselves. They also thought that the poor whites despised the slaves and considered any work that a slave did as beneath them and disgraceful. This promoted laziness and helped to keep the poor whites of the South from advancing. The Republicans thought that the institution of slavery was not only oppressing the slaves but the southern economy as well. In 1858 Aaron Cragin, a New Hampshire Congressman observed after hearing southern speech, "this language of feudalism and aristocracy has a strange sound to me." (p.

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