

## [Fobare on Bordewich, 'Congress at War: How Republican Reformers Fought the Civil War, Defied Lincoln, Ended Slavery, and Remade America'](#)

Review published on Monday, May 9, 2022

**Fergus M. Bordewich.** *Congress at War: How Republican Reformers Fought the Civil War, Defied Lincoln, Ended Slavery, and Remade America.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2020. Illustrations. xx +

450 pp. \$32.50 (cloth), [ISBN 978-0-451-49444-3](#).



**Reviewed by** Chris Fobare (Worcester State University) **Published on** H-CivWar (May, 2022)  
**Commissioned by** Madeleine Ramsey (Virginia Military Institute)

**Printable Version:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=57066>

The political history of the Civil War and Reconstruction has seen a renaissance over the last two decades. Well-received narrative histories by noted scholars Heather Cox Richardson (*West from Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War* [2008]), Douglas Edgerton (*The Wars of Reconstruction: The Brief, Violent History of America's Most Progressive Era* [2015]), Steven Hahn (*A Nation without Borders: The United States and Its World in an Age of Civil Wars, 1830-1910* [2016]), Richard White (*The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865-1896* [2017]), and Elizabeth R. Varon (*Armies of Deliverance: A New History of the Civil War* [2019]) situate the revolutionary changes set in motion by the Confederate rebellion within the broader context of American history. In *Congress at War: How Republican Reformers Fought the Civil War, Defied Lincoln, Ended Slavery, and Remade America*, Fergus M. Bordewich offers a popular history of the “herculean task” the young and untested Republican Party faced in constructing a wartime state capable of suppressing the South’s rebellion and preserving the Union (p. xix). For Bordewich, Abraham Lincoln’s war effort was only possible because of an unlikely alliance between Radical and moderate Republicans whose legislative prerogatives created a powerful wartime state that future generations of politicians built on to construct everything from the Federal Reserve to publicly funded colleges and universities. Because of the sheer scale of what Republicans achieved in passing “such controversial legislation as the suspension of habeas corpus, the freeing and arming of former slaves, the raising of the enormous sums of money needed to fight the war, the confiscation of rebel property, and radical banking and currency reform,” Bordewich places the Thirty-Seventh and Thirty-Eighth Congresses on par with the New Deal Congresses of the 1930s and the Great Society Congresses of the 1960s (p. 365).

*Congress at War* opens in the late 1850s with the divisive sectional struggles that served as the catalyst to the birth of the Republican Party. After providing planters with an oversized influence in national politics as a result of decades of compromises protecting the expansion of slavery, the South’s refusal to accept Lincoln’s election to the presidency exposed the anti-democratic ethos of the Slave Power. A longtime “doughface” ally of Southern Democrats, President James Buchanan made no meaningful effort to move against members of his party who organized themselves into an insurrectionary force and tested his willingness to defend the nation against a budding insurrection.

Citation: H-Net Reviews. Fobare on Bordewich, 'Congress at War: How Republican Reformers Fought the Civil War, Defied Lincoln, Ended Slavery, and Remade America'. H-CivWar. 05-09-2022.

<https://networks.h-net.org/node/4113/reviews/10233686/fobare-bordewich-congress-war-how-republican-reformers-fought-civil>

Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.

When compromise failed, Republicans seized on the departure of Southern representatives from Congress to pass “transformative” legislation that reimagined federal power as a positive force. By the end of the war, Congress laid the foundation for a “strong activist central government” that opened the potential for “a racial and economic revolution that would overthrow the South's cotton economy” (p. xvii).

Bordewich views a handful of key congressmen and senators who chaired powerful congressional committees as responsible for driving the legislative activism underlying the war effort. In the House of Representatives, the Radical Republican chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, Thaddeus Stevens, worked with the far more conservative chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, William Pitt Fessenden, to craft laws that addressed Secretary of the Treasury Salmon Chase’s search for new revenue streams to pay for the war. Additionally, Ohio’s Radical Republican senator, Benjamin Wade, wielded his position as chairman of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War to hold officers and government bureaucrats responsible when they proved incompetent or shirked their responsibilities. Examining droves of documents and witnesses that included visits to several battlefields, Wade took his mandate seriously, moving with surgical precision to ensure that the military remained accountable to elected officials. As chairmen of their respective committees, Stevens, Fessenden, and Wade served as a type of advanced legislative guard, piloting crucial and often controversial legislation through Congress to address the unprecedented political, military, and economic demands thrust onto the federal government's shoulders during the war years.

With obstructionist Southern representatives no longer entrenched in Congress, Republican majorities in both the House of Representatives and the Senate passed a flurry of legislation that planter politicians had long obstructed to prevent the federal government from potentially interfering with the expansion of slavery. While many of the measures Congress passed were essential to the Union war effort, others anticipated Reconstruction. Such measures included the Homestead Act (1862), which promoted western expansion and the establishment of new farms that would grow the nation’s economy. In addition, Senators William Pitt Fessenden and John Sherman, along with Congressmen Justin Morrill and Thaddeus Stevens, dramatically increased the nation’s tariff rates to bolster domestic industry and meet the sudden demand for war matériel. The same men engineered the creation of a national banking system and financial innovations through the birth of the nation’s first officially sanctioned paper money: “greenbacks.” The Pacific Railway Acts (1862 and 1864) united the private and public sectors to construct a transcontinental railroad promoting western expansion and binding the agricultural and manufacturing regions of the country together into a national economy, thus opening the path to widespread economic mobility and a rising standard of living. To further this effort, Congress passed the Land Grant College Act (Morrill Act), which provided states with public lands for the purpose of establishing “land grant colleges” to educate farmers on the latest techniques of agricultural production. Despite an impressive legislative record, growing casualties, mounting debt, and a vocal antiwar movement continuously tempered Republicans’ ambitions during the early years of the war.

Democratic leaders Clement Vallandigham and S. S. (“Sunset”) Cox play an important role in supporting the author’s claim that congressional politics “sustained [the war effort], drove it to its revolutionary conclusion, and gave it lasting meaning” (p. xviii). Both men embodied the Jacksonian Democratic ethos of states’ rights and white supremacy that consistently translated into victories at the polls in the decades leading into the Civil War. Unlike War Democrats, who had placed the

nation's salvation above partisan struggle, Peace Democrats followed Vallandigham and Cox in waging a partisan struggle to reclaim control of the federal government by positioning Republicans as the chief impediment to the nation's salvation. Seizing on the well-worn racial animus of the North, Vallandigham, Cox, and their followers demanded that "it was not the aggrieved South but the Lincoln administration that was guilty of treason, climaxing decades of 'violent' and 'unprovoked agitation of the slavery question'" (p. 63). In portraying the Lincoln administration as the face of a Republican cabal whose objective was to seize on the war's emergencies to create a military dictatorship, Peace Democrats won some support headed into the midterm elections of 1862; however, the duration and demands of the war pushed many moderates to embrace Radicals' long-held contention that the abolition of slavery was the most important requisite to the Union's restoration.

Bordewich reminds readers that congressional Radicals like Stevens and Wade led the charge in championing the steady legislative push toward abolishing slavery through the Confiscation Acts and legislation bringing about emancipation in the nation's capital and federally controlled territories. Yet even as the Union war effort shifted toward recognizing emancipation as the essential element to restoring the Union, discrimination remained an ever-present impediment in achieving a practical sense of equality. Long-held beliefs that the abolition of slavery would trigger a mass migration of freedpeople north to compete with white workers convinced many Republicans, including Lincoln, to support the colonization of African Americans outside of the United States. Although the Emancipation Proclamation ended any meaningful discussion of colonization by opening the door to Black military service, other forms of discrimination, which included unequal pay and popular theories that Black men lacked the "manliness" to charge into battle, remained prevalent as Vallandigham, Cox, and Peace Democrats consistently claimed that the Republican Party's move toward enlisting enslaved men in the United States Colored Troops hardened Southerners' resolve and prolonged the war (p. 254). In reality, the badly needed infusion of more than two hundred thousand Black men into Union ranks dispelled many lingering stereotypes in a way that further marginalized Peace Democrats and moved moderate Republicans further in the direction of Radicals' call for Black citizenship, especially as it became clearer that a central feature of Reconstruction would be the restoration of citizenship to white Southerners

Bordewich artfully weaves the story of Reconstruction into the war years, reminding readers that the contentious debates surrounding the South's restoration to the Union paralleled the changing nature of the war. In the early years of the conflict, Lincoln's unshakable faith that Southern Unionists would rise up against secessionist firebrands, setting in motion a process of "self-reconstruction," fell in line with congressional majorities who lined up behind the Crittenden-Johnson resolution's commitment to restoring the Union without interfering with slavery. Yet the war's transition to a revolutionary struggle for the abolition of slavery led the struggle between Congress and Lincoln over whether the legislative or executive branch controlled war policy to bleed over into future debates about Reconstruction. As Bordewich explains, the sometimes contentious struggle between Lincoln's "ten-percent program" and Radicals' Wade-Davis Bill was a new phase in Congress's earlier efforts to assert its authority over war policy through the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War. Indeed, those familiar with the political history of Reconstruction will likely see many similarities between the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War and the later Joint Committee on Reconstruction.

*Congress at War* is a popular history steeped in primary and secondary source research. Bordewich

consulted a varied historiography from well-known studies, like Eric Foner's *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (1988) and James Oakes's *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861-1865* (2014), to more focused scholarly works, such as Adam Goodheart's *1861: The Civil War Awakening* (2011), and several scholarly biographies detailing the lives of politicians who form the cornerstone of this study. Additionally, Bordewich has done the yeoman's work of combing through the mountains of congressional debates, government publications, and personal correspondence of the key figures who frame this study—Stevens, Wade, Fessenden, and Vallandigham—to offer an approachable synthesis of weighty topics like economic policy, mid-nineteenth-century banking and finance, and the ideological commitments that drove the Peace Democrats' antiwar movement.

Although *Congress at War* offers a page-turning examination of politics and legislative activism during the Civil War, surprising omissions will leave those familiar with Civil War and Reconstruction historiography somewhat perplexed. For example, Bordewich draws heavily on Heather Cox Richardson's *The Greatest Nation of the Earth: Republican Economic Policies during the Civil War* (1997) to tease out the different ways that Secretary of the Treasury Chase, Chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee Stevens, and Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee Fessenden transformed finance and banking to fund a war effort of unprecedented size and scale. Yet as Richardson and other Civil War scholars have shown, Republicans legislated through the lens of a free labor ideology that viewed planters as an aristocracy whose exploitation of slave labor upended the "harmony of interests" between capital and labor. As a close ally of Fessenden, Sherman demonstrated the party's support for a free labor nation built on a so-called harmony of interests during debates over the National Banking Act when he declared: "You will harmonize these interests [between capital and labor] so that every stockholder, every mechanic, every laborer who holds one of these notes will be interested in the government—not in a local bank, but in the government of the United States—whose faith and credit and security he will be more anxious to uphold" (p. 212). The omission of any serious analysis of Republicans' free labor ideology ignores how the party's wartime economic policies set the stage for the "boom-bust" cycle of the Gilded Age, which in turn undermined the very activist state that filtered over into Reconstruction.

*Congress at War* also falls short of demonstrating that the legislative will of Congress guided Lincoln's hand in administering the Union war effort. As president, Lincoln signed into law nearly all of the legislation Congress passed during the war years, thus illustrating his support for the measures that came to his desk. If, as Bordewich posits, Congress used its authority to pass transformative laws and assert regulatory control over the war through the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, Lincoln used powers reserved to the executive branch to push back against Congress. For example, Lincoln blocked Congress's efforts to bring about a "partial reconstruction" of his cabinet when Senators Fessenden and Wade led a delegation of congressional Republicans that pressured the president to replace Secretary of State William Seward with someone of their choosing following the midterm elections of 1862 (p. 189). Additionally, the president stood firm against Congress's prerogative when he killed the Wade-Davis Bill with a pocket veto. In short, checks and balances played an important role in empowering and modifying some of the primary objectives and measures the legislative and executive branches put forth at different points of the war. Therefore, it is not entirely clear that Congress wielded as much authority over the executive branch as Bordewich posits.

Ultimately, *Congress at War* is an engaging and well-researched examination of the Republican Party's monumental task of leading the United States through a civil war less than a decade after the party's birth. The author's detailed examination of the role that the Joint Committee on the Conduct of War played in influencing wartime governance adds to the already expansive historiography of the Civil War. Additionally, compelling character sketches of Democratic leaders Vallandigham and Cox trace the great lengths both men traveled to preserve the antebellum Jacksonian Democratic order by actively championing an antiwar movement that has generally received limited attention compared to other topics in Civil War historiography. Bordewich's masterful ability to synthesize complex political and economic debates into an engaging analysis of the crucial political figures who shaped congressional politics during the Civil War makes this study an excellent primer for more detailed scholarly monographs examining specific aspects of the war.

**Citation:** Chris Fobare. Review of Bordewich, Fergus M., *Congress at War: How Republican Reformers Fought the Civil War, Defied Lincoln, Ended Slavery, and Remade America*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. May, 2022. **URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=57066>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).