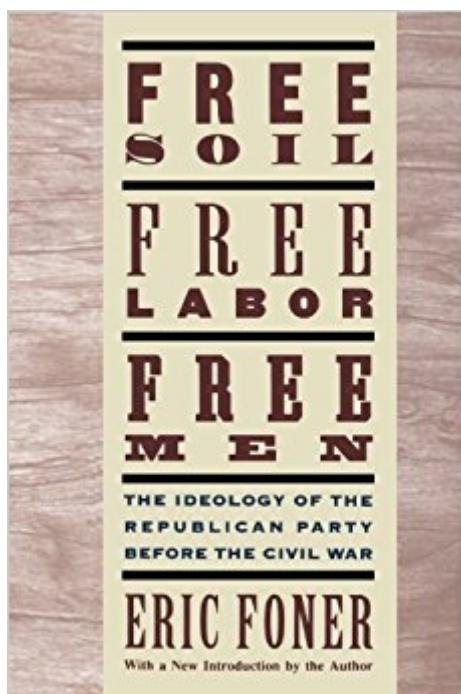


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Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology Of The Republican Party Before The Civil War



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

"First-rate in every respect...a work of genuine distinction, and a major contribution to ante-bellum political history."--Kenneth Stampp, author of *The Imperiled Union*"Still the best book on the politics of the 1850's."--Norman B. Ferris, Middle Tennessee State University"It's the best book on Republican ideology there is. Foner is among the very best Americanists ever. Bravo!"--Harlow Sheidley, University of Colorado"Foner's work remains the classic treatment of the subject!"--K.M. Startip, Williams Baptist College"Excellent volume--Foner is always good anyway!"--John F. McCormack, Delaware County Community College

Eric Foner is Professor of History at Columbia University, and author of *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* and *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War*.

It's 5 stars easy. I'm not an expert in this field at all. Have read about 7 books on Lincoln, but this book gives amazing context beyond trying to figure out the one personality. It helps me understand not just THE out look on the part of early Republicans, but rather the outlooks. He talks about personalities as well as groups and how things change over time. Well researched. I don't know who has followed up on such a book, or if there is a better book out there now on the subject, but I can't imagine that anyone following Foner does not have to stand on his shoulders. If you are interested in the period, I highly recommend this work.

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, that 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.

This book, along with Foner's *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution*, provides extremely valuable insights into a crucial turning point in American history, which still resonates today. Both are masterpieces of synthesis and interpretation. Both are scholarly and detailed, yet convey a feeling of excitement at the events described. Both enable the reader to relive the tensions, aspirations, thoughts, and struggles of the times they describe. The 1995 reissue of *Free Soil* begins with an important essay by Foner, which he wrote for it. Foner was a Marxist-Leninist when he wrote both books. But he never allowed his Marxism to vitiate his historical analysis. On the contrary, he constantly emphasized that the motives that propelled the participants were ideas and ideals, not economic interest or social class (e.g., pages 4-5, 104-5, 110, 113, 168-76, 183-4, 304)

Foner provides an excellent review, from a variety of perspectives, to thoroughly present the republican ideology and beliefs prior to the Civil War. Of particular interest are the various factions that made up the newly formed party, and their influence on the elections. Foner also recognizes the differences by section (North, Western, border states) on the party platforms. Very good presentation.

Probably one of the best lead-up-to prior to The Civil War books I have read. A must read in understanding the origins of the Republican Party and its early evolution.

Excellent.

This is a fantastic book to help someone understand the development of the Republican Party. It is written by Eric Foner, I have other works by this author and I have never been disappointed. If you are interested in Antebellum era politics this is a must have!

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