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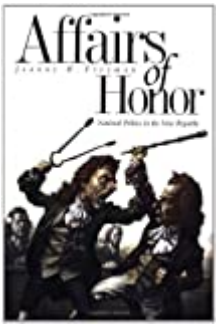

Joanne B. Freeman. *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001. xxiv + 376 pp. $29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-08877-9.

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Political Culture in Blacklight

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For over a quarter century, one has heard it said–by some in fear, by others in hope–that political history is suffering from fatal rot. Never subjected to careful scrutiny, the claim has been easy either to scoff at or, alternatively, to accept without question. But its repeated and enduring assertion has long invited some kind of measured response, which it has not received. A review of a single book is admittedly not exactly the place for that response, nor can it here be long enough. Yet it seems clear on the basis of available evidence that any argument for the end of political history suffers from certain serious disabilities. *Affairs of Honor*, along with many other works like it, helps make that fact blindingly clear.

What critics and defenders of political history had in mind when they first began to notice a change in political history's fortune–and let us include along with political history all of the major subjects around which modern Western historiography originally emerged: political, constitutional, institutional, policy, diplomatic, and military history–was the comparative decrease in the proportion of historians, experienced as well as aspiring, who studied the great themes of the allocation of power. But how could that decline have been otherwise? The numbers and proportion of political historians could have held their own only by a vastly greater expansion in the number of practicing historians than occurred in the 1950s and 1960s. And that expansion ended roughly by 1970, when new species of social and cultural history began to make their appearance. Since there would always be a finite number of historians, advances in historical knowledge about women and children, ethic and racial groups, the forgotten and colonized had to come at the expense of older subjects, the principal one of which was political history. For similar and closely related reasons, faculty positions traditionally allocated to men and to their long favorite topics had necessarily to decline as a proportion of all history professorships. In short, if knowledge of the past in general was to expand beyond traditional subjects, the reallocation of professorships was also more or less inevitable. There was no way around that fact, and it is difficult to see how, even if some choose not to welcome the fundamental changes that overcame Western historiography as a result, we can

avoid accepting it.

Aside from these natural consequences of intellectual change, many historians sought directly to hasten the decline of political history, and it was this active assault on their cherished subject, an assault internal to the discipline, that engendered the bitterness of so many historians of politics. Some historians of newer subjects purposefully sought a kind of reckoning against a subject and its largely male practitioners who could be said (with quite questionable validity) to represent nothing more than old and indefensible intellectual traditions and academic mores. Others, no less tribal in their interests, simply did not wish to notice in their pursuit of new knowledge and understanding that the omission of questions of power from study of the past rendered it meaningless.

It was against the advances of new knowledge, fueled by ideologies and social need, by changes in academic ways, and often by profound alterations in the very lives of particular historians, that many political historians, still mostly men, reacted with feelings of siege and resentment. That reaction took the form of complaints that the learned societies and their meetings and journals were ignoring political history, as well as of bitter attacks against the newer subjects. But it also led more positively to the creation of new "caucuses" and journals, such as the *Journal of Policy History*, and to the founding of at least one new organization, the arrogantly named Historical Society. Defensive measures all, but measures nonetheless lacking in harm and in many cases (especially, I think, in the case of the *Journal of Policy History*) exceedingly productive of new and important work. Throughout all of this, however, unnoticed sometimes even by its most vigorous, if aggrieved, paladins, political history was humming along quite well.

What was the evidence for that assertion? Evidence too huge to cite (and here only from the literature of American history) but easily available for random sampling. To wit: Important works of useful policy history, such as Ernest May's and Richard Neustadt's *Thinking in Time*. Works synthetic and comprehensive, like James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom*, David Kennedy's *Freedom from Fear*, and James Patterson's *Grand Expectations*. The many biographies, always appealing to the public, of large political figures (TR, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson). And then those encompassing, often pathbreaking, works like Alexander Keyssar's *The Right to Vote*, Michael Holt's *American Whig Party*, Stanley Elkins's and Eric McKitrick's *The Age of Federalism*, Pauline Maier's *American Scripture*, Jack Rakove's *Original Meanings*, and Kent Newmyer's superb new study, *John Marshall and the Heroic Age of the Supreme Court*. Nor should it escape notice that the books proving so popular now–those on the nation's political founders–did not emerge fully formed straight from the head of Clio. This varied harvest of studies of the founders was germinating deep in thirty years of torn-up soil amidst the newer species of historical inquiry.

If throughout this turmoil there has been a particular subfield of American historiography in which political history has proceeded along more healthily than others, it has been the period of the early republic. Equaled only by the history of the neighboring field of the Civil War era, early national political history has stood out for its venturesomeness and quality, for its absorption of perspectives from other disciplines and subfields of history, for its refusal to ignore the commanding presence of white men in the young nation, and for the sheer interpretive power of so much of its scholarship. This is a risky claim to advance, and I might be accused of a kind of easy pride in my own field. But one has only to examine post-Civil War historiography, especially that of the twentieth century, to see how rich and advanced is the historiography of the early nation compared to the general caution and inertia of so much else.

The problems experienced by political history, I am convinced, lie largely with political historians themselves, largely with students of twentieth-century political history, too many of whom almost willfully seem to ignore the recent great advances in pre-Civil War historiography and who continue to write histories of ideology, agencies, policies, administrations, and presidents as if they were the only fertile terrain of political history and who do so without the imagination shown by historians of earlier eras. Part of this is no doubt due to the parochialism that always accompanies specialization, part to the overwhelming mass of evidence that historians of the modern nation must examine, part to the heavily anecdotal bent of recent commentary, especially that of so-called "presidential historians." Nevertheless, it remains the case that one has to look far to find historians of the American twentieth-century who struggle to bring coherence to the history of their era, to create research agendas around which scholarship can advance, and to break out of the confines of their subject–as historians of the colonies and the early nation have done for many decades with such great success. Instead, much of the fresh work in post-Civil War political history is emerging from within the ranks of political scientists and sociologists, like Stephen Skowronek and Theda Skocpol,

instead of from historians.

It is in this general context that a book like Joanne Freeman's must be set. It joins company with a number of other recent works–David Waldstreicher's *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, Catherine Allgor's *Parlor Politics*, and Jeffrey L. Pasley's *The Tyranny of Printers*, to name only the most recent and noteworthy–that retain for political history a vital central place in the history of the early nation, and it can be said to be a kind of culmination of them. Yet to call this body of work and Freeman's book, as some appear already to be doing, the "new new" political history is misleading, unnecessary, and (as I will explain further on) perhaps in one major particular wrong. That quintessentially American adjective "new" has been assumed by historians as a sign of blessing since the days of James Harvey Robinson and most recently in the 1970s, when statistical and social science history was all the rage. It is worn, or applied, as a badge to distinguish its bearers from those who have gone before, when in fact, rather than something new, what historiography often needs (as it seems to me works like Elkins's and McKitrick's magisterial work delivers) is summation, synthesis, depth, clarity, elegance, and weight. Novelty proves or bears nothing in particular. Its value lies in its quality.

In any case, whether or not it is new, Freeman's often dazzling work is distinctive in its subject matter, its analytical power, and its style. Explicitly, it puts forth a new way of interpreting the public history of the early nation. Implicitly, it asks us to reorient our approach to that history. That it probably will not fully accomplish that latter aim detracts not at all from its achievement.

Affairs of Honor concerns what its author calls "the culture of honor," which, despite the fact that men rather frequently were found popping away at each other on the field of honor, was "a source of stability" in the early nation. Providing "solid ground," the markings of gentility, and an ethic of superior character and correct behavior in a democratizing society, honor culture was more than a code of dueling. It was "a way of life," "a crucial proving ground for the elite," and a remedy for "the barely controlled chaos of national public life" (pp. xv-xvii).

We can forgive the touch of overstatement ("barely controlled chaos") in these claims because of the skill with which Freeman constructs her larger argument. She unearths a complex code of honor, unwritten and without formal rules, whose provisions and nuances would rival those of a modern protocol manual. In fact, Freeman's book can be read as a kind of retrospective Amy Vanderbilt guide for the post-Revolutionary gentry. In one of her few genuflections to the lingo of theory in a long but always gracefully written work, she terms the code's intricate components "a grammar of political combat" (p. xxii), by which she seems to mean a structure of social relations applied, not externally by a standard-setting body like l'Academie francaise, but internally by those who chose to lead their lives by its constituent rules. In her telling, public figures spent as much of their time calibrating and responding to minutely crafted forms of criticism and subtle shadings of language and calculating the condition of their reputation as they did to shaping public policy and governing the nation. In the absence of accepted norms of legitimate partisanship and long experience with democratic politics, the political was, as Freeman implies it always had been, the personal. Words and behavior were measured for their implications for individual repute, both contemporary and future, both of oneself and of one's opponents, rather than for the strength of their argument or the prospect of their working the public good.

By placing this culture of honor front and center in the public life of the early nation, Freeman achieves two goals. She greatly deepens our understanding of precisely how at that time culture was implicated in politics–as, of course, it is in all others. Since politics was one part of the larger culture, not somehow unrelated to it, each affected the other, and neither can be understood separately. (Where this leaves society is not quite clear.) In the second place, she makes us see how much more pervasive than we have realized was a kind of generalized anxiety in the years after 1787. Heretofore, historians, including myself, have portrayed this anxiety as reaching only to strictly political matters and rooted principally in the realities of a world in revolution and of gradually emerging democracy in the United States. Freeman allows us to understand that anxiety was at once general and particular–for personal standing and reputation as much as for the republican experiment as governed by a novel constitution in a hostile world. And if we are to measure a society by the levels of its anxiety, then the era of Hamilton and Jefferson was a thoroughly modern one.

The result of Freeman's virtuoso analyses is to vastly widen the lens that opens onto the felt susceptibilities of the young nation. Previously, we have interpreted them–Americans' suspicion of politics and parties, of bargains and compromises–as owing chiefly to republican fears, to the conditions of late colonial politics that gave dissenting, Commonwealth, and other bodies of British thought

a special meaning and depth on the American Atlantic. But such single emphasis upon fears of Old World corruption and of unbridled power will not survive Freeman's achievement. Fearfulness of division and democracy, resentment of political opposition, even the lack of firm party discipline can now be seen in part as the consequence of a profound sensitivity about personal standing and of maneuverings, psychological and public, to avoid both stains on reputation and the real threat of injury, even death, in dueling contests to salvage honor.

Not the least strength of Freeman's work, however, is the particular readings of events and documents that it offers. Actions and words previously assumed to have been given their definitive interpretation suddenly have new meaning, new significance, when seen as expressions of anxiety over reputation and fame. Freeman searches well known documents not for their information but for their emotional content, for the discordant passion-laden asides or remarks that dot their pages. >From them, she constructs a novel, if somewhat problematic, analysis of political culture in the years after 1787.

For instance, no one will again read William Maclay's diary as before. It has been previously mined for information, for impressions, for color. Freeman reads it as the reflections of an overwrought sensibility. Maclay suspects everyone, is filled with self-doubt, implicates his own reputation in just about every public act of the Philadelphia capital, and slinks home in political defeat feeling dishonored. For Freeman, his diary stands in for an entire era's concern for self-presentation, for the manner in which a man will be perceived and judged by contemporaries and posterity. In another brilliant chapter, Freeman reads Jefferson's *Anas* as an intentionally gossip-filled "defense pamphlet," one of the era's many finely calibrated means–not the same as a handbill, or a newspaper article, or a private letter designed for distribution, all of which occupied other positions in the intricate etiquette of honor–by which repute was built, maintained, and defended.

Another chapter uses John Adams's 1809 *Boston Patriot* letters in effect to provide the manual for paper wars, not just through newspapers but in pamphlets and other media. Chapter 4 enlarges on one of the essays by which Freeman first made her presence known among historians of the early nation by taking dueling as a text of politics and focusing upon the ill-fated Burr-Hamilton confrontation. A fifth chapter places the election of 1800 within honor culture and thus adds an entirely new dimension to an epochal contest that has yet to gain its definitive history. And, to round off her study, Freeman takes up her figures' efforts to determine how the history of their endeavors would be written in the ages to come–efforts designed as much to assure her elite subjects' rightful place in the drama of nation building as to win the ideological battles over how that process should be understood.

Affairs of Honor is one of those books so rich in fresh insights and ideas that it defies summary or adequate sampling. Part of its value is the contribution it makes–and, because Freeman refuses to wear theory on her sleeve or directly argue with other historians, always *sub silentio*–to such topics as the history of books, of the circulation of ideas, of clandestine publishing, and of gossip, all subjects that have gained a specialized historical literature of their own in recent years. Somewhat more explicitly, Freeman briefly offers a new interpretation of the rise of organized political parties–as institutions that were gradually accepted by contemporaries because parties substituted the safer contests of elections governed by the rules and rituals of law for the more dangerous battles of personal honor growing out of personal injury and fought by largely hidden protocols.

Freeman occasionally goes too far, as when she characterizes newspapers as "profoundly personal documents" (p. 147). In her determination to bring everything–everything!–within the compass of honor culture, she also makes every event, every word seem too scripted. In the hermetic world of the Founders, little room for contingency, for choice, most importantly for change, exists. Much is ritual, little is impulse. And this in an age of passion and "phrenzy." Credulity is occasionally strained.

One curiosity of *Affairs of Honor* is the comparative absence of George Washington. The man who above all embodied in his very figure the quality of honor is never brought front and center to the stage, nor is his position in the wings explained. Yet perhaps no other figure of the era was more concerned with reputation, his own and the nation's, than the commanding general and president. It was Washington who referred in his response to the Newburgh Address of 1793 to "sacred honor." His Farewell Address noted "the office with which you have honored me." He constantly worked to rebuild Mt. Vernon into a house befitting his station. In addition, Washington's and others' concerns for honor were also more than personal. They extended far beyond considerations of federal politics and the national elite.

They crucially affected the nation's stance toward other states and contributed much to the touchiness of policy makers regarding American independence from Europe. And they even undergirded appeals for understanding and support abroad. One has only to recall the revolutionaries' pledge of their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor in 1776 to gain a sense of their recognition of the international resonance of appeals, some of whose particular national terms Freeman has excavated from later years.

Less a matter of scholarly strategy than an unintentional consequence of it is the book's effect on the Founders themselves. Freeman's work joins a cycle of studies that have largely succeeded in freeing members of the founding generation from the refrigerated mold in which they were for so long cast. They have given the lie to the notion that the nation's early years were times of relative calm, gravity, stability, and greatness among men. Yet while *Affairs of Honor* is deeply sympathetic to the elite which is its focus–to its members' struggle to create functional roles for themselves, live honorably, and behave appropriately in a society shifting beneath their feet–the book also has the curious effect of making the Founders seem not just human but little. It is their egos, their sensitivities, their social concerns rather than their minds and purposes that we get. It is hard to imagine that Freeman intended this. Perhaps it is the cost we must pay for seeing their world whole. But this unintended diminishing of their stature may also arise from the very nature of this kind of history.

For if it holds itself out as political history, it is political history with the politics left out. It is blacklight history, history only for a few objects made visible in the surrounding darkness. Focusing her untraviolet beam on a single subject, the culture of honor, the author leaves in the dark everything not composed to reflect that beam. Freeman's men–all men; one wonders how their women responded to these masculine contests–are political figures only by her so denominating them. We do not see them forming and leading a new republic, struggling to give life to young institutions, engaging in epic struggles to define the ideological direction of their nation, constructing its economy, fending off its enemies, trying to transform into law and policy their legitimate, and not just paranoid, fears about the security and stability of the republic. That is, we do not see them govern.

Nor do we get a glimpse of those other "sources of stability" that, with the sole exception of the Civil War, has allowed this nation state to proceed through time without the volcanic interruptions experienced by other countries. The code of honor was not alone in imposing order on potential chaos, in channeling and direction the expression of emotion: Laws and constitutions? Institutions–like state and local governments, churches, voluntary associations, police forces? Practices and other conventions–patriotic holidays, militia musters, elections? In appreciably advancing our understanding of the early nation's public life, Freeman has also thrown it out of kilter. Surely she is correct that parties did not yet provide the structural constraints to action that they would develop in later decades. Relations among political opponents remained personal rather than becoming partisan; divisions among men were seen as personally, rather than politically, motivated. (Have they ever entirely lost that quality?) But to reduce virtually every public act, every document, every difference of view to an aspect of honor is to drive a brilliant argument and brilliant history somewhat too far.

Furthermore, one is justified in asking about the applicability of Freeman's interpretation to society as a whole. She is quite careful in insisting that she is dealing only with the early nation's political gentry. But one is naturally left wondering how deep the culture of honor penetrated into the rest of society. After all, partisan politics quite quickly made it into the nation's hamlets and towns. Did anxiety about honor and reputation follow or precede politics there? (Freeman restricts herself to the bitter disputes among figures on the national stage.) Or was the culture of honor already there, ready to define and contain politics among local elites as well, and perhaps not just the elites at that?

One achievement of *Affairs of Honor* is to make clear that the culture of honor was not a monopoly of the South or limited after 1804 to the code duello in a society of magnolias and slaves. The book fully domesticates and nationalizes the culture of honor. Now, however, we are left with two new challenges. One is to discover whether the American "culture of honor" was unique, or uniquely determinative of action and thought, when compared with the same cultural trait in political elite cultures elsewhere. The second is to determine when the culture of honor lost its power in American politics, especially northern politics–or whether in fact it has ever lost all its power. The endless justificatory writings of political and other public figures in our own day–take only those of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, as well as those sure to appear from the pen of William J. Clinton–reveal the still strong hold of the entirely human urge

to preserve reputation in a complex world. Freeman's splendid *Affairs of Honor* has set a high standard for those who will choose now to venture into these historical waters.

A Research Note:

Freeman, like many other historian, makes use of William B. Allen's edition of the *The Works of Fisher Ames* (2 vols; Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983), more easily available than the older compilation edited by Seth Ames. They should exercise much care in the use of Allen's edition. While adding some materials omitted from the original version, the newer edition omits some text included in that earlier edition while creating new, un-indicated elisions of its own. Moreover, since Allen missed the opportunity to note where Ames's original letters now reside, it remains difficult to verify the validity of the texts in either edition.