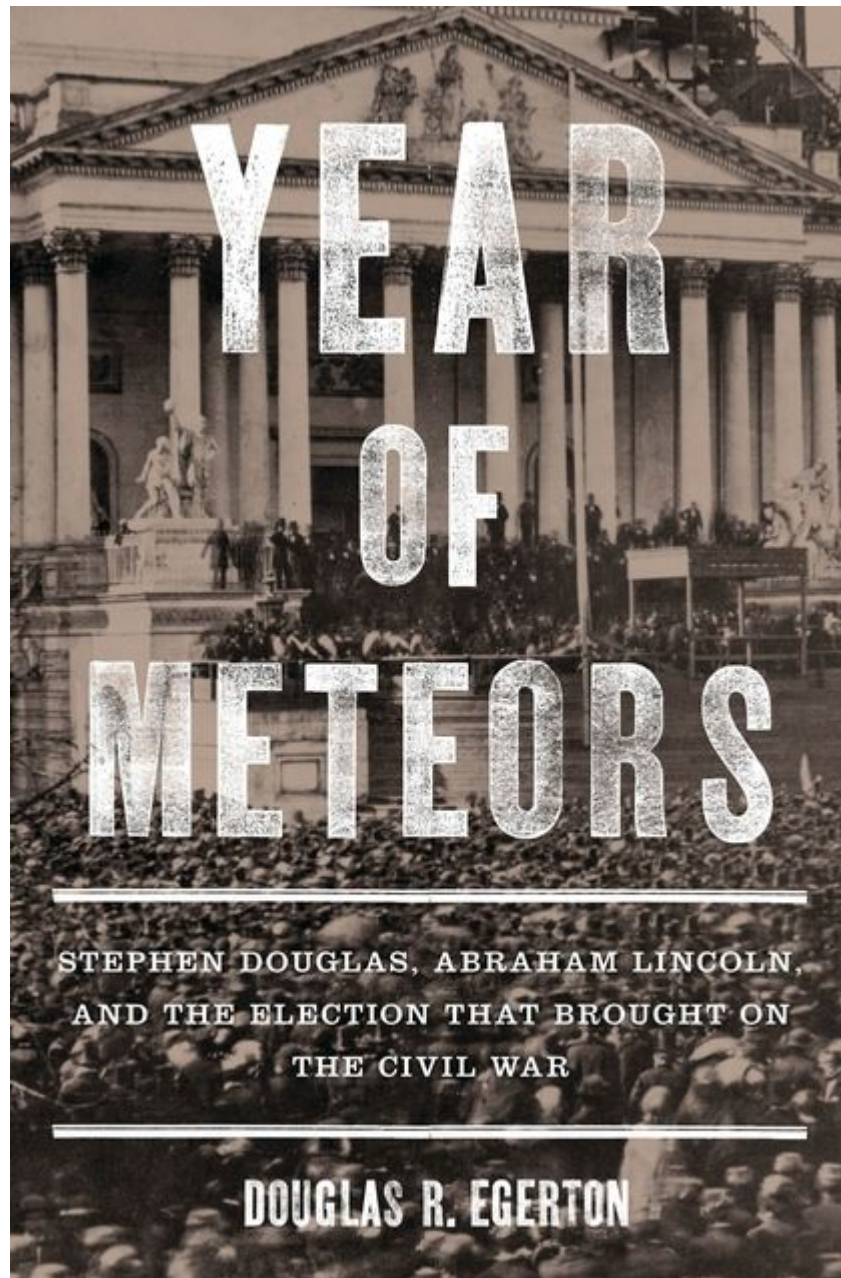


{essays in history}

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Year of Meteors: Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, and the Election That Brought on the Civil War



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Reviewed Work(s)

Year of Meteors: Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, and the Election That Brought on the Civil War. By Douglas R. Egerton (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2010). Pp. 416. Cloth, \$29.00.

Studies on the election of 1860 often trace Abraham Lincoln's rise to the presidency, concentrating on the likelihood of his Republican nomination and consequent victory. While some maintain that the

Illinoisan's election constituted a surprising event, other Lincoln scholars point to the significance of the Lincoln-Douglas Debates or the Cooper Union Address in propelling Lincoln's later victory.^[1] Douglas R. Egerton's *Year of Meteors: Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, and the Election that Brought on the Civil War* focuses on this presidential election from a different perspective, outlining the trajectories of northern and southern politics from the mid 1850s to Lincoln's inauguration in 1861. Rather than tracing Lincoln's rise in order to explain the success of the Republicans' presidential campaign, Egerton follows Stephen Douglas's career to better understand the immediate causes of secession. The author points to this Illinois Senator's "final, angry claims that his career and nation had fallen victim to 'an enormous conspiracy'" and argues that historians have not paid enough attention to Douglas's sudden political transformation from anti-Republican advocate of popular sovereignty to anti-Slave Power supporter of Lincoln. Egerton's method places Douglas's conspiracy accusation against the backdrop of pre-election political events, ultimately finding that the election of 1860 was indeed, as Douglas claimed, "unique in that a small number of southern reactionaries manipulated the process" (8). Although Douglas later exaggerated the extent of the "conspiracy," as Egerton asserts, his allegation did not lack grounding in reality. Southern opponents intentionally destroyed the Democratic Party's bisectonal base to foment secession and create a separate Confederacy of slave states.

Adopting Walt Whitman's designation of 1860 as a "year of meteors," Egerton depicts the rise of the Republican Party, the 1860 defection of staunch Whigs to the Constitutional Union Party, and, ultimately, the Democratic Party's division into northern and southern components. These events completely disrupted the traditional two-party political system, opening the way for dark horse candidate Abraham Lincoln to make his successful run in 1860. The division of the Democratic Party, however, also severed the nation into two irreconcilable halves before that election even took place, marking a pivotal moment in the nation's history. While Egerton notes the inability of all three parties—Republican, Democratic, and Constitutional Union—to craft a viable compromise in 1860, he clearly assigns the greatest responsibility for disunion on the heads of southern secessionists like William Lowndes Yancey and Robert Barnwell Rhett, who engineered the Democratic

Party's demise. Stephen Douglas's misguided attempts to avoid the moral issue of slavery in favor of popular sovereignty only accelerated disunion. Attempting to salvage the Democratic Party upon an artificial middle ground, Stephen Douglas based his conciliations to the South on the assumption that southern Democrats sought to protect their interests within the Union. Only in 1860 did he realize that "a few dedicated secessionists enjoyed the ability to encourage quick-tempered southern delegates—many of them otherwise-dedicated unionists—to bolt the conference" and leave behind the Democrats for a Confederate union (11). After working so diligently to meet southern demands, Douglas reacted with outraged astonishment when fellow Democrats intentionally undermined his beloved party to create an independent Confederate republic.

Through this reinterpretation of the final years before the Civil War, Douglas Egerton offers a refreshing narrative that manages to remove Abraham Lincoln from the center of the story. Focused instead on Stephen Douglas's belated cry against a Slave Power conspiracy, *Year of Meteors* depicts the famous senator as a northern Democrat who unintentionally fostered the growth of a proslavery contingent intent on engineering his party's destruction and the Union's dissolution. While his work is reminiscent of Robert W. Johannsen's sympathetic 1973 biography of Douglas, Egerton incorporates a wealth of new scholarship on the period and offers a timely re-evaluation of the events preceding the South's secession.^[2] The book covers the entire array of political factions during this period, granting a fair amount of attention to the Constitutional Union, Liberty, Whig, and Republican parties. Egerton ultimately saves most of his analysis, however, for the Democratic Party and leaders such as William Lowndes Yancey and Jefferson Davis. Rescuing this historical moment from the overwhelming weight of recent Lincoln scholarship, Egerton presents Stephen Douglas simultaneously as a significant catalyst to civil war, and as a patriotic American striving desperately to salvage his nation.

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[1] A trio of recent works has maintained that the Lincoln election was an underdog victory: Bruce Chadwick, *Lincoln for President: An Unlikely Candidate, an Audacious Strategy, and the Victory No One Saw Coming* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2009), Timothy Sean Good, *Lincoln for President: An Underdog's Path to the 1860 Republican Nomination* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2009) and Gary L. Ecelbarger, *The Great Comeback: How Abraham Lincoln Beat the Odds to Win the Republican Nomination* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008). Meanwhile, Harold Holzer has emphasized the Cooper Union speech in Holzer, *Lincoln at Cooper Union: The Speech That Made Abraham Lincoln President* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).

[2] Robert W. Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).



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