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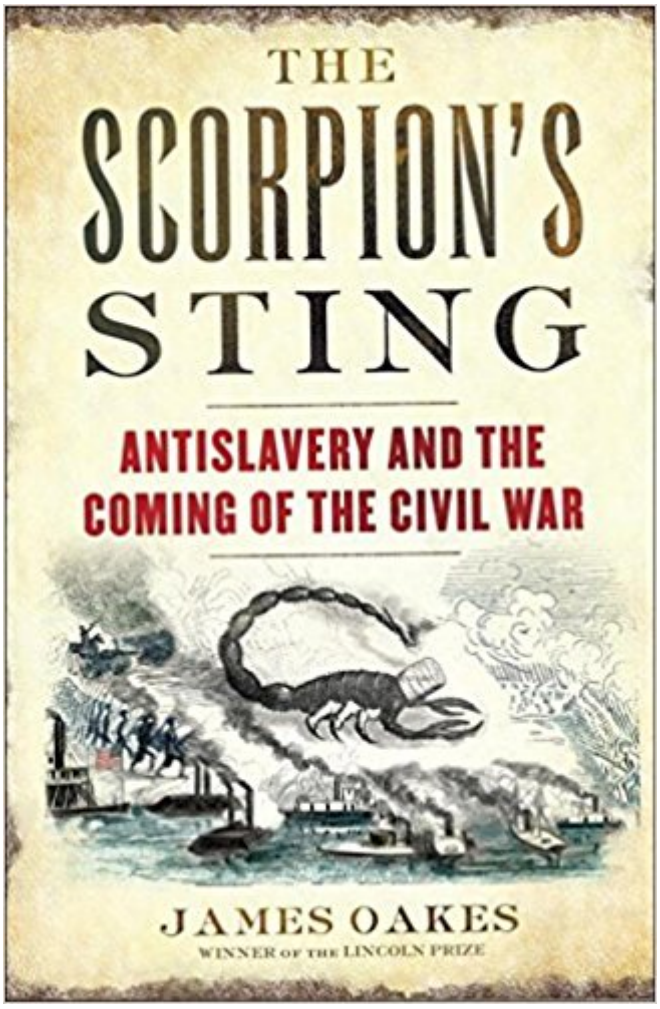
The Scorpion's Sting: Antislavery And The Coming Of The Civil War



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Synopsis

An award-winning historian illuminates the strategy for ending slavery that precipitated the crisis of civil war. Surrounded by a ring of fire, the scorpion stings itself to death. The image, widespread among antislavery leaders before the Civil War, captures their long-standing strategy for peaceful abolition: they would surround the slave states with a cordon of freedom. They planned to use federal power wherever they could to establish freedom: the western territories, the District of Columbia, the high seas. By constricting slavery they would induce a crisis: slaves would escape in ever-greater numbers, the southern economy would falter, and finally the southern states would abolish the institution themselves. For their part the southern states fully understood this antislavery strategy. They cited it repeatedly as they adopted secession ordinances in response to Lincoln's election. The scorpion's sting is the centerpiece of this fresh, incisive exploration of slavery and the Civil War: Was there a peaceful route to abolition? Was Lincoln late to emancipation? What role did race play in the politics of slavery? With stunning insight James Oakes moves us ever closer to a new understanding of the most momentous events in our history.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I think the Booklist reviewer got it completely right. If you are a casual Civil War buff or are more concerned with the military aspects of the conflict rather than the political, cultural and philosophical ones, this book is probably not for you. On the other hand, if legal and philosophical fine points are your daily bread, you'll likely gobble it up with gusto. After briefly explaining that most anti-slavery

Americans put their hopes into a policy of containment that would cause the institution to wither and die, the author spends most of his book detailing fine points concerning the treaties that ended the American Revolution and the War of 1812. These provisions had to do with American slaves emancipated by British forces and demands by the former owners for a return of their "property" or compensation for its loss. Debates over these issues, both between Americans and British people and among Americans themselves helped lay the groundwork for U.S. emancipation as it eventually occurred in practice.I found the book interesting in the beginning, but by the end of the first third, repetition began to set in for me, and while the overall thrust of the book casts an interesting perspective on the intellectual run up to the Civil War, I confess I found the second half to be a long-winded exercise in going over the same points again and again. Following that good first half, the book just withered away for me.

In the years leading up to the American Civil War, why did the question of slavery become so completely intractable? In this fascinating book, author James Oakes explains that the two sides rightly saw what Abraham Lincoln had explained, that the nation could not continue half slave and half free. That is to say, that either slavery must exist everywhere in the nation, or it would fail where it did exist. Early on, the abolitionists had suggested that if the slave states could be ringed with free states, that it would quickly die out, the way that a scorpion ringed with fire would stink itself to death. This was a powerful metaphor that grabbed the attention of both the North and the South.Overall, I think that the author does do a great job of showing how philosophically deep the question of slavery ran, and why the nation could not be a partial slave state. The book is relatively short, but is a very interesting and thought-provoking read. If you are interested in the American Civil War, and want to understand it even better, then get this book. I highly recommend it!

The first three chapters offer a very strong analysis of the Republicans and slavery, slaves as property, and race and slavery. The final chapter on wartime emancipation, which goes back to the War for Independence, unfortunately searches for a point. In addition, the final chapter inexplicably fails to examine military emancipation during the Civil War (the subject of Oakes’s Freedom National).

The first chapter is disappointing as it seems a long and convoluted way of stating the obvious. However, the rest of the book is first rate.

Fresh look at battles over slavery leading up to Civil War - new sources and original analysis.

read it all the day I got it. Clear,well organized writing makes his points well. Not sure I understand why military emancipation issues needed so much coverage though.

This book was purchases for a class. For being such a concise book, this is one of the most valuable books that detail slavery leading up to the Civil War.

A fine book regarding the anti-slavery positions in the country prior to the war. The chapter on military emancipation was overly detailed.

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