Book Review: Joel H. Silbey's Storm Over Texas

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In surveying the mostly positive reviews of this work, one question came to mind: did Amazon switch books on me? Perhaps the publishers soaked the reviewers’ copies in some sort of mind-altering drug. I purchased the Kindle edition, so the flashy cover page and carefully-chosen period font may not have had the same hypnotic effect on me. The book I read should be held up as a negative example to all who choose to write history. If you are looking for an excellent example of how to cram a 15-page undergraduate paper into a full-length monograph, *Storm Over Texas* will make your day. If, instead, you want a well-reasoned and tightly-argued book that brings new insight into the political issues surrounding the annexation of Texas, you will have to wait until someone has written it.

For those who are interested in the thesis and content of this book, this paragraph shall suffice. Silbey’s thesis is the annexation of Texas into the Union was the first domino leading to the Civil War. In order to substantiate his thesis, he spends what seems like the plurality of the book on Martin Van Buren and the internal politics of New York state, with a close second on James K. Polk. On an average of once every 10 to 20 pages, he mentions Texas, usually by quoting a New York politician who blames Van Buren’s failed second nomination bid on the Texas controversy. The book recounts in chronological order the political machinations before and after annexation, in particular those that drove Tyler out of office and brought the unknown Polk into the White House. The question of whether Texas would be a slave state is coupled with Polk’s alienation of Northern Democrats over Oregon Territory and war with Mexico. In addition, Silbey explains how even Stephen Douglas managed to alienate himself from the Southern Democrats with his tin-eared Kansas-Nebraska Act—an attempt to implement the Texas annexation terms on all further territorial expansion. In short, because after Texas’ annexation Congress and the nation grew more sectional than partisan, Texas’ annexation must have been the necessary catalyst.

It is not that I necessarily disagree with Silbey’s thesis, as much as find it uninteresting. Texas’ annexation was certainly a big, pivotal moment in American history, and was certainly an important link in the chain of events that led to the Civil War. But, so were any number of events in antebellum America, dating back to the first importation of slaves in 1619. To set Texas apart from all other events as the *sine qua non* of Civil War antecedents is a cheap sleight of hand. It is impossible to know whether the rise of sectionalism would occur without Texas, of course. What he can and did demonstrate from the historical record is uncontroversial; what he cannot defend is his thesis.

All who suppose the book somehow explores new ground, or synthesizes old evidence in a fresh and more reasonable manner are simply
mistaken. That is one of my main points of contention. *Storm Over Texas* covers one of the most vibrant and controversial periods in American history, from the Texan Revolution and the Mexican War, into the era of Bleeding Kansas. Within his topic, America more than doubled in size, Mexico lost two wars, countless numbers of people from America and Europe poured westward, living out the ideals of the pioneer spirit and Manifest Destiny. Telegraphs, steam ships, and trains were beginning to carry information, people, and goods across vast distances at speeds and costs unimaginable a generation earlier, enabling each section of the nation to see each other more directly for the first time, often shattering the illusion of a national consensus. Herein lies my main issue with the book: Silbey takes all of this rich material and makes it trite, narrow, and boring.

There is simply nothing new in the book. As I mentioned, the bulk of the material covered could fit into an undergraduate’s thesis. In his chapters on the same subject, Daniel Walker Howe provides all of the material covered by Silbey and more, in a more thorough and insightful manner. On the one hand, by focusing so narrowly on the political intrigue, *Storm Over Texas* assumes the reader already has a good working knowledge of the subject. On the other hand, the material that is covered is also part of the general knowledge of the subject. This is a book that manages to be both too basic to advance scholarship, and too obscure to serve as an introduction to the subject.

I read this book on my Kindle and computer, so I couldn’t tell by feel how far along I was. I kept thinking to myself, “These background chapters sure are long. I wonder when I’ll get to the meat of the book, because so far I have read nothing new.” About halfway through, I realized it was all background material! To make it worse, Silbey is an awful writer. Three out of four sentences seem useless, redundant, or both. To be cruel, I will share a couple.

An utterly useless transition sentence, on the 1844 election:

*AFTER THE INTENSE CAMPAIGN* of the fall, the country went to the polls in early November and then settled down to await the announcement of the results that would be forwarded from local polling stations to county seats, and then to state capitals, to be tallied, checked, and, finally, announced. (77)

The average sentence a reader must wade through, commas and all:

These representatives could not, therefore, they familiarly repeated, afford to continue their opposition. (85)

Silbey also seems to have an allergy to direct quotation and exemplary illustration. Since the text of Calhoun’s notorious *Pakenham Letter* would have been exciting, he summarizes it in the least interesting way he could manage. The quotes he does employ seem to have been carefully screened, with all color and personality filtered out. Almost all of the illustrations he uses are oval-framed portraits of the key players, with captions like, “A young congressman and senator, Douglas was an ardent
supporter of western expansion,” and “Sam Houston was the Republic of Texas’s pro-annexation hero and president.” Strangely, the illustrations made the book even more boring!

In short, Storm Over Texas is a book with “Texas” in its title that covers Martin Van Buren in more detail than Texas; it manages to touch on every event mentioned in a good high school textbook, only with more words and less depth. Joel Silbey has taken a big rack of Texas barbecue, and managed to de-season it with his own special recipe of “Blandifying Sauce.”

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