

## Apostle of Union: A Political Biography of Edward Everett

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This timely biography depicts a persistent moderate who deplored North-South sectional polarization and feared that jousting between anti-slavery and pro-slavery forces endangered the Union. Edward Everett worked instead to keep the divisive slavery issue out of national politics. *Apostle of Union* focuses on his long effort to elevate love for the Union and make it the paramount national value. Matthew Mason focuses on Everett's public career rather than his private life. He thinks Everett's 'emotional brand of Unionism' enjoyed greater popular appeal than historians usually allow (p. 3). An emphasis on the divisive forces tearing the Union apart inevitably marginalizes those such as Everett who tried to hold it together. So too, many historians today impose 'purity tests' that downgrade the reputations of any who deigned to compromise with slaveholders (p. 8). Mason, like the great David Potter, insists on a more complex reality: 'the antislavery sentiment of the vast majority of Northerners conflicted with their love of a Union and Constitution that manifestly protected slavery' (p. 7).

Everett, born in 1794, gained national notice at a young age. For a decade he held a seat from Massachusetts in the US House. He then was elected the state's governor and before long appointed as the minister to Great Britain. Even though he held office only briefly after the mid-1840s, his oratorical prowess kept him in the national spotlight. During the latter 1850s, he delivered over 100 performances of a celebrated set speech, 'The Character of Washington,' designed both to rekindle a cohesive patriotism and to raise money to save the first president's Virginia home, Mount Vernon. Everett's visibility extended until November 1863, when he was the featured speaker at the Gettysburg battlefield commemoration, and his two-hour monologue overshadowed the brief concluding words offered by Abraham Lincoln.

Politically ambitious young Bostonians during the early 19th century had to navigate treacherous crosscurrents. Massachusetts rejected Andrew Jackson, but it was no easy task to cobble together a coalition between Anti-Masons and National Republicans, both of which vied to lead the Anti-Jackson cause. Everett strove to unite the disparate factions into the Whig Party, committed to national uplift and improvement. But the explosive challenge posed by immediate abolitionists soon pressured Massachusetts Whigs to affirm anti-slavery values. Everett, governor of the state from 1836 to 1840, walked a fine line. He disapproved of slavery and anti-abolition mobs, but he called for a moratorium on divisive discussion (which, 'there is great reason to fear, will prove the rock on which the Union will split'). He thereby alienated grass-roots activists

(p. 101).

These fractures continued to bedevil Everett. As his country's minister in London in the early 1840s, he had no choice but to defend American claims to rebellious slaves who seized control of a ship, the *Creole*, and then sought refuge in the Bahamas. Anti-slavery publicists, who directed their principal fire at Secretary of State Daniel Webster, considered Everett a soulless apparatchik. The conflicted diplomat privately vented his frustration: 'God grant that this millstone [slavery] may be taken from the neck of my country, in some peaceful & Constitutional way' (p. 144).

Texas annexation and the Mexican War placed Unionists such as Everett even more on the defensive. The free soil movement, which demanded a ban on slavery in all territories, flourished in Massachusetts. Anti-slavery 'Conscience Whigs' divided from 'Cotton Whigs,' who gave priority to appeasing the Southern wing of the party. Everett and his likeminded friends, Robert C. Winthrop and Rufus Choate, tried to shield the party from anti-slavery excess. But the Conscience faction bolted to create the Free Soil Party, which allied temporarily with Democrats to control the state government. The coalition then placed the dogmatic anti-slavery doctrinaire, Charles Sumner, in the US Senate.

Conservative Bay State Whigs marched to a different drummer. Throughout their careers, Everett, Winthrop, and Choate deferentially tailored their careers to suit the giant among them, the 'Godlike' Daniel Webster, who stood astride Massachusetts Whiggery like a colossus and was convinced that continued anti-slavery agitation threatened the Union. Webster's famed Seventh of March speech in 1850 rejected the key Free Soil idea, to bar slavery from the territories. Contending that that the climate of the arid west was not suited for plantation agriculture, he saw no need to insult Southern sensibilities. Moreover, and most controversially, he said the South had the right to a Fugitive Slave Law. The Free Soil element erupted in fury. The impasse paralyzed Webster's friends, who were powerless to resolve it. The crisis gradually abated only after Zachary Taylor's unexpected death in July 1850. Millard Fillmore, the new president, filled his cabinet with sectional moderates and successfully promoted the Compromise of 1850. Fillmore's top post, secretary of state, went to Webster, who reclaimed the office he earlier held in the early 1840s (while his protégé Everett was minister to Britain). When Webster died in October 1852, Everett briefly became his successor.<sup>(1)</sup>

Everett won a US Senate seat in early 1853 after Massachusetts Whigs regained control of the legislature. Hopeful that the Compromise of 1850 had quashed any further slavery-related controversies, he looked forward to promoting conservative Unionism. Some even talked of him as a future president. 'But then came the Kansas-Nebraska Act' (p. 198). Everett spoke out against repeal of the Missouri Compromise, the centerpiece of Stephen A. Douglas' ill-starred measure. But he could not approve the adversarial polemics employed by Sumner and other quasi-abolitionists, who lambasted Douglas as a moral reprobate. Depressed and weakened by illness, Everett resigned from the Senate in May 1854, little more than a year after his term began. His hopes for sectional accord blasted, he would never again hold political office. He distanced himself completely from the partisan arena as upstart Republicans displaced Whigs across the free states. Convinced that political anti-slavery failed the Union test, he rejected the new Republican Party.

Instead, Everett sought to strengthen bi-sectional Unionism by rekindling historical memory. He joined with high-minded women from the Upper South and the Northeast to rescue George Washington's Potomac River estate, which had fallen into dangerous disrepair. The Mount Vernon Ladies Association of the Union (MVLAU) – which still manages the property today – attempted to save both the historic structure and the ever more sharply divided Union. His health restored by this new venture, Everett undertook grueling lecture tours that featured his famed oration, 'The Character of Washington'. Audiences up and down the east coast loved it. Everett's many speeches brought in fully half of the \$200,000 that the MVLAU needed to raise. Mason emphasizes the 'cultural power' of Everett's oratory and the 'outpouring of Unionist emotion and action, so counter to narratives of the thoroughgoing sectionalization of American politics in the 1850s' (pp. 235, 239).

Everett's brief return to the arena of electoral politics in 1860 proved a complete fizzle. He agreed to take the

Vice-Presidential nomination of the so-called Constitutional Union Party (CUP), which distanced itself from the politics of sectional grievance and appealed to former Whigs in the Upper South. Everett hoped to attract their Northern counterparts. But he failed utterly. The CUP only collected a paltry 78,000 votes in the free states. Most of the 395,000 Northerners who had voted in 1856 on the American Party ticket for former President Fillmore sided in 1860 with the Republican nominee, Abraham Lincoln.<sup>(2)</sup> The grim sequel to the election traumatized Everett. Appalled by the prospect of civil war, he favored last-minute conciliation and urged President James Buchanan to recall federal forces from Fort Sumter, the beleaguered outpost in Charleston harbor, South Carolina.

The outbreak of war left the CUP's claims to nationality in tatters. Its former presidential candidate, Tennessee's John Bell, reversed course and sided with the Confederacy. Everett leaned North and repositioned himself on the partisan spectrum. He had long wanted, above all else, to preserve the Union. As it became plain that the Union only could be held together by force, he championed the Union war effort and gravitated gradually toward the Republican Party. By 1864 he accepted the mainstream Republican position on emancipation. Mason notes correctly that Everett's stance anticipated historian Gary Gallagher's influential point – that the primary Northern war aim always remained restoration of the Union. Support for the subsidiary war aim – emancipation – rose as it came to be seen as the best way to assure the Union's future.<sup>(3)</sup> Everett's patriotic bona fides earned him the featured speaking duties at Gettysburg. But his course hardly was predetermined. Some of his long-time former Whig allies, notably Robert C. Winthrop, refused to reconsider their pre-war hostility to the Republican Party. Everett died in January 1865, convinced that Confederates had perverted the legacy of the founders but hopeful that a 'revitalized affective Union' would emerge after the fighting ended (p. 321).

Everett's career invites comparison with two other notable Northerners. He and Caleb Cushing incubated similarly. Both were young Massachusetts prodigies, with the slightly elder Everett an early mentor for Cushing. Both grappled gingerly with the abolitionist insurgency of the 1830s. Each moved from elective office to the diplomatic service. Indeed, Cushing accepted a post that Everett refused and became the first US minister to China. Most Massachusetts Whigs were so outraged by John Tyler's apostasy that they hounded Webster out of Tyler's cabinet, but Cushing made his peace with the Tyler faction and followed it into the Democratic Party. When Franklin Pierce became president in 1853, Cushing was appointed US Attorney General and served four years in the cabinet alongside Jefferson Davis. A bitter antagonist of the Free Soil movement and the Republican Party, Cushing considered Southern secession an inevitable consequence of Lincoln's election. He judged it hopeless to try holding the Union together by armed force. For the rest of his long life, Cushing remained tainted. Even so, he did stand up for the Union after the war started, became a close, if informal, advisor to Secretary of State William H. Seward, and provided a last-minute endorsement for Lincoln in 1864.<sup>(4)</sup>

Everett's brief career in the US Senate overlapped him with Hamilton Fish of New York, a likeminded prudent Whig who was 14 years Everett's junior. Fish too was dismayed by the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the 'useless, senseless, perpetual agitation of the slavery question'. Unlike Everett, he nominally supported the Republican presidential candidates in 1856 and 1860, but his heart remained with the defunct Whig Party and he lost his Senate seat. Secession appalled Fish. The 'movement at the South' was, he judged, 'beyond the control of those who originated it; they have succeeded in inflaming passions and in exciting alarms and hatreds which they cannot stay, and which are sweeping themselves along in this mad torrent which they have let loose'. At the same time, he faulted Republicans for failing to offer Union-saving concessions. They were acting like mariners who 'make no effort to save the ship'. Their 'suicidal' policy would, he lamented, not only lose them 'the legitimate fruits of their victory' but also lose the country itself, which would plunge into years of ruinous warfare.<sup>(5)</sup> Fish embraced the Union cause when war came, but otherwise he stayed out of the public arena until the end of Andrew Johnson's troubled term in office. At that juncture, however, Ulysses S. Grant made Fish his Secretary of State. It was a wise choice. Fish (aided by Cushing) successfully negotiated the Treaty of Washington, which resolved the festering *Alabama* claims that had poisoned relations between the United States and Great Britain. He also adroitly deflected popular clamor about Cuba and so prevented his chief from going to war against Spain.<sup>(6)</sup>

*Apostle of Union* places Matthew Mason squarely within the neo-revisionist camp of historians who study the origins of the American Civil War. Like Edward L. Ayers, whose stimulating and oft-cited essay first called for 'a new Civil War revisionism', Mason's sympathetic account of Everett's career implicitly agrees that the crisis leading to war was fueled by outsized Northern resentment of Southern power in the Union ('Slave Power'), set against Southern hysteria about a Black Republican menace to slavery and the very well-being of white Southern families.<sup>(7)</sup> This collision of opposites fed on itself, with each side convinced that it was the aggrieved party and neither seeing the other as fit to exercise national power. Republicans successfully sought political remedies for their grievances, while the white South dreaded what its leaders described as racial apocalypse. The South's estrangement was the danger point. As Michael F. Holt ably recognized, most Republicans had no initial design to attack slavery and instead regarded Lincoln's victory and Democratic defeat as 'the only triumph over the South, the Slave Power, and slavery they required.' This political result appeared to most Northerners to mark 'the legitimate conclusion of the sectional conflict, an end to strife not a beginning'. But the Deep South's defiant refusal to accept the outcome of the election set forces in motion that led directly to war.<sup>(8)</sup>

How might Mason's study of Everett strike John Ashworth, the chief theoretician of the late antebellum political snarl? Ashworth himself might best answer – and I hope that he does – but a few preliminary thoughts are in order. Ashworth contends that Southern demands for pro-slavery concessions boomeranged. Instead, the South triggered exaggerated 'Northern misperceptions' about a slave power conspiracy. He also observes that a revisionist outlook 'has rather more to recommend it than modern-day historians usually allow'.<sup>(9)</sup> Mason would find each of these points congenial. But Ashworth doubtless would take exception to Mason's 'narrative form' and its tendency to ignore the economic and class structures that Ashworth thinks shaped the political arena.<sup>(10)</sup> And Ashworth likely would argue that Everett, just like secessionists and Republicans, could not see the reality he faced because his own class interests distorted his vision. By trying to downplay slavery-related issues, the CUP left itself 'insufficiently northern in the North and insufficiently southern in the South'. Mason, in turn, would note the groundswell of public acclaim for Everett's 'Character of Washington' and therefore would question Ashworth's insistence that the pre-war political system was hopelessly polarized. Mason also would challenge Ashworth's claims for a 'highly rational' logic behind the secession movement.<sup>(11)</sup>

Ashworth required over 600 densely argued pages to explain why the North-South sectional conflict was irrepressible. Several other professionals – led by Sean Wilentz, James Huston, Allan Guelzo, and James Oakes – take an intellectual short cut to reach the same destination.<sup>(12)</sup> They echo Republican critics of Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, who baldly asserted, in the *Dred Scott* decision, that 'the right of property in a slave is distinctly and expressly affirmed in the Constitution'. It was not. Instead, as Abraham Lincoln



triumphantly noted, James Madison had ‘thought it wrong to admit in the Constitution the idea that there could be property in men’.[\(13\)](#) Score one for Lincoln, but it must be recognized that he turned a blind eye to the many ways the Constitution did buttress the slave system. Taney garbled the point of detail, not the big picture. Hardly any Republican claimed the power to interfere with slavery in the states where it existed. Historians such as Oakes who want the political antislavery movement to have been more radical than it was have fallen in love with Lincoln’s rebuke to Taney and stretched it to make Lincoln a proto-abolitionist (Everett reached the same conclusion and therefore deplored Lincoln’s candidacy). Ashworth, by contrast, wisely cautions that Lincoln was ‘a moderate on the slavery question’.[\(14\)](#) Also pertinent is Brian Holden Reid’s tart complaint about the ‘shallow tendentiousness’ among historians who want a past that conforms to ‘the high standards expected in the 21st century’.[\(15\)](#)

In the end, white Americans North and South in the late antebellum era emphasized their differences rather than listen to moderates like Everett who attempted to remind them what they shared in common. Nevertheless, they shared a great deal. And, sad to say, most shared such a low regard for black Americans that they could not imagine them as fellow citizens. Only amid a terrible war did significant numbers of Northern whites start to accept the logic and justice of equal rights.

## Notes

1. Robert V. Remini, *Daniel Webster: The Man and His Time* (New York, NY, 1997); Robert F. Dalzell, Jr., *Daniel Webster and the Trial of American Nationalism, 1843–1852* (Boston, MA, 1972).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York, NY, 1978), p. 215.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Gary W. Gallagher, *The Union War* (Cambridge, MA, 2011).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. John M. Belohlavek, *Broken Glass: Caleb Cushing and the Shattering of the Union* (Kent, OH, 2005).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Allan Nevins, *Hamilton Fish: The Inner History of the Grant Administration* (New York, NY, 1936), pp. 56, 79–81; Daniel W. Crofts, *Lincoln and the Politics of Slavery: The Other Thirteenth Amendment and the Struggle to Save the Union* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2016), pp. 180–1.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Nevins, *Fish*, pp. 470–93, 874–86. Like Everett and Cushing, Fish too left a vast trove of manuscripts.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Edward L. Ayers, ‘Worrying about the Civil War’, in *Moral Problems in American Life: New Perspectives on Cultural History*, ed. Karen Halttunen and Lewis Perry (Ithaca, NY, 1999), pp. 145–66, reprinted in Edward L. Ayers, *What Caused the Civil War? Reflections on the South and Southern History* (New York, NY, 2005), pp. 103–30, quotation on p. 129. See also Edward L. Ayers, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America, 1859–1863* (New York, NY, 2003). Mason does not self-identify as a new- or neo-revisionist.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s*, pp. 216–17.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic; Volume 2: The Coming of the Civil War, 1850–1861* (New York, NY, 2007), pp. 167–71, 263–4, 335.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics*, pp. 334, 670.[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics*, pp. 145, 603.[Back to \(11\)](#)
12. Sean Wilentz, *The Politicians and the Egalitarians: The Hidden History of American Politics* (New York, NY, 2016), pp. 193, 219–20; James Huston, *Calculating the Value of the Union* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003); Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* (New York, NY, 2004), pp. 4–6; James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1861–1865* (New York, NY, 2013), pp. 44–8. For a nuanced historical assessment of the persons/property issue, see Paul Finkelman, ‘Slavery in the United States: Persons or Property?’ in *The Legal Understanding of Slavery: From the Historical to the Contemporary*, ed. Jean Allain (New York, NY, 2012), 105–34.[Back to \(12\)](#)
13. *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler, 9 vols. (New Brunswick, NJ, 1953–5), vol. 3, pp. 544–6.[Back to \(13\)](#)
14. Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics*, pp. 152, 228, 242–4.[Back to \(14\)](#)

15. Brian Holden Reid, [‘God cannot afford to do without America’: what was the American Civil War about?’](#) [2], *Reviews in History* (September 2012), review of Gallagher, *The Union War*; Brian Holden Reid, *The Origins of the American Civil War* (New York, NY, 1996, 2014), pp. 9–10.[Back to \(15\)](#)

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