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## BOOKSHELF

# The First Republican Candidate

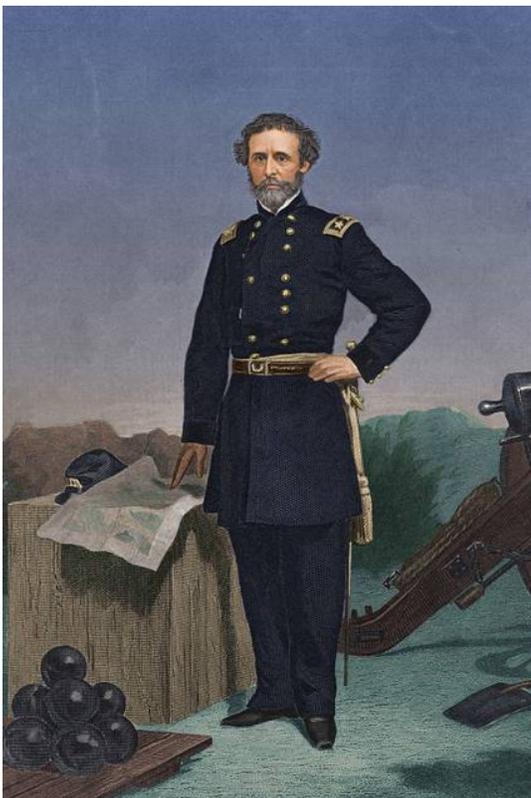
A dashing explorer before his nomination, John C. Frémont spent the 1856 presidential campaign fencing, riding his horse and strolling in New York. Robert K. Landers reviews 'Lincoln's Pathfinder' by John Bicknell.

*By Robert K. Landers*

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Accepting the Republican Party's first presidential nomination in July 1856, John C. Frémont declared that the very "design of the nation, in asserting its own independence and freedom," made it imperative "to avoid giving countenance to the extension of slavery." This assertion about the hottest issue of the day would be Frémont's "only substantive statement of the campaign," John Bicknell notes in "Lincoln's Pathfinder." At the time, candidates for president customarily chose not to stoop to speechifying or actively seeking the voters' favor.

That was fine with Frémont, a dashing explorer (nicknamed "the Pathfinder") whose best-selling reports on his expeditions in the American West had made him famous. Though he had served briefly in 1850-51 as one of California's first U.S. senators, the 43-year-old former Democrat was "a babe in the woods when it came to politics," Mr. Bicknell says. Residing in New York City, the Republican candidate spent most of his time "fencing, riding his horse, and taking long walks through what was then still not an entirely urban landscape."



American explorer, army officer and politician John C. Frémont. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

The campaign for Frémont was left to others, chiefly his wife, Jessie, the daughter of former Sen. Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri. Besides organizing the campaign, she made the case for Frémont to newspapermen and influential public figures whom she received in her New York home. Though women couldn't vote, Mr. Bicknell notes, "Republicans were not shy about making direct appeals to women"—presumably hoping they would sway the men in their lives. Next to Frémont's heroic but taciturn persona, Jessie's own appeared "beautiful, graceful, intellectual, and enthusiastic," as Frank Leslie's Weekly described her. Women's clubs

By John Bicknell

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sprang up in the North in her name. Women imitated her hairstyle, adopted her favorite color (violet) for their outfits, named their newborns after her—and turned out “in huge numbers” for Frémont rallies, which had banners hailing “Jessie’s Choice.”

Frémont faced strong opposition in the general election. Even his famous father-in-law, believing that preserving the Union was more urgent than containing slavery, was voting Democratic. Though candidate Frémont is the leading character in “Lincoln’s Pathfinder,” his opponents and the forces arrayed against the nascent, anti-slavery Republican Party necessarily play large roles, too.

President Franklin Pierce, hoping for a second term, might have been the Democratic candidate. But Pierce, of New Hampshire, had alienated many in New England, a key part of his political base, with his strong support for the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854). That law, instead of preserving the 1820 Missouri Compromise’s ban on slavery north of a certain latitude, let the settlers in each of the new territories of Kansas and Nebraska vote to decide whether the state would be free or slave. The law led to violent conflict in “Bleeding Kansas” and prompted many Northern Whigs and some Northern Democrats who opposed slavery’s extension to leave their parties for the new Republican one.

The Democratic Party, refusing in June 1856 to nominate the weakened Pierce, instead nominated James Buchanan of Pennsylvania, a Northerner with Southern sentiments. Having recently served as U.S. minister to England, Buchanan at 65 was an elder statesman with a glittering political resume devoid of significant accomplishment.

A third candidate appeared on the November ballot: former president Millard Fillmore, nominated by the American Party of so-called Know Nothings. Distressed by Irish and German immigration after 1845, Know Nothings opposed full citizenship for Catholics and further Catholic immigration. Fillmore tempered the party’s anti-Catholicism and emphasized preserving the Union—which meant appeasing the South. “He had no delusions of winning,” Mr. Bicknell says, but hoped to throw the election into the House, where “bargaining might produce almost any result.”

Mr. Bicknell, a former editor at *Congressional Quarterly* and the author of “America 1844” (2014), tells the election story skillfully—though the reader may experience some confusing moments due to the large cast of characters and the multiple parties and factions. But “Lincoln’s Pathfinder” is about more than the making of the president, 1856. Mr. Bicknell explores what was happening out in the country, where sectional strife and violence were raising the specter of disunion.

It wasn’t only settlers in Kansas who were bleeding in the mid-1850s. So were Native Americans and U.S. soldiers in Nebraska, as the Army, in one case, turned a dispute over a lost cow into a fight that wiped out a detachment of its own soldiers and, in its effort to establish its authority a year later, attacked a Sioux camp, slaughtering 85 Native Americans. In Washington, a Northern antislavery senator was beaten in the Senate chamber by a Southern congressman. Mormons were fighting exposure and starvation as they trekked westward to their Zion in Utah. Fugitive slaves were desperately seeking freedom in the North, despite the Fugitive Slave Act (1850). All of this Mr. Bicknell captures in detailed excursions from the election narrative.

When the November 1856 ballots were counted, Buchanan was the victor, though with the lowest percentage of the popular vote (45.3%) since 1824. Fillmore got 21.5% but received almost 44% of the popular vote in the South. Frémont, for his part, got a third

of the popular vote, all but a smidgen of it in the North, winning a total of 11 states. Had he also carried Pennsylvania and Indiana or Illinois (where Abraham Lincoln had given more than 50 speeches on his behalf), he would have been the victor.

In 1860, Lincoln added those three states, three others and part of a fourth to Frémont's 11 and became president. Frémont may have been Lincoln's "pathfinder," showing him how the country's political forces responded to a Republican candidate, but Lincoln had the political skills that Frémont lacked.

*Mr. Landers, a former editor at the Wilson Quarterly, posts his reviews and essays at [robertklanders.com](http://robertklanders.com).*

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