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## The North American Gamble: An Examination of Nation-State Projects in Canada and the United States

Alexander J. Cramer  
*University of Windsor*, [cramera@uwindsor.ca](mailto:cramera@uwindsor.ca)

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### Cover Page Footnote

Laxer, James. *Staking Claims to a Continent: John A. Macdonald, Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, and the Making of North America* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2016).

## Book Review

# Staking Claims to a Continent: John A. Macdonald, Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, and the Making of North America

James Laxer. House of Anansi Press, 2016. Pp. 352. (9781770894303)

Alex Cramer  
*University of Windsor*

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**T**he growing influence of nationalism in the post-Napoleonic era peaked in 1848, when revolutions dedicated to the advancement of political democracy erupted across western Europe. On both sides of the Atlantic, ideas of self-determination and political autonomy resulted in a similar desire for nationhood. Political leaders in the United States and British North America found much appeal in the idea of self-determination and sought to facilitate their political visions through nation state projects. Nation state projects are ventures where leaders of a nation, existing within a larger state, launch a political campaign to secede and become sovereign. The importance of these political enterprises is central to James Laxer's *Staking Claims to a Continent: John A. Macdonald, Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, and the Making of North America*, a rich history of Canada, the United States, and the leaders who shaped and reshaped them. Specifically, he examines the ways in which Macdonald, Lincoln, and Davis' personalities would profoundly shape the fate of North America. In his concluding remarks, Laxer argues that the legacies of Macdonald, Lincoln, and Davis laid the foundations for

the political philosophies of Canada and the United States, with “immense implications [...] that reverberate to the present day.”<sup>1</sup>

*Staking Claims to a Continent* opens with a discussion on the genesis of Southern secession from the Union of the United States in the late 1840s. In this case study, Laxer correctly details the South’s motivations for nationhood, defending the contemporary argument that slavery served as the central impetus for secession. He considers how social, political, and economic divisions between Northern and Southern states created separate American identities, and how these in turn shaped the political philosophy of Mississippi Senator Jefferson Davis. A staunch proponent of slavery and states’ rights, Davis would come to lead a nation state project dedicated to achieving full autonomy from the United States. Laxer follows Davis through the Civil War, drawing parallels between Canadian and Confederate challenges to achieve independence from the British Empire and United States, respectively. However, while the Confederacy lost the war, Laxer contends that Davis’ political principles “remained key elements of the American social order,” many of which continue to shape Southern US nationalism to this day.<sup>2</sup>

Laxer juxtaposes Jefferson Davis’ quest for a Southern American nation with Abraham Lincoln, the President of the United States during the Civil War. Throughout the book, he analyses the various military and political strategies Lincoln used to achieve Union victory, and emphasizes Lincoln’s succinct ability to grasp the political weight of morality. His power to reframe the Civil War as serving the higher purpose of abolition redefined the nature of the American nation. Laxer evaluates Lincoln’s scrupulous efforts to retain British neutrality and the loyalty of the contestable border states, ensuring Southern isolation and eventual defeat. Throughout this case study, Laxer justly praises Lincoln for his consistent leadership throughout the war. However, he also presents the compelling counter argument that fortuitous circumstances had equally aided the President’s

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<sup>1</sup> James Laxer, *Staking Claims to a Continent*, (Toronto: Anansi, 2016), 285.

<sup>2</sup> James Laxer, *Staking Claims to a Continent*, (Toronto: Anansi, 2016), 292.

political success and the Union's military victory. He concludes that Lincoln's quest to rebuild the Union of the United States redefined American conceptions of freedom, liberty, democracy, and most importantly, of what the American nation represented.

Sir John A. Macdonald, stands in sharp contrast to both Davis and Lincoln. Beginning with the Rebellions of 1837, the book follows Macdonald's rise in British North American politics over the subsequent decades. It focuses on the significance of his key political principles – centralism, pragmatism, and loyalty to the British Empire – and how these came to define the political philosophy of the Canadian nation state. Here, in his final case study, Laxer makes the convincing case that Macdonald's unexampled ability to balance Canadian regional and British imperial interests proved vital to the nation state's success. By 1864, with the Civil War nearing its end, many political leaders in British North America were eager to acquire Rupert's Land before the United States would seize it. To achieve this, Macdonald proposed Confederation: A union between Upper and Lower Canada as well as the Maritime Provinces under one dominion. His "capacity to bring disparate parties to agreement," Laxer argues, "was critical to the Confederation project."<sup>33</sup> He rallied French and English Canadians alike, who then supported his leadership and vision for a united, self-governing Canada. By 1867, Confederation was achieved, with Macdonald as the country's first Prime Minister. The Canadian nation state stands in contrast to its southern neighbour: It was negotiation and compromise that allowed Macdonald to forge Canada, while Davis and Lincoln relied on war to birth and rebirth their nations, respectively.

The legacy of the North American nation state projects and its leaders can still be felt today. Laxer concludes that in the United States, the Civil War became the central event in American history, one that defined the American identity for the next century and beyond. In British North America, Confederation founded the Dominion of Canada: A transcontinental nation distinct from both Britain and the United States. *Staking Claim to a Continent* serves as an

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<sup>33</sup> James Laxer, *Staking Claims to a Continent*, (Toronto: Anansi, 2016), 298.

excellent read for those interested in the history of the Civil War, Confederation, or Canadian and American nationalism. As James Laxer has demonstrated, Canada and the United States illustrate the series of forces that determine if a nation state project will fail or succeed, as well as how individual agency determines this. This work is more than just a series of case studies; it presents a clear study of how political leaders can utilize the idea of the nation to create states and advance their political legacy.