



# The Abolitionist Imagination (The Alexis de Tocqueville Lectures on American Politics)

By Andrew Delbanco

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The abolitionists of the mid-nineteenth century have long been painted in extremes--vilified as reckless zealots who provoked the catastrophic bloodletting of the Civil War, or praised as daring and courageous reformers who hastened the end of slavery. But Andrew Delbanco sees abolitionists in a different light, as the embodiment of a driving force in American history: the recurrent impulse of an adamant minority to rid the world of outrageous evil.

Delbanco imparts to the reader a sense of what it meant to be a thoughtful citizen in nineteenth-century America, appalled by slavery yet aware of the fragility of the republic and the high cost of radical action. In this light, we can better understand why the fiery vision of the "abolitionist imagination" alarmed such contemporary witnesses as Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne even as they sympathized with the cause. The story of the abolitionists thus becomes both a stirring tale of moral fervor and a cautionary tale of ideological certitude. And it raises the question of when the demand for purifying action is cogent and honorable, and when it is fanatic and irresponsible.

Delbanco's work is placed in conversation with responses from literary scholars and historians. These provocative essays bring the past into urgent dialogue with the present, dissecting the power and legacies of a determined movement to bring America's reality into conformity with American ideals.

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#### Review

A brilliant, risky, provocative account of the changing historical reputation of abolitionists in America. Delbanco offers a timely take on just why this prototypical American reform movement never goes away as a template, as a useable past, as a story that can be appropriated by all ends of the political spectrum. (David Blight, author of *American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era*)

With his characteristic eloquence, Andrew Delbanco provides an interpretation of abolitionism, in history and literature, which challenges the received wisdom--and his four critics are up to the challenge. This splendid book demonstrates that the most successful radical movement in American history still retains its power to provoke and enlighten. (Michael Kazin, author of *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation*)

The lucidity of the prose and the relevance of the topic to today's cultural divides may attract broader audiences. (Brendan Driscoll *Booklist* 2012-03-01)

#### About the Author

Andrew Delbanco is the Mendelson Family Chair of American Studies and Julian Clarence Levi Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University.

John Stauffer is Professor of English, of American Studies, and of African and African American Studies, Harvard University. He is the author of *Giants: The Parallel Lives of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln*.

Manisha Sinha is Associate Professor of History and Afro-American Studies at University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

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