

At the Precipice: Americans North and South During the Secession Crisis

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Review

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Bowman, Shearer Davis *At the Precipice: Americans North and South during the Secession Crisis*. University of North Carolina Press, \$30.00 ISBN 978-0-8078-3392-6

A Survey of Secession

Dave Bowman is well known within the guild of academic historians. He demonstrated his prowess with one of the few genuinely comparative books ever written by an Americanist—*Masters and Lords: Mid-19th-Century U.S. Planters and Prussian Junkers* (1993). One approaches his new book with high expectations.

Rather than provide a narrative of events between November 1860 and April 1861, *At the Precipice* opts for background and context. Bowman attempts to assess the mental baggage Americans already had in place when the crisis of the Union erupted. He introduces an eclectic group of characters—many were prominent but others have never before attracted notice.

Bowman seeks to be evenhanded, perhaps to a fault. Both North and South deemed their respective societies and ways of life as “authentically American” (12) and each acted to protect their perceived “interests, rights, and honor” (33, 278). White Northerners loved the Union but had little regard for the slaves. White Southerners had a “paramount” anxiety about slavery, coupled with “what they saw as fundamental principles of state’s rights” (18, 38).

As part of a series, *The Littlefield History of the Civil War Era*, *At the Precipice* may have been commissioned to reach a wider than academic audience. But Bowman has addressed this volume to his fellow professionals. It brims with references to specific titles published since David Potter’s *Impending Crisis* (1976) and James McPherson’s *Battle Cry of Freedom* (1988). Bowman alerts his readers to a wide array of worthy monographs and manuscript

collections but gives lower priority to interpretation. The absence of a plot line or point of view deprives this useful book of force and cohesion.

At the Precipice starts by noticing that the slavery extension debates of the late 1840s and 1850s tended to generate mirror-image anxieties about conspiracies, so that both North and South saw themselves endangered and on the defensive. Bowman knows that Eric Foner and Michael Holt disagree about the dynamic that fed the furor—whether the South did in fact covet the unsettled west and aspire to make slavery legal North as well as South, or whether instead the North was chasing a phantom. Foner thinks the territorial issue had tangible foundations, whereas Holt would say that partisan jousting and intra-party rivalries got out of hand and became detached from reality. Bowman is content merely to observe, not to adjudicate. A key disagreement erupted in the South as the secession movement unfolded—whether slavery faced a mortal danger, or whether it was still safe in the Union, even with Abraham Lincoln as president. Bowman positions himself on both sides of this matter (29, 35, 68). McPherson contends that war resulted because North and South were increasingly unlike each other, whereas Edward Ayers emphasizes that North and South had a good deal in common until they suddenly polarized to fight a catastrophic war. Bowman does not touch these foundational issues.

Bowman's cryptic coverage of the crisis months in 1860-61 is based largely on secondary sources. One would not guess from his account that leading southern Democrats such as Jefferson Davis and Howell Cobb, both part of the Washington establishment and potential contenders for national power, had to execute a hasty about face to maintain their political footing as the secession tide threatened to engulf them. Bowman takes at face value an outrageous public letter written in December 1860, in which Cobb cravenly embraced secessionist nonsense that he knew to be untrue. Bowman writes that both Lincoln and William H. Seward misunderstood "the highly conditional nature of most white southerners' commitment to the United States" (272), but he thereby masks key differences. Lincoln gambled that Unionism in the Upper South was strong enough to weather a showdown between the federal government and the Lower South, but Seward feared that a shooting war would drive the Upper South out of the Union. At the same time, Seward hoped that the Lower South might ultimately retrace its steps if force were not used and it then became apparent that the Upper South would not secede, whereas Lincoln was unwilling to place all his chips on the uncertain possibility that the Lower South would voluntarily experience a change of heart.

The most striking chapter in the book examines the potentially deadly rivalry between white males, North and South, who eagerly sought to achieve and maintain an honorable reputation. Building on the work of Samuel Haber and James Bowman (no kin), *At the Precipice* advances the pioneering insights of Bertram Wyatt-Brown. Honorable men, Dave Bowman writes, enjoyed “the prospect of advancement,” combined “courageous manliness with a virtuous moral character,” and vigilantly protected the sexual purity of their wives and daughters (92, 95). One who lacked honor was degraded—he had no prospects for advancement, and he could neither demonstrate his courage nor protect the women in his family. He had, in short, the attributes of a slave. In the North, the quest for honor largely ceased to involve a display of “martial values” and became “bourgeois and feminized,” but in the South, white men “often demonstrated a touchy determination to maintain in the public eye their manly authority, respect, and honor” (97-98, 105). Many such touchy white southern men, infuriated by Northern aspersions against the morality of slaveholders and a slaveholding society, regarded the Republican victory in 1860 in and of itself as a direct blow against their honor, to be remedied only by disunion. Their actions stiffened the backs of many Republicans, who decided it would be “humiliating and dishonorable” (83) to compromise with traitors, in order to allow Lincoln to claim the prize that he had already fairly won. This impasse triggered an unimaginably violent sequel, waged in part to reclaim tarnished honor.

Those who seek modern assessments of the path to war in the weeks and months before April 1861 will continue to turn first to Russell McClintock’s *Lincoln and the Decision for War* (2008), to William Freehling’s second volume of *The Road to Disunion* (2007), and to Ayers’ *In the Presence of Mine Enemies* (2003). Bowman has other objectives and priorities. *At the Precipice* might best be characterized as a meditation on recent pre-Civil War era historiography.

This book is also a poignant reminder of our common mortality—Dave Bowman did not live to see his words in print.

Daniel W. Crofts, Professor of History at The College of New Jersey, is the author of Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis (University of North Carolina Press, 1989) and A Secession Crisis Enigma: William Henry Hurlbert and “The Diary of a Public Man” (Louisiana State University Press, 2010). He is currently writing a book about the would-be Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution that was approved by both houses of

Congress just before Lincoln's first inauguration in 1861.