

### We Have the War Upon Us: The Onset of the Civil War, November 1860-April 1861

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## Review

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**Cooper, William J.** *We Have the War upon Us: The Onset of the Civil War, November 1860-April 1861*. Knopf, \$30.00 ISBN 978-1-4000-4200-5

### A Reassessment of the Secession Crisis

A prolific scholar, William J. Cooper, has made major contributions to our understanding of southern history, especially in the Civil War era. More than thirty years ago, he clearly and convincingly affirmed slavery's centrality to the politics of the antebellum white South.<sup>1</sup> Later, his thoughtful, deeply researched, and smoothly-written biography of Jefferson Davis unflinchingly depicted that major Mississippi planter's attachment to the South's "peculiar institution" and the role it played in his opting for secession.<sup>2</sup>

Cooper's latest book re-examines the event-filled half-year between Lincoln's election in November 1860 and Fort Sumter and its aftermath. And it is built around a consequential and strongly-made argument. He depicts the Civil War as a resistible, repressible tragedy and lays responsibility for its occurrence principally at the feet of Abraham Lincoln and his Republican Party. Taking the white South's dedication to slavery as a given, Cooper suggests that both secession and war could (and should) have been avoided if Lincoln and his party colleagues had taken the wishes, grievances, and demands of the South more seriously and responded to them more wisely, reasonably, and fairly in 1860-61. More specifically, they should have abandoned the platform on which Lincoln had just been elected (which pledged to halt slavery's expansion into the federal territories) and agreed instead to John J. Crittenden's proposal to divide those territories between slavery's friends and foes and to permit slavery's spread into any additional territories that might be "thereafter acquired" further south (presumably in the Caribbean or central America). When the Confederacy fired upon and seized Fort Sumter, furthermore, the Republican White House should not have reacted by calling the nation to arms.

Cooper is not shy about identifying his heroes and villains. The former include "Upper South Conservatives" like Kentucky's Crittenden and North Carolina's John A. Gilmer. Such men "disliked secession, most rejecting it altogether" (95). The author admires their "eloquent plea for conciliation" (209). After all, he tells us, they merely "asked for fairness in the territories" -- as defined by Crittenden's proposal (177).

Had Republicans done their patriotic duty, Cooper plainly believes, they would have accepted those terms. Unfortunately, Lincoln and company refused. That makes them the heavies of this story. The author especially dislikes those he describes as the "gang" of abolitionist "hard-liners," the "antislavery zealots" on the Republican Party's left flank (61-2, 79). Since they "demanded an immediate end to slavery," he tells us, it comes as no surprise that they adamantly opposed any concessions on the territorial question (62). But while they "professed" to take that stand out of "moral purity," he adds, some of them acted on considerably baser motives -- concern "that backing compromise 'would disband the Republican party'" by alienating a major part of its constituency (62).

But Cooper holds the party's mainstream at least equally guilty. Less politically radical, those men had the numbers necessary to isolate the "hard-liners." But in their "obstinacy" they, too, rejected "any stratagem to settle the territorial question" (97, 101). Instead, they preferred simply to stand "arrayed atop the monument" of their party's anti-slavery electoral platform "chanting the shibboleth of 'no territorial compromise,'" endlessly "trumpeting the same no-territorial-compromise anthem" (111, 112).

The buck, however, really stopped with Abraham Lincoln. He unfortunately "defined compromise as giving in or submitting," and refused to do such a thing (139).<sup>3</sup> And by rejecting all the Crittenden-type deals on the table during the secession season, Lincoln needlessly precipitated the incredibly bloody war (79). The Republican leader did that, says Cooper, because of "his visceral antislavery commitment," his insistence on thinking and acting sectionally rather than nationally, and "his ignorance of the South," its goals, needs, and likely response to his intransigence (73). Just as responsible and regrettable as these qualities was Lincoln's "vigorous partisanship." Lincoln, Cooper complains, "approached the crisis not as president-elect of the United States, but as a leader of the Republican party" (76).

Cooper's indictment of Republican policy extends beyond Lincoln's inauguration to the new president's handling of the Confederate siege and then bombardment and seizure of the federal installation of Fort Sumter. Cooper reports that Secretary of State William Seward urged Lincoln to abandon Sumter (as well as southern-based federal customs houses) to the secessionists and to rest content instead with collecting national tariffs offshore, with federal ships, while resolving to hold another federal installation (Ft. Pickens in Florida) at all costs. Cooper's evident approval of that plan implies that it might have avoided war. He also wishes that Lincoln had responded to Sumter's bombardment and surrender not by calling up troops but by declaring the clash there "a last opportunity, even a requirement, for Americans on both sides to turn from employing arms to searching for a peaceful solution" (270).

*We Have the War upon Us* displays some of the qualities for which Cooper's earlier works have justly been praised. The author accurately summarizes many of the reasons why southern political leaders reacted as strongly as they did to Lincoln's election. He has carefully researched and explained, at some length, the various compromise proposals advanced in these months. His account of the showdown over Ft. Sumter is painstakingly detailed. Along the way, Cooper quite accurately notes that throughout the secession season, Lincoln – a professed admirer of Henry Clay – refused the role of "the Great Pacifier" that Clay had played during the sectional crises of 1820 and 1850 (72). Cooper's writing throughout is transparent, direct, and accessible, increasing the likelihood that his book will attract and possibly convince many readers.

But this book suffers from weaknesses that, in my view, considerably outweigh its strengths.

The first is the presence in the text of a surprising number of significant errors of fact that combine to overstate his case. In rejecting the Republicans' tenuous claim to basic continuity with the Constitution's framers, for example, Cooper goes too far, asserting that "the Founding Fathers had not circumscribed slavery" (16). But of course the famous Northwest Ordinance did indeed do that, banning slavery outright in the lands north of the Ohio River between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River. Cooper also mischaracterizes the program of the abolitionists in and out of the Republican Party. As other historians have been at pains to point out, nearly all of the people in question called not for "an immediate end to slavery" but for immediate steps to bring

slavery to an eventual end. Those were two very different things.

The book's second, and more important, group of problems is interpretive. At a number of points Cooper seems to question slavery's real centrality to the southern white cause and therefore to secession and war. Similarly, as he narrates the cotton states' decision to secede, Cooper attributes the ultimate assent to that course by ex-unionists there chiefly to their "loyalty to their states" -- rather than to their own oft-stated concerns about slavery's future, which sharpened as it became clear that Lincoln would not repudiate his party's platform (135).

The same kind of problem plagues Cooper's treatment of the upper South and the reason its four states joined the Confederacy after Sumter. Here he seems to switch interpretations in mid-stream. Much of the book, as already noted, is a sustained indictment of the Republicans' refusal of the Crittenden-type deals, strongly implying that this bad policy stance lost the upper South to the Union (101, 173). But elsewhere, in attributing woeful consequences to Lincoln's response to Sumter, Cooper denies that the issue of slavery in the territories had ever, in fact, been a real sectional deal-breaker. In this part of the argument, he holds that Virginia, North Carolina, Arkansas, and Tennessee would not have left the Union, that only "overt acts against the South and slavery" could (and did) have driven them out (168). Cooper seems aware that leaders of every one of those had said the opposite -- making Lincoln's repudiation of his party's stand against slavery's further expansion a condition for their remaining in the Union. He does not tell us why we should doubt those threatening manifestoes.

There are other problems as well. After depicting Seward's advice in the Sumter crisis (abandon southern-based customs houses and collect tariffs with the navy, abandon that fort but hold Pickens) as an enlightened alternative to Lincoln's actual policy, Cooper then concedes that even that course of action would eventually have led to war (251-2, 265). And here he is certainly right. The seceding states demanded the complete and total surrender of all federal claims to act as their national government, and (as Sumter demonstrated) their leaders were more than ready to enforce those words with deeds. But this fact logically prompts the question, what policy does Cooper think Lincoln should have adopted?

But I believe the book's most debilitating weakness is this: By focusing so narrowly on the words and deeds of a relative handful of political leaders in

Washington over the course of a few months, it gives readers little sense of just how divergent had been the paths of social, economic, and political development taken by the slave and free states over the preceding decades and how sharply opposed their basic economic, social, and moral interests and values had thereby become. *We Have the War upon Us* consequently obscures rather than illuminates exactly why there remained so few mutually acceptable courses of action by 1860-61.

Cooper's analysis is especially weak concerning the ideals and corollary beliefs that shaped the conduct of Lincoln, his party, and their constituents during these crucial months. The sensitivity and perceptiveness that in the past have served him so well when studying the South seem to fail him as he now turns his attention to the North. He seems unaware, or at least takes little note of that fact that so many northerners, by this point, had become quite convinced that slavery's indefinite survival, much less its further spread, represented a mortal threat to the republic, its economic development, political health, and moral sense.

In his inattention to that fact, William Cooper is a bit reminiscent of Henry Clay, whose conduct he wishes Lincoln had chosen to emulate. During the sectional conflict of 1850, Clay urged northerners to make "larger and more expansive concessions than ... the slave States" on the grounds that the South had much more at stake than did the North. "In the one scale," Clay admonished, "we behold sentiment, sentiment, sentiment alone; in the other, property, the social fabric, life, and all that makes life desirable and happy."<sup>4</sup> Five years later, as it happens, Lincoln's Kentucky friend Joshua Speed tried the same line of argument on him. Lincoln replied with asperity that Speed had no right "to assume, that I have no interest in a thing which has, and continually exercises, the power of making me miserable. You ought rather to appreciate how much the great body of the Northern people do crucify their feelings" in making concessions to slavery for the sake of preserving the Union.<sup>5</sup>

Lincoln, his colleagues, and the northerners who in their majority now backed them viewed the actually very limited Republican program as the minimum needed to counter slavery's threat to their interests and values. It had taken decades of often-frustrated effort to bring a mass party into being on that program. That party had now finally and legally won the presidency.

Most slaveholders recognized in that fact a mortal danger to the form of society that gave them their wealth, power, social status, and self-image, a type of society to which they had therefore become tenaciously attached. Those of the lower South believed that nothing but physical separation from the Union could now save them and their beloved society. Those of the upper South hoped to use the Union's impending breakup as a means with which to coerce the Republicans into capitulation.

And what if those would-be compromisers had succeeded in their intentions? What if the Republicans had done as Cooper today wishes? What would that have meant for the nation, its people, and their future?

The author refers once, early in the book, to "the human tragedy of slavery" (12). But he then neglects the impact that the policies he retrospectively advocates would have had on the four million human beings most directly and terribly affected by that tragedy. The political outlook that held up sectional peace and conciliation as the supreme standard of right would have kept those people in chains – along with an unknown number of their descendants.

That is true in part, by the way, because Lincoln and other Republicans were quite right to fear that abandoning their core program in the face of slave-owner blackmail would thoroughly demoralize and destroy their party. It may seem self-evident to Cooper that allowing concerns about that party's health and survival to influence policy decisions meant spurning statesmanship for the sake of narrow, base, careerist concerns. But for earnest opponents of slavery and the slaveowners in 1860-61, striving to preserve the Republican Party was a necessary part of genuine statesmanship. That hard-won party embodied the only plausible hope of wresting the nation and its government from the hands of slaveowners and their friends, who had controlled it for nearly all of its life. If that party now collapsed or disintegrated, those hopes would be dashed for the indefinite future. (And if the Republican party collapsed, furthermore, facilitating the slaveowners' recapture of the federal executive branch, then attempts to annex and turn Cuba and/or parts of central America into slave states would have become far less far-fetched than William J. Cooper assumes.)

Lincoln's refusal to back down in 1860-61 did indeed constitute another step along the road to war -- a war that not only destroyed the Confederacy and reunified the country but also broke the national power of the master class and led by the end of 1865 to the elimination of slavery throughout the United States.

Those achievements came at a very high price in blood and treasure, it is true. But was the price too high? Or could these things have been accomplished without war? If the really fine historian who wrote *We Have the War upon Us* thinks so, he has not made that case in this book.

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**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> The South and the Politics of Slavery, 1828-1856 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> Jefferson Davis, *American* (New York: Knopf, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Cooper acknowledges that at one point Lincoln agreed to a plan that could have legalized slavery in parts of the Southwest by immediately admitting territorial land there into the Union as a slave state. But Cooper dismisses this apparent concession as meaningless on the grounds that it was “only ... a circumlocution of the orthodox Republican doctrine” – that is, it did not concede the right of slavery to exist in territories. (144-45)

<sup>4</sup> Allen Nevins, *The Ordeal of the Union* (New York: Scribner’s, 1947), vol. 1, p. 267.

<sup>5</sup> Lincoln to Joshua F. Speed, Aug. 24, 1855, in *Lincoln’s Collected Works*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953) vol. 2, p. 320.

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