The Road to Disunion, Volume II: Secessionists Triumphant, 1854-1861

William W. Freehling

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Interview with William W. Freehling

Interviewed by Christopher Childers

_Civil War Book Review (CWBR)_: The two volumes of _The Road to Disunion_ constitute a grand narrative history not often seen in recent historical writing. What compelled you to write the history of secession in this way?

William W. Freehling (WWF): I relish a good story, whether in a novel or in a history. Some historical material is not best explained through storytelling. But an epic event such as secession is perfect for this literary form.

The epic narrative style is also perfect for the second audience that I covet. I cherish my scholarly readers. But I also wish to interest the so-called general readers—the cultivated citizens who have no academic training in history but love accessible renditions of historical lessons. History, to repeat my tritest (but truest) phrasing of the case for scholarly reach, is too important to be reserved for historians. The tale of secession bears civic lessons that are important for non-Civil War historians: the capacity of racism to distort democracy, the danger that cries of traitor can close democratic discourse, the power of minorities to control majorities, the fact that republican government is not always capable of thriving—not even here, arrogant Americans need to learn, not to provide peaceful solutions for our gravest domestic problems in the nineteenth century. Anytime I can clothe vital lessons in sophisticated stories that attract nonacademics as well as academics, I call it a good day's work.

CWBR: Approximately sixteen years have passed since the first volume of _The Road to Disunion_ appeared. Did your views on how the war came
change in any way between your completion of Volume 1 and 2?

**WWF**: When I wrote volume 1, I thought that the pre-1854 events set off irresistible trends that would inevitably lead to disunion and war after Lincoln's election. While I still think that those trends existed and powerfully continued, I have come to think that disunion need not necessarily have come precisely when it did or exactly in the way that it did. While the nation's ability to deal with the slavery issue peacefully had deteriorated significantly by 1860, there were still ways out of a civil war at that time. I now put more stress on personalities, contingencies, and coincidences in explaining why the descent into war at that time overcame the other possibilities. As to whether some kind of civil war was very probable at some time, thanks to the worsening trends that started way back in 1776—well, I still think that. So volume 1 was not in vain!

**CWBR**: You emphasize personal forces, or the actions of individual people in shaping antebellum southern history. How did the actions of southern political leaders influence the outcome of the sectional crisis?

**WWF**: I think the shrewdness or shortcomings of many leaders had much to do with happenings during the last year before the war, including William L. Yancey's clever tactics at the Charleston National Democratic Party Convention, Robert Gourdin's and John Townsend's superb manipulations in Charleston at secessionists' moment of breakthrough, Alexander Stephens's and James Henry Hammond's dismal performances at crunch time for the so-called Unionists, and Winfield Scott's blunders in regards to Lincoln's orders to reinforce Fort Pickens (the details of that last story will be in my forthcoming Lincoln book). Each of these episodes comes replete with unforgettable characters, stirring scenes, illustrious places, and fabulous photographs—perfect for a narrative history.

**CWBR**: You describe The Road to Disunion II as mainstream political history, a mode of historical inquiry that once dominated the field, but that social and cultural history has recently challenged. In your search for fresh angles in the historical record, what was the most glaring omission you found among older works that you have uncovered in this book?

**WWF**: Many things that are new in my book can be found in bits and pieces of older narratives, especially David Potter's wonderful *The Impending Crisis*. But these clues are submerged; I need to display them afresh and in new contexts. As for the monographs that specialists have written since folks wrote
the big Civil War syntheses—they often tell important pieces of the story, but not usually as a story, and not usually in the context of other and bigger stories. In storytelling as in politics, context is king. And then too there are some important stories that I found in no other scholar's account, not even in bits and pieces, including a full-blown conspiracy to seize all Lower South forts before any state except South Carolina had seceded, in response to James Buchanan's Star of the West—a series of military events that bore on decisions to secede.

**CWBR:** In your coda to the final chapter of *The Road to Disunion II*, you ask how did slavery cause the Civil War and cite contingency, or the effects of personality, accidents, and timing—use your words—as a major factor in how the war came and why it came in 1861. How did contingencies set the course of the eight years leading up to the Civil War?

**WWF:** The big coincidence was the Charleston and Savannah Railroad's celebration on just the right day and with just the right people in attendance—the only way to explain South Carolina's critical transformation from November 9 to 10, 1860. There isn't space here to retell that incredible tale, so let me take a simpler example. In my judgment, John Brown's impact came not just from his raid but also from his speech to his judges and from the resulting northern hurrahs for his words, so infuriating to the Southrons. Brown could have easily been killed rather than wounded when Lee's men assaulted him in the Harpers Ferry engine house. The coincidence that he was but wounded had nothing to do with the slavery issue's remorseless trends—and everything to do with his ability to give the speech that largely forged his influence on events.

**CWBR:** The last historian to write a synthetic history of the South's road to disunion was revisionist historian Avery O. Craven, the author of *The Coming of the Civil War and The Growth of Southern Nationalism, 1848-1861*. Craven and other revisionists labeled the men of the antebellum years as a blundering generation. Given your emphasis on personalities and individuals in setting the course of disunion, did southern leaders blunder their way into civil war?

**WWF:** Certainly the secessionists blundered by triumphing, given that they thought their crusade offered the best way to save slavery! There is an overriding suicidal irony to this tale. So too, certainly blunders helped the secessionists along, include Scott's in re Fort Pickens, Buchanan's in regards to the Dred Scott Case and the *Star of the West*, and Stephens's-Hammond's abject failure at
mounting a viable unionist' campaign. But I see no worse blunders in this period than in any other, and as I have said, the slavery issue likely would have caused some sort of civil war, sometime, even if the most enlightened leaders had always been in command. The big task is to explain why the slavery issue was so difficult to resolve peacefully, even without any blunders.

**CWBR:** You devote a sizable portion of The Road to Disunion II to the Bleeding Kansas debacle. Why did Kansas become the contested ground for the expansion of slavery and how did the struggle for a free or slave Kansas Territory resonate throughout the years leading up to the Civil War?

**WWF:** The Kansas turmoil stretched over the perfect time to be critical chronologically. The bloody affair convulsed the time between the illusory armistice called the Compromise of 1850 and the inflamed presidential campaign that anointed Lincoln.

The Kansas turmoil also stretched over the perfect place to be important geographically. The showdown occurred in the Border South region, where slavery had shallowest roots, and more specifically across the Missouri River from the western Missouri slaveholders, whose stake in the institution faced greatest siege. To acquiesce in a free soil Kansas, neighboring Missouri rednecks thought, was to accept external incendiary assaults hard by their firesides. The result, they conceived, could only be the shrinkage of slavery from Missouri and then from the entire Border South.

To repel this supposed mortal threat, western Missourians, led by U. S. Senator Atchison, insisted that Kansas be open to slaveholding settlers, then insisted that the territory bar free soil agitation, then insisted that the barely enslaved territory be admitted to the Union as a slave state. The embittered minority succeeded in everything except the admission of enslaved Kansas—there the slaveholders barely lost.

This four years of political combat, streaked with bloodshed, violence, and colorful combatants, invite epic storytelling. More important, like the best tales, the long confrontation illuminates the most cutting abstractions. The Kansas turmoil illustrates one of my central themes in *Road*, one that illuminates many trails in democracy's history besides the path to secession—the way a minority controls majoritarian processes. Just as only the western Missouri minority of the southern minority at first considered a showdown in Kansas crucial, so only the
Lower South (and especially South Carolina) fragment of the southern minority at first considered President-elect Abraham Lincoln an immediate menace to slavery. In both cases, historians' intellectual adventure is to explain why the first hotspot raged while cooler regions but fretted, then to explain why the blaze spread in the South and ultimately to the nation.

The slaveholders' temporary Kansas triumph also illuminates a recurring human happening—the way victories can have unintended consequences that become suicidal to the victors. The fleeting triumph of the secessionists is of course the best Civil War example of how winners can establish conditions for their fastest possible destruction. So too, by insisting on the Kansas-Nebraska Act and then by establishing the most despotic slave codes anywhere in the South in territorial Kansas, the western Missourians set the stage for the almost-victory of the Republicans in the presidential contest of 1856. Subsequently, the almost-victory of the South in the 1858 Lecompton controversy, with the admission of (barely) enslaved Kansas at stake, set the stage for the Republicans' mammoth gains in the 1858 congressional elections and their march to the White House in 1860.

The South's empty fleeting victory in Kansas illuminates the frustration of the pre-secession southern extremists and one of their central fears, that slavery in the Border South, like slavery in the Border North in the Founding Fathers' days, possessed too little staying power. The ultimate question, in Kansas as in all the other antebellum hotspots, was whether dictatorship over blacks could be reconciled with majoritarianism for whites. When both sections came away from Kansas wondering all the more, a civil war was closer.

_CWBR_: In this book, you articulate a theme that reveals internal conflicts between the Border South and the Lower South, a concept you first explored in _The South Vs. The South: How Anti-Confederate Southerners Shaped the Course of the Civil War_. How did Border Southerners shape the course of secession?

_WWF_: As in Kansas and its neighbor Missouri, almost all the pre-War controversies began with borderland proslavery warriors fighting a rearguard action against the turtle-slow waning of slavery in their northern South region. In the climactic secession crisis, the first disunionists stormed that President-elect Lincoln would use his control over federal patronage to start a Southern Republican Party in this least southern South (and would encourage fugitive
slaves to pass over an increasingly porous border and further weaken the South's northern hinterlands; here as throughout the pre-War and wartime epics, the heroics of fugitive slaves showed the impact of blacks on whites' political (and military) processes).

Lincoln, as so often, put it best: I hope to have God on my side, but I must have Kentucky. The more southern South's convulsive, ultimately counterproductive efforts to keep Kentucky (and Missouri, Maryland, Delaware, western Virginia, and eastern Tennessee) on its side had much to do with how the war came and in the characteristic ironies of this epic, much to do with how the war turned out.

_CWBR_: Your analysis of the secession winter of 1860-1861 comprises a third of the book. How did personalities and contingencies shape the course of the secession process in the South? Why did the southern states begin seceding after Lincoln's election?

_WWF_: I believe that the railroad coincidence, mentioned above, had much to do with South Carolina's gaining the nerve to go it at first alone. Then I think that James Buchanan's (arguably blundering) decision to send the Star of the West had some impact in making sure that South Carolina would not stand alone. Furthermore, the personalities of the South Carolinians who took over the revolution—most of them little known or unknown—had much to do with soothing the initial secessionists, just as the personalities of Alexander Stephens and James Hammond had much to do with (and illustrated) the lame resistance of the Lower South's opponents of instant disunion. (A great book needs to be written on that Unionist lameness.)

As to why initial secessionists did it, my largest generalization would be that the South's most enslaved, most reactionary region, the South Carolina lowcountry, harbored a peculiar contempt for mobocratic nineteenth century two-party politics, with its alleged demagogues supposedly fooling the gullible public and thus gaining the loaves and fishes of office. South Carolina oligarchs climactically focused on President-elect Lincoln's potential use of patronage to establish a Southern Republican Party in the borderlands. But this oligarchic logic about why Lincoln was an immediate menace was only part of the story. Also involved was the honor of a state that had often pledged to nullify or to secede, and then had shamefully (so it thought) cowered. Here the analytical categories of Kenneth Greenburg, Joanne Freeman, and Bertram Wyatt-Brown,
when given a fresh context, gain heightened value.

**CWBR:** You explain how a series of errors led to the showdown at Fort Sumter in South Carolina rather than Fort Pickens in Florida. How would circumstances have been different with a confrontation at Fort Pickens?

**WWF:** Contingency analysis—based on the conviction that little things outside the main trends can provide a context that deflects the big things—becomes tricky at exactly such points as the Fort Pickens story. Can we say that without the little things, the big bang would necessarily not have happened? No way! We can only say that without the little things, the big things would have coursed in a slightly different way and that one possibility is that the different course would have yielded a wildly different result.

Thus I think that if human errors (especially Winfield Scott's) had not defeated Lincoln's brilliant plan to refortify Fort Pickens and then possibly to withdraw from Fort Sumter, the Civil War might have started in a different way (and in a way less congenial to the Confederacy's need to gain the Upper South). So too, I think that the war might not have started so swiftly, and even might not have started in 1861, and even might never have started over this particular secession situation.

The Confederates, for example, probably could never have conquered a refortified Fort Pickens. (After all, they never did during the Civil War.) Thus Lincoln might not have had to issue his proclamation of April 15, calling up 75,000 men to put down the revolution that had triumphed at Fort Sumter. Without bloodshed at Fort Sumter and Lincoln's proclamation, different historical scenarios might have evolved.

But one can never be sure about a history that never happened. Contingency only helps explain why history developed the way it did, not whether history would have necessarily leapt in another direction. I explain all this is my book in a long coda on the railroad coincidence, and I'm now writing a longer essay on the tricky phenomenon.

**CWBR:** As a historian with an interest in writing narrative history, how do you craft your books to engage your audience? What presented the greatest challenge in writing The Road to Disunion II in an engaging style?
WWF: I use visual material, especially maps and photographs, to illustrate my words. For example, my cartographer, David Fuller, working with my goals in mind, has drawn a brilliant original map of the comparative situations at Forts Pickens and Fort Sumter, one that can help readers see at a glance what was involved in Lincoln's first fort strategy. So too, the magnificent, very rare pictures of John Townsend and Alexander Stephens can help readers instantly see why secessionists' and anti-secessionists' personalities vitally mattered.

But ultimately, words must tell my tale. I endeavor to follow the journalistic rules of accessible popular writing: avoid sleepy passive verbs and excess verbal baggage, seek shorter paragraphs, and slimmer sentences, and pithier words, eliminate academic jargon and find words that nonexperts can instantly recognize.

In addition, I have sought to reserve the text only for words that propel my tale. The important words that only fellow academics need, about for example how my story varies from or feeds on other scholars' tales, are reserved for the notes. So too, I have tried to minimize abstract historical theory when telling stories; abstruse explanations, when important for all readers and not just fellow scholars, are placed in codas, after the stories have been related. The after words seek a reader's rethinking at a deeper level about the textual rendezvous just experienced.

I have also tried to clothe abstractions with verbal portraits of people, places, and confrontations. For example, I start the book with a prologue on William L. Yancey. I thereby seek to give a crucial abstract theme—the South's hatred of Yankee holier-than-thous—the human form of an Alabama stepson's loathing for his Yankee stepfather. Some of my favorite pages in the book are of this sort. For example, the Kentucky anti-slavery preacher John G. Fee's anguish over his Mammy illuminates the abstract problems that ate at the evangelical Christian argument for slavery.

The shortcomings of these tactics include the sometimes-absence of enough material in the sources to paint portraits of the people involved in the abstraction and the sometimes abstruse weight of the abstractions that obsessed folk at the time. Thus a few of my pages are not easy reading. But I cannot eliminate ideas crucial to the antebellum southerners because they are hard for modern readers to comprehend. I have to trust my readers to keep going at the occasional tough spots where portraiture cannot illustrate the abstruse. Fortunately, the most
abstract pages occur in the middle of the book, and the whole last third is full of vivid people and striking scenes.

My objectives and methods here are very similar to those of academic scholars when seeking a popular audience in their lecture rooms. To interest our students, we must render the abstractions that are vital to our fellow scholars in an engaging style congenial to nonscholars. The best lecturers in no way cheapen their abstractions by finding colorful ways to illustrate sophisticated ideas. Why should it be any different with our books, especially with a lush literary form, the epic narrative, begging to be used?

**CWBR: Thank you.**