

Texas Terror: the Slave Insurrection Panic of 1860 and the Secession of the Lower South

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Review

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Reynolds, Donald E. *Texas Terror: The Slave Insurrection Panic of 1860 and the Secession of the Lower South*. Louisiana State University Press, \$45.00 hardcover ISBN 9780807132838

Texas and the Coming of the Civil War

In *Texas Terror* Donald E. Reynolds, Professor Emeritus of history, Texas A&M, Commerce, brings historians' collective attention back to an important series of events in the Lone Star State during the months leading up to the election of 1860. He argues that a series of destructive fires in several cities—the Texas Troubles as southern newspapers named them—sparked a massive, irrational anti-abolitionist panic that played an important role not only in Texas's decision to withdraw from the Union, but in the secession of most of the lower South.

Reynolds begins by looking at slave revolts in the South in general and in Texas in particular. While there are few examples of real, violent slave uprisings in the American context, the southern mind magnified the possible threat to almost epic proportions. The specter of the slave rebellion in Haiti particularly terrified them. While southerners claimed to believe that their slaves were content, they also worried about the ever-present abolitionist movement somehow infecting their slaves' thoughts with ideas about freedom and equality. Concrete examples of northern abolitionists actively trying to promote a slave uprising were even rarer than slave-led efforts, but John Brown's 1859 raid struck a very raw nerve, leaving paranoid Texas slaveholders primed for an extreme reaction. As if matters could get no worse, in 1860 Texas faced one of its driest, hottest summers on record, with temperatures regularly climbing past 100 degrees in the shade.

On July 8, 1860, the hottest day of the year, a series of startling and destructive fires broke out in Dallas, Denton, and a number of other towns. Reynolds blames these conflagrations on the spontaneous combustion of a new

type of volatile prairie match that stores had recently begun stocking. Initially the Texans tended to agree. Unfortunately, a combination of questions over the timing of the fires, irresponsible reporting, and plain paranoia escalated the situation to a full-fledged panic. Various localities created vigilante committees made up of theoretically responsible citizens to investigate the situation. These men soon discovered the details of a supposedly widespread abolitionist plot to use slaves to poison hundreds of white settlers and wipeout entire towns with fire. Most of these details came from forcibly elicited slave confessions and were soon magnified by more of the sensational reporting that helped create the mess in the first place.

The panic snowballed from there. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of slaves were interrogated and an unknown number lynched. Reynolds suggests that possibly hundreds died as a result of vigilante action. The Texans did not limit their wrath to black men and women. Any unknown white man—particularly those unlucky enough to be of northern descent—was automatically suspected of being one of the dozens of mysterious abolitionist collaborators. One Texas-born merchant had to defend himself with his pistol and call on Masonic ties to avoid the noose. Slave suspects were either murdered outright or whipped; whites could expect either hanging or banishment.

The panic ripped through Texas politics and thrust a formerly conservative state into the open arms of secession. In the previous election cycle, Sam Houston had won the governorship back against a radical pro southern candidate. After the panic he faced the impossible task of preventing Texas secession. Worse for the Union, exaggerated accounts of events found their way into papers all over the South. Southern Fire-eaters quickly exploited the situation, playing on southerners' fears of slave insurrection, further radicalizing the region prior to the election of 1860.

As Reynolds points out in his epilogue, the Texas Troubles were quickly forgotten as new crises and history-making events swept by in quick succession. Even the participants moved on to new issues and rarely spoke about the panic later (often out of shame). Historians have also often ignored or misinterpreted what it meant and how important it was to Texas and the lower South in general. *Texas Terror* reminds its readers of the often profound effects the panic exerted. That is Reynolds's greatest contribution in this book. Moreover, it is an interesting read and would make a fine addition to any Texas history course.

Texas Terror, like all other human efforts, does suffer from a few shortcomings. Reynolds's decision not to include an introduction leaves the reader with some unanswered questions that would have been better cleared up early. For instance, he does not completely discuss the issue's historiography or the evidence for and against a spontaneous origin to the fires until the epilogue. That left this reader questioning some of his in-text statements until the very end of the book. Also, he fails to show that his prairie match explanation (good though it is) is substantially different from the logic used to justify the arson theory. Essentially, he argues that historians know that volatile matches were present in many places that caught fire on that hot day; therefore the matches must have been responsible (*cum hoc, propter hoc*). The result keeps a circumstantial feel.

That does not seriously affect this useful and interesting book. Reynolds has done an excellent job of focusing attention back onto an important series of events that shed light onto the slaveholder mindset on the eve of Civil War. The thought process he reveals is indeed a terror.

Brian C. Melton is associate professor of history at Liberty University and the author of Sherman's Forgotten General: Henry W. Slocum.