

Albert Taylor Bledsoe: Defender of the Old South and Architect of the Lost Cause

Barton C. Shaw

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Shaw, Barton C. (2011) "Albert Taylor Bledsoe: Defender of the Old South and Architect of the Lost Cause," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.13.4.12

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol13/iss4/34>

Review

Shaw, Barton C.

Fall 2011

Barnhart, Terry A. *Albert Taylor Bledsoe: Defender of the Old South and Architect of the Lost Cause*. Louisiana State University Press, \$42.50 ISBN 978-0-8071-3724-6

Shining the Spotlight on a Fascinating Figure

In the third century BCE, Archimedes posed a geometrical problem (beyond the ken of this reviewer) that remained unsolved for nearly two thousand years. Sir Isaac Newton struggled with the puzzle with only partial success. The solution finally came in 1826, when a sixteen-year-old cadet at West Point found the answer. The cadet's name was Albert Taylor Bledsoe.

Today Bledsoe is largely forgotten. When he is remembered, it is as an apologist for slavery and the Lost Cause. But there was more to Bledsoe than this. Before and after the Civil War he was one of the South's leading intellectuals, distinguishing himself as a logician, theologian, and political theorist. Many of his private papers have been lost. Nevertheless, Terry A. Barnhart's new book casts much light on Bledsoe's life and ideas.

Albert Taylor Bledsoe was born in Kentucky in 1809. As a boy, he received only a modest education. Even so, he gained an appointment to West Point, probably the best institution in the United States for the study of mathematics. There his classmates included Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis. After graduation, Bledsoe served in the Army for two years, resigning his commission to study law and to become an instructor of mathematics at Kenyon College and Miami University. Later he served as a Protestant Episcopal clergyman. In these positions, he was able to devote himself to the two great passions of his intellectual life: logic (inspired by his work in mathematics) and his resolute belief in a just and rational God. Such ideas as predestination and infant damnation struck him as illogical and an affront to the teachings of Christ. At length he wrote *An Examination of President Edwards' Inquiry into the Freedom*

of the Will (1845), a searching critique of the theology of Jonathan Edwards.

In 1839 Bledsoe moved to Springfield, Illinois, to practice law. One of his colleagues at the bar was Abraham Lincoln. Like Lincoln, Bledsoe was a loyal member of the Whig party and an admirer of Henry Clay. In 1848 Bledsoe returned to teaching, by turns taking professorships at the University of Mississippi and the University of Virginia. During this period he wrote extensively on political theory and took a strong stand in support of state's rights. In addition, he penned *Essay on Liberty and Slavery* (1856), a defense of slavery that some modern scholars regard as equal to the work of John C. Calhoun. But if Bledsoe's ideas about the peculiar institution were skillfully argued, they were largely conventional. Bledsoe was silent, for example, about the more brutal aspects of slavery, while asserting that slavery uplifted the enslaved. In only one important regard did he stray from orthodoxy: he maintained that all slaves should receive enough education to read the Bible.

As relations between the North and South soured in the late 1850s, Bledsoe remained a moderate, hoping for a compromise that might head off civil war. His views may have been linked to his many years of residency in the North. Indeed, unlike many southerners, he avoided attacks on northern institutions as being inferior to those of the South.

When war finally came in 1861, Bledsoe found himself in an unusual position. Thanks to his years at West Point, he was commissioned a colonel and given command of a Virginia regiment. And thanks to his friendship with Jefferson Davis, he was quickly transferred to Richmond, first to head the Bureau of War, and then to serve as Assistant Secretary of War. In both positions, Bledsoe proved to be a dismal administrator, one who was quarrelsome, tactless, and vain. In September 1862, he resigned (to the relief of many) and departed for London. Hoping that he might gain British support for the Confederate cause, he wrote on the legality of secession and the morality of slavery. It was his most significant, if futile, service to the embattled South.

Bledsoe devoted the last decade of his life to editing the *Southern Review*, a journal he helped found in Baltimore in 1867. In its pages he fought pitched battles, frequently on abstruse details of theology or political theory, with his intellectual rivals. But Bledsoe also used his journal to publish the literature of an unrepentant South. Fiction that glorified the antebellum years, articles that refought political clashes between the North and the South, appeared again and

again. The *Southern Review* did much to bring to prominence the idea of the Lost Cause. The *Review*, which was always strapped for money, came to an end a few years after Bledsoe's death in 1877.

Terry A. Barnhart offers us a well-conceived and well-researched examination of Albert Taylor Bledsoe's ideas. Barnhart's easy command of history, philosophy, theology, and political theory gives his work special authority. Without a heavy hand, he also demonstrates how his findings agree and disagree with the work of other scholars.

Barnhart, however, provides more than a masterful study of Bledsoe's thinking. He also explores Bledsoe's sometimes contradictory and not always agreeable nature. When he chose, Bledsoe could indeed be charming. Too often, however, he was stiff-necked and argumentative, especially when confronted by people who dared disagree with him. In his day, Albert Taylor Bledsoe was one of the South's leading intellectuals. Yet he was also something else. As Barnhart observes: "He was first and last a controversialist, who, in a very real sense, lived for the fight" (p. 2).

Barton C. Shaw is Professor of History at Cedar Crest College, Allentown, PA. He is the author of The Wool-Hat Boys: Georgia's Populist Party (1984), which won the Frederick Jackson Turner Award of the Organization of American Historians. More recently, he and Paul A. Cimbala co-edited Making a New South: Race, Leadership, and Community after the Civil War (2007).