

CIVIL WAR SESQUICENTENNIAL: Secession

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Feature Essay

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Checking the Pulse of Secession Historiography

The winter and spring of 2010-2011 have seen the largest outpouring in decades of reflections on the Civil War, particularly its origins and opening -- and fittingly so, for sesquicentennials don't roll around every day. While national media giants like the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *Time* magazine work to convey to the reading public a basic understanding of the war's causes and a sense of its most pressing current questions, it seems more appropriate to the readership of *Civil War Book Review* to take a brief look at some of the most important studies of what Henry Adams famously labeled "The Great Secession Winter" of 1860-1861.

Naturally, any discussion of this sort is idiosyncratic, both in its areas of focus and its selection of featured works. With regard to the latter, the criteria for my choices were four. First, I have limited my discussion to published, book-length studies -- no essays, unpublished dissertations, etc. Second, the books featured here focus strictly on the Secession Crisis itself; limited by space, I reluctantly eliminated books on broader topics -- biographies and Southern state studies, for example -- that include a discussion of the crisis. Third, all have made important contributions to one or more of the various ongoing debates surrounding the crisis, and fourth, all are both well-researched and well-written. This is far from an exhaustive list of the works that meet these requirements, of course, so I suppose an unofficial fifth standard is the most idiosyncratic: all of the books here have influenced my own thinking in important ways, given me great enjoyment, or (quite often) both.

We'll begin with the South, as most explanations of the war's origins do. Surprisingly, although studies of Southern secession are legion, few focus specifically on the Secession Crisis itself. Even more remarkably, the only book to look broadly at the South during these crucial months is Dwight Lowell

Dumond's *The Secession Movement, 1860-1861* (1931), which remains an excellent statement of the pro-secession constitutional argument with an unexpectedly frank acknowledgement of the centrality of the slave controversy. An early "revisionist," Dumond spurned the dominant Progressive-school argument that impersonal economic forces had generated an irrepressible conflict. To his mind, war could have been avoided, but once stubborn, short-sighted Northerners rejected compromise, cotton-state leaders had no choice but to secede. Demonstrating a tendency common to those who study southern secession, Dumond focuses on the Gulf States; his discussion of the Upper South is largely confined to a closing chapter in which conservatives in that region interpreted Lincoln's inauguration "as a virtual declaration of war" and followed their sister slave states out of the Union (260). (That Lower South bias also shaped Dumond's selections in his invaluable, oft-consulted primary-source collection, *Southern Editorials on Secession*, also published in 1931.)

Scholars of secession continued to focus on the Deep South, but by 1974, when Steven Channing published *Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina*, American attitudes toward race and slavery had shifted profoundly, and with them historians' views of the war's causes. Where Dumond offered a rational defense of southern constitutional principles, Channing painted a vivid portrait of racial hysteria: coming as it did upon the heels of John Brown's raid and the pervasive rumors of slave plots and uprisings that followed, the Republican victory in 1860 sparked a panicked response among South Carolina whites that quickly drove the state out of the Union.

William Freehling's recent opus, *Secessionists Triumphant 1854-1861* (2007)-volume 2 of his two-part epic *The Road to Disunion*-does not dispute Channing's emphasis on racial fears, but does complicate his story immensely, adding (among many other things) considerable emphasis to contingency and individual agency. The propaganda and political machinations of southern radicals loom large here as fire-eaters such as Robert Barnwell Rhett and William Lowndes Yancey consciously played upon the racial and economic fears of southern whites in order to precipitate the Palmetto State's unilateral secession, an act that forced the hands of other, less radical Deep South states. (A side note: while Freehling's study does not meet criterion number one, it fulfills numbers two through five so resoundingly that I couldn't justify not including it.)

Charles B. Dew's brilliant *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War* (2001) bridges the gap between Lower and Upper South, analyzing the arguments made by Deep South emissaries whose goal was to lure a reluctant Upper South into the new confederacy. If by the turn of the twenty-first century any question remained about secession's stemming from southern anxieties surrounding slavery and the racial order it established, Dew's study eradicated it. Deep South commissioners presented to their Upper South brethren a vision of "the dawning of an abominable new world in the South," a world in which the destruction of slavery would usher in racial equality, race war, and racial amalgamation (76).

Those commissioners were but one element of the tug-of-war waged by secessionists and unionists outside of, among, and within those eight crucial swing states -- especially Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee -- from Lincoln's early November election through the opening shots of war in mid-April, and beyond. Nobody has explored the delicate, complicated maneuverings in and over these states more fully or sensitively than Daniel W. Crofts in his modern classic, *Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis* (1989). Crofts masterfully recounts the "triangular struggle between the North, the deep South, and the upper South" (xix). In addition to once more confirming the centrality of slavery to the secession debate, Crofts also establishes the pivotal role that political parties played in the crisis. Perhaps more than any other single factor, he concludes, it was the continued existence of viable two-party competition (which had long since died out farther south) that enabled unionists to slow secession's apparently unstoppable momentum in January and February 1861, containing the movement to the cotton states -- at least until hostilities at Fort Sumter and, most importantly, Lincoln's April 15 proclamation sent four more slave states into the new Confederacy.

Crofts not only provides what remains the standard account of events in the critical Upper South, but he also offers valuable new insight into the northern rejoinder, particularly in secession-winter congressional negotiations and the tense deliberations of the fledgling Lincoln administration. Indeed, his work was originally inspired by David M. Potter's landmark study, *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis* (1942; repr. with a new preface, 1962; repr. again with a new introduction by Daniel W. Crofts, 1995). In response to southern-leaning historians such as Charles Ramsdell who had portrayed Republicans as overtly hostile to the South, inflexibly opposed to a Union-saving compromise and needlessly provoking war at Fort Sumter, Potter argued that Republicans were

not so much hostile as overconfident. Oft-repeated threats of disunion, he pointed out, had long since conditioned Republicans to dismiss secession as mere bluster, with the result that they consistently underestimated the danger throughout the crisis. While Republicans such as Lincoln and conciliatory senator William H. Seward differed in the extent to which they would be willing to compromise, Potter believed, they agreed that a latent but deeply rooted southern unionism would lead to voluntary reconstruction, provided that hostilities could be averted.

The most important rebuttal to Potter came not from Southerners like Ramsdell but from Milwaukee native Kenneth M. Stamp, whose outstanding *And the War Came: The North and the Secession Crisis* (1950; repr. with a new preface, 1970) was the first -- and until recently the only -- comprehensive examination of the northern response to the Secession Crisis. Whereas Potter recognized the difficulty of resolving slavery-related conflicts but did not see war as inevitable, Stamp posited an irreconcilable conflict between North and South, with peaceable separation the only realistic alternative to civil war -- thus, he concluded, by opposing peaceful secession Northerners actually opted for war. But unlike most southern-leaning historians who had previously championed this position, Stamp agreed with Potter that conflicting attitudes toward slavery, not abstract constitutional disputes, lay at the center of the sectional controversy. Neither portrayed the North as solidly antislavery -- far from it. Both recognized significant diversity between Northern Democrats and Republicans and among different Republican factions, but where Potter sympathized with Republican moderates ("practical politicians") and described radicals as "ideologues" and "zealots," Stamp strongly favored the antislavery position and cast moral doubt upon conciliatory Democrats and Republicans, especially William Seward (21-22). In his eyes "the compromise movement was superficial and in some respects fraudulent." (xiii).

Unlike Potter, Stamp believed that, as early as January 1861, Lincoln had given up on southern unionism and adopted a hard-line stance against compromise. Regarding Fort Sumter, Stamp rejected both Ramsdell's argument that Lincoln deliberately provoked war and Potter's contention that Lincoln, still hoping to avoid war, adopted the most peaceable policy available. Rather, he concluded, the new president realized by late March that unless he were to acknowledge southern independence, which he would not consider, war was inevitable; at that point, Lincoln's chief goal was to ensure that the commencement of hostilities would take the form of southern, not northern aggression, and he deliberately maneuvered the Confederates into firing the first

shot.

Almost all studies of the Secession Crisis have focused on North or South or some city, state, or region within North or South, and most fall into the trap of paying too little attention to events outside of that area. Daniel Crofts' exploration of the interplay between Upper South unionists and northern leaders represents one of the few efforts to bridge the gulf between histories of Southern secession and of the northern response, which remains the most important gap in the secession-crisis literature. Numerous books examine particular aspects of the war's origins from a national rather than a sectional perspective, generally with an eye to the long-term development of sectional tensions. While this approach is invaluable for placing the crisis into its larger historical contexts, such works have not been balanced by the depth that a discrete study of the crisis itself can provide. Unfortunately, the two best general studies of the crisis -- Bruce Catton's *The Coming Fury* (1961) and Maury Klein's *Days of Defiance: Sumter, Secession, and the Coming of the Civil War* (1997) -- are popular histories. Both are extremely well-written, well-researched, and full of thought-provoking insight; yet they neither reach beyond the high politics of national leaders nor place that politics within the larger social, cultural, economic, or ideological frameworks so painstakingly mapped by antebellum historians.

The most recent comprehensive history of the crisis takes precisely the opposite approach. Reflecting the dominant trend of the profession over the last two decades, the late Shearer Davis Bowman's *At the Precipice: Americans North and South during the Secession Crisis* (2010) approaches the crisis through several of its broad cultural contexts, exploring the impact of antebellum notions of honor and manliness, race and slavery, gender, and religion. Oddly, though, aside from an overly careful analysis of the disparate constitutional views of North and South and several biographically centered discussions of the 1840s and 1850s, Bowman offers little account of the politics of this fundamentally political crisis and, not coincidentally, no real narrative of the secession winter. The result is fascinating and rewarding for specialists, but readers with little previous knowledge of the contours of the crisis will find it tough going.

Nevertheless, it is in the realm of politics that the most exciting work on the crisis is being done. Jonathan Earle, bringing his impressive insight into antebellum politics to the election of 1860, will soon release the first broad account of that pivotal event since 1944. Lawrence T. McDonnell promises to add a vital layer of depth to our understanding of South Carolina's secession

through a grassroots-level probe into popular attitudes and actions in Charleston during the crisis. Daniel Crofts is in the midst of a long-overdue study of Thomas Corwin and the slavery-guaranteeing Thirteenth Amendment of 1861, while Mark Stegmaier has done a staggering amount of research into secession-crisis newspaper correspondents (and will soon publish a wonderful annotated collection of young Henry Adams' crisis-winter reports to the *Boston Advertiser*). In addition, a number of historians are currently working on biographies that should cast much light on the neglected middle, the crisis's pro-compromise advocates: Matthew Mason on Edward Everett, Walter Stahr on William Seward, and I on Stephen Douglas. While a much-needed broad, comprehensive history of the Secession Crisis may not appear any time soon, our knowledge and understanding of the crisis continues to expand.