

A Union Indivisible: Secession and the Politics of Slavery in the Border South

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Interview

A Union Indivisible: Secession and the Politics of Slavery in the Border South

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Interview by: Tom Barber

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Today the *Civil War Book Review* is pleased to speak with Michael Robinson assistant professor of history at the University of Mobile. Today we are here to talk with him about his new book, *A Union Indivisible: Secession and the Politics of Slavery in the Border South*. Professor Robinson, thank you for joining us today.

Michael Robinson (MR): Thanks for having me.

CWBR: So, let's start out by talking about the Border South in general, so what was considered the Border South on the eve of the Civil War and how have historians typically treated this region?

MR: For the purposes of my book I've considered the Border South to be Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri. That term, "Border South" is one that's really more of a historian's construct because on the eve of the Civil War you'd often hear the term "Border States". And many times, when that term was used other states would get lumped in with those four states that I just mentioned. Sometimes Virginia was thrown in there because—what becomes West Virginia—was on the border between slavery and freedom. And sometimes North Carolina and Tennessee were thrown in as well. But I wanted to look at the four states—Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri—because I felt like those four states hadn't been treated by themselves in a book that looks specifically at the secession crisis.

In terms of how historians have treated the Border South, you know there is a great proliferation of works on the border region right now, and you look through the *Civil War Book Review* of books you guys reviewed, and it seems like a number of books come out in the last

five years or so that deal with the border. It's a region with a lot of paradoxes in many ways. It is a region that I argue was firmly attached to slavery even though the number of slaves is not nearly as great as the lower south or the middle south, but it's a region that also felt itself stretched thin in the crisis of the 1850s because of so many connections that it had to the free states as well; so, it's a region that really felt the push and pull of the secession crisis, of the crisis of the Union in the decades before the Civil War. Historians, I think are really focusing in on this region because there's so much complexity there, and there's so being learned about this region with each new book that comes out.

CWBR: And so how did taking this broader regionwide perspective of the Border South help you better understand Unionist efforts? And who were Unionists? Who were becoming these Unionist politicians in the 1850s?

MR: In terms of the regionwide vista, the study was actually going to start out just to be a study of Kentucky and as I dove into Kentucky the big question on my mind was "How come Kentucky didn't secede?" It looks so much like a lot of those middle South states that eventually seceded after the firing on Fort Sumter. And the more and more I pulled back the layers of Kentucky I started to realize that these folks in Kentucky were talking to, of course politicians in Virginia, but they were also talking to folks in the other Border South states in Missouri, in Maryland especially, and in Delaware to a lesser degree. But I felt like the story was a bigger story that needed to be told, and Kentucky wouldn't suffice by itself and I needed to look at the entire region to understand the forces that were really at play on the eve of the Civil War within these four states. And as I started to do that, I started to see some parallels with these four states, especially with Unionists and the things they argued about. And one of the things that really rose to prominence, when I sifted through a lot of the evidence, was just how important they found slavery to be and how they felt like the Union itself better protected slavery than any effort at secession. What I really hoped to do in the book is try to show people that the folks in the Border South, by and large, were just as attached to slavery as say secessionists in Alabama, it's just that they saw the Union as the best vehicle to preserve slavery, rather than secession.

Now in terms of the folks who were becoming Unionists—there's many degrees to why a person would be attached to the Union. Most of the politicians that I look at are what I call "pro-slavery Unionists." They were folks who were really strong believers in what I was just talking about, folks who believed that the Union provided the best vehicle to protecting the institution of slavery. Whether it be the protections built into the U.S. Constitution, or the protections that the federal government provided for the institution of slavery, laws that had been passed like the Fugitive Slave law that protected this institution of slavery as well.

CWBR: Now as you just hinted to, and what I thought was a really great part of the book, was this notion that Unionism was not monolithic at all. So, can you talk about what factors split Unionism, and what sort of events will eventually divide Unionists in the Border South?

MR: Well you do have varying degrees of Unionism, and a lot of historians as you know have pointed that, not just in the Border South, but throughout the South. But I make a distinction between unconditional Unionists, who you could find more of those folks in the Border South than I think anywhere else in the slaveholding South, more so than in the Middle South, more so than in the Lower South. And these folks vowed to stand by the flag at all costs. They didn't want to see secession of course. And they basically go into the secession crisis with the mindset that they were not going to be separated from the flag and that they were going to remain loyal throughout it all.

Now most of the Unionists, I would argue, throughout the Border South are what we call "conditional" Unionists and they're constantly weighing the situation and how things are proceeding and constantly—they're Unionism is kind of a wishy-washy Unionism; it could change. A lot of those Unionists, who are conditional Unionists, they wanted to find a way to patch things up, and prevent the secession crisis from expanding and prevent the secession crisis from turning into an actual war, but they also maintained that the federal government shouldn't try and coerce those lower south states that had already seceded back into the Union. They looked at an attack on their fellow slave holding states as being about the worst thing that could happen and they warned Lincoln, and people in the federal government time and time again that if military force was used on those states had already seceded that [military aggression] could

cause them to seriously re-evaluate their attachment to the Union. So, you see that with the bumps in the road all throughout the Secession Crisis. There's many near misses. You see things like when the *Star of the West* is sent down to Fort Sumter in January of 1861 and there's a near outbreak of war at that point and it causes some of those conditional Unionists re-evaluate their loyal to the Union. You see it when you have the actual outbreak of the war in April 1861 when the cannons do start firing, some people really, really re-evaluate their fealty to the Union at that point. And I think, I guess maybe another thing that props up this conditional Unionism are the hopes for compromise. Right, they're constantly looking to Congress to maybe come up with some type of compromise solution, and a lot of those hopes fade when Congress adjourns in March of 1861 but Unionists continue to work to try and bring other options for compromise before the people of the Border South, hopefully keeping them in the Union column.

CWBR: What were some of the solutions that Border South politicians offered to ease sectional tension after Lincoln's election, especially?

MR: Yeah, I mean the center piece of those compromise efforts were the efforts of John Jordan Crittenden, a senator from Kentucky to try and get a compromise package through Congress. He was quite elderly at this point and in all honestly, he was hoping to be able retire and go home. He was drawn into this crisis once Lincoln was elected. And his compromise package really centered on extending the Missouri Compromise line that divided the territories between free territory and slave territory, he wanted to carry it all the way out to the border of California to appease some folks who were worried about the Republicans and their efforts to keep slavery out of those territories. And beyond that I mean there are other parts of the Crittenden Compromise that really focused in on slavery. Another element of it was passing an amendment that would prevent Congress from abolishing slavery in the states. That's something actually does get through Congress, but it fails to get ratified once it gets through Congress, but there's this belief that Congress itself shouldn't be able to interfere with slavery in the States. Crittenden doesn't say anything about states themselves later abolishing slavery, but he felt like this would appease people who are worried that a Republican controlled Congress, or a Republican dominated Union, might use a constitutional amendment to get rid of slavery down the road.

CWBR: Right, and so talking about Crittenden's efforts, another question that hit me too, was that you make a great argument that Unionism was not a given among southern borderites. What made those appeals more persuasive than say the appeals of Fire-Eaters or Republicans?

MR: That's a really good question. I mean a big part of what I do try to argue in the book is show that men like John Crittenden and fellow Unionists in the Border South, worked hard—I mean they really worked hard—to try keep Unionism afloat, to try and keep the idea of compromise afloat. I think one of the things they could bank on was the tradition of the Border South being mediators in past conflicts. Right, because they are pulled in both directions, there was this long-standing Unionism, that they could rely, they could rely on the legacy of men like Henry Clay, who was of course instrumental in one compromise after another. And a guy like Crittenden, and a lot of the other Unionists that he worked with on this offensive to keep Unionism alive and well, constantly looked to the ghost of Henry Clay. One of the ways I frame the book with the introduction talking about the cemetery where Henry Clay was laid to rest and also the conclusion coming back to Henry Clay and his legacy of finding ways to secure compromises that had prevented disunion in 1820, 1833, and 1850.

CWBR: And so to circle back to Crittenden, and even though we know his efforts at peace didn't prevent war, you do this great job of linking his efforts in D.C. back to Border South states. How did his efforts in D.C. help strengthen Unionist efforts at the state level?

MR: I mean he does everything in his power to keep this idea of compromise alive. So, he is constantly working to get his own compromise proposals through Congress; and, when he figures out that maybe that's not going to work, he started looking to other efforts to try and secure a compromise whether it be the Washington Peace Convention that was assembled in February of 1861, he uses that as a possibility to get a compromise through; he uses a border state committee that was convened, kind of an ad hoc committee, made up of people on both the Border South, and the States that were free states on the border, to come up with some compromise solutions. Nearly all of these compromise packages that they float, kind of have similarities to Crittenden's grand package, they change things here and there, but I mean he's

trying everything in his power just to keep this idea of compromise alive because he knows that that's what a lot of these conditional Unionists throughout the Border South are relying on finding some type of solution to this. And they're also hoping that Republicans would show a good faith effort at meeting them half way and maybe talking about the possibility of compromise, so Crittenden is constantly trying to assemble some type of coalition that could get something like a compromise, at least sounded out by the opposition party, in his mind the Republican Party. And he struggles with this. The Republicans join ranks and they are a party that's founded on this idea of preventing the spread of slavery, so there are certainly all types of elements of these compromise packages that go against their party doctrine and make it tough for them to bend to what Crittenden wants, but he's always looking to the next thing in case these compromises packages fail to help keep Border South Unionists optimistic about the possibility of some type of solution down the road. So, when Congress adjourns, and the Crittenden compromise crashes and burns, Crittenden can go to the people and say "Well, we at least have this 13th amendment that will keep Congress from interfering with slavery," and uses that as something to float Unionism at that point. And then he also works to have another convention, a border state convention, where he can get folks together to possibly float other types of proposals down the road.

CWBR: So, like you said, a lot of these troubles are political in nature and so they took place in backrooms, in the halls of Congress, where did you find the richest evidence of this Unionist struggle?

MR: Sifting through politician's letters a lot of times, they can tell you a lot more about what was happening behind the scenes, more so than if you read official government records. The official government records, the *Congressional Globe* for example, it's going to present a picture of the way Congress operates and the reality of the situation is there is a lot more backroom dealing that is going on. Letters were important; diaries were important, to try and sift through what was happening and see how the wheels are turning in the backrooms and to see the strategies both sides are employing. As you can imagine you know, if somebody is writing a letter to a friend, or colleague, or family member, they're going to be a lot more honest than they would when they are putting on a face for the public, so you get all types of information about

the seamy underside of politics and how things get done. From reading Joan Freedman's new book called *Violence in Congress* right now, and she does a wonderful job of talking about that face politicians want to present to the public versus the reality. What happens when you really see the sausage made and it's kind of ugly.

CWBR: Absolutely, so we go from the Unionists not being able to secure compromise, and the war beginning, so what happens to Unionism once war begins? And what forces keep it intact?

MR: Well, you know one of the things that Crittenden especially does, once the War starts, he realizes that compromise is a lost hope by that point in time, and he tries to reframe the question and try and make sure this war is being fought to preserve the Union, and not eradicate slavery. So, he works hard to get Unionists in the Border South to understand that this is not a war that is going to be taking slavery head on; it's not a war where slavery is going to be placed in the crosshairs. So pretty early on in the summer of 1861, Crittenden, he works with Andy Johnson of Tennessee, and they put through resolutions that say just that: This is a war to preserve the Union; it's not a war about slavery. And while that sounds great, the forces are already in play that are going to up end slavery. I mean these guys had talked throughout the 1850s about how dangerous it would be to preserve slavery once war breaks out, but they do try and go on this campaign to situate the war as a war that's not about slavery and these are forces they can't contain. As the war proceeds, the crosshairs get placed more and more on slavery—and it's almost like they're fighting a battle that was impossible for them to win at that point and time. But they do try, at least in 1861, to convince people that it's not a war about slavery even though everybody kind of knew that, and historians have gone back and shown that it is all about slavery. And that slavery, even before Lincoln releases the Emancipation Proclamation, slavery had been placed in the crosshairs of the Union movement.

CWBR: Professor Robinson I appreciate you taking the time to sit with us and discuss your most recent work, *A Union Indivisible: Secession and the Politics of Slavery in the Border South*.