

# Rebels in the Making: The Secession Crisis and the Birth of the Confederacy

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### Recommended Citation

Crofts, Daniel W. (2022) "Rebels in the Making: The Secession Crisis and the Birth of the Confederacy," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 24 : Iss. 4 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.24.4.04

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol24/iss4/4>

## Review

**Crofts, Daniel W.**

**Fall 2022**

**Barney, William L.** *Rebels in the Making: The Secession Crisis and the Birth of the Confederacy*. Oxford University Press, 2020. HARDCOVER. \$34.95 ISBN 9780190076085 pp. 380

The “most disruptive event in American history” occurred in late 1860 and early 1861, when seven Deep South states seceded from the Union on grounds that Abraham Lincoln’s victory in the recent presidential election posed an intolerable affront (313). Secessionists promised that Southern independence would bring manifold benefits. It would forever shield slaveholders from insidious outside meddling. It would unite Southern whites and quiet their racial anxieties. The Confederate States of America, as the seceders soon labeled their project, would open new lands for slavery, not just in territories already owned by the United States but also new acquisitions in the Caribbean and Central America. Because the slave South provided the bulk of raw cotton for world markets, the European powers would befriend the new nation and assure its future. The cowardly Yankees would not fight: A lady’s thimble would hold all the blood that might be shed. The Confederacy, once up and running, would display exemplary “social and political harmony” and “set a model for other nations to follow” (275).

These “utopian visions” proved hollow (275). The Fire-Eaters set in motion forces that boomeranged. Within months, the Confederacy found itself at war against an aroused enemy. It did manage to draw in parts of the Upper South, most notably the pivotal state of Virginia. Perhaps two-thirds of white Southerners embraced the Confederate nation. But its ambition to open new slave territories was revealed to be a chimera: It had to swallow its vaunted claim that slavery must expand. Its hoped-for European allies never materialized. Its soaring wartime casualties contrasted painfully with its initial overconfidence. Secession eventually spawned a whirlwind of unintended consequences—a “prostrate South at the war’s end engulfed in an unfathomable tragedy of death, poverty, and broken bodies” (317).

William L. Barney sets out to explain how such an ill-conceived venture got off the ground in the first place. He brings to his task an unsurpassed command of relevant secondary

and primary sources. He often clinches a point by citing a pertinent unpublished manuscript. The spearhead for the secession movement, he contends, was a network of “young Breckinridge planters and slaveholding farmers” who coveted new lands for slavery (Vice President John C. Breckinridge headed the ticket for Southern Democrats in 1860) (109). This idea anchored Barney’s first book, *The Secessionist Impulse: Alabama and Mississippi in 1860*, and he expands on it here. The advocates of independence insisted that the South could fulfill its destiny only by breaking the shackles that bound it to the Union.

Secessionist ideology may have contemporary resonance. Then as in the United States today, many regarded fact-free nonsense as agreed-upon reality. Today’s claim that Donald Trump won the election of 2020 and that his “victory” somehow was defrauded or stolen parallels an earlier Big Lie that took root in the South after John Brown’s abortive raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in October 1859. For the next year, Southern Democrats trumpeted that “Black Republicans” had masterminded Brown’s effort to ignite a slave insurrection. This charge was false. Brown was a messianic lone wolf, neither inspired by nor answerable to any politician. To compete for national power, Republicans had to affirm their constitutional conservatism. They opposed carrying slavery to new territories, but they would not interfere with it in the states where it already existed. They counted instead upon white Southerners to recognize that free labor was more productive than slave labor—a transformed outlook that might await the distant future.

When the Republican national convention met in Chicago in May 1860, it selected Abraham Lincoln as its presidential candidate. Lincoln reflected his party’s consensus on slavery-related issues: He would bar slavery from the territories and hope for its “ultimate extinction.” But the qualifier here ought not be overlooked: “ultimate.” Lincoln had no plan to hasten emancipation, which might happen, he predicted, a century hence. He also spurned the Big Lie. “John Brown was no Republican,” Lincoln exclaimed, “and you have failed to implicate a single Republican in his Harper’s Ferry enterprise.”

Yet throughout the South, and especially the Lower South, the purported menace of “Black Republicanism” became conventional wisdom as the presidential campaign unfolded. Should Lincoln prove victorious at the polls, Southern Rights zealots warned, Republicans would unleash abolitionists to free vengeful slaves and subject the white South’s mothers and daughters to ghastly peril. Squads of “Minute Men” organized rallies and held torchlit night marches to

whip up public fervor and intimidate the undecided. These vigilante tactics promoted “an atmosphere of fear and hysteria” that precluded “rational debate” (117-18). The South thus blinded itself. Leading Republicans had no plan to attack slavery, let alone to bring about racial equality. Until late in the game, they refused to take seriously the clamor in the South, because it appeared based on fictitious fabrications.

The Upper South’s anti-secessionists—who at first held back and attempted to restore the Union peacefully—grasped matters of first importance. They warned that secession and war could unhinge the slave system and defeat the very object for which secession was risked. To be sure, would-be Unionists who anticipated that Republicans would compromise their stance on the territorial issue also were guilty of wishful thinking. But Lincoln did in the end offer a constitutional amendment to rule out any interference with slavery in the states where it already existed.

Barney thinks the South’s course cannot be understood without recognizing “the centrality of slavery,” a view that all reputable historians now accept. No slavery; no war. Period. He exposes as threadbare older explanations that depict the South contending for “states rights.” Barney positions himself among the scholarly vanguard committed to “a new history of slavery,” which emphasizes tangible black agency in shaping events (3). To substantiate the claim that the enslaved were “political actors,” he points to an alleged epidemic of arson across the South in 1860 (135). But he then pulls back: The clamor was based on “paranoia.” “Not a shred of hard evidence” ever was produced to justify a much-ballyhooed Texas panic over a supposed conspiracy involving itinerant abolitionists and rebellious slaves, even though dozens of victims were killed or brutalized as the inquisition spread (95-96).

Yet secession did unleash many subsequent opportunities for black agency. Once the Union army penetrated the Confederate domain, its enslaved peoples could aid the invaders and start to stand up for themselves in ways that previously would have been unimaginable. During wartime and Reconstruction, black Southerners could glimpse fleetingly the possibilities of a more just social order.

This volume immediately becomes the most tightly focused study of Southern secession. Barney repeatedly drills down to explicate developments in each slave state. But *Rebels in the Making* should be read in tandem with William W. Freehling’s *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists Triumphant, 1854-1861*, which captures the uncertainties and the moments of

contingency, as audacious radicals steamrolled those with qualms or doubts and drove through an implausible revolution. Those seeking to comprehend the broader political crisis triggered by the South's recklessness should turn to Russell McClintock, *Lincoln and the Decision for War: The Northern Response to Secession*.

*Rebels in the Making* appeared just as a national historical reassessment was taking place. By exposing the delusive assumptions that underlay the morally bankrupt Confederacy's initial moments, Barney contributes to the twin causes of racial justice and historical truth.

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*Daniel W. Crofts' book, Lincoln and the Politics of Slavery: The Other Thirteenth Amendment and the Struggle to Save the Union, was awarded the University of Virginia's Bobbie and John Nau Book Prize in American Civil War Era History. He has recently published essays about Sidney George Fisher in The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography and The Journal of the Civil War Era crofts@tcnj.edu.*