

ISSUE 14



Was Slavery the Key Issue in the Sectional Conflict Leading to the Civil War?

YES: Charles B. Dew, from *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War* (University of Virginia Press, 2001)

NO: Marc Egnal, from "Rethinking the Secession of the Lower South: The Clash of Two Groups," *Civil War History* 50 (September 2004): 261-90

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Charles B. Dew uses the speeches and public letters of 41 white southerners who, as commissioners in 1860 and 1861, attempted to secure support for secession by appealing to their audiences' commitment to the preservation of slavery and of white supremacy.

NO: Marc Egnal argues that the decision of Lower South states to secede from the Union was determined by an economically based struggle between residents with strong ties to the North and Upper South who embraced an entrepreneurial outlook, on one hand, and those who were largely isolated from the North and who opposed the implementation of a diversified economy, on the other hand.

In April 1861, less than a month after his inauguration, President Abraham Lincoln attempted to send provisions to Fort Sumter in South Carolina, part of the newly formed Confederate States of America. Southern troops under the command of General P. G. T. Beauregard opened fire on the fort, forcing its surrender on April 14. The American Civil War had begun.

Numerous explanations have been offered for the cause of this "war between the states." Many contemporaries and some historians saw the conflict as the product of a conspiracy housed either in the North or South, depending upon one's regional perspective. For many in the northern states, the chief culprits were the planters and their political allies who were willing to defend southern institutions at all costs. South of the Mason-Dixon line, blame was laid at the feet of the fanatical abolitionists, like John Brown (see Issue 13) and

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of the institution of slavery. In the 85 years between the coming of the Civil War, on the slavery issue in or the 1787 forbade slavery under its control, and the possibility that the A

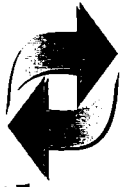
There was some hope that the die would be cast from natural causes. The contradiction between the slaveholding aristocracy and the free-soil advocates, not a positive good, was the driving force behind the abolishing slavery by 1800, and Maryland contributed to

Unfortunately, the free-soil economy—made slavery the driving force behind the Civil War. First, new lands were being added into lands ceded to the United States in 1783 and the Louisiana Purchase. The upper to the lower regions made it possible to produce goods like cloth and clothing as part of the

The slavery issue was a major concern of Congressmen who proposed that the Louisiana Purchase. A line that preserved the exception of Missouri)

The annexation of Texas and California, as a result of the slavery question. A compromise ended the conflict. The Compromise, allowed slavery on the party system of Whigs to confine slavery to the Democrats and in

Charles B. Dew argued that the decision to secede was the states' rights. Marc Egnal argued that the driving force of two opposing social and economic developme



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the free-soil architects of the Republican Party. Some viewed secession and war as the consequence of a constitutional struggle between states-rights advocates and defenders of the federal government, whereas others focused upon the economic rivalries or the cultural differences between North and South. Embedded in each of these interpretations, however, is the powerful influence of the institution of slavery.

In the 85 years between the start of the American Revolution and the coming of the Civil War, Americans made the necessary political compromises on the slavery issue in order not to split the nation apart. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 forbade slavery from spreading into those designated territories under its control, and the new Constitution written in the same year held out the possibility that the Atlantic slave trade would be prohibited after 1808.

There was some hope in the early nineteenth century that slavery might die from natural causes. The Revolutionary generation was well aware of the contradiction between the values of an egalitarian society and the practices of a slaveholding aristocracy. Philosophically, slavery was viewed as a necessary evil, not a positive good. The northern states were well on their way to abolishing slavery by 1800, and the erosion of the tobacco lands in Virginia and Maryland contributed to the lessening importance of a slave labor system.

Unfortunately, two factors—territorial expansion and the market economy—made slavery the key to the South's wealth in the 35 years before the Civil War. First, new slave states were created out of a population expanding into lands ceded to the United States as a result of the Treaty of Paris of 1783 and the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. Second, slaves were sold from the upper to the lower regions of the South because the invention of the cotton gin made it possible to harvest large quantities of cotton, ship it to the textile mills in New England and the British Isles, and turn it into cloth and finished clothing as part of the new, specialized market economy.

The slavery issue came to the forefront in 1819 when some northern congressmen proposed that slavery be banned from the states being carved out of the Louisiana Purchase. A heated debate ensued, but the Missouri Compromise drew a line that preserved the balance between free and slave states and that (with the exception of Missouri) prohibited slavery north of the 36°30' latitude.

The annexation of Texas in 1845 and the acquisition of New Mexico, Utah, and California, as a result of the Mexican-American War (see Issue 12), reopened the slavery question. Attempts at compromises in 1850 and 1854 only accelerated the conflict. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which repealed the Missouri Compromise, allowed citizens in the new territories to decide whether they wanted slavery on the basis of the doctrine of popular sovereignty. As the second party system of Whigs and Democrats fell apart, the Republican party, who held to confine slavery to existing slave states, mounted a successful challenge against the Democrats and in 1860 elected Abraham Lincoln as president.

Charles B. Dew challenges the neo-Confederate arguments that insists that the decision to secede was driven by the federal government's abuse of states' rights. Marc Egnal, argues that the battle over secession was a product of two opposing societies in the South that espoused different approaches to economic development.

YES 

Charles B. Dew

Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War

Slavery, States' Rights, and Secession Commissioners

"The Civil War was fought over what important issue?" So reads one of twenty questions on an exam administered by the Immigration and Naturalization Service to prospective American citizens. According to the INS, you are correct if you offer either one of the following answers: "Slavery or states rights."

It is reassuring to know that the INS has a flexible approach to one of the critical questions in American history, but one might ask how the single "issue" raised in the question can have an either/or answer in this instance—the only time such an option occurs on the test. Beyond that, some might want to know whether "slavery" or "states rights" is the more correct answer. But it is probably unfair to chide the test preparers at the INS for trying to fudge the issue. Their uncertainty reflects the deep division and profound ambivalence in contemporary American culture over the origins of the Civil War. One hundred and forty years after the beginning of that fratricidal conflict, neither the public nor the scholarly community has reached anything approaching a consensus as to what caused the bloodiest four years in this country's history. . . .

There is, however, a remarkably clear window into the secessionist mind that has been largely ignored by students of this era. If we want to know what role slavery may or may not have played in the coming of the Civil War, there is no better place to look than in the speeches and letters of the men who served their states as secession commissioners on the eve of the conflict.

As sectional tension mounted in late 1860 and early 1861, five states of the lower South—Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, Georgia, and Louisiana—appointed commissioners to other slave states and instructed them to spread the secessionist message across the entire region. These commissioners often explained in detail why their states were exiting the Union, and they did everything in their power to persuade laggard slave states to join the secessionist cause. From December 1860 to April 1861, they carried the *gospel of disunion* to the far corners of the South.

From *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War* by Charles B. Dew (University of Virginia Press, 2001), pp. 4, 18–21, 74–81. Copyright © 2001 by the Rectors and Visitors of the University of Virginia. Reprinted by permission of University of Virginia Press.

The overwhelming Deep South states of Mississippi and Alabama and thus took the field at secession conventions

The number of representatives from Mississippi and Alabama and other slave states. Some of those states which had so only nine representatives at the secession movement—to Arkansas, Virginia, and some of these same states—Virginia—and added Missouri to the list of secessionist states. The Texas Convention had

In all, some fifty-five weeks just before the famous names of obscure figures—judges, farmers—who had been famous for oratory. Sometimes general or members of the convention which they were selected by choice of a number

The commissioners to state legislatures, the question of secession and in the streets, and not in session. To a instructive and high

Despite their efforts have been almost completely ignored by the public at large. Propagandaries in both Northern movements and were full in newspapers in pamphlet form and a crisis published during their activities. In ment were assembled extensive coverage of the conflict—a series in the sequence

Dwight Lowery in his 1931 s

The overwhelming majority of the commissioners came from the four Deep South states of Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, and Georgia. In Mississippi and Alabama the commissioners were appointed by the governor and thus took the field first. In South Carolina, Georgia, and Louisiana, the secession conventions chose the commissioners.

The number of men sent on this vital mission varied from state to state. Mississippi and Alabama named commissioners to every one of the fourteen other slave states. South Carolina, however, only appointed commissioners to those states which had announced they were calling secession conventions, so only nine representatives eventually went out from the cradle of the secession movement—to Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, Virginia, and North Carolina. Georgia dispatched commissioners to six of these same states—Alabama, Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Virginia—and added the border slave states of Maryland, Delaware, Kentucky, and Missouri to the list. The Louisiana Convention appointed a single commissioner, to neighboring Texas, and he did not arrive in Austin until well after the Texas Convention had passed its ordinance of secession.

In all, some fifty-two men served as secession commissioners in the critical weeks just before the Civil War. These individuals were not, by and large, the famous names of antebellum Southern politics. They were often relatively obscure figures—judges, lawyers, doctors, newspaper editors, planters, and farmers—who had had modest political careers but who possessed a reputation for oratory. Sometimes they were better known—ex-governors or state attorneys general or members of Congress. Often they had been born in the states to which they were sent; place of birth was clearly an important factor in the choice of a number of commissioners.

The commissioners appeared in a host of different venues. They addressed state legislatures, they spoke before state conventions called to consider the question of secession, they took the platform before crowds in meeting halls and in the streets, and they wrote letters to governors whose legislatures were not in session. To a man, what they had to say was, and remains, exceedingly instructive and highly illuminating.

Despite their enormous value, the commissioners' speeches and letters have been almost completely overlooked by historians and, as a consequence, by the public at large. This scholarly neglect is difficult to understand. Contemporaries in both North and South paid close attention to the commissioners' movements and what they had to say. Many of their speeches were reprinted in full in newspapers and official state publications, and several appeared in pamphlet form and apparently gained wide circulation. Accounts of the secession crisis published during and just after the war also devoted considerable space to their activities. In the late nineteenth century when editors at the War Department were assembling a documentary record of the Civil War, they included extensive coverage of the commissioners in the volume dealing with the onset of the conflict—a clear indication that they considered these men to be key players in the sequence of events leading up to the war.

Dwight Lowell Dumond highlighted the importance of the commissioners in his 1931 study of the secession movement, a book that remains the

Charles B. Dew

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most detailed scholarly treatment of this subject. He described the commissioners' words as extraordinarily important and revealing. "From the speeches and writings of the commissioners, as nowhere else, one may realize the depth of feeling and the lack of sympathy between the two sections of the country," Dumond wrote. "Vividly denunciatory of a party pledged to the destruction of Southern institutions, almost tragic in their prophetic tone, and pleading for a unity of allied interests, they constitute one of the most interesting series of documents in American history," he went on to say.

Yet Professor Dumond's book provides little detailed coverage of what these men actually said, and that pattern has persisted in the torrent of literature on the Civil War that has appeared in subsequent decades. As Jon L. Wakelyn notes in his recent *Southern Pamphlets on Secession*, "No adequate study of the Lower South delegates sent to the Upper South exists," and that same observation could be made about the commissioners who addressed their remarks to fellow Southerners in the states of the Deep South as well. Indeed, Professor Wakelyn does not include the full text of a single commissioner's speech in his otherwise superb collection of pamphlet literature, even though, in my opinion, several of the addresses published in pamphlet form are among the most powerful and revealing expressions of the secessionist persuasion put to paper on the eve of the war.

I have managed to locate the full texts or detailed synopses of forty-one of the commissioners' speeches and public letters. It is, as Professor Dumond suggested, a truly remarkable set of documents. What is most striking about them is their amazing openness and frankness. The commissioners' words convey an unmistakable impression of candor, of white Southerners talking to fellow Southerners with no need to hold back out of deference to outside sensibilities. These men infused their speeches and letters with emotion, with passion, and with a powerful "Let's cut to the chase" analysis that reveals, better than any other sources I know, what was really driving the Deep South states toward disunion.

The explanations the commissioners offered and the arguments the commissioners made, in short, provide us with extraordinary insight into the secession of the lower South in 1860-61. And by helping us to understand the "why" of secession, these apostles of disunion have gone a long way toward answering that all-important question, "The Civil War was fought over what important issue?" . . .

John Smith Preston spent the war years in uniform. After serving in a number of different staff positions in the army, he found a home in the Confederate Bureau of Conscription. He took over that agency in 1863, was promoted to the rank of brigadier general in 1864, and headed the Conscript Bureau until the South went down to defeat. Preston lived for a time in England after the war, but in 1868 he went back to South Carolina. His reputation as an orator still intact, Preston was invited to return to his native state in 1868 to address the Washington and Jefferson Societies of the University of Virginia. On June 30 of that year, Preston spoke in Charlottesville to the young Virginians.

Much of his address was an eloquent tribute to the Founding Fathers and their principal handiwork—the Revolution, the state constitutions, and the

Constitution of that liberty which peace," Preston forms establishments of the spring of the fountain against you," "the principles, America," Preston Constitution—States, and guarantee essential for liberty in ashes, however and now the liberty but the Union and Milesian nation "cruel, bloody, they cannot cry of Virginia," Preston cry aloud, in the of the earth—

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Constitution of the United States. Through their efforts "your fathers achieved that liberty which comes of a free government, founded on justice, order and peace," Preston said. In order to preserve the principles and the constitutional forms established by the Revolutionary generation, "you, the immediate offspring of the founders, went forth to that death grapple which has prevailed against you," he continued. It was the North, "the victors," who rejected "the principles," destroyed "the forms," and defeated "the promised destiny of America," Preston charged. "The Constitution you fought for"—the Confederate Constitution—"embodied every principle of the Constitution of the United States, and guaranteed the free Constitution of Virginia. It did not omit one essential for liberty and the public welfare," he claimed. The Confederacy was in ashes, however, and so was true constitutional liberty. "That liberty was lost, and now the loud hosanna is shouted over land and sea—'Liberty may be dead, but the Union is preserved. Glory, glory, glory to Massachusetts and her Hessian and Milesian mercenaries,'" Preston declaimed. Yet all was not lost. Even though "cruel, bloody, remorseless tyrants may rule at Fort Sumter and at Richmond . . . they cannot crush that immortal hope, which rises from the blood soaked earth of Virginia," Preston believed. "I see the sacred image of regenerate Virginia, and cry aloud, in the hearing of a God of Right, and in the hearing of all the nations of the earth—ALL HAIL OUR MOTHER."

Passionate, unregenerate, unapologetic, unreconstructed—all these and more apply to Preston's remarks on this occasion. But so do words like "conveniently forgetful," "strongly revisionist," and "purposely misleading." Nowhere to be found are references to many of the arguments and descriptions he had used over and over again before the Virginia Convention in February 1861—things like "the subject race . . . rising and murdering their masters" or "the conflict between slavery and non-slavery is a conflict for life and death," or his insistence that "the South cannot exist without African slavery," or his portrait of the "fermenting millions" of the North as "canting, fanatics, festering in the licentiousness of abolition and amalgamation." All this was swept aside as Preston sought to paint the Civil War as a mighty struggle over differing concepts of constitutional liberty. Like Jefferson Davis and Alexander H. Stephens in their postwar writings, Preston was trying to reframe the causes of the conflict in terms that would be much more favorable to the South.

Preston was not the only former secession commissioner to launch such an effort after the war. Jabez L. M. Curry, who had served as Alabama's commissioner to Maryland in December 1860, became a leading figure in the drive to improve primary and secondary education in the postwar South. As agent for both the Peabody and Slater Funds and as supervising director of the Southern Education Board, Curry worked tirelessly to establish public schools and teacher training for both races in the states of the former Confederacy. Curry also worked diligently to justify the Lost Cause of the Confederacy. In his *Civil History of the Government of the Confederate States, with Some Personal Reminiscences*, published in Richmond in 1901, Curry offered an analysis of the coming of the war that closely paralleled the argument used by John S. Preston in 1868. "The object in quitting the Union was not to destroy, but to save the principles of the Constitution," Curry wrote. "The Southern States

from the beginning of the government had striven to keep it within the orbit prescribed by the Constitution and failed." The Curry of 1901 would hardly have recognized the Curry of 1860, who told the governor of Maryland that secession meant "deliverance from Abolition domination," and who predicted that under Republican rule the South's slave-based social system would "be assaulted, humbled, dwarfed, degraded, and finally crushed out."

In 1860 and 1861 Preston, Curry, and the other commissioners had seen a horrific future facing their region within the confines of Abraham Lincoln's Union. When they used words like "submission" and "degradation," when they referred to "final subjugation" and "annihilation," they were not talking about constitutional differences or political arguments. They were talking about the dawning of an abominable new world in the South, a world created by the Republican destruction of the institution of slavery.

The secession commissioners knew what this new and hateful world would look like. Over and over again they called up three stark images that, taken together, constituted the white South's worst nightmare.

The first threat was the looming specter of racial equality. The commissioners insisted almost to a man that Republican ascendancy in Washington placed white supremacy in the South in mortal peril. Mississippi commissioner William L. Harris made this point clearly and unambiguously in his speech to the Georgia legislature in December 1860. "Our fathers made this a government for the white man," Harris told the Georgians, "rejecting the negro, as an ignorant, inferior, barbarian race, incapable of self-government, and not, therefore, entitled to be associated with the white man upon terms of civil, political, or social equality." But the Republicans intended "to overturn and strike down this great feature of our Union . . . and to substitute in its stead their new theory of the universal equality of the black and white races." Alabama's commissioners to North Carolina, Isham W. Garrott and Robert H. Smith, predicted that the white children of their state would "be compelled to flee from the land of their birth, and from the slaves their parents have toiled to acquire as an inheritance for them, or to submit to the degradation of being reduced to an equality with them, and all its attendant horrors." South Carolina's John McQueen warned the Texas Convention that Lincoln and the Republicans were bent upon "the abolition of slavery upon this continent and the elevation of our own slaves to an equality with ourselves and our children." And so it went, as commissioner after commissioner—Leonidas Spratt of South Carolina, David Clopton and Arthur F. Hopkins of Alabama, Henry L. Benning of Georgia—hammered home this same point.

The impending imposition of racial equality informed the speeches of other commissioners as well. Thomas J. Wharton, Mississippi's attorney general and that state's commissioner to Tennessee, said in Nashville on January 8, 1861, that the Republican Party would, "at no distant day, inaugurate the reign of equality of all races and colors, and the universality of the elective franchise." Commissioner Samuel L. Hall of Georgia told the North Carolina legislature on February 13, 1861, that only a people "dead to all sense of virtue and dignity" would embrace the Republican doctrine of "the social and political equality of the black and white races." Another Georgia commissioner,

Luther J. Gleason on March 2, had made the "hostility to of the negro reasons and nexion with

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Luther J. Glenn of Atlanta, made the same point to the Missouri legislature on March 2, 1861. The Republican platform, press, and principal spokesmen had made their "purposes, objects, and motives" crystal clear, Glenn insisted: "hostility to the South, the extinction of slavery, and the ultimate elevation of the negro to civil, political and social equality with the white man." These reasons and these reasons alone had prompted his state "to dissolve her connexion with the General Government," Glenn insisted.

The second element in the commissioners' prophecy was the prospect of a race war. Mississippi commissioner Alexander H. Handy raised this threat in his Baltimore speech in December 1860—Republican agents infiltrating the South "to excite the slave to cut the throat of his master." Alabamians Garrott and Smith told their Raleigh audience that Republican policies would force the South either to abandon slavery "or be doomed to a servile war." William Cooper, Alabama's commissioner to Missouri, delivered a similar message in Jefferson City. "Under the policy of the Republican party, the time would arrive when the scenes of San Domingo and Hayti, with all their attendant horrors, would be enacted in the slaveholding States," he told the Missourians. David Clopton of Alabama wrote the governor of Delaware that Republican ascendancy "endangers instead of insuring domestic tranquility by the possession of channels through which to circulate insurrectionary documents and disseminate insurrectionary sentiments among a hitherto contented servile population." Wharton of Mississippi told the Tennessee legislature that Southerners "will not, cannot surrender our institutions," and that Republican attempts to subvert slavery "will drench the country in blood, and extirpate one or other of the races." In their speeches to the Virginia Convention, Fulton Anderson, Henry L. Benning, and John S. Preston all forecast a Republican-inspired race war that would, as Benning put it, "break out everywhere like hidden fire from the earth."

The third prospect in the commissioners' doomsday vision was, in many ways, the most dire: racial amalgamation. Judge Harris of Mississippi sounded this note in Georgia in December 1860 when he spoke of Republican insistence on "equality in the rights of matrimony." Other commissioners repeated this warning in the weeks that followed. In Virginia, Henry Benning insisted that under Republican-led abolition "our women" would suffer "horrors . . . we cannot contemplate in imagination." There was not an adult present who could not imagine exactly what Benning was talking about. Leroy Pope Walker, Alabama's commissioner to Tennessee and subsequently the first Confederate secretary of war, predicted that in the absence of secession all would be lost—first, "our property," and "then our liberties," and finally the South's greatest treasure, "the sacred purity of our daughters."

No commissioner articulated the racial fears of the secessionists better, or more graphically, than Alabama's Stephen F. Hale. When he wrote of a South facing "amalgamation or extermination," when he referred to "all the horrors of a San Domingo servile insurrection," when he described every white Southerner "degraded to a position of equality with free negroes," when he foresaw the "sons and daughters" of the South "associating with free negroes upon terms of political and social equality," when he spoke of the Lincoln administration consigning the citizens of the South "to assassinations and her wives and daughters

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to pollution and violation to gratify the lust of half-civilized Africans," he was giving voice to the night terrors of the secessionist South. States' rights, historic political abuses, territorial questions, economic differences, constitutional arguments—all these and more paled into insignificance when placed alongside this vision of the South's future under Republican domination.

The choice was absolutely clear. The slave states could secede and establish their independence, or they could submit to "Black Republican" rule with its inevitable consequences: Armageddon or amalgamation. Whites forced to endure racial equality, race war, a staining of the blood—who could tolerate such things?

The commissioners sent out to spread the secessionist gospel in late 1860 and early 1861 clearly believed that the racial fate of their region was hanging in the balance in the wake of Lincoln's election. Only through disunion could the South be saved from the disastrous effects of Republican principles and Republican malevolence. Hesitation, submission—any course other than immediate secession—would place both slavery and white supremacy on the road to certain extinction. The commissioners were arguing that disunion, even if it meant risking war, was the only way to save the white race.

Did these men really believe these things? Did they honestly think that secession was necessary in order to stay the frenzied hand of the Republican abolitionist, preserve racial purity and racial supremacy, and save their women and children from rape and slaughter at the hands of "half-civilized Africans"? They made these statements, and used the appropriate code words, too many times in too many places with too much fervor and raw emotion to leave much room for doubt. They knew these things in the marrow of their bones, and they destroyed a political union because of what they believed and what they foresaw.

But, we might ask, could they not see the illogicality, indeed the absurdity, of their insistence that Lincoln's election meant that the white South faced the sure prospect of either massive miscegenation or a race war to the finish? They seem to have been totally untroubled by logical inconsistencies of this sort. Indeed, the capacity for compartmentalization among this generation of white Southerners appears to have been practically boundless. How else can we explain Judge William L. Harris's comments before the Mississippi State Agricultural Society in November 1858? "It has been said by an eminent statesman," Harris observed on this occasion, "that nothing can advance the mass of society in prosperity and happiness, nothing can uphold the substantial interest and steadily improve the general condition and character of the whole, but this one thing—compensating rewards for labor." It apparently never occurred to Harris that this observation might apply to the hundreds of thousands of slaves working in Mississippi in 1858 as well as to the white farmers and mechanics of his adopted state. His mind could not even comprehend the possibility that slaves, too, were human beings who, if given the opportunity, might well respond to "compensating rewards" for their labor.

In setting out to explain secession to their fellow Southerners, the commissioners have explained a very great deal to us as well. By illuminating so clearly the racial content of the secession persuasion, the commissioners would seem to have laid to rest, once and for all, any notion that slavery had nothing to do

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with the coming of the Civil War. To put it quite simply, slavery and race were absolutely critical elements in the coming of the war. Neo-Confederate groups may have "a problem" with this interpretation, as the leader of the Virginia Heritage Preservation Association put it. But these defenders of the Lost Cause need only read the speeches and letters of the secession commissioners to learn what was really driving the Deep South to the brink of war in 1860-61.



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Marc Egnal



Rethinking the Secession of the Lower South: The Clash of Two Groups

Despite almost a century and a half of writing on secession by participants, engaged amateurs, and professional historians, there is no clear answer to the question, "Why did the Lower South secede?" In a thoughtful discussion of several books on the topic, James Moore remarked in 1986 that the picture that emerges is more a "mosaic than a monolith, a cacophony rather than a consensus." That conclusion still holds true. Some historians contend that psychology trumped rationality. Steven Channing, for example, argues that South Carolina seceded because of a "crisis of fear" fed by anxieties about abolitionists and the large slave population. Others point to more rational motives. William Barney's book on Mississippi and Alabama underscores the desperate need of the planters for fresh soils, which the newly elected Republican party now denied them. Still others emphasize ideology. Lacy K. Ford Jr. argues that South Carolinians were dedicated to republican values and preferred secession to abandoning their principles. A few scholars bring internal discord to the fore: Michael P. Johnson suggests that the tension between wealthy slaveholders and poorer whites lay at the heart of the story in Georgia. The slave lords spearheaded secession and created a "patriarchal republic" because of concerns that Republican patronage might exacerbate class conflict. Finally, and most recently, many historians have returned to the traditional wisdom that the defense of slavery drove the Confederates. James McPherson remarks that "the primacy of the slavery issue . . . has reemerged in modern historiography as the principal cause of secession."

Serious problems, however, confront any interpretation that explains secession by reference to a single ideology or mind-set, whether rational or irrational, whether focused on slavery or republicanism. Citizens in almost every state in the Deep South were seriously divided over the wisdom of secession. Explanations that trumpet a single theme might explain those who chose disunion, but they ignore the sizeable minority that rejected such rash actions. At least 40 percent of voters, and in some cases half, opposed immediate secession in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Florida. In Texas more than 20 percent of the electorate rejected disunion, and even South Carolina had important pockets of resistance.

From *Civil War History* by Marc Egnal vol. 50, no. 3, September 2004, pp. 261–274 (notes omitted). Copyright © 2004 by Kent State University Press. Reprinted by permission.

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The nature of this division has proven elusive. Several scholars have suggested a split between unionist small farmers and secessionist slaveholders, but any generalization that seeks to link the split over secession in the Deep South to wealth or slaveholding will not stand. The ranks of ardent secessionists included many small farmers in the southern districts of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi; in peninsular Florida; and in southwestern Louisiana. To be sure, *some* nonslaveholding farmers in the Lower South were consistent, outspoken unionists; but their role should not lead us to generalize about a whole class.

Two studies that closely analyze the opposing sides in the secession debate highlight the weak connection between slaveholding and disunion in the Lower South. An analysis of the votes for the secession conventions in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana concludes that "the variance in the cooperationist vote is explained by factors other than the percentage of slaveholders." The correlation computed was extremely low, with slaveholding explaining only 17 percent of the vote for secession. Another scholar reaches the same conclusion through a different method. Ralph Wooster's study of the members of the secession conventions demonstrates that comparable groups of small farmers and slaveholders stood on both sides of the issue. Wooster observes: "In the conventions of the lower South the percentage of those who held 20 slaves or more was almost the same for the secessionists and their opponents, 41.8 percent of secessionists and 41.0 percent of the cooperationists."

This essay suggests a new approach to secession and the events leading up to that crisis by contending that the battle over secession in the Lower South was the culmination of a long-standing struggle between two groups—one with strong ties to the Union and one that flourished in relative isolation from the states to the north. . . .

Two factors in particular shaped the clashing societies of the cotton states—the origins of the settlers and the patterns of the regional economy. These elements also gave rise to conflicting worldviews that guided the behavior of the two groups. The two camps, it should be emphasized, were loose coalitions. No firm geographical features defined their boundaries. Their ideological borders were permeable and shifted from issue to issue. Furthermore, the opposing sides shared many fundamental values, including a dedication to slavery and a deep-rooted racism. References to two "societies" must be taken figuratively, not literally.

Still these qualifications should not obscure the importance of these groupings. The opposing sides are not ahistorical conceptions. Contemporaries were well aware of the lines that split several states of the Deep South into northern and southern reaches and divided others along similar, geographical lines. During the crisis of 1849-52 and the secession winter of 1860-61, these warring camps shattered the Democratic party and disrupted the Whig-
Opposition party. A close analysis of this division helps us understand the ardent secessionists as well as their more moderate opponents.

The first of the two forces shaping these groups was the origins of the settlers. The white people who populated the Lower South came from distinct sending areas and set the imprint of contrasting cultures on states from South

Carolina to Texas. One set of migrants came from the Upper South, although many could trace their family ties back to Northern Ireland and the continent of Europe. Typically, the ancestors of these migrants had landed in Philadelphia and resided for a time in southeastern Pennsylvania. Over the course of generations, these families had migrated south through the Appalachian highlands before spreading through large areas of the Upper and Lower South. These migrants from the Upper South arrived in South Carolina and Georgia before the Revolution and moved into the other Gulf states during the period of initial settlement. A second group of migrants came from a different "hearth": the tidewater region of South Carolina and Georgia. Many of these Lower South residents had ancestors who hailed from southern England. These two large-scale migrations divided the Deep South into distinct regions. The most important line of division separated several states into northern and southern regions. Settlers from the Upper South predominated in the northern reaches of South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama, as well as northeastern Mississippi; Lower South residents dominated the southern districts in these states. The two groups of migrants had different outlooks, distinct family histories, and different ways of building their homes and talking to their neighbors.

John C. Calhoun described the two societies within his own state of South Carolina. "Our State was first settled on the coast by emigrants principally from England, but with no inconsiderable intermixture of Huguenots from France . . .," he noted in 1846. "The portion of the State along the falls of the rivers and back to the mountains had a very different origin and settlement. Its settlement commenced long after, at a period, but little anterior to the war of the Revolution, and consisted principally of emigrants who followed the course of the mountains, from Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia & North Carolina. They had very little connection, or intercourse for a long time with the old settlement on the coast."

Migrants from the two hearths influenced politics and society in Texas and Florida, although these groups did not follow the pattern of settling along a north-south axis. In Texas, Upper South migrants dominated the northern and west central counties. Similarly, a study of Florida shows that Upper South settlers arrived in the 1830s, became wealthy cotton planters, and controlled the politics of "Middle Florida," the term for the Panhandle counties between the Suwannee and Apalachicola Rivers. These districts supported the Whigs and were moderate in sectional politics. The most striking difference between the Democratic and Whig leaders was their origins. Fully 64 percent of prominent Florida Democrats were from the Deep South, while only 37 percent of the Whigs originated from that area.

Conflicts over Southern rights often featured politicians with different origins. For example, the clash in Texas pitted John Reagan and Sam Houston, both with strong Tennessee roots, against Louis Wigfall of South Carolina. The division in Mississippi found on one side cooperationist James Alcorn, who was raised in Kentucky, and on the other side secessionist Albert Gallatin Brown of South Carolina. In Alabama moderates William King and George Smith Houston from the Upper South clashed with Georgians Dixon Hall Lewis and William Lowndes Yancey. There were exceptions to the rule. Some

prominent secessionists from the Upper South.

The distinction between the important cultural differences among the various groups in the migration from the Upper South to the Lower South. The migrants from South Carolina and Georgia, the Acadians rejected the culture of the Upper South. Elmore reported from New Orleans he had met many of them but among the friends of the secessionists he had met none. "The majority of the secessionists in 1854 were from the Upper South. The movement. The Meigs family frequently sheltered secessionists."

Most Northern and Southern nationalistic sentiment was concentrated in the towns. For example, in the Upper South, the estate is owned by the aristocracy. Lesesne reported that every thing in the South was done for the profits at the North. "The North is the source of these people."

This discussion suggests how sectional migration influenced the proportionate support of the Whigs in turbulent times. The impact of migration on the Republican Party's support is illustrated by the dominant factors in the North.

Economic factors in the North, such as the citizenry of the North, the abolition of slavery, the growth of the cotton crop, and the growth of the Georgia, Alabama, and Florida cotton crop, the settlers' support of the Whigs in this region. The North, where the cotton crop fostered the growth of the craftspeople, the growth of the wheels and the union-learned

prominent secessionists, such as Kentuckian Jefferson Davis, were scions of the Upper South.

The distinction between these two migrations constituted the most important cultural divide in the Lower South, but it was not the only one. Several groups in the more southerly reaches of the Deep South stood apart from the migrants from South Carolina and Georgia. In Louisiana the Creoles and Acadians rejected the cotton planters' Southern nationalism. In 1842 William Elmore reported from Louisiana about Calhoun's supporters: "In the city of New Orleans he has a great many friends among the American democrats, but among the french and creole population his claims have not been canvassed." The majority of Germans in south-central Texas opposed slavery and secession; in 1854 a group of them met in San Antonio to endorse a free soil movement. The Mexicans in Texas also denounced slavery and disunion and frequently sheltered runaway slaves.

Most Northerners who settled in the Deep South decried the extremes of Southern nationalism. Such individuals composed an influential minority in the towns. For example, in Mobile, Alabama, nonresident cotton factors and representatives of Northern firms dominated commerce. "Half our real estate is owned by non residents of the same section [i.e., the North]," Joseph Lesesne reported from Mobile in 1847. "Our whole sale and retail business—every thing in short worth mentioning is in the hands of men who invest their profits at the North. The commercial privileges extended by the Constitution to these people has wholly deprived us of a mercantile class."

This discussion of migration and its impact, it should be noted, dovetails with a growing body of scholarship on antebellum mobility. These studies suggest how stable social and political structures coexisted with the "torrent of migration." In each community the small group of "persisters" held a disproportionate share of wealth and influence and provided continuity in turbulent times. Works on the antebellum North also emphasize the far-reaching impact of migration on politics. Greater New England provided a foundation for the Republican party, while settlers from the Upper South became the strongest supporters of the Democrats. Richard Steckel's precinct-level voting study illustrates this point. He concludes: "Migration was a major force—perhaps a dominant factor—shaping political conflict in the Midwest."

Economic activities constituted a second set of factors that divided the citizenry of the Lower South, reinforcing (for the most part) the divisions established by the patterns of settlement. To begin with, wheat cultivation, garden crops, and home manufactures gave the northern reaches of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Texas an economic unity that mirrored the settlers' shared origins. Wheat was a common note throughout much of this region. Although the quantities raised were far below the levels in the North, wheat growing was an important facet of the regional culture. The crop fostered a society of independent farmers, small milling centers, skilled craftspeople, and vigorous local exchanges. Steven Hahn's study of counties in northern Georgia indicates that seven of ten households had spinning wheels and looms, and one in ten heads of free households was an artisan. The union-leaning population of northern South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and

planters residing upon the confines [i.e., outskirts] of the Confederacy." William McBurney also fretted about the growth of inland trade. He remarked, "What is to hinder Wilmington and Charlotte, N.C., from becoming depots from which the upcountry of S.C. may be supplied. And so of Knoxville, Chattanooga, & Memphis, Tennessee, for the other states?" McBurney favored a light duty on goods entering the Confederacy: "A small percentage would have the advantage of giving to the Seaboard Cities the importing business and the supply of the interior merchants, whereas an entire exemption would enable to the interior merchant to do as many of them have always done—buy in northern cities—at least there would be no impediment in their way of so doing."

The separation of the Deep South into northern and southern regions was the most important division produced by economic activities, but others may be noted. The Louisiana sugar planters, who enjoyed the protection of federal tariffs, looked favorably on the Union. In the Bayou State crop preferences often became political preferences. Finally, commercial activities tied many city and townsfolk to the North and made them less willing to entertain extreme states' rights views during the secession crisis. Northern capital financed the sale of Southern staples and the import of finished goods into the South. A few traders advocated secession, but most were unionists. These city dwellers were more likely to join the Whig party, which became the party of moderation.

The division that emerged from differences in birthplaces and economic activities reflected opposing outlooks. These distinct mind-sets can best be understood in the context of the debate between historians James Oakes and Eugene Genovese. For Oakes the South was characterized by an "entrepreneurial ethos" and an "intense devotion to the capitalistic spirit of accumulation." Genovese, by contrast, emphasizes the "premodern quality of the Southern world." The slave lords, he asserted, were "precapitalist, quasi-aristocratic landowners" who "grew into the closest thing to feudal lords imaginable in a nineteenth-century bourgeois republic." Other historians and economists have chosen sides in this debate. Both sides suggest the universality of their conclusions. All planters, indeed, all white Southerners, these works contend, conformed to a single mold.

A closer look at the divisions within the Lower South suggests that we must credit the insights of both Oakes and Genovese—but in each case for only one of the two groups. The cohort with roots in the Upper South and North embodied the buoyant, entrepreneurial spirit that Oakes delineates. The bustling economic activities of the small farmers in northern counties of their states disturbed outspoken advocates of Southern rights. Daniel Hamilton of Charleston shared his concerns with radical congressman William Porcher Miles. "How long would it be after disunion," Hamilton asked in January 1860, "before we should have the same hungry manufacturing population infesting the upper part of So. Ca., Cherokee [i.e., northern] Georgia, Tennessee, North Carolina (French Broad [River] with its exhaustless water power) and even the upper portion of Alabama?" He continued: "Why not five years would elapse before they would be setting their looms to work on every stream in these locations under the impulse of occupation and the introduction of numbers, they would soon make their presence felt. . . . A few years more and you would have a strong party of our

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Wealthy planters as well as small farmers in this region shared this entrepreneurial outlook and a desire to build a more diversified economy. James Orr, the upcountry leader of the South Carolina National Democrats, pointed out the path to growth. "The first step to be taken . . .," he explained in an 1855 speech, "to reinvigorate our decaying prosperity, and to develop our exhaustless resources, is for our planters and farmers to invest the whole of the net profits on agricultural capital in some species of manufacturing; the field is broad and inviting, and but little has yet been occupied. With prudence and energy there can be no failure in any branch." Fellow upcountry politician Benjamin Perry, who often boosted manufacturing in his newspaper, applauded these remarks: "One such speech as this of Col. Orr's will do more good in the State than all the patriotic fustian and bombast which have been delivered in South Carolina for the last twenty years." Other planters shared these views. James Alcorn, the prominent north Mississippi politician (and opponent of secession), hoped the state would support new enterprises. He observed, "The wealth of a State consists in the property and intelligence of her people; every intelligent proposition which has for its object the increase of knowledge, or the enhancement of aggregate wealth, should receive the calm judgment of the Legislature."

Merchants, traders, and other townsmen also applauded diversification, and their views were reflected in the Whig press. The Milledgeville, Georgia, *Southern Recorder* noted in 1843 that "our climate, the face of our country, our copious and unfailing water power, the abundant supply of raw materials, and the cheap labor which we command, invite us to apply a portion of our labor and capital to manufactures." The *Mobile Advertiser* concurred, remarking in 1848 that cotton planters, "instead of investing their surplus capital in negroes and lands, [should] invest it in manufactures."

Spokesmen for the settlers who came from the South Carolina—Georgia "hearth" enunciated a different outlook, one that was more in keeping with Genovese's depiction of the Southern economy. These individuals were proud that Southerners were not like the hard-trading, entrepreneurial Yankees. In 1855 Alabama fire-eater William Lowndes Yancey expounded on the differences between the North and South: "The climate, the soil and productions of these two grand divisions of the land, have made the character of their inhabitants. Those who occupy the one are cool, calculating, enterprising, selfish and grasping; the inhabitants of the other, are ardent, brave and magnanimous, more disposed to give than to accumulate, to enjoy ease rather than to labor." Mississippi radical John F. H. Claiborne agreed. He remarked in 1860, "Sedentary and agricultural, we cherish the homesteads and laws of our ancestors, and live among the reminiscences of the past." Jefferson Davis echoed these views. During the Panic of 1857 he rejoiced in the strengths of the Southern way. "Ours was an agricultural people, and in that consisted their strength," he told an audience in Jackson, Mississippi. "Their prosperity was not at the mercy of such a commercial crisis as the one with which the country had just been visited. Our great staple was our safety."

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These states' rights advocates relegated manufacturing to a minor role. Few went as far in condemning enterprise as John Forsythe, the editor of the *Columbus (Georgia) Times*, who declared in 1850, "I would to God we had fewer miles of railroad, fewer millions invested in manufactures and stocks, fewer proofs of enterprise, and thrift and money-making, and more of that chivalry of Georgia, of the olden time, which, on more than one occasion, has interposed her sovereignty to check the usurpations of the federal government." Most politicians of all persuasions favored railroads, but states' rights leaders condemned the spread of manufacturing and argued that fresh soils, not factories, were the key to continuing prosperity.

In short, the origins of the settlers and their economic activities created within the Lower South two opposing societies whose spokesmen expounded different approaches to development. One set of individuals, typically located in the towns and northern counties, favored diversification and saw advantages in links with the states to the north and, more generally, in the Union. The other group, whose strength lay in the southern reaches of the Lower South, defended an economy focused on slaves, cotton, and rice. They were more ready to separate as the threat to Southern institutions increased in the 1840s and 1850s. . . .



POSTSCRIPT



Was Slavery the Key Issue in the Sectional Conflict Leading to the Civil War?

Charles B. Dew makes a very powerful argument regarding the influence of the slavery question on the decision by 11 southern slaveholding states to secede and to join the Confederate States of America. Whose attitudes would provide a better window into the thinking of white southerners on the eve of the Civil War than those individuals commissioned to travel throughout the region to drum up support for secession? Dew, however, by no means stands alone as a proponent of the view that slavery was the main cause of the war. In *America in 1857: A Nation on the Brink* (Oxford University Press, 1990), Kenneth M. Stampp argues that conflict became inevitable after the election of James Buchanan (not Lincoln) to the presidency, the continuing firestorm in Kansas, and the Supreme Court's decision in the Dred Scott case. Eric Foner, who has written extensively on the influence of the free-soil ideology and its impact on the coming of the Civil War in such works as *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (Oxford University Press, 1970) also points out that the argument for states' rights as an explanation for the cause of the war is largely a product of the post-Civil War era and, hence, more or less an afterthought on the part of southerners who hoped to distance themselves from the institution of slavery that dominated their region in the antebellum period.

Marc Egnal's essay provides a nuanced interpretation that focuses upon economics as the main issue in determining support for secession in the Lower South. Noting that it is overly simplistic to assert that slave owners supported secession while small farmers who owned no slaves did not, Egnal goes on to assert that the debate over secession can be boiled down to a clash of two societies in the Lower South defined by the origin of the settlers and distinctive patterns of the regional economy: those in the northern parts of the states who often had ties with the North and Upper South and who favored a diversified economy that included manufacturing and industrial production; and those in the southern regions of the states who were largely isolated from the Upper South and who persisted in their commitment to cash-crop agriculture. It was this latter group, Egnal points out, which was most likely to support secession whether or not they were slave owners. Egnal's interpretation is presented in an expanded form in *Clash of Extremes: The Economic Origins of the Civil War* (Hill & Wang, 2009).

Another challenge to the belief that slavery was the sole cause of the war can be found in the works of Joel Silbey. In "The Civil War Synthesis in American Political History," *Civil War History* (June 1964); *The Partisan Imperative: The Dynamics of American Politics Before the Civil War* (Oxford University Press, 1985);

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Another approach is presented by Michael F. Holt in *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (John Wiley & Sons, 1978). Holt also is interested in analyzing the struggles for power at the state and local levels by the major political parties, but he is critical of the ethnocultural school represented by Silbey. In Holt's view, Silbey's emphasis on voter analysis does not explain why the Whig Party disappeared nor why the Republican Party became the majority party in the northern and western states in the 1850s. Holt also rejects the more traditional view that the Civil War resulted from the "intensifying sectional disagreements over slavery." Instead, he promotes a more complicated picture of the events leading to the Civil War. Between 1845 and 1860, he maintains, three important things happened: (1) the breakdown of the Whig Party, (2) the realignment of voters, and (3) "a shift from a nationally balanced party system where both major parties competed on fairly even terms in all parts of the nation to a sectionalized polarized one with Republicans dominant in the North and Democrats in the South."

The list of books about the causes of the Civil War is extensive. Kenneth M. Stampp, ed., *The Causes of the Civil War* (Prentice-Hall, 1965) provides a collection of primary documents and historical interpretations by leading scholars. Other edited volumes of scholarly interpretations can be found in William R. Brock, ed., *The Civil War* (Harper & Row, 1969); Hans L. Trefousse, ed., *The Causes of the Civil War: Institutional Failure or Human Blunder?* (Holt, Rinehart and Watson, 1971); and Michael Perman, ed., *The Coming of the American Civil War* (3d ed.; D.C. Heath, 1993). John Niven's, *The Coming of the Civil War, 1837-1861* (Harlan Davidson, 1990) is a brief presentation, but readers seeking a compelling narrative cannot do much better than David Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861* (Harper & Row, 1976), one of the best volumes in the prestigious New American Nation Series.

and *Party Over Section: The Rough and Ready Presidential Election of 1848* (University Press of Kansas, 2009), Silbey argues that historians, by positioning slavery as the major issue that divided the United States, have distorted "the reality of American political life between 1844 and 1861." Silbey is one of the "new political historians" who have applied the techniques of modern-day political scientists in analyzing the election returns and voting patterns of Americans' nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century predecessors. These historians use computers and regression analysis of voting patterns, favor a quantitative analysis of past behavior, and reject the traditional sources of quotes from partisan newspapers and major politicians because these sources provide anecdotal and often misleading portraits of our past. Silbey and other new political historians maintain that all politics are local. Therefore, the primary issues for voters and their politicians in the 1860 election were ethnic and cultural, and party loyalty was more important than sectional considerations.

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