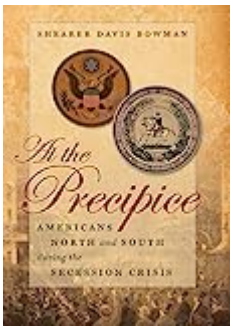
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Shearer Davis Bowman. *At the Precipice: Americans North and South during the Secession Crisis.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. 379 pp. $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3392-6.

Reviewed by Christopher Childers (Pittsburg State University)

Published on H-CivWar (April, 2011)

Commissioned by Hugh F. Dubrulle (Saint Anselm College)

And the War Came–But Why?

Historians who have analyzed the secession crisis of 1860-61 have traditionally opted to chronicle the intense and often labyrinthine process by which eleven Southern states formed a new nation, and the Union response to the challenge. Shearer Davis Bowman takes a strikingly different approach, choosing instead to offer a selective portrait of what Northerners and Southerners thought and believed in the months and years before they came to blows. In *At the Precipice*, Bowman focuses on competing notions of the âinterests, rights, and honorâ that Americans lived by and believed in (p. 3). He attributes the growing differences between North and South to decades of discord over slavery *and* statesâ rights, two issues that Bowman contends cannot be separated from one another.

Americans shared a common heritage, Bowman affirms, but they came to contest its meaning. Northerners clothed their antislavery rhetoric in the mantle of morality, attributing to the founders a vision of a moral republic without slavery. When Northerners came to view the Southern beliefs on slavery and statesâ rights as a moral abomination and a political threat, they sought an end (however gradual) to the Southâs peculiar institution and a reaffirmation of their view of the founding vision. Southerners, who âpreferred to discuss the questions of slavery and later secession in terms of threats to their constitutional and natural rights,â demanded that the North honor the foundersâ vision as they interpreted it: a union that honored regional interests, statesâ rights, and personal honor (p. 33). Southerners demanded absolute control over the institution of slavery and freedom from outside intervention. To the South, Abraham Lincolnâs election to the presidency in 1860 portended a future of Northern domination over politics and slavery. Fearing the loss of power, the alteration of Southern racial mores, the destruction of slavery, and the loss of honor, eleven Southern states seceded from the Union to form their own nation based on their own understanding of Americaâs revolutionary heritage.

Bowman presents a sweeping case in his introduction, an argument rooted in the rich and voluminous historiography of the Civil War era, yet his narrative proceeds most unevenly. He makes the case for a more in-

clusive understanding of America in 1860 and 1861 by addressing how religion, honor, race, and gender played a role in the political crisis of secession. With religion, Bowman succeeds admirably, explaining its role in affirming the moral righteousness of nationhood. Northerners especially became interested in how Christian religiosity transformed America into a moral beacon; yet both sections affirmed their beliefs âby understandings of genuine Christianityâ (p. 31). Likewise, Bowman expands our understanding of honor, reminding readers of its critical role in creating the contentious political arena in which Americans sparred over the meaning of freedom and the future of slavery. Though in the introduction he curiously dismisses the extension of slavery into the territories as a direct cause of the war, Bowman argues that âequality of right between slave and free states in territorial questionsâ proved âfoundational to the preservation of both southern honor and national harmonyâ (pp. 39-40). Southerners and Northerners alike, however, shared common notions about honor. Republican resistance to compromise during the secession winter stemmed from notions of honor; bending to Southern demands opened Lincoln and his party to calls of weakness.

Unfortunately, Bowmanâs narrative loses focus when confronting race and gender. Throughout *At the Precipice*, the author uses sketches of both prominent and obscure individuals to illustrate different themes. In a chapter on the intersection of race and gender, Bowman uses stories from the lives of Sojourner Truth and Keziah Goodwyn Hopkins Brevard to address the role women and African Americans played in the secession crisis. Truth imbued her calls for abolition of slavery with religious imagery, but Bowman does not sufficiently develop her role. Brevardâs presence, as a pious Christian widow of a prominent slaveholder, seems superfluous aside from her inner struggle between her faith and the morality of slavery. Ultimately, Bowman resorts to that oft-quoted Southern woman Mary Chesnut to draw conclusions about how women in the South confronted secession and the creation of the Confederacy.

At the Precipice ultimately advances a political interpretation of the secession crisis that relies on competing interests, rights, and honor between the sections. In a series of chapters that address party politics on the eve of the Civil War, Bowman investigates how politicians grappled with–and themselves often created–ideological disputes over the nature of the Union. The creators of the so-called Second American Party System designed a durable form of politics to quell discord over slavery that had exploded during the Missouri Controversy. In part they succeeded; in part they failed. Slavery still crept into the national discourse, as westward expansion, economics, and social issues transformed both North and South. Yet both sections harbored deep internal divisions over the issues that led to disunion. Northerners may have despised slavery, for example, but they held strong racist sentiments. And drawing from William W. Freehlingâs insightful and influential thesis about the divided South (*The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854* [1990] and *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists Triumphant, 1854-1861* [2007]), Bowman recognizes diverse patterns of social, economic, and political development within that section. At the same time, North and South both confronted seemingly inexorable economic changes as the nation industrialized. Both sections sought economic development and enhanced commerce in an economically integrated nation. One of the signal insights in *At the Precipice* is the simple, but powerful reminder that for all the differences over slavery, North and South shared much in common. Conflict and consensus were ubiquitous in antebellum American social and political discourse.

In sum, Bowman has produced an often-insightful study of how consensus and conflict, slavery and statesâ rights, and competing notions of the meaning of America led to the Civil War. Though *At the Precipice* lacks narrative coherence, it nonetheless provides cogent insights into why North and South took such divergent paths in spite of significant commonalities. Readers seeking a comprehensive history of the secession crisis must look elsewhere, but in Bowmanâs book they will find a thoughtful, if idiosyncratic, meditation on the issues that Americans faced during the secession crisis–issues they would ultimately be adjudicated not in the halls of Congress, judicial chambers, or the polling place, but on the field of battle.

Citation: Christopher Childers. Review of Bowman, Shearer Davis, *At the Precipice: Americans North and South during the Secession Crisis*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. April, 2011.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=32322