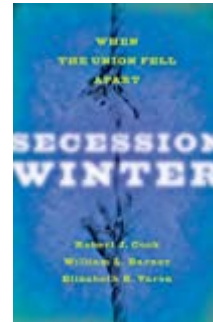


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert J. Cook, William L. Barney, Elizabeth R. Varon. *Secession Winter: When the Union Fell Apart*. The Marcus Cunliffe Lecture Series. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013. viii + 119 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4214-0895-8; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4214-0896-5.



Paul Finkelman, Donald R. Kennon. *Congress and the Crisis of the 1850s*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012. vi + 231 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1977-9.

CONGRESS
and the CRISIS
of the 1850s

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Wait! Wait! There's More! New Scholarship on the Coming of the Civil War

Despite over 150 years of historiographic and public debate, the best scholarship on the 1850s, secession, and the immediate causes of the Civil War has emerged only recently. There has been a revival of antebellum political history, and, thanks to a new generation of scholars, a fresh look at some timeworn topics. Two new essay collections combine older scholars with younger challengers to offer an assortment of analyses of the fateful decisions that resulted in disunion.

The aptly named *Congress and the Crisis of the 1850s*, based on a lecture series hosted by the United States Capitol Historical Society and edited by Albany Law School's Paul Finkelman and Donald R. Kennon, chief historian at the historical society, is a mixed bag. Some essays provide exciting new research and arguments, while others seem unoriginal. Of the latter sort is Michael F. Holt's piece on the Compromise of 1850, "Politics, Patronage, and Public Policy: The Compromise of

1850. Holt stays close to his expertise on the Whig Party and argues that its failure to achieve a national settlement was due to Whig President Zachary Taylor's patronage appointments. It is an interesting argument, and patronage was certainly an important factor, but Holt's focus on the Whigs prevents him from addressing the actions of other groups, such as the Northern Democrats who were ultimately responsible for the so-called compromise. Holt's argument is also undermined by his lack of sources—he provides only one single primary source for the entire essay, a Henry Clay letter from December 1849.

Similarly, Spencer R. Crew, a professor of public history at George Mason University, does not meet expectations. Despite its promising title, "When the Victims of Oppression Stand Up Manfully for Themselves: The Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 and the Role of African Americans in Obstructing Its Enforcement," his essay only briefly examines interracial resistance to the heinous law. The bulk of the piece, rather, follows the traditional narrative: 1793 fugitive slave law, cross-border kidnappings, African American/abolitionist vigilance committees, Northern personal liberty laws, *Prigg v. Pennsylvania*, and finally the Compromise of 1850. All of these events and issues have been explored in greater detail and nuance by Thomas Morris, Finkelman, James Horton, H. Robert Baker, Stanley Harrold, and others.

Nevertheless, *Congress and the Crisis of the 1850s* contains some sparkling gems, the most exciting of which is Jenny Wahl's "Dred, Panic, War: How a Slave Case Triggered Financial Crisis and Civil Disunion." A professor of economics at Carleton College, Wahl offers a *Freakonomics*-style approach to the Panic of 1857, arguing that the *Dred Scott* decision of March 1857 (which permitted the unrestricted spread of slavery) caused a dramatic drop in the value of western lands, which triggered a drop in railroad securities, which, in turn, caused panic on Wall Street. "Converting a territory from free-soil to slave," writes Wahl, "would thus reduce the probability of migration westward for northerners due to the anticipated effect on land values" (p. 182). Armed with impressive statistics, graphs, and charts, Wahl makes a persuasive and provocative argument. Similarly, Matthew Glassman, an analyst for the Congressional Research Service, takes an unexpected approach to the territorial crisis of the 1850s. Taking aim at the time-honored "balance rule" interpretation of state admission (slave and free states admitted together, as pairs, to maintain congressional balance), Glassman posits that it was the process of admission itself that was the problem, not slavery.

By analyzing the entry of free states Minnesota (1858) and Oregon (1859), Glassman shows that the process was problematic, that slavery and the sectional crisis played only supporting roles, and that Republican opposition to and Democratic support for the admission of Oregon was motivated by partisanship. Democrats were ascendant in Oregon, and thus the state would help the party in the 1860 elections.

The remaining essays in the collection—Finkelman on the Compromise of 1850, Amy Greenburg on gender and expansionism, Martin Hershock on Democrats-turned-Republicans, and Brooks Simpson on the caning of Charles Sumner—are all enjoyable and useful. Their chief utility lies in their length; each offers a concise version of larger arguments found elsewhere in the authors' previous works. Finkelman's essay, in particular, is worth passing onto your students, especially since his monographs can be difficult to digest. Shorn of the niceties of older accounts of 1850, Finkelman's "The Appeasement of 1850" is a no-nonsense narrative of events and a double-barreled attack on stale myths and flawed scholarship. In refreshingly blunt language, he argues that the Compromise of 1850 was anything but a compromise. Rather, it was Northern appeasement of Southern aggression. "The final compromise was," he concludes, "overwhelmingly proslavery. It was an appeasement of the most radical proslavery men, and gave virtually nothing to the North or to freedom" (p. 38). The essay's directness is sharpened by its placement in the collection immediately after Holt's, whose work has downplayed the importance of slavery.

From the political crises of the 1850s, we turn to *Secession Winter: When the Union Fell Apart*, a three-essay volume by William L. Barney, Elizabeth R. Varon, and Robert J. Cook. In contrast to the scattered topics of *Congress and the Crisis of the 1850s*, *Secession Winter* focuses specifically on the short period between Abraham Lincoln's election and Fort Sumter. The introduction to the collection, assumedly penned by Jarod Roll of the University of Sussex (there is no identified author), explains that the essays are derived from lectures delivered at The Marcus Cunliffe Centre for the Study of the American South at the University of Sussex. It also sets the overall tone of the work, one that is pro-compromise and ant-war. The individual essays, despite their many differences, hint that the Civil War could have (and should have) been prevented, and that Lincoln "forced the hand" of the Confederates by resupplying Sumter (p. 4). In addition, the essays share a focus on internal Southern divisions, particularly secessionist efforts to convince the

Southern masses to rebel.

The three essays depart from the standard narrative of the secession winter and tackle issues that are often overlooked. Barney, professor of Civil War history at the University of North Carolina, begins the volume with "Rush to Disaster: Secession and the Slaves' Revenge," an odd title that is not fully explained. Stepping into the risky realm of emotional exploration, Barney asserts that Southerners were guilty about slave ownership, and that guilt, in turn, made them sensitive to Northern criticism. Thus, secession was motivated by wounded ego. "Rather than bear the brunt of any more Yankee insults," he writes, "the secessionists would embrace the risk of seeing slavery eviscerated in a war for independence" (p. 13). Proslavery propaganda, he continues, was actually a guise to hide widespread antislavery sentiment among Southerners. An "untold number" of Southerners, he claims, secretly opposed slavery and accepted secession as the only way to free themselves of the burden. Unfortunately, Barney offers little evidence to support his contentions. He includes a variety of vignettes, but many seem out of place and unrepresentative. He also accepts slave-owner avowals at face value, most of which were recorded by Northern visitors who tarried with courteous and obliging Southern hosts.

The second essay, "Save in Defense of My Native State: A New Look at Robert E. Lee's Decision to Join the Confederacy" by Varon, professor of history at the University of Virginia, is far more careful in its evidence and conclusions. The historiography of Lee's fateful decision, Varon reminds us, is in near total agreement that Lee's choice to abandon his loyalty to the United States was based on emotion and feeling. Varon argues the opposite: the decision was calculated and principled. By providing a succinct account of Virginia's path into the Confederacy, Varon demonstrates that Lee was a "reluctant rebel" who placed state before nation out of conviction, not impulse (p. 57). "In rendering his decision,"

she explains, "Lee insisted that Virginia's duty was neither to mediate the conflict nor lead the revolution, but instead to protect her own moral and territorial integrity" (p. 48). Lee, Varon concludes, accepted service in the Confederacy only as a means of defending the Old Dominion.

The final essay, "The Shadow of the Past: Collective Memory and the Coming of the American Civil War," is an engaging study of how both pro-war Republicans and rabid secessionists utilized and manipulated national history to bolster their positions. "Politicians on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line were heavily influenced by, and were aware of, potent collective memories that assumed the status of grand historical narratives," writes Cook of the University of Sussex. "These narratives possessed the capacity to exercise a controlling force on the behavior of all Americans during the secession winter" (p. 63). Secessionists labored to paint themselves as the new patriots, fighting for freedom as the Founding Fathers had done against tyrannical England. Republicans, led by Lincoln, argued that the Founding Fathers had hoped to put slavery on a path to extinction and that it was Republicans who were carrying out the will of the Founders. In addition, Cook explains that even recent events, such as the crises of 1820, 1833, and 1850, were dragged into the fray, with Republicans condemning a slave power conspiracy and secessionists denouncing inglorious compromises with evil Yankees. Cook does not weigh in on the validity of the arguments and gives both sides equal treatment.

Both essay collections are a welcome addition to the revived debates over antebellum politics and secession. They remind us that there is still much to say on these issues and much more work to be done. They also provide a useful instructional tool, particularly for upper-level students who will have little difficulty seeing the historiographic divisions, as well as the pitfalls of straying too far from primary sources.

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