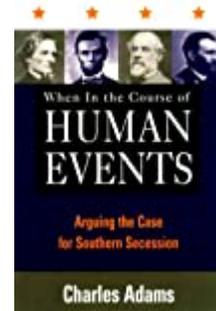


Charles Adams. *When in the Course of Human Events: Arguing the Case for Southern Secession.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000. 257 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8476-9722-9.



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Published on H-CivWar (July, 2000)

Secession Vindicated! Or, Taxes, Death, and the Civil War

Charles Adams hates taxes and likes history. Put these together and you get *When in the Course of Human Events: Arguing the Case for Southern Secession*, a libertarian reading of the Civil War from Rowman & Littlefield.

Though he is himself a northerner, Adams tells us in his introduction that the Civil War, contrary to northern opinion, was not fought to preserve the Union and end slavery. Adams believes with Dickens that the Civil War was a “fiscal quarrel.” In turn, the Civil War brought a host of evils into the world, including authoritarianism, total war, and uncompensated emancipation. Indeed, of all the emancipations of slaves in the nineteenth century, argues Adams, American emancipation was “the worst” because it cost so many lives and caused so much disruption in the South.[1]

Adams goes on to tell us that, over the past century, historians have shown “zeal to make heroes out of Northern leaders and generals not unlike Soviet historians of the recent past who glorified Lenin and the heroes of the Communist revolution.” With time, however, “history’s final verdict will be rendered, and the sanitation brigade [i.e., historians and writers who ostensibly have

supported the North’s cause] will have to face up to its falsehoods and errors, however laudable its motives of patriotism may have been.”[2] Seldom do historians state their own biases more clearly than this.

Here is the gist of Adams’s historical arguments (do not be surprised if they sound familiar, since Marxists and southern apologists elaborated them before Adams): President Lincoln chose to resupply Fort Sumter only after Wall Street financiers informed him that secession might lead to economic catastrophe for the North. If the South carried out its plan to open ports to free trade, northern goods would no longer be competitive with English goods (which would enter the South duty free), and the federal government would no longer fill its coffers with revenues from high tariffs. “As with all secession wars throughout history,” writes Adams, the Civil War “was a fight for land and resources. Moral issues are not really motivating factors.”[3]

Having chosen war, Lincoln became an unrepentant dictator, bent on destroying the South even if this required suspending the writ of habeas corpus, imprisoning anti-war Democrats, and arresting Chief Justice

Roger Taney. Radical Republicans, claims Adams, not only backed Lincoln, but “wanted to slaughter every Southern white in sight and then repeople the Southern territory.”[4] The postwar creation of the Ku Klux Klan, finally, was more than understandable (if not altogether commendable) as a response to the North’s continued bullying of the South after the War.

Before offering my own opinion of Adams’s arguments, let me say that this book is worth adopting for undergraduate Civil War courses. Adams challenges readers to think of the Civil War not as a triumph of right, but as a morally ambiguous event. Adam’s arguments, moreover, are consistently entertaining, if not convincing or new; and certainly, we need to remember that Lincoln violated the Constitution in suspending the writ of habeas corpus. When read in conjunction with John McCardell’s *The Idea of a Southern Nation*, James McPherson’s *Battle Cry of Freedom*, and Eric Foner’s *A Short History of Reconstruction*, Adams’s book becomes a legitimate teaching tool. No student, however, should for a moment believe Adams’s assertion that tariffs, rather than slavery, caused the Civil War.

To put economics above slavery as “the cause” of the Civil War requires several leaps of faith, each of which Adams boldly makes. Like Marxist and Progressive historians before him, Adams suggests, for instance, that southern leaders seized upon slavery as the primary cause of secession only because the tariff issue had failed to spark unity in the South. Hence the slavery issue became the “‘pretext’” for those who wanted to secede; the real issue was tariffs. The same phenomenon, according to Adams, occurred among northerners. Though politicians and soldiers believed the fight was about saving the Union or freeing the slaves, these were rhetorical smokescreens erected by the government, whose real goal was to protect manufacturing and tariff revenues.[5] It is Adams’s libertarian theories, in other words, that must be accurate rather than the words of historical actors; taxes, not slavery or the idea of indissoluble Union, caused the Civil War.

Just how Union and Confederate leaders, with no propaganda machines to speak of, went about fooling all those millions who volunteered to fight is a riddle that Adams leaves unanswered. Assuming for the moment, however, that Adams is correct, and that Confederate and Union leaders did have ulterior, unspoken motives for prosecuting war, an interesting question arises: do the causes of war lie in the political and economic maneuvering of leaders, or in the moral and psychological

forces that move men to fight? Surely the calculus is different for different wars. It seems, however, that the Civil War itself was made possible not so much by the machinations of leaders as by the willingness of men to volunteer. What prepared these men for war was not a call to arms issued by a president, but years of tension between North and South (years that Adams ignores altogether).

It is true, however, that many English observers, whose “objectivity” Adams greatly admires, did not believe slavery or even union to be the great issues of the War.[6] Yet in relying on English journalists and scholars to convey the idea that the Civil War was a fiscal quarrel, Adams substitutes Anglo bias for American. The English, whose manufactures competed with those of the North, who were dependent on Southern cotton, and who still smarted from the American Revolution, were hardly objective observers.

More problematic than Adams’s use of sources is his tendency to exaggerate his arguments. Though he accuses Lincoln of arguing against the constitutionality of secession in the manner of a trial lawyer (employing emotional appeal rather than good law), it is Adams himself who is the master of emotional appeal. Indeed, Adams’s whole book is an exercise in rhetoric. He becomes so engaged in attacking Lincoln that he never explains the constitutionality issue in the depth it merits.

The constitutionality of secession is a complex question, one that neither Adams nor this reviewer can hope to untangle in a page or two. To say with Adams, however, that Lincoln and the North had no legal basis on which to save the Union is to engage in hyperbole. As Kenneth Stampp explained years ago, the framers left the secession issue unanswered in order to get wavering states to ratify the Constitution.[7] That the framers left the question unanswered, however, did not mean that they endorsed secession; they simply made the question a political and philosophical one instead of a strictly legal one. By no means does this make Lincoln legally or morally wrong to have defended the Union.

Adams also enters the realm of hyperbole when he accuses northerners of promoting “ethnic cleansing.”[8] Though it is true that, in the heat of passion, some northerners called for the annihilation of a southern city or two, ethnic cleansing was hardly federal policy. One might say, of course, that Sherman’s attacks on civilians during his march to the sea amounted to war crimes (Adams is quick to point out that Sherman transgressed the Lieber Code of military ethics), but Sherman’s policy was to destroy the southern will to resist, not to kill

or remove all southerners. When Joseph E. Johnston's army surrendered to Sherman in 1865, indeed, Sherman offered terms even more lenient than those Grant had offered Lee. This hardly suggests that Sherman – or any other Northern general or politician – was bent on ethnic cleansing.

Adams goes on to intimate that the North's foray into ethnic cleansing and war crimes during the Civil War led to the government's genocidal policies in the Indian Wars of the late nineteenth century. He assures readers, for instance, that Sherman, who was commander of the U.S. Army from 1869 to 1884, was the man who said that "the only good Indian is a dead Indian."^[9] The man who said (or, more properly, is supposed to have said) that the "only good Indian is a dead Indian," however, was General Phil Sheridan, not Sherman, as any careful historian would know.

I do not mean to defend the conduct of Sherman in the Indian Wars; yet one wonders how Adams can single out northerners as agents of genocide against Indian peoples, yet ignore the fact that southerners had pushed for the Indian Removal Act of 1830. How can Adams be so critical of the North's refusal to recognize the sovereignty of states, yet ignore the southern states' refusal to recognize the sovereignty of tribes? How can Adams ignore, moreover, the fact that northeastern Republicans (like certain Whigs before them) were the only political constituency that consistently supported Indian rights and opposed Indian wars? Finally, how can Adams ignore the fact that, for every Sherman, Sheridan, or Custer in the post-Civil War army, there was a Howard, a Miles, or a Crook? Each of these latter three men had fought for the North, and each of them – ethnocentric though they were – advocated reform of Indian policy, not genocide.

This points to another error on Adams's part, his obfuscation of northern politics. In chapter nine, "Negrophobia," Adams pillories the North for passing racist laws in the antebellum era. Taking a page from left-wing historians, Adams suggests that the North was hypocritical on the race issue, since some northern states excluded free blacks altogether, while others refused to allow blacks "to attend the theater, be admitted to hospitals, or attend school."^[10] These accusations are true, yet Adams ignores the fact that racist laws received overwhelming support not from Republicans, but from Democrats. The so-called "butternuts" of southern Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, with their southern heritage and economic ties to the South, were particularly apt to support such laws. During the Civil War, these same individuals often be-

came copperheads and/or refused to support emancipation.^[11]

We should not assume, based on Adams's flimsy analysis of northern politics, that all northerners were hypocrites on the race issue and that the war was fought for economic reasons alone. The North fought the Civil War for many reasons, but to end slavery was a paramount concern to a significant number of Unionists, particularly Republicans from New England and the northern parts of the Midwestern states. The North simply could not have prosecuted the war successfully without support from those who opposed slavery. Recall that northern soldiers, even if some found it distasteful, marched to the tune of *John Brown's Body* at the outset of the war. More than a year before the Emancipation Proclamation took effect, this song had been remade by Julia Ward Howe into the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*, with its famous line, "As He died to make men holy, Let us die to make men free."

One should not assume, moreover (per Adams and his English sources), that Republicans were raging imperialists, bent on taking not only Canada, but also Mexico, Cuba, and the Caribbean. Despite Secretary of State Seward's odd suggestion in 1861 that the North should threaten war against European powers that had violated the Monroe Doctrine (Seward hoped to re-unite the nation against a common enemy), it was southerners who had repeatedly sought to annex Cuba, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central America. They had sought these territories to extend slavery.

Nor should readers believe that Lincoln abrogated prisoner exchanges with the South because "he wanted the Southern people to suffer," and that he was therefore responsible for the horrors of Andersonville.^[12] Adams fails to mention that prisoner exchanges broke down only after the South had determined to execute or enslave captured black soldiers, not because of Lincoln's malice.

To heap yet more recriminations on the North, Adams tells us that the death rate of southern captives in Northern prisons was no better than the death rate at Andersonville.^[13] This is false. Some 27,000 Southern prisoners died in all Northern prisons combined during the War, which meant that southern captives were 29 percent less likely to die in Union prison camps than to die of disease in their own army. Northerners, by contrast, were 68 percent more likely to die in southern prison camps than to die of disease in their own army. More than 13,000 northern prisoners died at Andersonville alone. It is true that most of these deaths came in the last year of the war, when economic catastrophe made it difficult for

the South to provide adequate provisions for POWs; but that does not make Andersonville “not any worse” than northern camps.[14]

One wonders why Adams is so cavalier with facts, yet so eager to make extravagant claims that few Civil War historians will take seriously. The answer is ideology. Adams, together with all four of the professors who sing praises to him on the back of his book, are connected to the Ludwig von Mises Institute of Auburn University. The Mises Institute, according to its website (<http://www.mises.org>), “defends the market economy, private property, sound money, peaceful international relations, and opposes all forms of government intervention as economically and socially destructive.” Even as Marxist ideologues have all but disappeared from the ranks of American historians, libertarian ideologues like those from the Mises Institute have geared up for battle with establishment academics.

Most readers will not know, of course, that the scholars whose blurbs appear on the dust jacket are affiliated with the Mises Institute, nor will readers know that three of these same men are active in the League of the South. The League’s purpose, according to its website (<http://www/dixie.net.org>), is to “advance the cultural, social, economic, and political well being and independence of the Southern people by all honourable means,” including the means of secession. The word “honourable,” incidentally, contains the “u” because the League prefers traditional southern orthography to that of New England “busy bodies” like Noah Webster.

It is hardly surprising that one of these blurb writers, Donald Livingston, a professor of political science at Emory University, writes that “the first step in healing the fractural historical memory imposed on all Americans by the Civil War is to face the hard truths that Adams brings into focus. Having read this book, I can no longer, with ease, recite the ‘Gettysburg Address’ or sing the ‘Battle Hymn of the Republic.’” To think, however, that Livingston was reciting the Gettysburg Address and singing the Battle Hymn of the Republic with ease BEFORE reading Adams’s book will astonish members of the League of the South, given that Livingston serves as Director of the League of the South Institute for the Study of Southern Culture and History. Indeed, Professor Livingston lectures on “The Legal and Moral Means of Secession” and “The Fourteenth Amendment and the Destruction of American Federalism” on the Institute’s behalf.

Adams himself, one would guess, is not so committed to the League’s cause as Livingston. Adams’s crusade is

not so much for the South as against big government, i.e., government that seeks to redress social problems; thus his attack on Reconstruction efforts to help freedmen. What is interesting about Adams’s book, however, is that it betokens a new unity between economic libertarians and Confederate nostalgists. Insofar as the Republican Party has become the home for both these groups, it has truly come full circle from its past association with Lincoln, Sumner, and Stevens.

Meanwhile, despite his professed contempt for war of any kind, Adams rushes to do ideological battle with establishment academics, trampling over facts in the process. Adams makes Mary Boykin Chesnut into “Mary Boykin Chestnut,” asserts that blacks refused to volunteer for the Union Army, and describes secession as a “democratic process,” though more than forty percent of the South’s adult male population could not vote.[15] Adams does not advocate war, to be sure, yet his willingness to ignore, obfuscate, or misuse evidence is a kind of violence in itself.

Let me offer some final thoughts. I agree with Adams and the League of the South that white southerners need not be ashamed of their past. Though I am not myself a southerner, I, too, am fascinated by, and even a bit proud of, my Confederate ancestors who fought for what they believed to be right. At the same time, however, I am ashamed that ideologues like Adams and his League of the South supporters go on crusading for causes that deserved to die long ago. Should the half-truths propagated by Adams become reality for Americans, Adams’s assertion that the Civil War was not worth fighting will indeed be correct.

Notes

[1]. Charles Adams, *When in the Course of Human Events: Arguing the Case for Southern Secession* (Lanham, Maryland, 2000), 2.

[2]. *Ibid.*

[3]. *Ibid.*, 12.

[4]. *Ibid.*, 54.

[5]. *Ibid.*, 34, 7483.

[6]. *Ibid.*, 3.

[7]. In subsequent writings and speeches, some drafters of the Constitution indicated that they believed secession to be unconstitutional, while others concluded that secession was possible. See Kenneth M. Stampp,

“The Concept of a Perpetual Union,” in *The Imperiled Union: Essays on the Background of the Civil War* (Oxford, England, 1980), 3_36.

[8]. Adams, *When in the Course*, 54.

[9]. *Ibid.*, 114.

[10]. *Ibid.*, 132.

[11]. James M. McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York, 1982), 273_75.

[12]. Adams, *When in the Course*, 57.

[13]. *Ibid.*

[14]. *Ibid.*, 57; McPherson, *Ordeal*, 450.

[15]. Adams, *When in the Course*, 86, 102, 122.

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Citation: Daniel Justin Herman. Review of Adams, Charles, *When in the Course of Human Events: Arguing the Case for Southern Secession*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. July, 2000.

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