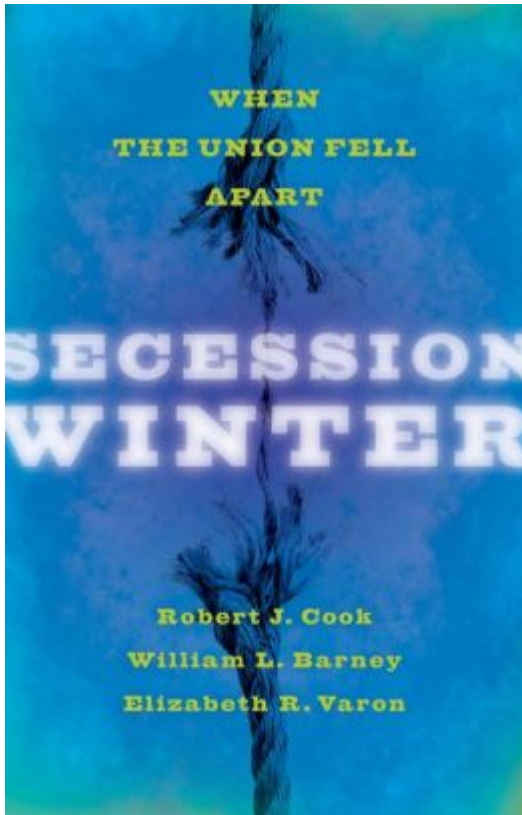


Creating Two Nations



“Henceforth there must be two peoples, Northerners and Southerners.” The doomed Orton Williams, writing in May 1861, was surprised by this new dichotomy. A young cousin of the Robert E. Lee family, Williams had grown up in a United States that did not oblige you to choose sides. Instead, most eagerly embraced an American nationality. But suddenly that secure world had come unhinged. The three essays in this brief but welcome volume revisit the startling six-month interval between November 1860 and April 1861, when the Union disintegrated and the Civil War erupted.

Certainly there had been Northerners and Southerners before 1861. Most Yankees in New England and the New England exodus states to the west embraced free labor, free schools, free soil, and the Republican Party. Some saw slavery as a moral problem; a larger number deplored its economic and social effects. But their North was no monolith. Swarms of immigrants, especially from Ireland and Germany, flooded into the Northeast and the Midwest during the 1840s and 1850s. Democratic Party loyalists, even if temporarily outnumbered, fiercely contested the upstart Republicans and looked forward to better times. One observer in January 1861 reported that Democrats in Maine were “decidedly against Coercion” and that many Republicans had “no stomach for civil war.” Democratic gains in state elections in Connecticut and Rhode Island in early April 1861 suggested that the North was increasingly disunited as the crisis deepened.

The seven Deep South states, from South Carolina west to Texas, likewise had a

distinct identity. Here toiled more than three-fifths of American slaves. Their overall numbers almost matched the white population; two states and many cotton-growing counties across the Lower South had black majorities. The antislavery movement stirred visceral indignation in the Deep South. But the Lower South did not regard itself as separate from the American nation. Jefferson Davis, who masterminded construction of the splendid new U.S. Capitol building in the mid- and late 1850s, would have welcomed the 1860 presidential nomination of a united Democratic Party. His wife, Varina Davis, felt more at home in Washington, D.C., than in Mississippi. Many in the Deep South hoped before November that the nation would hold together. In mid-October former South Carolina congressman Waddy Thompson wrote to his old friend, Ohio's Thomas Corwin, seeking assurances that Abraham Lincoln would be "conservative" and offering advice on how to "prevent seceding movements."



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The first essay in this volume addresses the extraordinary upheaval in the Deep South that directly followed Lincoln's election. William L. Barney, its author, wrote one of the landmark studies of Deep South secession that appeared in the 1970s. His essay builds upon his earlier work, but also breaks new ground. As a young scholar, Barney thought the Deep South's shocking course resulted primarily from anxiety that a Republican president would close off the territories and implement a slow strangulation of the slave system. Upwardly mobile supporters of John C. Breckinridge, the Southern Rights presidential candidate, led the drive for secession. Downplaying any danger of war, secession took place in Alabama and Mississippi amid a carnival atmosphere. Within just a few months, the Confederate States of America took shape.

Barney now introduces a fresh angle of vision. Secession was "the slaves' revenge." By "daily giving the lie to the professed white image of them as loyal, docile servants content in their bondage," enslaved African Americans distorted Southern white perceptions of reality. Finding it "ever harder to convince themselves that slavery was right" and to justify their slave-based society, whites in the Deep South "ignored all the risks involved and rushed to embrace secession in the winter of 1860-61." They thereby embarked on "a suicidal, self-defeating rush to destruction" (10, 33). Here Barney accomplishes several things at once. He moves irony to the center of historical inquiry. In effect he also tips his hat to the hardworking scholars associated with the Freedmen and Southern Society Project, who have demonstrated how much the slaves themselves did to bring about emancipation. Not least, Barney illuminates the pivotal juncture in the larger drama. The Lower South's wild spasm—an astonishing moment of collective catharsis, when established political leaders either had to join the mob or step aside—created a deadly standoff that soon spiraled into war.

Let us turn to the eight slave states of the Upper South, which were less

absolutely wed to the slave system and less inclined to go berserk because of Lincoln's election. Our guide here is the author of the second essay, Elizabeth R. Varon, who focuses on the Upper South's key state and her most famous son, Virginia's Robert E. Lee. Varon has written two books on late antebellum and wartime Virginia, notably a biography of Elizabeth Van Lew, an elite native-born lady who headed a Union spy ring in wartime Richmond—striking evidence indeed that the Upper South was not quite so united in favor of the abortive Southern project as the Deep South. And this was most especially true during the months of uncertainty in early 1861, when the Upper South initially refused to follow the Deep South out of the Union.

Like the majority of white Virginians, Lee hoped to see the Union restored. For that to happen, the seceding states would have to rethink their course. He favored concession and compromise. Lee and like-minded Virginians ruled out any effort to compel their return; that would be counterproductive and inadmissible. Virginia would not tolerate "coercion." In truth, Virginians had no idea what to do if the Deep South remained estranged, and they did not want to think about a possible shooting war.

Everything changed in mid-April 1861. The Confederates assaulted Fort Sumter. Three days later, on April 15, Lincoln called for 75,000 troops to put down the rebellion. Lincoln's proclamation outraged most white Virginians (but not those in the trans-Allegheny northwest), much as his election had ignited the Deep South's secessionist firestorm five months before. In the Shenandoah Valley town of Lexington, where Lee lived his last days after the war, assertive Unionists on April 13 erected a tall pole with an eagle on it to fly the American flag and overawe the pro-secession minority. But on April 16 the men who had raised the pole chopped it down. Lincoln had forced Virginians to pick a side.

We all know what Lee decided. Francis Preston Blair and Winfield Scott told him that he could expect to command the Union Army. Lee would not accept the possibility of fighting against Virginia, and so he resigned abruptly, ending a career that stretched for more than three decades. Several days later he was persuaded to take charge of Virginia's forces. Varon rejects the well-worn canard that Lee's answer was the one "he was born to make" (35). And so does Lee's most discerning biographer, Elizabeth Brown Pryor, who notes that the majority of high-ranking Southern officers in the U.S. Army decided otherwise, that members of the Lee's extended family included many with Union proclivities, and that the members of his immediate household were left speechless by the patriarch's decision. Varon sees Lee's decision-making process as "rational and calculated" (6), echoing her book, *Disunion!*; Pryor would amend that to say "the quick turnaround was probably entirely logical in Lee's heart."

Large parts of the South (though not all parts) fled the Union, but the previously divided North refused to allow it and rallied to reverse Southern secession. The North's determination to restore the Union by force set in

motion the astonishing events of the next four years. The third essay here, by Robert J. Cook, author of a fine recent biography of Maine's William Pitt Fessenden, "probes the function of collective memory in the coming of the Civil War," as "politicians on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line battled to persuade ordinary Americans that they and not their enemies were on the right side of history" (60). He focuses on "grievance narratives" (74, 76, 84). Secession leaders claimed to be following the footsteps of the Founding Fathers, by striking for independence rather than submitting to tyranny and oppression. Hard-line Republicans, by contrast, warned that a slave power conspiracy had long tried to undermine the antislavery aspirations of the Founding Fathers; Republicans promised to save the nation by refusing to compromise with wicked secessionists.

Cook then narrows his focus to the early months of 1861, especially the Fort Sumter crisis. William H. Seward held that "blind unreasoning popular excitement" in the Deep South would subside if not further inflamed. To bring that about, and to hold and strengthen the allegiance of the border slave states, he would relinquish Sumter. His counsel was, he claimed, "such as Chatham gave to his country under circumstances not widely different." Seward thereby presented an intriguing alternative to the two grievance narratives. His own historical exemplar would be William Pitt, First Earl of Chatham, who in the 1770s "had tried to prevent war between Britain and its seditious colonies" (71).

Charles Francis Adams agreed. The South had been swept by "panic, pure panic," but he would not "absolutely clos[e] the door to reconciliation," as many of his fellow Republicans demanded. Instead, Adams thought it wiser to heed the examples of Chatham and Edmund Burke, who urged Britain to conciliate the American colonies. Had George III listened to Chatham's "words of wisdom," Adams observed, "he might have saved the brightest jewel of his crown." Instead he took the opposite course. "He rejected the olive branch. He insisted upon coercion. And what was the result? History records its verdict in favor of Chatham and against the king."

In the end, however, the decision was Lincoln's to make. Dovetailing with Russell McClintock's expert dissection of the decision-making process, Cook finds that the untested new president found inspiration in two sources—Andrew Jackson's threat to use armed force against South Carolina's nullification in 1832, and Henry Clay's comparable line in the sand in 1850, when he vowed that any "open resistance to the Union" by South Carolina must be "put down at every hazard" (81-85).

When Lincoln made his decision, there was no way to know whether it was the right one. Would war ultimately reknit the national fabric? Or would war so alienate the divergent sections as to make reunion impossible? What did become apparent almost immediately was that Lincoln's Proclamation for 75,000 troops bifurcated the former United States as never before. Blinking with amazement, North Carolina newspaper editor William W. Holden wrote that the proclamation,

“as by a stroke of lightning, made the North wholly North and the South wholly South.” Seward’s ally, North Carolina Congressman John A. Gilmer, agreed. “As matters now stand,” he sadly concluded, “there is a United North against a United South, and both marching to the field of blood.”