

America's Longest Siege: Charleston, Slavery, and the Slow March Toward Civil War

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Review

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Kelly, Joseph *America's Longest Siege: Charleston, Slavery, and the Slow March Toward Civil War*. Overlook Press, \$27.95 ISBN 978-1-59020-719-2

The Siege Mentality of Slavery

Few historians are likely aware that Charleston is the site of the longest siege in American history. At 545 days, Charleston far surpasses both Vicksburg and Petersburg. Joseph Kelly's new book, which takes its title from this momentous event, is not a study of the military campaign. Rather, the title conveys the way that slavery besieged the mind and manners of Charleston; it is the story of how the "jewel of the South," which had once the rival of New York and Philadelphia, was eclipsed owing to the political, moral, and economic divisions that a closed slave society mandated. The city's "devotion to slavery," Kelly writes, "sealed its sentence, and the Union's siege of Charleston and the Civil War's dead...were playing out of its tragic flaw."(17)

By placing Charleston at the epicenter of his study, Kelly's eminently readable history is in the company of a number of books that are devoted to exploring the peculiarity of South Carolina's antebellum politics. *The Longest Siege* departs from other works, however, owing to the fact that Kelly, a professor of literature at the College of Charleston, is interested in the cultural climate that surrounded the Palmetto State's narrowing political mind. For Kelly, the critical turn comes in the early nineteenth century with the 1822 frustration of Denmark Vesey's rebellion. Kelly's account of the episode is vivid, and he casts doubt about the validity of the testimony that indicted Vesey.

In the wake of Vesey's rebellion Kelly argues that South Carolina's political figures, who would step onto the national stage within the decade, used "fear" to "leverage[e] the public into enacting and enforcing proslavery policy."(169) After Nullification, he advances that the planters completed their dominion with the advancement of slavery as a positive good. Leading the charge in South Carolina was none other than the state's foremost political philosopher, John C.

Calhoun. In denying the claims of equality made by the Declaration of Independence, Calhoun put South Carolina on the path of radical myopia. In the penultimate chapter, Kelly describes the ways that emerging writers, thinkers, and politicians conformed to this newly warped reality. From that moment forward, the players are set and the tragedy plays out.

Throughout, Kelly's literary sensibilities are on display and he regularly humanizes such historical events. In a poignant summation of the consequences of secession, Kelly quotes William Tecumseh Sherman, who when visiting the ruins of the city, proffered: "Charleston and secession being synonymous terms, the city should be left as a sample, so that centuries will pass away before that false doctrine is again preached in our Union." (312) In another example Kelly uses the story of Angelina Grimke and her traumatic encounter with a slave to reinforce the ever-constricting and complicit nature of South Carolina's slave society.

Kelly's concluding chapter suggests that the legacies of white supremacy and secession cast a long shadow. He advances that South Carolina's twentieth-century state's rights demagogues seized upon such a heritage oppose the federal government and its desegregation mandate. In the twenty-first century, Kelly argues that this has continued and manifested in the passage of voter identification laws and in the Freedom of Health Care Protection Act, which would make complying with federal healthcare a crime within South Carolina. Some readers may object to the inclusion of contemporary political issues, and such complex linkages deserve more scrutiny than can be provided here. These arguments are an undoubtedly provoking coda in a generally thoughtful work.

Geoffrey Cunningham is a PhD candidate in the Department of History at Louisiana State University. He is writing a dissertation on the Confederate cabinet.