

### The Road to Disunion, Vol. II: Secessionists Triumphant, 1854-1861

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## Review

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**Freehling, William W.** *The Road to Disunion, Vol. II: Secessionists Triumphant, 1854-1861*. Oxford University Press, \$35.00 hardcover ISBN 9780195058151

The South and Disunion

The Complexity of Sectionalism and Secession

The publication in 1990 of William W. Freehling's *Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854* was a major event. The first volume of a projected two-volume magnum opus entitled *The Road to Disunion*, it launched one of the most provocative and compelling attempts ever written to understand the southern road to Sumter.

*Secessionists at Bay* had many strengths. Chief among them was its emphasis on the South's geographical heterogeneity, and especially its effective division into three sub-regions — the Border South (Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland, and Delaware), the Upper or Middle South (Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas), and the Lower South (Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, and South Carolina). Freehling artfully depicted how variations among (and sometimes within) those sub-regions in — variations in climate, soil, economic development, and social structure -- yielded distinctive political cultures. Those same variations also left slaveholding more profitable, more broadly based, more firmly rooted (and left slaveholders more politically influential) in some of these places than in others. For example, while the Lower South grew in size as well as in dependence upon and commitment to the peculiar institution, slavery's grip on the Border South and parts of the Upper South proved (or over time became) weaker.

Bill Freehling was not, of course, the first to note slavery's variable viability south of the Mason-Dixon Line. Some earlier scholars had made similar points — and then claimed that by the 1850s slavery had reached the natural limits of its

possible expansion. From that premise, in turn, they deduced that slavery had been doomed to extinction by the laws of nature and economics. The era's sharpening sectional conflict and the eventual outbreak of sectional war, they therefore concluded, were utterly unnecessary, products of blunders by a generation of inept and careerist politicians, North and South, who were blind to or heedless of the direction in which history was inexorably headed anyway.

In the mid-1960s, Eugene Genovese offered a particularly powerful rebuttal to that line of argument. He skillfully demonstrated that a class of slaveholders bent on remaining slaveholders could (and, in fact, did) reasonably react to slavery's systemic problems not by abandoning it but by aggressively demanding and imposing a series of measures designed to ensure slavery's survival. *Secessionists at Bay* implicitly elaborated on Genovese's crucial insight. As Freehling skillfully demonstrated in that volume and in a series of stunningly insightful essays, slavery's various weaknesses only heightened anxieties about that system's security among masters both there and (especially) in the states of the Lower South.

Freehling thus complicated our understanding of antebellum southern history while simultaneously rendering it both subtler and more profound. Volume one closed by demonstrating how worries about the future of slavery on the South's frontier — in that case, Missouri — led southern politicians in 1854 to demand repeal of the old Missouri Compromise, thereby opening the half-decade of aggravated sectional conflict that would culminate in the Civil War.

Naturally, then, those fascinated by the history of the South, slavery, and national politics have been awaiting with great anticipation the appearance of the second volume of this monumental work. While we waited, Freehling gave us a short but equally illuminating and thought-proving volume that applied his insights about southern heterogeneity to the story of how the Confederacy lost the Civil War. In the process, *The South vs. the South: How Anti-Confederate Southerners Shaped the Course of the Civil War* (2001) deepened our appreciation of the ways in which social and political factors influenced not only the outbreak but also the prosecution of the Civil War.

Now, seventeen years after the appearance of *Secessionists at Bay*, the much-anticipated sequel has arrived, *Secessionists Triumphant, 1854-1861*. The adjective magisterial has been badly overused and devalued of late, but if it properly describes anyone's work, it certainly does Freehling's. The completion

of this project is a genuinely monumental achievement. In his second volume, Freehling brings his stress on the South's socio-economic and political heterogeneity to bear on Bleeding Kansas, filibustering, the movement to reform slavery from within, the Dred Scott decision, Harpers Ferry, the defection and disarray of the southern Whigs, the division and then sundering of the national Democratic party, the election of 1860, and the secession movement. The result is a significantly more complete and penetrating view than we have previously had of these key moments in the movement toward war.

Freehling early and clearly formulates this volume's specific overriding argument: To bridge potentially corrosive differences, late antebellum Southerners deployed ever more intriguing proslavery ideologies and ever more zany political crusades. Precisely because these initiatives failed, he holds, the secessionist faction of white Southerners considered President-elect Lincoln an immediate menace to their imperfectly consolidated regime (xiii). A Republican White House, they feared, would move all too swiftly and effectively to further widen the divisions that already plagued the South. Only secession, they believed, could avoid that outcome.

The book's final chapters focus on the struggle that the South's minority of committed secessionist cadres waged to bring the rest of the white population along with them into national independence. Just how, the author asks, did this minority — which had for so long been outmaneuvered and outvoted by southern devotees of the federal Union — finally manage to get its way, especially in the stubbornly unionist Upper South? The familiar narrative, of course, points to the firing on Fort Sumter, Lincoln's resulting call to arms to suppress the rebellion, and the Upper South's decision to join rather than to help crush their fellow southerners. Freehling duly (and rather quickly) recapitulates that tale. But then, curiously, his argument seems to falter, almost as though after all these pages he has run out of energy.

How does the story that Freehling has been telling us about the South's internal divisions — the divisions that so worried and frustrated the most ardent champions of chattel slavery, the divisions that helped drive the secessionist campaign — how does this story help us understand the eleventh-hour overcoming of those intra-regional divisions and the creation of a united southern Confederacy? The book's last few pages fleetingly invoke a developing southern nationalism that overcame many differences, a nationalism apparently fed by resentment of holier-than-thou outsiders, a visceral loathing of

Yankees, a rage at Yankee intruders and insulters, and a commitment to defend a white [right to] consent to be governed. Always, he tells us, northern castigation ... provoked insulted Southerners to line up behind their minority of precipitators (527-534).

Always? Surely not, and no one knows that better than William Freehling. His very first book, *Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1816-1836* (1965), brilliantly dissected the Nullification crisis of the early 1830s. Alarmed and outraged by the Nat Turner insurrection and the birth of immediatist abolitionism, South Carolina planters then determined to check the power of a federal government that might someday be turned against the most vital interests of the white South. In so doing, they brought down on their heads plenty of northern castigation and insults, and they quickly found themselves facing the very real threat of military action to enforce federal law and thereby set limits on the right of these white men to govern themselves as they pleased. Yet on that occasion, not one other southern state came to South Carolina's aid. Why not? And why, in stark contrast, did so many southern states act so differently thirty years later?

There were, of course, sundry differences between these two crises. But surely the chief explanation for these different outcomes is to be found in the protracted tale that William Freehling has worked so hard and effectively to analyze in these two important volumes. Between 1832 and 1860-61, the gradually (and then more rapidly) escalating sectional contention over slavery had sharply raised fears throughout the South that slavery was, indeed, in peril. Here the North's gradually (and then more rapidly) hardening resistance to the claims of the Slave Power becomes essential to the story. The spread of abolitionism, the rescinding of the gag rule, the popularity of the Wilmot Proviso, the birth of the Free Soil Party, the resistance to the Fugitive Slave Act, the storm over Kansas, and the surge of Republican power in the North—all these things had by 1860-61 left most of the slave states that had abandoned South Carolina to its fate in 1832 unwilling to abandon it again. Too much was now at stake; too much was seen to be at stake. True, Lincoln's election was not by itself enough to galvanize them into united action. But Lincoln's threat to do what Jackson had once threatened to do was enough. As North Carolina Unionist John Gilmer explained in March 1865, Upper South leaders now worried that the whipping of a slave state, is the whipping of slavery. The many decades of mounting national contention over slavery that William Freehling has done so much to illuminate had given them good cause to worry and to act upon that

worry.

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