

Disunion!: The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789-1859

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Varon, Elizabeth R.

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The Disunionist Impulse

Elizabeth Varon has written a highly engaging account of the sectional conflict and the coming of the Civil War around the idea of disunion, which she argues was a “*keyword* of the nation’s political vocabulary” in the first seven decades of its existence (2). Briefly describing the two dominant schools of Civil War causation as “fundamentalist” and “revisionist,” Varon’s characterization of Kenneth Stampp and David Potter as revisionists, those who downplay the role of slavery and fundamental differences between the sections in the coming of the war, will surprise more than a few Civil War historians. She quickly moves beyond historiographical debates to describe how Americans North and South used disunion as threat, accusation, prophecy, process, or program in the political debates over slavery. This interpretive framework pops up throughout the book but it fortunately does not constrain Varon’s lively narrative of sectional tensions. She makes good use of recent historical literature to produce a synthetic and balanced account of the politics of disunion in the American republic. There is however enough originality in scholarship and primary research in accounts of congressional debates and newspapers to make this book not just a work of synthesis.

Unlike most books on Civil War causation, Varon begins her story with the birth of the republic and the constitutional compromises over slavery. Disunion and its corollary dangers that encompassed fears of the fragility of republics and foreign intervention pervaded American political discourse from the very start. While she spends some time describing early controversies over Quaker antislavery petitions to Congress, the Missouri Crisis, and the nullification controversy, Varon devotes most of the book to the antebellum period, the three decades preceding the Civil War.

Perhaps the most valuable contribution of the book is the attention Varon lavishes on the abolition movement, including African American abolitionists. She correctly argues that abolitionists were the first to consistently and insistently introduce the subject of slavery in the national political arena highlighting their pioneering role in the rise of political antislavery in the north. Her summary of the black origins of immediatism introduces the latest scholarship in this area to a wider audience. Indeed her sympathetic portrait of William Lloyd Garrison is a useful corrective to the popular image of the preeminent abolitionist as a fanatical outsider who exercised little political influence beyond his coterie of followers. She carefully delineates all the early sectional controversies over abolitionist meetings, petitioning, lecturing, and mailing. She also provides useful summaries of the fall out over the Amistad and Creole cases, stresses the importance of the publication of books like Theodore Weld's *American Slavery As It Is*, and of grass roots activism in the Underground Railroad. And in writing about the significance of African American and slave petitions to southern legislatures she mines work done in this area in a new and significant way. Not surprisingly given her own earlier work in women's history, Varon introduces us to a much wider cast of characters than the mainstream politicians who dominate traditional political history. Slave rebels, women's righters, black and white antislavery activists get ample space in the first half of the book and continue to emerge right until the end as astute commentators on the politics of slavery. Given the focus of her book, Varon also renders one of the most thoughtful discussions of Garrisonian disunionism as an abolitionist tactic in the 1840s and 1850s.

Varon's description of the sectional controversy over the expansion of slavery that reappeared in the debate over the annexation of Texas and took off during the Mexican War is surprisingly even handed in light of her endorsement of Frederick Douglass's conclusion that there was a right and a wrong side to the war. She uncritically reproduces the arguments of southerners who worried about the safety of slavery and their alleged rights in the Union along with the rise of political abolitionism and the free soil critique of slave society. In some original and interesting asides, she highlights the gendered language of antebellum American politics. Varon walks the reader through all the familiar stepping stones on the road to the Civil War, the Wilmot Proviso and the Compromise of 1850, the Fugitive Slave Law and the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the Kansas Nebraska Act and the crisis over the Lecompton Constitution, the caning of Sumner and the Dred Scott

decision, the rapid rise of the Republican Party and the Lincoln-Douglas debates, and finally, John Brown's raid. Southern fire-eaters or secessionists of course get a lot of attention in a book devoted to exploring the influence of the idea of disunion in pre-Civil War American politics. She describes the finished proslavery argument of the 1850s as well as southern extremist fantasies about reopening the slave trade and acquiring Central America and Cuba. In fact, even though Varon occasionally evokes her five models of disunion, the majority of her examples show how southerners used disunion as a threat to get northerners to accede to their demands on slavery. Despite an epilogue that briefly discusses the idea of disunion during the war itself, she does not spend much time looking at what one might imagine a crucial period for a book devoted to disunion, the presidential election of 1860 and the secession of the southern states. After concluding that Brown's raid made secession inevitable, she chooses to end her book somewhat prematurely in this reviewer's opinion.

Disunion! is a highly readable book that should be accessible to undergraduate students as well as a lay audience. In fact Varon has done yeoman's work in rendering the tangled history of particular sectional issues clearly and judiciously. Her conclusion that disunion was "inseparable from the issue of slavery's destiny" (337) and that slavery "encompassed" (338) anxieties about disunion is on the mark. But if slavery was the root cause of disunion then without the slavery issue, disunion would probably have died an early death. In the end, Varon's attempt to use disunion as way to overcome the revisionist/fundamentalist disagreement over the role of slavery in causing the Civil War does not work entirely. As Lincoln famously put it, everyone knew that slavery had caused disunion and the war.

Manisha Sinha is Associate Professor of Afro-American Studies and History at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She is the author of The Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina (2000) and co-editor of the two-volume African American Mosaic: A Documentary History from the Slave Trade to the Twenty First Century (2004) and Contested Democracy: Freedom, Race and Power in American History (2007). Currently, she is writing a book on African Americans and the movement to abolish slavery, 1775-1865. She would like to thank her graduate students in the Slavery seminar for their comments on this review.