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William J. Cooper

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## Interview

### CWBR AUTHOR INTERVIEW: WE HAVE THE WAR UPON US: THE ONSET OF THE CIVIL WAR, DECEMBER 1860-APRIL 1861

Cooper, William J.

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Interview with William J. Cooper, Boyd Professor of History at Louisiana State University  
Interviewed by Nathan Buman

**Civil War Book Review (CWBR):** Today, I'm discussing with Professor William J. Cooper, Jr., his newly-published *We Have the War Upon Us: The Onset of the Civil War, December 1860-April 1861*. Professor Cooper, thank you for joining us today.

**CWBR:** You examine the failure of the Democratic National Convention when it met in Charleston as a signal of the splintering of the Democratic Party. Surely the Democrats understood what their failure meant nationally; why couldn't northern and southern Democrats compromise to oppose the Republicans who faced a much easier task in an election against a broken Democratic Party?

**William J. Cooper, Jr. (WJC):** Well the Democratic Party had two problems. The first problem was Stephen A. Douglas who was an anathema to the southerners, and the southerners were determined to stop him. They thought they had a good chance to do so because of the two-thirds rule requiring two-thirds of the delegates to nominate a candidate. Moreover, the more moderate southern leaders like Jefferson Davis, for example, wanted the convention to move toward nominations before a platform. They wanted to get a candidate in place and then get a platform, but the more radical southerners wanted a platform first because they wanted to force Douglas to come towards them or to beat Douglas at his own game. And those people led by William Lowndes Yancey of Alabama forced through a platform regarding slavery in the territories that the Douglas people could not and would not accept. Though the

platform committee voted for that platform, or that plank, because the vote was by states. Once the radical southerners pressed the others on the platform committee went along with them. But when it went before the full convention it was voted down, and at that point Yancey lead a walk-out. Now most scholars don't think Yancey wanted to break up the Democratic Party, that he wanted to come back as a kind of hero, a king maker. Well he didn't come back, and other southern states that walked out with him didn't come back because they weren't asked to do so. The Douglas people in Charleston thought that they could get him nominated but the ruling was made by the convention chair that it took two-thirds of all the delegates, not just those remaining; thus they didn't get what they wanted and the convention adjourned, agreeing to meet again in Baltimore. It met and it was the same difficulty even compounded because some of the southern states sent old delegations and some sent new delegations. The party came apart. It came apart both on the southern antipathy to Douglas and on radical southern demands that northerners wouldn't accept.

**CWBR:** You mention Yancey from Alabama, but you state that "Fire-eaters considered [at one point] the Palmetto State their citadel, the stronghold where they exercised enormous influence." How and why did South Carolina ascend to this status instead of any of the other Deep South states?

**(WJC):** I'll do the best I can with that. That's a vexing question that numerous historians have addressed, and none have come to a conclusion that satisfies more than a handful of individuals. Why South Carolina became so radical and stayed so radical so long is very hard to understand. The political organization of the state which gave great power to the legislature and still required property qualifications to sit in it, the absence of a two-party system which was chiefly due to John C. Calhoun's dominance of the state during the formative period of the Democratic and Whig Parties, the overwhelming domination of the state by large planters, the fact that the state had been majority black for so long, all of these come together. And of course South Carolina was a seceding state in the 1830s and wanted to secede in 1850, but even the radicals of the state decided that someone needed to go first because they had been alone once before yet they could not get anybody else to go out so secession in South Carolina came apart. In 1860 they still wanted someone to go out first-most of them-but they couldn't get anybody to take that step. But when they thought they got promises that some would follow especially Georgia, the radicals in the legislature in the state succeeded in getting the state to go out. It's very difficult to understand because amongst the chief radicals were some of the richest people in

America: the rice and Sea Island cotton planters on both sides of Charleston on the sea coast, people who were absolutely vulnerable if any military conflict should occur. And when that did occur one of the first places that fell to Union forces was around Beaufort, South Carolina, a radical bastion and a center of very wealthy planters. My answer is not very satisfactory because I don't think a satisfactory answer exists at this point.

**CWBR:** It seems that the Radicals-we mentioned those fire-eaters in the South, but also those hard-liner Republicans in the North- that they are the ones that scooped up any potential undecided support during the secession crisis. Why couldn't the Border Conservatives, as you call them, garner more support for compromise and patience during the secession crisis?

**(WJC):** The Border Conservatives failed because they failed to move the leadership of the Republican Party. And I spend a lot of time in this book talking about the struggle of Border Conservatives. They had an ally in the Republican Party, William Henry Seward. I'm persuaded that Seward wanted to make a deal, that he would have made a deal had it been within his power, but Lincoln said no and Seward pushed Lincoln as far as he thought he could. He did urge Lincoln to adopt a more conservative, more conciliatory course, even down to Fort Sumter when he wanted Lincoln to remove the federal garrison. But he never got too far in front of Lincoln, he never wanted to alienate Lincoln. The failure of the Border Conservatives to convince Lincoln that he needed to move toward their position guaranteed that the Republican Party would not move. Nothing would have moved the Republican hard-liners but, if Lincoln had moved, the great center of the party would have followed him. I am persuaded of that.

**CWBR:** It almost feels, at times like politics got away from the political giants of the day, specifically William Seward and Jefferson Davis, who preached caution and union. How did the people on the ground, the hard-liner Republicans and the Fire-eaters successfully achieve the plunge into secession and war?

**(WJC):** Well let's go to the South first. Secession followed the election of Lincoln. Fire-eaters had been preaching secession to break up the Union, for so long, but they advocated a doctrine that asked southerners to step into the unknown, to take a giant step away from something they knew into something that they didn't know. Now the fire-eaters proclaimed that this was going to be the political Garden of Eden, the land of milk and honey. But southerners weren't

sure and southerners were loyal Americans; they embraced the United States. They looked to the great American heroes as their own heroes. Leaving the country, leaving the United States was not a step they would take easily but with Republicans in charge, now the fire-eaters ask: what's going to happen with the Republican administration? So now you've got the unknown of secession matched with the unknown of what a Republican would do. What men like Jefferson Davis wanted was some signal from the Republicans that they were going to respect what a person like him thought of as southern rights. And that meant to say that the southerners had a constitutional right, not only to own slaves in Mississippi, but a constitutional right to share in the national territory, in the national property . Davis didn't demand a slave code for the territories but he did demand a constitutional right. He was quite willing-and men like him were quite willing-to make compromises on territorial alignments, but on the fundamental right he wanted Republican acquiescence or recognition. He thought that if he had that he could go back to Mississippi and to the rest of the South and say: look, they recognize our rights. When he couldn't get that, the fire- eaters had him in a box; if he wanted to retain, if men like him wanted to retain, any power and prestige in their states they were forced to go in that direction. Likewise, in the North, the hardline Republicans said: we will never make any deals, we will never make any compromise. While their number was a minority within their party, the president- elect, the man who was to be the leader of their party, stood with them on that particular issue. We must remember that, despite the fire-eaters in the South and the hard-liners in the North, a large pro-compromise element did exist and that group included northerners and southerners, anti-slave and pro-slave alike who sought to maintain the Union despite sectional differences. In my judgment Lincoln's failure in this crisis was that he never said anything publicly about what he would and wouldn't do. He never stood up and told southerners that he would be president of all Americans, that he and they were different but also alike. Lincoln had an enormous gift for fitting political language and one can imagine the kind of statement he would have made. It might very well have quieted some of the southern concern but he didn't do it.

**CWBR:** On pages 72-73, you discuss a shift in Lincoln's approach to compromise, noting that he supported the Compromise of 1850 publicly but within a decade of that support, "Lincoln unequivocally opposed compromise even as the Union came apart." What accounts for this adjustment in his viewpoint?

**(WJC):** Well I think that there are two things. This is a general position on Lincoln and compromise, but I think you have to be a little more specific and look at Lincoln at this particular instance between his election and his taking office, why he was so adamantly opposed then. And I think that there are three reasons, and I talk about them in my book at some length. First, he was ignorant of the South; he had no southern political friends, really no southern friends of any kind except a few in Kentucky. He didn't know anything about the Deep South politics; also he didn't understand the society of the Deep South. I don't think he had any recognition of how deeply slavery had become embedded, how white southerners, no matter whether they thought slavery was good or bad, were committed to it. Committed to their slave society, they wanted no interference with it. They feared that he was going to interfere with them. I don't believe he stopped to think, when he said this country can't continue half-slave and half-free, how southerners might react when he says something like that. Second, Lincoln approached this whole problem as a Republican partisan, I think he had just become party leader. He knew Seward, for example, had more national stature than he did even after his election, and he knew that many Republicans still looked to Seward. He wanted to establish himself as the party leader. He was very concerned about what he saw as the fragility of the Republican coalition, that he was the first elected Republican president and he feared that if he moved toward conciliation, toward any serious compromise, that he would alienate the hard-liners, the left wing of his party, who might bolt. In contrast, Seward who had been a spokesman for antislavery politics for a decade, first as a Whig, then as a Republican, had a standing to face those people head-on if they came after him, and he suspected that they would. But where would they go if the most radical bolted? He thought that the Republican Party needed to expand, and he was looking to those conservatives in the border states to build a national Republican Party based on Union. Now, Lincoln eventually came to the Union party idea during the war, but before war he never saw the Republican Party expanding beyond its initial boundaries. He did not come to this crisis as the president-elect of a country but as the leader of a party and a party that had always been in opposition. But there was even a third factor. Lincoln, I think, was more viscerally anti-slave than Seward. Yet, he was no abolitionist; he even supported the original Thirteenth Amendment which would have made it practically impossible to touch slavery in the states. As a constitutionalist, he couldn't do otherwise because he believed the constitution sanctioned slavery in the states, but by emphasizing the territories and by saying never again in any territory he could get around that constitutional barricade and still hold to his

constitutional scruples. He saw the future in territories. In his view stopping slavery in the territories stopped slavery in the future. He also claimed that he was simply carrying out the legacy of the founding fathers. In his famous Cooper Union address back in February 1860, he focused on the signers of the Constitution and he said that these men really intended for an antislavery America and somehow that legacy had been turned in the wrong direction. But although Lincoln in the speech talked about what he called the facts, the founding fathers bequeathed a much more complicated legacy. With every president from Washington to Monroe new territories permitting slavery were added to the Union or organized

**CWBR:** You mentioned Seward's national recognition and leadership in the formation of the Republican Party, being one of the premier Whigs before that. In those weeks after the election, did Seward want to appear as the savior of the Union for his own self-fulfilling purposes or did he simply not trust Lincoln to serve the country adequately?

**(WJC):** I don't think he knew enough about Lincoln to know what to think about Lincoln. I think most Republicans were in that position except those who were very close to Lincoln in Illinois. Lincoln had a fairly small circle, his circle of intimates was almost closed. And Seward wasn't the only Republican concerned about what Lincoln would do. I think he did have concerns about Lincoln but I think Seward also, early on, decided that the Union was in great danger and something had to be done to pacify the South in terms of convincing southerners that the Republicans weren't out to get them. And that's what he wanted to do, but as I said a few minutes back, he was never willing to cross Lincoln. Lincoln had bested Seward for the nomination and had been elected. You can understand Lincoln's thinking: if I go along with Seward, it's going to look like I'm Seward's man, and it's going to be Seward's presidency rather than mine. I've got to establish myself and put myself in the front. And he did that; he certainly did that in December of 1860 when after Thurlow Weed, Seward's political ally, went to Illinois hoping to get Lincoln's agreement on things he and Seward wanted. Weed failed.

**CWBR:** James Buchanan has time and again faced severe criticism for his failure to prevent secession and his seemingly passive stance in the face of southern attacks on federal property. But, I wonder, how tough was the task that he faced and might historians have judged too harshly what he did not do (hold the Deep South in the Union) while failing to commend him for halting the

spread of secession and preventing open conflict?

**(WJC):** Well I don't think Buchanan could have done much to halt the spread of secession. Yet, he did have a great deal to do with keeping the flag flying at Fort Sumter and Fort Pickens that gave Lincoln levers that Lincoln wouldn't have had otherwise. There was enormous pressure on Buchanan to give up both of them, and he held his ground in both. I think he deserves a good deal of credit in terms of maintaining a position that his successor could use if his successor chose to. What Buchanan would have done if he had ever faced what Lincoln faced at Fort Sumter: Anderson's saying he needed to come out, that he was running out of supplies. I think he would have withdrawn Anderson under those circumstances because his agreement with Anderson was if Anderson asked for help he would send help, Anderson didn't ask for help in early March of 1861. He said he couldn't be successfully reinforced. In terms of stopping secession there was very little Buchanan could do. You may say, well he should have done what Andrew Jackson did. Well remember Andrew Jackson did two things. One, he did raise the threat of the sword but he also worked with Congress to get a compromise to diffuse the situation. Buchanan had no chance with Congress, the Republicans wouldn't pay him any mind whatever. He had even lost his influence with the southern Democrats over Fort Sumter. So by January the first he was in Congress a dead letter practically speaking, with both Republicans and southern Democrats. Then, he faced a much more difficult situation than Jackson did. Jackson had one state where Buchanan had one state going out and several other states, all the way west to Texas saying we're all going out if you do anything. So he calculated that if he took any overt act that would encourage secession more than if he didn't take any overt act. Now perhaps taking an overt act would have slowed it down; we can't know that but that was the calculation he made and in my mind to compare him and Jackson is really like comparing apples and oranges.

**CWBR:** When Alabama Congressman, Williamson Cobb, left his post in Washington to return home, he writes the Republican Party: "you can still this storm before the sun shall set to-day." Is that correct, and how?

**(WJC):** Well he said that in a speech in the House of Representatives. If the Republicans would have agreed to a serious compromise, that would have killed secession. I mean Cobb believed that; I certainly believe that; Jefferson Davis believed that, Robert Toombs (who didn't want any compromise) believed that. It's hard to see, in a state like Georgia where the vote was so close anyway, that if



serious compromise had been reached that Georgia would have gone out. Even though South Carolina had gone out, Georgia was the bridge to the rest of the Deep South. However, the same deal that started secession in Georgia would have done likewise farther west. In sum, I think Cobb was right.

**CWBR:** You end your book, just as you begin it, with a look at John J. Crittenden, the political heir-apparent to Henry Clay. While Clay became known as the Great Compromiser or Great Pacificator, Crittenden failed to hold the nation together. Does this signal failure on Crittenden's part or is he symbolic of the inability to compromise after Lincoln's election?

**(WJC):** I think that Crittenden did all that Crittenden could do. He could not move Lincoln; he could not move the Republicans. The Republican Party was not going to break with Lincoln. He was the first elected Republican. The Republicans had never had the White House before and they were going to stand united behind that man if they could. And even Seward, who wanted to go toward Crittenden wasn't going to break with Lincoln. They were going to keep a united party. It was not Crittenden's fault as one hard-liner Republican said and I quote him: "we couldn't stand firm until people like Clay and Webster were gone." Crittenden just couldn't move the people he had to move. **CWBR:** Professor Cooper, I appreciate you taking the time to sit and discuss your most recent work, *We have the War Upon Us: The Onset of the Civil War, December 1860-April 1861*.