

### A Union Indivisible: Secession and the Politics of Slavery in the Border South

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## Review

**Richards, Leonard L.**

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**Robinson, Michael D.** *A Union Indivisible: Secession and the Politics of Slavery in the Border South*. University of North Carolina Press, \$34.95  
ISBN 9781469633787

Michael D. Robinson is currently an assistant professor at the University of Mobile. This is his first book. It is an outgrowth of a dissertation that he did at LSU under the direction William J. Cooper, Jr. As the subtitle indicates, it is about the secession crisis in the slave states bordering the Mason-Dixon line and the Ohio River. But it is not about all of them. Originally, Robinson intended to focus solely on Kentucky, but then expanded his study to include what he calls the border South. In doing so, however, he excluded the 386,000 Virginians who also lived along the border, the folks who later formed West Virginia. So the book is really about the four slave states that in 1861 remained in the Union—Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri.

These states differed in many respects. Kentucky could thumb its nose at the federal government, while Maryland and Delaware always had to worry about being strong-armed by federal troops. Kentucky had over 38,000 slave owners, more than any state other than Virginia and Georgia, while Delaware had fewer than 600 slave owners. Lincoln got less than one percent of the vote in Kentucky, nearly 24 percent in Delaware. Roughly 17 percent of Kentucky's white males of fighting age went off to fight for the Confederacy, only 5 percent of Delaware's. Yet, oddly enough, Delaware almost matched Kentucky in its devotion to slavery. Unlike Maryland and Missouri, which abolished slavery during the war, Delaware and Kentucky opposed abolition to the bitter end. Both rejected the Thirteenth Amendment, Delaware until 1901, Kentucky until 1976. Only Mississippi held out longer.

Robinson is well aware of the differences, but he doesn't focus on them. Instead, his focus is on the proslavery Unionists who successfully convinced their neighbors that secession was a fool's errand, and that remaining in the Union was the best way to protect slavery. These men and women have often been portrayed as staunch Unionists, men and women who were determined to support the Union regardless of what happened. But Robinson makes it clear that most were Conditional Unionists, men and women who were supportive of the federal government only as long as Congress refused to meddle with slavery in the states, enforced the Fugitive Slave Law, protected the interstate slave trade, and didn't force them to take sides against their fellow Southerners. Most seemingly were more proslavery than they were pro-Union.

In telling this story, Robinson does what many historians before him have done. He highlights the work of Kentucky's John Jordan Crittenden. And, like many historians before him, he portrays Crittenden as a "great compromiser," much like Henry Clay, even though all of Crittenden's proposals were clearly one-sided, obviously designed to further the long life of slavery and to appease South Carolina, the Deep South, and his Kentucky constituents. Especially interesting is the way Robinson handles the most famous of Crittenden's so-called "compromises," his proposal to extend the Missouri Compromise line west, barring slavery north of the line, and guaranteeing its protection below the line. Originally, as Robinson points out, the wording seemed to limit new slave territory to the American southwest. But that limitation didn't last long. The proposal was soon amended so that slavery could expand to land "hereafter acquired" south of the line. Why was this done? Was it to appease Southerners who wanted to add Cuba to the United States? Many of Crittenden's northern critics certainly thought so. And Crittenden's nephew, in 1851, had lost his life fighting for the cause. Robinson, however, doesn't deal with the question.

Overall, the book deals mainly with the problems that Crittenden and others like him had to overcome. It is organized chronologically, beginning with John Brown's raid, the election of William Pennington as Speaker of the House, and then moving on to Lincoln's election, the first secession crisis, the firing on Ft Sumter, Lincoln's call for 75,000 troops, the secession of neighboring Virginia and the Upper South, and the first months of the war. And through it all, Robinson makes it clear that Crittenden and other

proslavery Unionists had their hands full, fighting battles in Washington, D.C., as well as in their home states. Oddly enough, Robinson gives little attention to the troubles Crittenden had in his own family, notably with his son George, a West Point graduate and career U.S. army officer who became a Confederate colonel in March 1861. Instead, he portrays Crittenden as mainly successful in his valiant efforts to keep Kentuckians in the Union.

The book is well written. It is also well argued. But it would have been an even better book had the tables in the Appendix been incorporated into the narrative. In Chapter 7, for example, Robinson presents information indicating that the proslavery Unionists were usually bigger slaveholders, and generally more substantial citizens, than their secessionist rivals. And in making this point, he refers the reader to several tables. But none are in sight. The reader has to hunt them down. They are all many pages away, buried back in the Appendix. Yet they are especially valuable. They add much to his point. Why, then, were they relegated to the back? Was it Robinson's doing? Or the publisher's? I suspect the latter.

Nonetheless, despite such organizational problems, this is an excellent book, and everyone interested in the origins of the Civil War should welcome its addition to the literature.

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