

Reviews

Charles B. Dew, *Apostles of Disunion, Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War*. Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 2001. 124 pp., ISBN: 0-8139-2036-1; \$22.95, cloth.

The current debate over the propriety of displaying the Confederate flag in public places and its incorporation in state flags has stirred a renewed debate over the true causes and meaning of the Civil War. To those who see the war as having been primarily about the preservation of the institution of slavery, the flag is a symbol of racism and an affront to those who believe in protecting the civil rights of all Americans. To those who view the war as having been a struggle for the preservation of states' rights, it symbolizes the heroism and sacrifice of southern patriots. Charles B. Dew is alert to the relevance his research will have on this debate. He acknowledges the fact that there are divergent points of view on this issue by relating how the Immigration and Naturalization Service treats the question on its citizenship examination. As a response to the question 'The Civil War was fought over what important issue?', the INS will accept either slavery or states's rights as the correct answer, the only question where two answers are possible. The author then goes on to show that his research indicates that only one answer is truly correct, and that answer is slavery.

The primary focus of Dew's study is on the rhetoric of southern leaders in the period leading up to actual hostilities. This is an area that has received scant attention in most histories of the war. In the cases of Jefferson Davis and his vice-president Alexander H. Stephens, their post-war assertions that secession had been motivated by concerns for states' rights are shown to be inconsistent with the views they stated previous to the outbreak of hostilities. Stephens was particularly strident in his defense of the peculiar institution. On March 21, 1865 he stated that '... its (the new Confederate government) foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery, subordination to the superior race, is his natural moral condition.' Jefferson Davis said that 'slavery was an institution that "a superior race" had used to transform "brutal savages into docile, intelligent, and civilized agricultural laborers".' The book then moves on to its particular purpose: to examine the public statements of a group of men appointed as commissioners by the slave states of the Deep South – Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, Georgia, and Louisiana. In all there were 52 such commissioners. Their job was to travel to other slave states to explain the rationale for secession. They spoke to state legislatures, conventions, and public meetings.

Mississippi was the first state to act. On November 30, 1860 the state legislature authorized the governor to send commissioners to all other slave states. Alabama's governor followed suit in early December because the Republicans were intent on 'the destruction of the institution of slavery.' In both cases, the commissioners were bi-partisan, with both Democrats and Whigs appointed. Lincoln's election had caused political opponents to close ranks, and it was the issue of slavery that united them. A typical example of the ra-

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cially-charged and incendiary nature of the commissioners' addresses would be the speech given by William L. Harris, Mississippi commissioner, to the state legislature of Georgia. "The new administration coming to power on March 4 promised "freedom to the slave, but eternal degradation for you and us"! 'Our fathers made this government for the white man, rejecting the negro as ignorant, inferior, barbarian race, incapable of self-government, and not, therefore, entitled to be associated with the white man upon terms of civil, political, or social equality.' The Georgia legislature passed a resolution condemning the Republicans as '... organized ... for the avowed purpose of destroying the institution of slavery, and consequently spreading ruin and desolation among the people in every portion of the states where it exists.' Judge Handy, a Mississippi commissioner, said to an audience in Maryland that the Republicans threatened 'the right "by which one man can own property in his fellow man"'. 'Slavery was ordained by God and sanctioned by humanity.' In speech after speech, the commissioners made it clear that slavery was the fundamental issue that prompted the slave states to secede.

As the first state to secede, South Carolina was among the first to take the initiative in appointing commissioners to represent its views in other slave states. South Carolinians felt vulnerable as theirs was the only state to have seceded and was eager to have other states join. Its commissioners were quite consistent in the rhetoric they employed. They invariably referred to the 'Black Republicans,' and made slavery their most important argument. South Carolina was careful to choose commissioners who had originally come from the states where they were to be sent in order to enhance the chances of a warm reception. In addition to inducing other states to secede, South Carolina wished to dispel the notion that it had acted in a precipitate manner, but had no other alternative as a result of Lincoln's election. They also hoped to bring together a Confederate constitutional convention as quickly as possible. They pushed for Montgomery, Alabama as a site that was central and well-connected with rail lines.

Alabama soon followed South Carolina's lead. With all of the Deep South out of the Union, it was imperative that they bring as many other slave states along with them as possible. On his mission to Kentucky, commissioner Stephen Fowler Hale warned against waiting for direct Union aggression, stating that Lincoln's election was already such an act. In a letter to the state's governor, he justified southern secession by beginning with slavery. He wrote that slavery was 'an institution with which is bound up not only the wealth and prosperity of the Southern people, but their very existence as a political community.' He went on to state that, through secession, Kentucky had bright prospects, but by remaining in the Union it would suffer the humiliation of racial equality and risk the fate of Santo Domingo. Although he did not succeed in persuading Kentucky to concede, his focus on the question and racial comments were consistent with those of the other commissioners.

Virginia was considered to be the key to Confederate chances of success against the Union. Its industrial base, population and wealth were essential to a prospective southern war effort. The state's status as the home of so many founding fathers and presidents would magnify the importance of its secession. Virginia's secession was never a foregone conclusion, and the commissioners' appeals alone were not enough to induce the state to do so. At the time of the Virginia Convention in February 1861, only forty of the one hun-

dred and fifty-two delegates were outright secessionists. It took the battle at Ft. Sumter to bring the issue to a head. The three commissions to the Virginia Convention harped on the theme of slavery. They insisted that the Republicans would stop at nothing to destroy the institution. The arguments they used did not focus on the economic impact of abolition, but on the cultural and social results. They painted a lurid picture of race war and miscegenation. The slave revolts of Santo Domingo and Haiti were given as examples of the fate that would befall Virginia if it remained in the Union. A key issue in Virginia was convincing its residents that secession by the states of the Deep South was irrevocable. Many in Virginia still held out hopes of reconciliation, and disabusing them of that notion was critical to the success of the commissioners' mission.

Like Jefferson Davis and Stephenson, the post-war statements by the commissioners were of an entirely different flavor and tenor than those they had made during the fateful months leading up to war. When John Smith Preston, one of the commissioners who spoke at the Virginia Convention, talked about the Confederate cause after the war, there was no reference to be found about his pre-war statements about slavery. He claimed that the war had been a noble fight for the preservation of states' rights. Nowhere did he repeat his pre-war claim that 'the South cannot live without African slavery.' Another commissioner, Jabez L. M. Curry, said after the war 'The object of quitting the Union was not to destroy, but to save the principles of the Constitution.' He neglected to mention that when speaking in Maryland he had asserted that they should secede to achieve 'deliverance from Abolition domination.' The commissioners had repeatedly hammered home three main reasons for secession, which seem to have been purposely forgotten after the war. The first fear they preyed upon was the fear of racial equality, stating that emancipated slaves would be able to out-vote southerners. The second fear was that of race war, where the slaves would rise up to destroy their white owners as they had done in the Caribbean. The third fear, and perhaps the worst, was the racial mixing which would follow in the wake of emancipation. Contrary to their post-war assertions that it had been states' rights that had been at stake, their pre-war rhetoric seems singularly focused on the issues of slavery and race.

Apostles of Disunion makes a convincing case for slavery as the prime motivation for southern secession. The only complaint that might be made concerns the book's brevity. Minus appendices and index it covers only 81 pages. Although the evidence presented is compelling, there could have been more of it. There were 52 commissioners in all, and we are not told anything about most of them. It would have been interesting to see if their rhetoric was consistent with that which is cited. Also, the activities of the commissioners are not detailed enough in all the slave states. This would have been worth going into more depth. What we are told, however, does shed light on a too-long neglected aspect of the Civil War. It also serves to warn against uncritically accepting states' rights as having been the true issue at stake when most of the slave states decided to secede from the Union.