

Disunion!

The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789-1859

By Elizabeth R. Varon

(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. Pp. xii, 455. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$30.00.)

A fierce passion for politics and a corrosive anxiety over national purpose drove three generations of post-Revolutionary Americans to bring down their Union. Ideologically considered, argues Elizabeth R. Varon in this excellent synthesis of the coming of the U.S. Civil War, the United States' "more perfect" Union carried within itself from its founding the germ of disunion. Talk of disunion was never absent even from the hopeful political vision of the U.S. as a people held together by bonds of interest, goodwill, and rational calculation. Fears abounded from the outset. Fear of foreign and internal enemies, of impure morality, of tainted faith in God, of corrupt use of public power, of economic collapse—the American nation had at hand the rich ingredients of its demise as national boundaries expanded and political conflicts multiplied. Once linked to the debate over slavery, disunion became the one fear that held them all.

In one sense, Varon tells a familiar story of the years from 1798 to 1859, based on the changes and continuities in national political leadership and parties, popular political culture, and the well-known public benchmarks of national collapse: territorial expansion, North-South economic and social divergence over slavery, Constitutional struggle and

repair (featuring the Missouri Crisis, the Kansas Crisis, and Dred Scott), and the final moral crucible that made slavery the sticking point. She is especially good on the rise of the Republican Party as a catalyst for the national grappling with disunion. Varon has worked in key primary sources and provides sharp, critical assessments of recent scholarship usefully synthesized. And although she is not inattentive to other issues in the American political firmament, Varon, like most modern historians of the era, understands slavery as the central, transgressive moral and political issue leading to the dissolution of the United States.

What, then, does the focus on disunion add to our understanding? For one, it puts the spotlight on ideological conflict to suggest that there never was a time when American national public life was not extreme. "Disunion" became a key weapon in the fight club that was American politics. Purists used it to prophesy final judgment. Political critics from abolitionists to pro-slavery zealots used it as an ultimate threat or accusation. Nearly everyone in the political arena saw disunion as a powerful process of sectional alienation that called for constant vigilance and suspicion. In taking this view, Varon heightens our sense of such language as basic to

how politics worked. Too, Varon is successful in showing that a focus on disunion provides a way to understand how slavery took on the political weight equal to its moral transgressions; “disunion” became both a desire and a doom in the partisan slavery struggle.

Varon’s is a narrative told with liveliness and clarity, though of course some features of antebellum politics emerge as less well-lighted than others. For example, her analysis tends to underplay the intensity and flexibility of Americans’ religious faith as a means for understanding the national crisis. In the same way, race takes a back seat to the institution of slavery, somewhat underplaying many

of the darker impulses of white American political power and national expansion. And, strangely, she gives very little attention to the meaning of “Union” (the term is not even indexed) as the good twin of her subject. More attention to Americans’ desire for wholeness, permanence, and harmony, even as a fantasy, might have given an extra edge to this very fine narrative of the great national unraveling.

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Presidents, Diplomats, and Other Mortals

Edited by J. Garry Clifford and Theodore A. Wilson

(Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007. Pp. x, 350. Notes, index. \$39.95.)

This volume is a collection of essays in honor of Robert H. Ferrell, the distinguished diplomatic historian and biographer of Harry Truman. The essays, composed by Ferrell’s former students and friends, cover a wide range of subjects from Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation to regime change in modern American foreign policy. Some of the essays deal with obscure figures: George Kennan’s uncle and namesake, whose influential travel writing introduced Americans to the mysteries of a Moscow where his nephew would later serve; or Lawrence Dennis, a minor diplo-

mat who played a major role in early twentieth-century relations between the United States and Nicaragua. Other essays focus on minor episodes in major careers: Franklin D. Roosevelt’s brief meeting with King Ibn Saud after the Yalta conference; or Ronald Reagan’s Hollywood experiences with the science fiction stories and scripts that were later alleged to enhance his fascination with missile defense. The essays focused on recent foreign policy developments take a critical view of Clinton-era interventions and the controversial buildup to the war in Iraq.