At the Precipice
Americans North and South during the Secession Crisis
By Shearer Davis Bowman
(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. Pp. 379. Maps, illustrations, notes, index. $30.00.)

Shearer Davis Bowman's *At the Precipice* draws from a vast array of sources to present an evenhanded interpretation of the secession crisis. Rather than taking the traditional approach of sifting through the maze-like chronology of events leading up to the national rupture in April 1861, Bowman draws out the thoughts and beliefs of Americans North and South lurking beneath the surface in the months and years before the crisis. Public perception in both sections of the country is central to Bowman's thesis, for it forms the basis of his grand assertion that slavery and states' rights were equal causes of the crisis and the war that followed.

Bowman focuses on what he describes as "complex and divergent…issues of interests, rights, and honor" to emphasize the shared values and characteristics of North and South (p. 12). The divergence, according to Bowman, is revealed in the interpretation of those values and characteristics. The North came to view the legacy of the Founders as a moral republic purged of practices and institutions that threatened the sanctity of the family and, by extension, society as a whole. Increasingly, moral reformers in the North viewed slavery as a sin and association with it as a stain on the national honor. The South viewed the Founders' legacy as a republic wherein their "constitutional and natural rights" were cherished and protected, and attacks on their "honor as citizens of a state and a section within the Union" were avenged (p. 33). According to Bowman, as abolition/proslavery rhetoric heated up, compromise became increasingly difficult. Ceding ground on such momentous issues as states' rights, slavery, and the meaning of freedom was akin to degradation. Therein lies the contentious issue, for as Bowman asserts, "Free northerners and southerners alike often associated degradation with submission and the condition of slaves in general and black slaves in particular" (p. 93).

In an effort to bolster his argument for a set of competing interests, rights, and honor between the sections, Bowman offers anecdotes from a variety of individuals, prominent and obscure, to advance and illustrate several themes. Among them is the role of African Americans in the secession crisis, Christian religiosity and its response to slavery, and slaveholders' inner struggles with the morality of the peculiar institution.

My chief criticism of *At the Precipice* is its lack of narrative cohesiveness. Bowman spins many tales

that are often disjointed and seem disconnected from his main argument. His effort to weave such tales into an explanation of how the North and South came to view each other as enemies is not entirely convincing. The book remains, however, a magnificent tool for instruction. Bowman's heavy reliance on secondary materials makes reading *At the Precipice* very much like attending an excellent graduate seminar on the subject. The book offers an insightful and fascinating contemplation of "what Americans on the eve of the Civil War believe[d] about themselves and the world around them" (p. 12). *At the Precipice* should be on the shelf of every Civil War historian and certainly should be required reading for any graduate student with an interest in the subject.

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The Union War

By Gary W. Gallagher

(Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011. Pp. 215. Illustrations, notes, acknowledgements, index. $27.95.)

Discussing the role of slavery and emancipation in reshaping the meaning of the Civil War, Barbara Fields wrote in 1990 that "preserving the Union [was] a goal too shallow to be worth the sacrifice of a single life" ("Who Freed the Slaves?," in Geoffrey C. Ward, *The Civil War: An Illustrated History*, 1990). To Gary Gallagher, Fields's statement embodies a wider trend that began in the 1970s as historians' skepticism about American nationalism, combined with their increasing use of "race, emancipation and slavery" as explanatory tools, led them to ignore or undervalue the degree to which mid-nineteenth-century white northerners cherished a nation that they considered synonymous to the hope of freedom (p. 78). Framing much of his analysis as a critique of recent scholarship—including the work of Walter McDougall, Orville Burton, Eric Foner, and David Williams among many others—Gallagher sets out to demonstrate that white northerners' Unionist sentiment, heavily infused with American exceptionalism, explains not only why they fought the war but also how they won it.

In his synthetic march over a broad terrain of historical and historiographical territory, Gallagher usefully concentrates readers' attention on the citizen armies that became a focal point for wartime republican