

The Crisis of the Union

1860-1861

Edited by

GEORGE HARMON KNOLES

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The chapter by Professor Avery Craven, "Why the Southern States Seceded," published initially in a collection of his essays entitled *An Historian and the Civil War*, is used with the permission of the University of Chicago Press.

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Republican party came to power,"
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When we assembled our panel
of American historians who had
the failure of party government
1850's had posed for the serious
the conference we invited other
in history; some five hundred at
at Stanford University on March

The conference as well as for that
to unravel the tangled threads
of the crisis of the union, the In-
me. Readers will find presented
in a manner theses and views of a
we have devoted the major portion
study of the forces and men in-
g to the American Civil War.
Professors Avery Craven, Don E.
sen, Roy F. Nichols, David M.
Kenneth M. Stampp, and Glyndon
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ess that it was, and for making
s Thomas A. Bailey and John C.
Edgar E. Robinson I owe thanks
g and moderating sessions of the
ink Miss Lisette Fast and Mrs.
ant secretary of the Institute, for
g and staging of the conference
rs for publication.

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Professor of History and
Director, Institute of
American History,
Stanford University

CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	v
by George H. Knoles, Editor	
I WHY THE REPUBLICAN PARTY CAME TO POWER	
by Glyndon G. Van Deusen	3
COMMENT by Don E. Fehrenbacher	21
II WHY THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY DIVIDED	
by Roy F. Nichols	30
COMMENT by Robert W. Johannsen	51
III WHY THE SOUTHERN STATES SECEDED	
by Avery O. Craven	60
COMMENT by Charles G. Sellers, Jr.	80
IV WHY THE REPUBLICANS REJECTED BOTH COMPROMISE AND SECESSION	
by David M. Potter	90
COMMENT by Kenneth M. Stampp	107
<i>List of Contributors</i>	115

Comment on
WHY THE SOUTHERN STATES SECEDED

Charles G. Sellers, Jr.

Professor Craven referred in concluding [his address] to the "terrifying prospect of being labeled 'a revisionist.'" ¹ While it is true that the group of Civil War historians called revisionists have differed widely among themselves on particular points, it is also true that they have shared a distinctive emphasis which has become a major element in our thinking about the subject. As one of the most distinguished members of this group, as one of the most influential instructors of a whole generation of historians, Professor Craven has himself become a legitimate subject for historical analysis.

What I want to suggest is that Professor Craven should wear the label "revisionist" proudly. The great and permanent contribution of the revisionists has been their insistence on the centrality of emotion and irrationality (or a-rationality) in the coming

¹ EDITOR'S NOTE. After the original papers and critiques were read at the conference, Professor Craven slightly revised his paper. He did not alter his basic theme, but he made some additions (illustrative material principally) and certain changes in phraseology. Thus, in places indicated by footnotes supplied by the editor, the language which Professor Sellers quotes in his critique no longer corresponds precisely to that appearing in Professor Craven's article as printed.

The unrevised version of Professor Craven's paper did not include section 11, he concluded his paper with this statement: "So in conclusion, at the terrifying prospect of being labeled 'a revisionist,' I would like to suggest that the much sought for 'central theme of Southern history' is, and always has been, a proud reluctance to being pushed into the modern world."

of the Civil War. Mary Scrugham first raised the revisionist banner over forty years ago (in *The Peaceable Americans*, 1921) by asserting that "psychological explanations" were fundamental. Drawing on the pioneering works in the infant discipline of social psychology—Graham Wallas, *Human Nature*; Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd*; William McDougall, *Social Psychology*; and Edward L. Thorndike, *Educational Psychology*—she suggested the applicability to Civil War historiography of such concepts as "the instinct of counter-attack," "the law of the mental unity of crowds," and "the suggestible state of mind."

While subsequent revisionists followed Miss Scrugham's lead in emphasizing emotion—in this, if little else, they were united—the impulse of revisionism was diverted into unprofitable channels. The primitive state of social psychology gave little encouragement to historians who might have wished to press deeper their analysis of the nature, causes, and dynamics of the emotional states that were so evidently important. Also the emotions of the historians themselves were still entangled in the enduring configurations of sectionalism, racism, and egalitarianism that the Civil War so powerfully symbolized. As a result revisionist historiography became preoccupied with questions which were emotionally important to the historians concerned but which impeded a more searching analysis of the emotional states that preceded the Civil War. Was the war repressible or irrepressible? Was slavery on its way to extinction peaceably? Which side was most to blame?

Since the late 1940's revisionism has been under attack. Implicitly or explicitly the critics charge that the revisionists were so horrified by the idea of war, or so intent on exonerating the South, or so insensitive to the moral enormity of slavery that they palliated the South's peculiar institution and aggressive actions, painted the abolitionists as self-righteous fanatics, and blamed irresponsible and/or fanatical leaders, mainly those of an abolitionist stripe, for precipitating a needless war. Under this mounting barrage of criticism revisionism's central insight is in danger of being lost.

Professor Craven rightly protests against the revisionist label if it carries with it this blanket indictment. Certainly he has always given great weight to the moral force of anti-slavery sentiment,

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and certainly he has recognized that the South as well as the North had its radical agitators. Yet his earlier and most influential writings do reflect some of the revisionist emphases that have been most justly criticized, especially the suggestion that the emotionality of the Civil War generation was somehow needless and artificially generated by irresponsible leaders. In *The Coming of the Civil War* (1942) he wrote:

Stripped of false assumptions, the tragedy of the nation in bloody strife from 1861-1865 must, in large part, be charged to a generation of well-meaning Americans, who, busy with the task of getting ahead, permitted their short-sighted politicians, their over-zealous editors, and their pious reformers to emotionalize real and potential differences and to conjure up distorted impressions of those who dwelt in other parts of the nation. For more than two decades, these molders of public opinion steadily . . . exalted a faltering and decadent labor system, on the one hand, into the cornerstone of a perfect society, and, on the other, into an aggressive, expanding evil about to destroy the white man's heritage and to ruin God's experiment in Democracy. They awakened new fears and led men to hate. . . .

The process by which a repressible conflict was made into an irrepressible one was closely seen and described by a thoughtful Georgia editor in 1858. . . .

In 1861 the crisis which this editor feared was reached. The legal election of a President set two peoples, who knew little of each other as realities, at each other's throats. . . . The cost was more than five billion dollars and more than a half million human lives. When the struggle was over few problems had been solved, and a whole series of new ones had been created far more vexing than those which led to war. Later historians would talk about "a blundering generation."

I have dealt at some length with revisionism and with Professor Craven's earlier views because his paper today has presented a substantially different interpretation. Instead of hearing about "a blundering generation" who "permitted their short-sighted politicians, their over-zealous editors, and their pious reformers to . . . conjure up distorted impressions of those who dwelt in other parts of the nation," we are now told that "the Northern mind and conscience had kept pace with the industry, the cities, the finance, and the railroads of the onrushing nineteenth century," and that "a realization of the dignity of a human being and a deep feeling of guilt for its violation was as marked as the material changes."

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tragedy of the nation in bloody part, be charged to a generation of people with the task of getting ahead, and, on the other hand, their over-zealous editors, and the real and potential differences and of those who dwelt in other parts of the country. In the decades, these molders of public opinion and decadent labor system, on the one hand, and those who dwelt in a perfect society, and, on the other, were bent on the evil about to destroy the white experiment in Democracy. They hated each other. . . .

The conflict was made into an irreconcilable one, as described by a thoughtful Georgia

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revisionism and with Professor Craven's paper today has presented a different view. Instead of hearing about "permitted their short-sighted editors, and their pious reformers' sessions of those who dwelt in the North," we now are told that "the Northern aggression with the industry, the cities, and the rushing nineteenth century," and the tragedy of a human being and a deep wound was as marked as the material

In place of "a blundering generation" we now have a "blundering Southern leadership" reinforcing the North's pervasive and ineluctable hostility to slavery. In their "blindness or indifference to the nationalistic and democratic-humanitarian character of the age," John C. Calhoun and his allies "created the impression that there was a 'slave power' bent on spreading its peculiar institution by every means possible to every corner of the nation. . . . By not understanding the fact that they were fighting an age, not just a group of fanatics, they had alarmed and aroused the whole North."

Yet Professor Craven's focus is no longer on an irresponsible leadership in the South any more than in the North. Instead he now squarely asks the question that revisionists have been criticized for avoiding: why did the Civil War generation produce and respond to this kind of leadership? "It is, indeed, difficult to believe that under normal conditions any considerable number of Southerners would have accepted" the oversimplifications of the radical fire-eaters, he tells us. "But nothing, in the 1850's could long remain normal." Northern antislavery sentiment, "when combined with the brutal fact that the South . . . had become a permanent political minority, its social system under moral condemnation by the whole Western world, its economic life . . . reduced to colonial dependence," created "the apprehensions, the fears, the indignation, and the abused² self-respect to which the fanatics could appeal. . . . Had not the struggle between the sections at bottom rested on such foundations as these," Professor Craven concludes, "there might have been some way out." Presumably the conflict was inherently irrepressible.

The real focus of Professor Craven's paper is on these Southern apprehensions and fears, on this Southern indignation and abused self-respect, as the fundamental precipitating factors in the coming of war. He recognizes that the problem is not as simple as it may first appear. The seceding South's outcries against Northern aggression on slavery leave much to be explained, he observes. The complaints were suspiciously unspecific; and "Lincoln's oft-repeated statement that he would not interfere with slavery in the

² EDITOR'S NOTE. The word "abused" is omitted in Professor Craven's revised version.

states where it existed, and the fact that both Congress and the Court would be against him if he should try to do so, only add to the difficulty." Yet there can be no doubt that the Southern feelings of outrage were widespread and genuine. "The only questions," Professor Craven says, "have to do with the reasons for them, and the soundness of those reasons."³

By focusing his attention on the Southern feelings that precip-

3 EDITOR'S NOTE. Professor Craven in the unrevised version, following a discussion of statements made in the Southern secession conventions (see p. 62), included the following passage: "The constant reference to 'continued aggression' and the seeming admission that harsh criticism of slavery and the political triumph of the critics had produced the present crisis, leaves much to be explained. Lincoln's oft-repeated statement that he would not interfere with slavery in the states where it existed, and the fact that both Congress and the Court would be against him if he should try to do so, only adds to the difficulty. In fact, the calm assurance that everybody knew all about the wrongs inflicted and the rights denied, creates for the historian, his first problem.

"Where one might reasonably expect to find a long list of the wrongs done or, at least, clear-cut evidence of willful aggression, he finds largely vague generalizations regarding assumed damages and much of dangers anticipated. There is abundant evidence of anger, of hurt pride, and of genuine fear. But in the main, the impression given is that of a feeling of helplessness in the face of what seemed to be a driving force against which resistance had all along been hopeless. Northern men, for some mistaken reason, would not leave the institution of slavery alone. Neither reason nor law seemed to make any difference. Driven by some mysterious force, the tide rolled on. As one frightened editor said, Southerners saw in the 'tremendous popular majorities' which had made Lincoln President, 'the huge mountainous waves that were beating down on the South with resistless force' and that 'must engulf the whole social system of the South in the relentless waters of anti-slavery fanaticism. . . . Whether these apprehensions be well or ill founded,' he added, 'is now of small practical consequence. They sufficiently possess the minds of a majority of the people in several Southern states to render a dissolution of the Union inevitable.'

"The first step, therefore, to be taken in answering the question of why the Southern states seceded, is to recognize the existence of this widespread and generally accepted belief in 'the volumes of insult and the long catalogue of aggressions that have been perpetrated by the North upon the South,' and which it 'would be an insult to the intelligence of the Southern mind to doubt . . . existed.' Even conservative Southerners, by 1860-61, generally agreed that their section 'had been wronged, insulted, injured, and degraded from her equality in the Union.' That their feelings were genuine cannot be doubted. The only questions have to do with the reasons for them and the soundness of those reasons."

Professor Craven replaced this passage by material in paragraphs two and four of section 2 and by sections 3 and 4 of the revised paper.

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itated secession and war, by recognizing that those feelings were
not an altogether rational adjustment to reality, and by proposing
to explore the reasons for those feelings, Professor Craven brings
revisionist historiography out of its forty years of wandering in
the wilderness of "needless war" polemics and back to the task
which Mary Scrugham set for it in 1921, the task of analyzing the
psychological dimensions of the sectional conflict.

Professor Craven's paper provides ample materials for such
an analysis. He cites much evidence indicating that the South
reacted mainly to the North's moral condemnation of slavery and
that the South increasingly insisted on national policies that con-
stituted an endorsement of the peculiar institution. Slavery "could
not stand criticism on moral grounds," he remarks early in his
paper. "Secession was an admission of that fact."⁴ And near the
end he emphasizes the "curious psychopathic twist" of Yancey
in demanding that Northern Democrats at the Charleston con-
vention endorse slavery as a positive good.

Yet Professor Craven does not draw the indicated conclusions,
and his analysis remains blurred. Partly this is because he has
brought along some baggage from revisionism's forty years of
wandering in the wilderness: a continuing preoccupation with the
economic inefficiency of slavery and with the colonial economic
status of the South. Ignoring the unprecedented prosperity and
entrepreneurial ebullience of the South in the 1850's and the extent
to which the South participated in the spirit of "the onrushing
nineteenth century," Professor Craven takes refuge in the vague
generalization "that the much sought for 'central theme of Southern
history' is, and always has been, a proud reluctance to being
pushed into the modern world."⁵

4 EDITOR'S NOTE. The unrevised version, following quotations from two
Southern editors (see p. 61), contained this passage: "What both [editors]
were saying was that the plantation, as the Southern expression of large-
scale production in a competitive capitalistic society, had become dependent
on Negro slave labor regardless of the inefficiency of the individual worker.
Mass production could subsist on less than maximum individual returns.
The whole Southern economy had been built on such an understanding. And
slavery, as a vital factor in this fragile, undiversified economy, could not
stand criticism on moral grounds. Secession was an admission of that
fact."

5 EDITOR'S NOTE. See above, Editor's Note 1, p. 80.

I would suggest that a more logical product of Professor Craven's evidence and arguments—a more logical conclusion from the profound central insight of revisionist historiography—would be a psychologically sophisticated version of the old “aggressive slavocracy” interpretation of the Civil War. In the same year that Mary Scrugham called for a psychological interpretation of the Civil War, Chauncey S. Boucher published an important article, “*In re That Aggressive Slavocracy*,” which satisfactorily demolished the idea of a “slave power conspiracy.” In the process, however, Boucher observed that many Southerners “took a stand which may perhaps best be termed ‘aggressively defensive’”; and he suggested that this behavior was connected with the fact that when Southerners talked of slavery as a divinely ordained institution, they were in the position of “saying a thing and being conscious while saying it that the thing is not true.” Professor Craven similarly observes that the South’s psychological environment in the 1850’s gave the Southern radicals “the opportunity to shift the Southern efforts from defense to aggression”; and that “they proclaimed the perfection of their own Southern ways and values so intensely as to half convince themselves of the truth of what they were saying.”⁶

In evaluating the “aggressively defensive” behavior of the South, it is important to recognize that in the 1850’s the South was not only in the midst of the greatest economic boom it had ever experienced but also enjoyed the greatest actual power in the federal government it had ever experienced. Dominating the only national political party and utilizing Northern Democratic politicians who competed with each other in serving Southern wishes as far as they could without being defeated at home, the South controlled the presidency, the Congress, and the Supreme Court. It was under these circumstances of unparalleled prosperity and unparalleled power that the South behaved like a more and more

6 EDITOR’S NOTE. Professor Craven in his revision changed the ending of the sentence (see p. 75). The unrevised version reads: “Closing their eyes to the tattered realities about them, and their minds to all the democratic-humanitarian demands of the age in which they lived, they proclaimed the perfection of their own Southern ways and values so intensely as to half convince themselves of the truth of what they were saying.”

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aggressive slavocracy, constantly demanding greater and greater
reassurances about slavery, especially with reference to the status
of slavery in the territories.

In 1820 the South had been willing to accept the principle that
Congress should decide the status of slavery in the Louisiana
Purchase, provided that some of the territories were reserved for
slavery. When the Mexican Cession reopened the question in 1848,
the doughface Democratic presidential candidate, Lewis Cass,
appealed for Southern support with the doctrine of squatter sover-
eignty, potentially opening all the new territories to slavery. Then
in 1854 Southerners demanded, in the Kansas-Nebraska bill, that
Congress go back and apply squatter sovereignty to those terri-
tories in the Louisiana Purchase previously reserved as free soil.
Roy Nichols’ article on “A Century of Kansas-Nebraska Historiog-
raphy,” published in 1954, gave powerful support to the “aggres-
sive slavocracy” thesis by showing that the impetus for repeal of
the Missouri Compromise came not from Stephen A. Douglas but
from the “F Street mess” of radical Southerners who dominated
the Senate and the Pierce administration. By this time Southerners
were no longer satisfied with “squatter sovereignty” as applied
by territorial legislatures and were insisting on “popular sover-
eignty,” a version of the doctrine that allowed slavery throughout
the territorial stage and permitted a decision about its future only
at the time of statehood. And when it came to applying “popular
sovereignty” to Kansas, Southerners tried to force acceptance of
the proslavery constitution drafted by the notoriously unrepresent-
ative Lecompton convention. Then came the Dred Scott decision,
buttressing the South’s right to take its slaves into any territory
and also reasonably raising in Northern minds the spectre of a
future decision forcing slaves into the free states. Finally when
Stephen A. Douglas—who was willing to be a doughface but who
had to be reelected by an alarmed Northern constituency—des-
perately told Illinois voters that a territorial legislature could keep
slavery out by merely refusing to enact police legislation support-
ing the institution, a considerable segment of the South’s leader-
ship demanded enactment of a congressional slave code for the
territories.

What is curious about these increasingly aggressive demands

is that they called into existence in the North, as Professor Craven seems to recognize, the powerful free-soil sentiment and the Republican party that were ultimately to destroy the institution the South thought it was defending. What is even more curious is the fact that the South followed this suicidal course with regard to territories when there is little evidence that any substantial number of Southerners ever wanted to carry any actual slaves into any of the territories in question. Some of the most radical Southerners admitted that "slavery by the laws of climate could never take foot-hold in Kansas," and that a proslavery constitution in Kansas, where a majority opposed slavery, "is not worth to the South the paper it is written on." But in the same breath these men demanded the technical right to take slaves to Kansas, because "a just deference to the sensitive honour of the Southern people demanded that there should be at least a *distinct theoretical* recognition of her constitutional rights etc." As a South Carolinian put it, the fight for Kansas involved "a 'point of honor' merely."

It seems to me that the whole pattern of "aggressively defensive" Southern behavior was a series of constantly mounting demands for symbolic acts by which the North would say that slavery was all right. Professor Craven has referred to numerous instances of this kind of behavior. Calhoun's "fatal Southern orthodox platform" of 1837 objected to any Northern meddling with slavery, "under any pretext whatever, political, moral or religious," on the ground, first, that it would be "an assumption of superiority," second, that it would be "insulting to the States interfered with," and only finally that it would tend "to endanger their domestic peace and tranquility." Professor Craven also reminds us of Calhoun's "next equally rash and shortsighted move" of linking the issue of Texas annexation with slavery, in effect saying to Northern Senators, "You can vote for Texas annexation only if you will vote for it as a slavery measure. You can have Texas if you will say that slavery is all right." When the South demands as part of the Compromise of 1850 a stringent Fugitive Slave Act, Professor Craven observes that "nothing could have contributed more towards rendering slavery obnoxious." It is suggestive of the fundamental Southern motivation that this act was drawn in such a way as to involve Northern private citizens in the return of runaway

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slaves, and that strict Northern compliance with the act was made
 the condition for continuing Southern acceptance of the Compro-
 mise. Professor Craven emphasizes the fact that the North's refusal
 to comply with the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was almost the only
 evidence Southerners could offer of the Northern aggression they
 complained about. And yet he quotes that bellwether of Southern
 radicalism, the *Charleston Mercury*, as saying that nonenforce-
 ment of the Fugitive Slave Law was "not of the slightest conse-
 quence" as a practical matter. Northern refusals to enforce the act,
 said the *Mercury*, mattered only "in the insult they conveyed to
 the South, and the evidence they offered of Northern faithlessness."

These constant demands for symbolic Northern approval of
 slavery—made all the more strenuously as Southerners succeeded
 in provoking greater Northern alarm at the encroachments of an
 "aggressive slavocracy"—suggest that the South was acting irra-
 tionally because of the mounting strain of being part of "the on-
 rushing nineteenth century" while trying to maintain an institution
 condemned by nineteenth-century attitudes which the South fully
 shared. "The South has been moved to resistance," declared a
 New Orleans editor on the eve of secession, "chiefly . . . by the
 popular dogma in the free states that slavery is a crime in the sight
 of GOD. The South in the eyes of the North, is degraded and un-
 worthy, because of the institution of servitude."

The South did not close its eyes to the nineteenth century; it
 did not display "a proud reluctance to being pushed into the
 modern world."⁷ It was already so much a part of that world,
 already so fearful that it was "degraded and unworthy because of
 the institution of servitude," that it became stridently aggressive,
 multiplying the threatening forces of outside criticism until the
 tension became intolerable and finally allowing itself to be swept
 by its radical leaders into the catharsis of secession and war.

7 EDITOR'S NOTE. See above, Editor's Note 1, p. 80.