

Apostles of Disunion

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In *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War*, Charles Dew draws attention to the question “The Civil War was fought over what important issue?” This question has two different answers depending on whom you ask, state’s rights or slavery. In his book, Dew presents the Southern belief that the federal government’s violation of state’s rights was the root cause for the commencement of the Civil War. Dew uses speeches given by state-appointed commissioners to illustrate the Southern view on the commencement of the Civil War and give insight into the commonality in beliefs Southerners shared. For example, the state-appointed commissioners argued that the election of President Abraham Lincoln would bring an end to the institution of slavery which would, in turn, bring about the downfall of the Southern way of life due to an overbearing central government. Southern states believed that the only reasonable thing to be done was to secede from the Union and form the Confederacy. After the fall of the Confederacy, Southern apologists attempted to revise history and claim that the Civil War was caused by the infringement on state’s rights, completely minimizing the impact of slavery.

Charles Dew discusses how the state-appointed commissioners from Mississippi were sent to other slave states to “seek the support of those states for whatever measures would promote the common defense and safety of the South.”¹ These commissioners were seeking support for their state’s convention where talks of secession were to take place. The Southern Manifesto was created as a call for action, a call for secession. The Southern Manifesto did not clearly state why secession was necessary, that would be a job for the state-appointed

commissioners. Alabama, just like Mississippi also appointed commissioners because the governor of Alabama believed the Republican Party aimed to abolish slavery and because “the peace, interests, security, and honor of the slaveholding states” were at stake.² The state-appointed commissioners were White men from the Democratic and Whig parties who were to advance the cause of secession.³ The commissioners were sent to states where they had ties because the state governors who sent them believed this would be impactful in convincing the state legislators to join the cause of secession.

The state-appointed commissioners echoed similar sentiments regarding the need for secession; predominantly, the argument was that the destruction of the Southern White race was eminent. Alabama’s commissioner to South Carolina, John Archer Elmore, stated that the election of Lincoln was an “avowed declaration of war upon the institutions, the rights and interests of the South.”⁴ This argument was the sentiment that resonated in all the speeches made by the state-appointed commissioners. Intense language and imagery were used when arguing for secession due to the election of President Abraham Lincoln. In Georgia’s General Assembly, the point for secession was furthered by depicting the new Union as a state with free Blacks that may openly molest Southerners.⁵ South Carolina’s state-appointed commissioner to Georgia, James L. Orr believed that the White race would suffer under Republican rule.⁶ After the election of President Abraham Lincoln, Orr made his fears known in a mass meeting in Pendleton, South Carolina. Orr stated his belief that with Lincoln in office, a struggle would ensue that would force the White man to enter the poor house or flee the country.⁷ Henry L. Benning from Georgia was a commissioner to the commonwealth of Virginia, and he, like Orr, had a “nightmarish” belief of Southern life under Lincoln.⁸ Benning stated that the White man “will be completely

exterminated” and that the land will be “left in the possession of the blacks, and then it will go back to a wilderness and become another Africa...”⁹ The destruction of the White race and their institutions is a common argument across all the speeches given by the state-appointed commissioners who advocated secession from the Union. Southern secessionists believed that the North was vehemently against the institution of slavery to the point of unhealthy fanaticism with destroying it and the White race as equality would be granted to Blacks. It is these beliefs that became the core aspect of forming the Confederacy.

Radical and moderate Southerners were united by the South’s racial order. Judge Harris of Georgia discussed the established racial order in the South and how “the triumph of the Republican Party...revealed a North more defiant and more intolerant than ever before.”¹⁰ Harris made his belief clear that the North intended to establish racial equality in the South, as there would be “freedom to the slave, but eternal degradation for you and us.”¹¹ The racial order was something that moderate and radical Southerners could agree on, but that was not particularly true with the case of secession. Southern radicals were firmly in support of secession from the Union and creating a Confederacy, but Southern moderates were not so quick to support secession. Southern moderates needed convincing, as was the case in Georgia where strong Unionist sentiment was still alive. The racial order became a cornerstone argument for pushing the agenda of secession. Judge Harris pushed the racial argument by stating that the Founding Fathers made the government for the White man and not Blacks, that Blacks were an “ignorant, inferior, barbaric race, incapable of self-government, and not, therefore, entitled to be associated with the white man...”¹² Such rhetoric amplified Southern fear and ideology that Blacks were not meant to be equals as they were viewed as backwards and meant to serve the White man.

This argument is embodied in multiple commissioner's speeches as they laid claim to the superiority of their race on top of the social, political, and economic order.

Southern apologists dismissed slavery as a cause of the war following the defeat of the Confederacy because they wanted to portray the South in a positive light, as oppressed people under an imperial power. Vice President of the Confederacy, Alexander H. Stephens, stated that enslavement of Blacks was not wrong because "the negro is not equal to the white man" and because Blacks needed to be subordinate to the "superior race" as it was their "natural and moral condition."¹³ President of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, insisted that slavery was an "institution which a superior race had used to transform brutal savages into docile, intelligent, and civilized agricultural laborers."¹⁴ Both Stephens and Davis argued that slavery was a necessary institution that was ultimately a positive good. After the fall of the Confederacy, both Stephens and Davis argued that the root cause of the Civil War was state's rights. Stephens stated that slavery was the "occasion of secession" but only because Northern states ignored their "constitutional obligation as to rendition of fugitive slaves...betraying total disregard for all constitutional barriers and guarantees."¹⁵ Stephens went on to state that the Civil War was a "strife between the principles of Federation, on the one side, and Centralism, or Consolidation on the other" and insisted that the Southerners were not from a "Pro-Slavery Party."¹⁶ Stephens claimed that the Civil War represented a struggle between the Southern states, "friends of Constitutional Liberty," and the northern states, "the Demon of Centralism, Absolutism, [and] Despotism!"¹⁷ Davis argued that the South fought to preserve "sectional equilibrium and to maintain the equality of the States" while the North fought to "acquire empire."¹⁸ He went on to state that slavery was "only an incident" as it was "far from being the cause."¹⁹ After the fall of the Confederacy, both Stephens and Davis affirmed that the North was a centralist power looking

to expand its imperial power by violating the rights of Southern states as the root cause for the Civil war and minimized the impact of slavery. Davis and Stephens attempted to portray the South in a positive light as champions for liberty against tyrannical oppression from their Northern neighbors, as they attempted to make parallel connections to the Founding Fathers as fighters for liberty against the tyrannical British Crown.

State-appointed commissioners echoed the sentiments of their states as they advocated for the formation of the Confederacy to preserve the Southern way of life. They used strong language to appeal to their audiences through fear, fear of having a country in which Black men were equal to White men. White racial superiority is what Southerners firmly believed in, it was the core argument in many of the commissioners' speeches. Southern apologists attempted to revise history and minimize the core aspect of the Civil War, slavery. Dew presents the Southern side of the conflict as he uses the speeches of state-appointed commissioners to show the beliefs held by Southern states and their motives for the commencement of the Civil War.

¹ Charles B. Dew, *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 23.

² Dew, *Apostles of Disunion*, 23.

³ Dew, 23.

⁴ Dew, 27.

⁵ Dew, 29.

⁶ Dew, 46.

⁷ Dew, 46.

⁸ Dew, 66.

⁹ Dew, 67.

¹⁰ Dew, 29.

¹¹ Dew, 29.

¹² Dew, 29.

¹³ Dew, 14.

¹⁴ Dew, 15.

¹⁵ Dew, 15.

¹⁶ Dew, 16.

¹⁷ Dew, 16.

¹⁸ Dew, 17.

¹⁹ Dew, 17.