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Book Review: Elizabeth R. Varon, *Disunion! The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789-1859.*

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Review of:

Elizabeth R. Varon, *Disunion! The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789-1859*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008.

Elizabeth R. Varon's book, *Disunion! The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789-1859*, discusses the issues and events that caused discord in the nation from the signing of the Constitution until the eve of the Civil War. According to Varon, "This book offers a new perspective on Civil War causality by arguing that disunion was a far more pervasive concept than secession in antebellum politics, that debates over the meaning of disunion permeated the political cultures of both North and South and embittered each section against the other, and that those debates reached back to the very founding of the republic." (p. 15) In addition, Varon's book "aims to provide a narrative synthesis of the best recent studies on antebellum America" and analyze "what the participant said, what they believed, and how they expressed their own passions, and agonies, as they set the Union on the road to war." (p. 2, 4) Varon argues that the terms "disunion" and "secession" should be considered separately because secession had a specific definition while disunion was an "adaptable concept."

"Disunion," according to Varon, "was invoked by Americans, across the political spectrum, in five registers: as a *prophecy* of national ruin, a *threat* of withdrawal from the federal compact, an *accusation* of treasonous plotting, a *process* of sectional alienation, and a *program* for regional independence." (p. 5) The word disunion embodied Americans' "fears of extreme political factionalism, tyranny, regionalism, economic decline, foreign intervention, class conflict, gender disorder, racial strife, widespread violence and anarchy, and civil war, all of which could be interpreted as God's retribution for America's moral failings." (p. 1)

The concept of disunion was considered "a nightmare, a tragic cataclysm" by many residents of the North and South. However, politicians, abolitionists, and pro-slavery advocates on both sides of

the Mason-Dixon Line did not hesitate to invoke disunion to further their objectives. As early as the Constitutional Convention, South Carolinian delegates John Rutledge and Charles Pinckney threatened that their state would not join the Union unless the African slave trade was allowed to continue. Moreover, the Northern fear of disunion allowed the South to insert three pro-slavery provisions in the Constitution: The Three-Fifths Compromise, the Fugitive Slave Clause, and the continuance of the international slave trade for twenty years. The threat of disunion was used successfully by advocates of slavery during the drafting of the Constitution, and would be used repeatedly in the following years by pro-slavery Southerners to gain concessions from the North.

Accusations as well as threats of disunion were common in antebellum politics. Thomas Jefferson's Democratic-Republican Party emerged in the late 1700s and gained ground in 1800. Democratic-Republicans used repeated accusations of disunion against the Federalists to further their chances in the election of 1800. When the War of 1812 came, Federalists protested the war and threatened Republicans with separation from the Union. Disunion rhetoric was tied to the discussion of admitting new states as free or slave. During the Missouri Crisis of 1819-21, disunion was used as a tool to push for compromise. In 1832-33, the Nullification Crisis brought political tensions as John C. Calhoun and other anti-tariff politicians threatened disunion. Although he refused to consider nullification, Jackson agreed to a gradual lowering of the tariff in an effort to quiet the cry of opposition.

Disunion as a prophecy was embodied in the slave rebellions and other violent incidents. Denmark Vesey's Rebellion in 1822 was used by advocates of slavery as an illustration of the terror that abolition would bring to America. Abolitionists, meanwhile, used the incident to illustrate their prophecy of how God was going to punish America for allowing the sin of slavery. Garrison considered Nat Turner's Rebellion on August 22, 1831, to illustrate the truth of this

prophecy. Further evidence of disunion as a prophecy was found in the Sectional Crisis of 1835, when forty-six pro-slavery riots and fifteen race riots occurred in America.

Disunion rhetoric increased between 1830 and 1850 as sectional tensions became chronic. In the late 1830s, some abolitionists, particularly William Lloyd Garrison, embraced the concept of disunion as a way of separating the pro-slavery South from the free North. This would have been considered using disunion as a process of sectional alienation. The discussion of the annexation of Texas caused further disunion rhetoric. As the issue was debated, Southerners such as Robert Barnwell Rhett decried anti-annexationists as being disunionists. When the Mexican War broke out, abolitionists were opposed to the war and were openly called disunionists by the war's supporters. While senate members had always denied such accusations in the past, the Crisis of 1850 saw Southerners Robert Toombs and Alexander Stephens proclaim themselves disunionists on the Senate floor. That same year, the Nashville Conventions passed "measures asserting the constitutional right of secession." (p. 227) The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, pro-slavery clashes in Kansas from 1855 to 1856, the caning of Charles Sumner on the Senate floor in 1856, and John Brown's raids in 1856 and 1859 all illustrated that abolitionist and pro-slavery tensions were rising to a dangerous level. The election of Republican Abraham Lincoln in 1860 proved to be the final breaking point for the Union.

Disunion! The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789-1859, is a thorough history of how disunion rhetoric was ingrained into the turmoil that led to the Civil War. Although Varon's book is clearly meant for a scholarly audience it is well-written and clearly argued, making it a great choice for students of the Civil War, abolitionism, or sectionalism.

Kayla Scott