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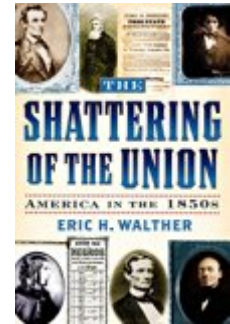
The Crisis of the 1850s in a Nutshell

Eric H. Walther's *The Shattering of the Union: America in the 1850s* achieves a complete success in presenting a concise history for an audience of undergraduates. Walther's excellent narrative synthesis provides an accessible and up-to-date study that fills a void in the scholarship of the last decade of the antebellum period. David Potter's *The Impending Crisis* (1976) has long and justly been the dominant book on the subject, but at a magisterial seven hundred pages and written thirty years before contemporary historical scholarship, it is a hard book to assign in survey courses (though many of us still do). Potter's study focuses on classic political history and notably underplays southern cultural and ideological developments. Walther is the perfect scholar to address these deficiencies while paying tribute to Potter's work.

Walther's outstanding scholarly monograph, *The Fire-Eaters* (1992), broke new ground on the zealots who preached secession in the 1850s. It is a key example of the many breakthroughs that historical scholarship has achieved during the past thirty years in theoretical and research techniques for cultural and intellectual studies, especially in the field of southern history. As a major contributor to this trend, Walther is well positioned to summarize the new research. In this new synthesis, his decision to focus on politics allows him to present new historical insights within a coherent narrative framework of the traditional events that characterize the era. Walther's book is a concise 190 pages, including notes. Walther makes liberal use of maps and photographs throughout the text, and, as in a good website,

he textwraps the photos, making them more accessible to today's students–a distinct improvement over having the illustrative material collected in a central section. His extensive teaching experience with large survey courses and innovative classes focused on the Civil War gives him an impressive ear for the needs and interests of students.

Even more importantly for the scholarly audience for this review, Walther is attuned to the needs of professors. I have already used this book in my general American survey courses covering the period 1492-1877. As with the topic of the American Revolution, it is hard to do justice to the intricate, numerous, and yet familiar events of the 1850s in a course that must cover hundreds of years of American history. The Compromise of 1850, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the Know-Nothing Party, the rise of the Republican Party, Dred Scott, the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, John Brown, and the Election of 1860 comprise essential knowledge for all citizens. Most undergraduates, however, only vaguely understand them (if, indeed, they remember ever having heard of them), and lectures can hardly do these topics justice without considering them in some detail and inevitably neglecting the larger issues. The causes of the Civil War and the underlying changes in the economy, culture, and social structure of the nation require nearly two lectures before a professor can address the classic political events. Enter Dr. Walther's study. It efficiently presents all the essential facts on these topics and sustains a lively interpretation of the era as a whole, while adding original and reflective examinations of overlooked documents and personalities. Walther also

sustains a high scholarly standard of synthetic narrative via a good bibliographic essay and concise endnotes. Assigned in an upper-level Civil War course, used to cover essential material in a survey course, or read to give professors and graduate students a refresher and inspiration before a lecture, *The Shattering of the Union* is indispensable.

Walther's interpretation of the South is strong and original. In this narrative, southern cultural and intellectual developments receive as much attention as do northern ones. The well-known impact of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* offers Walther a chance to introduce recent historical scholarship about the African-American antislavery authors Solomon Northup and William Wells Brown, as well as the South's lesser known but prolific proslavery author Louisa McCord. Walther populates his narrative with many such southern writers and ideologues, and he returns to their views at key moments throughout the book. Fruitful attention is given to such southern intellectuals as Josiah Nott, J. D. B. DeBow, Henry Hughes, and George Fitzhugh. He also presents fire-eaters Robert Barnwell Rhett and William Lowndes Yancey. William Walker, the southern filibustering zealot who met his demise in Honduras, is an inspired choice for the most sustained treatment because his territorial ambitions tie in so well with the political aspiration and ideology about the expansion of slavery within the United States that brought on the war. The Republican's and Lincoln's better-known aspirations to secure all of the territory in the West for free laborers makes an interesting juxtaposition to Walker's southern expansionism. Walther's regionally balanced approach gives him ample opportunity to discuss the underlying ideas, such as racist and religious dogmas, that dominated both regions in this era.

Walther gives due attention to northern abolitionists, but he focuses throughout the book on the depth of racism in the South and its presence in the North. He includes telling details of the acceptability of violence and racial hatred in antebellum culture, such as this account of the fate of one John Brown's African-American compatriots in 1859: "One furious Southerner then dragged [Dangerfield] Newby's body through the streets and cut off his ears to keep as souvenirs; others beat the lifeless body and drove hogs to devour the corpse" (p. 171). Lest such examples of racial viciousness fall into clichés of "Southern" attitudes, *The Shattering of the Union* highlights the racism of the abolitionist movement, the Republican Party, and Lincoln's positions in the Lincoln-Douglas Debates. Early in the book the author highlights an 1852 California law that bluntly read: "Black and mulatto persons are rendered incompetent as witnesses to give evidence against white persons" (p. 13). Walther never pushes regional balance to the point of sacrificing valid interpretation of the evidence of the sources, as when he points out that in contrast to the pluralistic North in 1860, "the line in the South between moderation and extremism all but vanished among their elected officials" (p. 177). The North and South in the 1850s were both deeply immersed in racism and paranoid politics. Walther acknowledges the shared culture while making clear distinctions between different regions, actors, and moments, especially when labeling groups as extremists as he does with the southern secessionists of 1860 and John Brown.

Walther's use of quotes, to illustrate the era's often wild and ugly cultural beliefs and visions of the nation's future, will help students recognize and question their reflexive belief that the values of the present were central in the American past. He makes the fears and dreams of the 1850s era appear as alien and lost–and even unbalanced– as they should from the distance of 150 years. This is a good correction, even when it threatens to be overdone in the interest of counter-balancing traditional political narratives that tend to reduce the picture of the entire era to that of a series of rational political decisions based on northern and southern interests. Walther provides a palpable sense of the paranoid and conspiratorial atmosphere that undergirded so much of political life in both the South and North. Walther's attention to the paranoia and violence of the times not only does justice to the record but allows him to make clear large-scale judgments about the dissolution of the union in 1860, as when he concludes, "After the events of the previous ten years, it was remarkable that the Union held together as long as it did" (p. 187). After reading his book, it is hard not to agree. *The Shattering of the Union* is a powerful and convincing narrative with a clear perspective, presenting the details while never becoming lost in them.

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