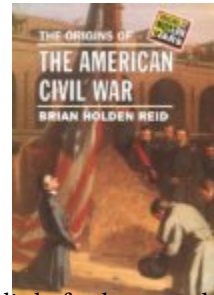


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Brian Holden Reid. *The Origins of the American Civil War*. London and New York: Longman, 1996. xv + 440 pp. \$106.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-49177-9.

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This latest entry in Longman's "Origins of Modern Wars" series promises a new model of causation based upon a fresh reading of both primary and secondary sources on the causes of the Civil War. Reid, a distinguished military historian at King's College, London, wants to determine how Americans turned from ballots to bullets and, by extension, how the origins of the war helped to prevent the conflict from becoming truly international in scope. These are ambitious objectives when one considers both the mammoth extant literature on the sectional conflict and the trend in the current literature away from contingent-based explanations for the war.

Reid argues that the war originated in conflicts over means, not ends, and that the South's separatism was based not in a singular regional identity but in a divergent interpretation of the cultural and political heritage it had shared with the North. The United States that Reid describes was a loose federation of states that lacked institutional cohesion and was highly vulnerable to separatist sentiments. Territorial expansionism and a frontier mentality (especially in the South) amplified regional loyalties and weakened nationalist sentiments. The South was particularly susceptible to secessionism because slavery stamped the region as unique and fostered deepening anxieties about race and class in the face of an industrializing North. What mattered about the South, then, was not slavery itself but the South's exaggerated perception of its own regional superiority and uniqueness. Considering the country's propensity for violence and the absence of strong institutions to check violence, the Southern mind was particularly explosive.

Most of the book is devoted to a rereading of the literature on the sectional conflict, abolitionism, slavery, and expansionism from a perspective influenced espe-

cially by English scholars. There is little fresh research in primary sources in those chapters, despite the book jacket's claims to the contrary (the bibliography mentions no primary sources). Scholars and students interested in a review of that material will find the book very informative and useful, as well as written in an engaging style. Two chapters provide what Reid calls a "model of causation" that explains the gap between the decision by each section to confront the other, and the decision for war itself. One of them lists and discusses psychological influences on decision-makers: the influences of a political culture of party and partisanship, the pervasive influence of Southern honor, the institutional forces that shaped political decisions and discussion. Much of this argument is reminiscent of the approach by David Donald, William Freehling, and others, who point to the weak institutional cohesion of the early republic, which placed the burden of national integration on the drawing power of patriotic rhetoric in public speech and education and on the satisfaction of populist yearnings through a policy of spread-eagle expansionism.

The second such chapter concentrates almost entirely on the crisis over Fort Sumter and contains the only extensive primary research in the book. The decision for war, he says, must really be traced to the secession crisis of 1860 to 1861, when the country deliberately turned to violence. Tracing the complex negotiations between members of the Lincoln administration and representatives from the Confederacy and Virginia, Reid argues that the decisions in the Upper and Lower South in favor of secession shared a common belief that force would compel Northern acquiescence or submission. Secession had its own local forms of logic and irrationality, he points out, but secession was at bottom an act of force, not of peace, accompanied by the rapid mobilization of armies

across the new Confederacy. Not surprisingly, he says, the resulting war was a punitive, devastating conflict.

In a concluding chapter, Reid addresses the issue of the war's international significance: why would a war of such magnitude not draw in other powers or spread beyond the United States? Despite the promise of examining this intriguing question from a perspective outside American academe, Reid's approach to it is disappointingly conventional. After a brief review of diplomatic issues between the belligerents and England that uncovers no new material and offers no new insights, Reid concludes, "the Confederacy blundered because it staked all on a theoretical economic argument wholly irrelevant to European power politics" (p. 393).

Such an endorsement of conventional wisdom reveals the central flaw of the book: the author has defined away many provocative, well-researched studies that might have stimulated a more imaginative treatment of a well-worn subject like the causes of the Civil War. Indeed, considering the tremendous importance the author gives to such contingent factors as the mere succession of events; the power of emotions, feelings, and impulses; and the undocumented collection of behaviors and attitudes we normally define as constituting the civic culture, one wonders why he begins the book with a diatribe against "cultural studies" that "offer nothing to the historian of the origins of the war." The study of Amer-

ican political culture has, in particular, probed the recesses of ideological and institutional forms so important to the shaping and expression of public consciousness. The "breath-taking reductionist approach" taken by "post-Marxist" scholars, he shouts, places a "simplistic stress on social factors as the core of historical explanation, which I utterly and unhesitatingly reject" (p. 15). This, in a book whose concluding chapter trumpets the author's "broadening the usual, rather narrow, political approach to discussing the origins of the American Civil War" to include "geography, social and cultural forces, economic vicissitudes, and how men thought and acted towards the possibility of war" (p. 396)! Judging by the complete absence of a single work in women's history or American political culture from the bibliography or notes, the author sees denunciations of entire fields of study as a convenient excuse to avoid consulting works in fields he "utterly and unhesitatingly rejects."

In the end, the book's interesting discussions of slavery, sectionalism, and politics are marred by the author's refusal to consider works in fields that are producing some of the freshest and most far-reaching research in the Middle Period.

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