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The Texas Slave Insurrection Panic of 1860 and Secession

In the summer of 1860, fear of an abolitionist plot to cause a slave insurrection spread across the South following a fire on July 8 that destroyed much of the business district of Dallas, Texas. Scholars, beginning with Ollinger Crenshaw in the 1940s, have seen the so-called Texas Troubles as an important step toward secession, particularly helping to create the psychological context for action.[1] The history and character of that panic, however, has never been explored fully prior to this work. Donald E. Reynolds, professor emeritus at Texas A&M at Commerce, explores the events that caused the widespread alarm, the response of local communities, and the extent to which concerns for Texas matters became important to other Southerners. A particularly important part of Reynolds's study is its evaluation of the reliability of the stories that generated the event, an effort that leads him to his finding that no credible evidence exists of a planned uprising. He goes on to suggest that the plot was a purposeful effort to move the South toward secession, and that the events that summer not only were important but also may have played a decisive role in setting the path of Texans toward secession.

Reynolds's portrait of events surrounding the panic in the summer of 1860 is based on extensive, and impressive, research in contemporary newspapers, bolstered by the use of relevant manuscript materials. He graphically portrays how fear of an insurrection spread following the Dallas fire. Contemporaries initially believed it was caused by the spontaneous combustion of new phospho-

rous matches, but fires in other nearby locations fed a growing concern that slave arsonists were behind the blaze and that their actions were part of a plan by Northern antislavery men to produce a slave rebellion. In the weeks after the first fires, reports of the destruction or attempted destruction of other Texas towns filled local papers and fueled fear. Subsequent news that caches of arms and large quantities of poisons had been uncovered confirmed in the minds of white Texans that their state was the target of nefarious abolitionist designs.

Texans responded to the perceived threat decisively, and Reynolds carefully documents their reaction. Across the state, townspeople created vigilance committees that acted aggressively against suspected rebels. Not surprisingly, given their methods of coercion, they secured from slaves confessions of plans for fires and murder elsewhere. State newspapers published items reporting the punishment and execution of culpable slaves in widespread communities. Whites suspected of being part of the plot were either lynched or ordered out of the South. In the most notorious instance, a posse from Fort Worth pursued an accused Northern Methodist missionary, Anthony Bewley, into southern Missouri, brought him back to Fort Worth, and surrendered him to a lynch mob.

Word of events in Texas spread widely, and Reynolds's thorough examination of Southern newspapers shows that the press gave them significant play

through the summer and early autumn. Stridently secessionist and state's rights publications presented the Texas stories as factual, using them to predict what would happen if Abraham Lincoln were elected president and the South lost all protection of the national government. Even pro-Union newspapers generally accepted the idea that slaves were responsible for the Texas fires, although they downplayed the possibility of a widespread plot.

The key to Reynolds's broader conclusions concerning the purposeful manipulation of public opinion by newspaper editors and the impact on contemporary political events is his discovery of the lack of any real evidence for either the purposeful setting of any of the fires or the existence of a conspiracy to cause a slave rebellion. Recent historians of Texas history have tended to discount contemporary theories of an abolitionist plot, but Reynolds conclusively shows that none existed. No contemporaries initially believed the fires in Dallas and nearby communities were started by incendiaries, nor was any evidence produced to demonstrate otherwise. In the end, only the fact that several fires occurred at roughly the same time led suspicious Texans to think that arsonists might have been at work. The reports of other fires that appeared afterward often were spurious. None of the accounts of the discovery of weapons and poison proved accurate. One of the most widely published pieces of evidence of an insurrection plot, a letter outlining abolitionist plans, in all likelihood was forged. In short, the only evidence supporting a conspiracy theory was the testimony coerced from slaves.

The fact that there was no evidence supporting the idea of an abolitionist conspiracy and that newspaper editors published outright lies that fed a white panic leads Reynolds to his hypothesis that the Texas Troubles were created purposefully in an effort to push Texans and other Southerners toward secession. That conclusion follows, however, only by inference. Unquestionably, the sole source of information on the alleged conspiracy was baseless and sometimes creative contemporary newspaper reporting. Reynolds also shows that fire-eating Southern politicians readily used Texas events

for their purposes, particularly to promote voter turnout for George Breckenridge and possibly to encourage secession. In the end, however, there is no direct evidence concerning the intentions of the newspaper editors or of the reporters who publicized the plot and went so far as to manufacture false accounts of fires, weapons, and poison. Charles Pryor, editor of the Dallas *Herald* whose letters to newspapers across the state first warned of a slave threat, left no clues other than his published letters of his intentions. Neither did other lesser-known Texas newsmen. It is possible that their goal was secession, but the evidence will allow little more than speculation.

That the Texas Troubles played a decisive role in pushing forward Texas and the South to secession also is a conclusion that is largely speculative, and Reynolds recognizes this. He shows that events in Texas were unquestionably on the minds of Texans in the critical months leading up to secession. At the same time, he acknowledges that many other events, from Bloody Kansas to John Brown, had already poisoned the political process by this time. Which, if any, particular event may have been decisive remains an untested premise.

The historian of the South and the American Civil War will find in this book a superb dissection of a slave panic. Reynolds is at his best in describing how a fire in a Texas town was transformed into a regionwide panic that led to violent suppression of anyone suspected of contributing to or even considering rebellion. The work shows clearly the white fear of slaves underlying antebellum society and how it fed their acceptance of what turned out to be an absurd interpretation of events in that summer of 1860.

Note

[1]. Ollinger Crenshaw, "The Psychological Background of the Election of 1860 in the South," *North Carolina Historical Review* 19 (July 1942): 260-279; and Ollinger Crenshaw, *The Slave States in the Presidential Election of 1860* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1945).

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