

# H-Net Reviews

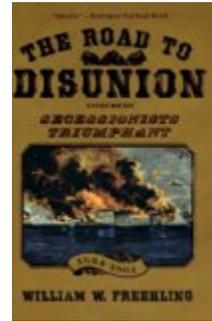
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

William W. Freehling. *The Road to Disunion: Volume II: Secessionists Triumphant, 1854-1861*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. 624 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-537018-8.

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Published on H-CivWar (June, 2011)

Commissioned by Matthew E. Mason



## Plodding and Insight on the Road to Charleston

Two features stand out in William W. Freehling's impressive *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists Triumphant*. One is the level of detail. To read this book cover to cover is to plod a road that spans the Old South but also somehow always returns to the secessionist haven of Charleston, South Carolina. Along the way, readers encounter a variety of increasingly panicky Southerners (almost all of whom were white, male, and wealthy). Freehling leads readers past proslavery theorists fruitlessly struggling to formulate a coherent argument that would unify the South. He passes through the familiar political crises of the mid to late 1850s beginning with the Kansas-Nebraska Act and continuing to the debates over the reopening of the African slave trade and the reenslavement of free blacks. He points out figures (all of whom by coincidence were named John) that were mounting violent or religious or economic or political challenges to slavery inside the South. And that is only the first half of the trek. The rest of the book takes readers through detailed accounts of the 1860 Democratic conventions in Charleston and Baltimore and the (conspiratorial) plotting of South Carolinians to lead the South out of the Union in the aftermath of Abraham Lincoln's election.

The second feature that stands out is the way in which Freehling marshals his massive amount of data to prove his thesis. Picking up where he left off in *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay*—the first volume of his study of Southern secession—Freehling argues that the tension resulting from the presence of slavery and the growth of

political democracy in the Union drove the movement for secession.[1] Antebellum democratization brought demands for free speech and expectations that government policy actually rest on the consent of the governed. Antebellum slavery of course required the coercion and domination of enslaved Southerners, but it also needed to restrain non-slaveholders, both North and South, who might use their freedom to undermine slavery. That tension produced antidemocratic tendencies ranging from the suppression of free speech to the enforcement of conformity through lynch mobs. Freehling's first volume analyzed the way in which slaveholding Southerners dominated the political system to protect slavery and beat back calls for secession. His second volume shows how that dominance unraveled over the course of the 1850s and argues that the advocates of immediate secession (a minority of Southern voters, even in the Deep South) took control of the situation and led the South out of the Union to ensure slavery's survival.

Restating the thesis in this fashion does not do justice to *Secessionists Triumphant* because doing so introduces a level of abstraction that Freehling emphatically rejects. He has no interest in "substituting one theory of impersonal causes of the Civil War for another." History for Freehling is driven by relationships; it changed course when "personal emotions exploded past impersonal drives," producing exchanges that united "otherwise divided southern whites in rage against Yankees' condemnations" (p. xiv). This approach effectively demonstrates why secession, after decades of half-steps

and aborted attempts, finally happened when and where it did. Freehling shows how threats to slavery in the border regions of the South—in Missouri where the fate of Kansas hedged slavery’s expansion, in Virginia where John Brown attempted to start a war against slavery, or in Kentucky where the Reverend John Fee sought antislavery converts—became, in the minds of the Deep South’s grandees, generalized anxieties about the future of slavery in the Union. As those anxieties intensified, advocates of immediate succession worked to outmaneuver the larger number of Southerners who saw no immediate need for disunion ... at least not at any particular present moment.

Freehling’s painstakingly close rendering of events allows him to show how a minority of extremists could compel majorities of less committed Southerners to move toward secession. His tracking of William Lowndes Yancey’s movements in the 1860 Charleston Democratic convention highlights the way a leading advocate of disunion who was fierce in print but surprisingly disarming in person could play on relatively moderate Southerners’ fears to block the nomination of Stephen Douglas. Freehling’s handling of how South Carolina’s politicians maneuvered—through conspiracy, effective organization, and plain chance—to leave the Union first, but not alone, shows how a small faction of extremists who were not a majority even in the Deep South could position itself to so that it could trigger a process of rapid secession across the region. As he does so, he highlights how the occupants of Charleston’s opulent drawing rooms forged connections with (reliable) leaders in other Southern states to circumvent the will of less organized majorities who would just as soon wait and see what Lincoln would do. The payoff for all of this detail management comes from his documenting of precisely how these elite slaveholders’ desire to protect slavery undermined the democratic process.

Freehling, however, will not have the last word on the origins of secession. Historians will debate his work for decades to come. His analysis raises many questions. Did immediate, single-state secession really have as little support as Freehling suggests? Were the South Carolinian elites really acting in an antidemocratic fashion, or were they playing by the rules of the political game as it was then constituted? Did an effective Southern nationalism really need a single coherent proslavery theory—or could it get by with competing theories drawing on race, theology, or political theory? Are we really to believe Freehling’s argument that the probability of secession’s occurrence in 1860 hinged on the completion of a rail line

between Charleston and Savannah, Georgia?

I will leave these questions to more qualified scholars, but this review should not close without commenting on some of the limitations of Freehling’s approach. Although insightful, Freehling’s insistence that historical events must be explained by focusing on “luck, accident, and coincidence—or the personal strivings and agency of individuals”—cannot account for everything. His analysis of *Dred Scott*, for example, focuses heavily on the relationships and correspondence between President-elect Buchanan and Justices Robert C. Grier of Pennsylvania and John Catron of Tennessee, and he suggests that Buchanan’s intervention may have united the Court’s Democrats around its ultimate decision. That was certainly possible, but recent scholarship on the decision points out that his intervention may not have been necessary because the Supreme Court’s understanding of federal law worked against *Dred Scott* on every level.[2] Freehling’s account does not really run counter to these arguments, but his analysis tends to give short shrift to the impersonal structures (like constitutional law) that provided the context in which the relationships of his subjects were embedded, and in so doing he occasionally misses opportunities to show how masterful his subjects were at gaming those structures for the advantage of their section.

Second, his decision to emphasize “white male’s political ... history” over “multi-cultural social history” reduces the coming of the Civil War to the maneuvering of a handful of elites. Freehling makes no apologies for his approach and would probably counter critics, with some justification, by pointing out that his political account is “deeply inform[ed]” by social history (p. xiii). His narrative, however, treats non-elites as not much more than components of the landscape that feed the anxiety of Freehling’s subjects by voting the wrong way, threatening to rebel, tolerating open discussion of slavery, and perhaps setting mysterious fires in Texas. Whatever experiences common folk may have had—whatever agency they may have exercised in bringing about secession—cannot be seen from *The Road to Disunion*. But despite these limitations, Freehling has constructed a path worth traveling.

#### Notes

[1]. William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion, Volume 1: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[2]. Austin Allen, *Origins of the Dred Scott Case: Jack-*

*sonian Jurisprudence and the Supreme Court, 1837-1857* Graber, *Dred Scott and the Problem of Constitutional Evil* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006); Mark A. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

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**Citation:** Austin Allen. Review of Freehling, William W., *The Road to Disunion: Volume II: Secessionists Triumphant, 1854-1861*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. June, 2011.

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