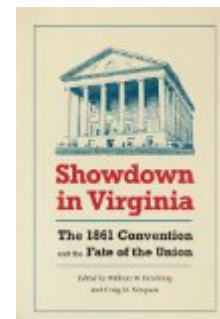


**William W. Freehling, Craig M. Simpson, eds..** *Showdown in Virginia: The 1861 Convention and the Fate of the Union*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010. xxvi + 210 pp. \$22.50, paper, ISBN 978-0-8139-2964-4.



**Reviewed by** Marc-William Palen

**Published on** H-CivWar (January, 2011)

**Commissioned by** Hugh F. Dubrulle (Saint Anselm College)

William W. Freehling and Craig M. Simpson's 2010 edited volume, *Showdown in Virginia*, dovetails nicely with the Civil War's approaching sesquicentennial. The editors themselves need little introduction. Freehling and Simpson have produced a variety of fine books on the origins and onset of the Civil War which have established them as masters of the secessionist debates.[1] This newest endeavor provides a marked Upper South counterpoint to their previous joint editorial venture into the Lower South, *Secession Debated: Georgia's Showdown in 1860* (1992). In doing so, Civil War buffs have been offered a fresh look at the lively debates surrounding Virginia's decision to secede.

So what is it about the Virginia convention that makes it stand out, for both the editors and general readers? The Virginia debates offer a window into the Upper South's dissent over disunion, in contrast to the pervasive secessionist sentiment in the Lower South. For instance, whereas Georgians deliberated over secession for five days in 1860, Virginians debated for five months in 1861.

Virginia secessionists justified the legality of disunion and sought redress for perceived grievances; they found insurmountable the North's all-pervasive "anti-slavery catechisms," "anti-slavery priests," "anti-slavery feeling," "anti-slavery sentiment," and "anti-slavery everything" (p. 119); they cried foul at the executive ascendancy of the abolitionist Black Republicans; they condemned a Republican high tariff policy that exploited and undercut the South's agrarian economy; and they emphasized the insufferable Northern desire to keep slavery from the territories. Unionists in turn pointed out that secession would not cure such perceived ills, but only make them worse; they argued against the constitutionality of secession; and they warned of the looming specter of imminent violence that would inevitably result from secession, thereby converting Virginia's "smiling valleys" into "slaughter pens" (p. 20). All the more fascinating is the shift in opinion among Virginia's convention delegates: on April 4, for example, the secessionists were handily defeated by the Unionist and undecided vote. Just two weeks

later, following Abraham Lincoln's call for troop mobilization and the Southern shelling of Fort Sumter, secessionist sentiment swelled. The tide had turned, and the Disunionists had their way.

In this volume, Freehling and Simpson almost reverentially offer homage to George H. Reese's 1965 "editorial masterwork," a comprehensive four-volume collection of material relating to the 1861 Virginia convention entitled *Proceedings of the Virginia State Convention of 1861*. Why, then, did they feel Reese's efforts needed revisionist revisiting? Because it was *too* comprehensive. The extended length of the Virginia convention created an overwhelming amount of primary source material. Numbering about three thousand pages and bereft of an index, Reese's compendium can be intimidating and unwieldy to specialists, let alone nonspecialists. Freehling and Simpson proffer instead a distilled draft, compressing "a great American verbal encounter into its widely readable essence" of about two hundred pages of text, pages that have in turn been separated into three parts (p. xxi). This condensed format thus "widens access to Upper South secessionist and Unionist arguments. It highlights how violence drives procrastinators to decision. And it recovers the convention's almost forgotten oratorical climax, a brilliant exploration of the clash between constitutional and military necessities" (p. x).

By far the largest chunk, part 1, or "Secession Debated," focuses on the speeches and pronouncements preceding Lincoln's April 15, 1861, proclamation. Part 2, entitled "Taxation Debated," includes speeches for and against limitations on the taxation of slave property. And the third section, "Decisions," is composed of the most important speeches surrounding the convention's ultimate choice to secede. Following the fall of Sumter and Lincoln's pronouncement calling for troops, the convention's April 17 decision resulted in Virginia's descent to disunion, followed closely by western Virginians' own subsequent secession from their Confederate counterparts.

This is a book designed for specialists and teachers alike, as both a handy primary reference source and a primer for allowing undergraduates to grapple with the complexities surrounding Southern secession. *Showdown in Virginia's* slimness will take up but a sliver of a historian's precious shelf space, its price a pittance compared to Reese's four-volume set. While *Showdown in Virginia* follows an unfortunate precedent from Reese's *Proceedings* and avoids the inclusion of an index, its absence is more than made up for with *Showdown's* brevity, insightful introduction, editorial comments, and recommendations for further reading. Scholars of the Civil War and Southern history would do well to add it to their library.

#### Note

[1]. See, for instance, Craig M. Simpson, *A Good Southerner: The Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985); William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990-2007); and William W. Freehling, *The South vs. the South: How Anti-Confederate Southerners Shaped the Course of the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Also, if you have not yet watched Freehling's enthusiastic CSPAN presentation and reenactment of the 1861 Virginia showdown, I highly recommend it. See <http://cspan.org/Watch/Media/2010/10/23/AHTV/A/39879/The+Virginia+Showdowns+and+Secession.aspx>.

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**Citation:** Marc-William Palen. Review of Freehling, William W.; Simpson, Craig M., eds. *Showdown in Virginia: The 1861 Convention and the Fate of the Union*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. January, 2011.

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