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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Edward L. Ayers, Carolyn R. Martin, eds. *America on the Eve of the Civil War.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010. x + 147 pp. $23.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-3063-3.

John Lockwood, Charles Lockwood. *The Siege of Washington: The Untold Story of the Twelve Days That Shook the Union.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Illustrations. xiv + 298 pp. $27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-975989-7.

Emory M. Thomas. *The Dogs of War: 1861.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 128 pp. $14.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-517470-0.

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Contingency and the Origins of the Civil War

This trio of books presents an object lesson in what Edward L. Ayers refers to in his *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America, 1859-1863* (2003) as "deep contingency." In his comparative study of Augusta County, Virginia, and Franklin County, Pennsylvania, in the Civil War era, Ayers urges historians to appreciate both structure and process, to see the deep underlying forces that shape social interactions and the momentary shifts and possibilities that inhere in individual action and chance. These three books, entirely different in format and approach, all consider the moments just before and during the opening of the U.S. Civil War and all force us to recognize "the dense and intricate connections in which lives and events are embedded."[1]

America on the Eve of the Civil War offers the transcript of a discussion among seventeen top historians of the era. Growing out of one of the first events sponsored by the Virginia Sesquicentennial of the American Civil War Commission, the volume offers a broad array of ideas and perspectives on the world from which the war came. Hosted by Ayers at the University of Richmond, the participants–who spoke in panels in front of a live audience–were charged to consider America as it was in the 1850s and not anticipate secession and war. But even as the participants restrained from indulging in explicit hindsight-driven analysis, their comments inevitably revealed the strains and stresses that drove the nation into war. The resulting volume is organized as the conference was, with sections on the nation, Virginia, the South, and the election of 1860. As a result, the book has no single narrative but does offer a great review for both academic and popular audiences of the state of historical knowledge about antebellum America. Graduate students studying for comprehensive exams will surely benefit from sitting down with these distinguished scholars for an hour's conversation.

Although the speakers approached the topics and the excellent questions from the audience from a variety of perspectives, several themes emerged clearly. The United States of the 1850s was characterized by dynamism, growth, and conflict. The South recovered more quickly from the financial crisis of 1857 and assumed the upward trajectory it had been on before the war. Even more so than their northern peers, southern planters profited from the lucrative but volatile global market for raw materials. Slavery, the basis of southern prosperity, suffered sustained attack from humanitarian, legal, and economic thinkers outside the South even as southerners themselves adapted the institution to meet the needs of the modern economy. As the nation's political system fractured over the future of slavery, Americans struggled to devise alternatives. The success of the Republican Party was no more foreordained than the collapse of slavery five years later. The tensions among the answers given by historians in this volume reveal both the historiographical contests in today's scholarship and also the elusiveness and incoherence of the evidence. Despite all we know about the era, competing explanations continue to be viable.

The Dogs of War offers a single senior historian's take on the moment of the war's origin. Emory M. Thomas has written what amounts to a long essay about the start

of the war. Having spent his career writing about different aspects of the conflict, Thomas is well positioned to offer his account of the war's origins. His focus, not unlike that of the many scholars convened for *America on the Eve of the Civil War*, is on contingency, uncertainty, and unintended consequences. Thomas moves quickly past the question of what caused the war in a deep sense–disputes over slavery's future–and focuses instead on the decisions made on each side to commit to war as a way to solve that dispute.

Thomas's most important contribution here is to emphasize misperception. Leaders on both sides desired to satisfy a majority of their constituents with the least disruption to everyday life. In the process of pursuing this, both sides blundered into a devastating war. Abraham Lincoln's belief that a majority of white southerners remained loyal to the Union structured his cavalier attitude toward secession during the presidential campaign and into the war's opening year. Although Jefferson Davis brought more military experience to his presidency than any other wartime president, he failed to anticipate how northern resources could be marshaled in its war effort. Both Lincoln and Davis, and every other American, anticipated a short war. This proved the most significant misperception and the one that ensured both sides would create ad hoc policies that required continual adjustment as they stumbled into war. Importantly, Thomas is sensitive to the fact that what may appear in retrospect as a gross error in judgment appeared quite plausible at the time. Few nations have the luxury of waiting until the perfect moment to launch a war, but the unpredictable interplay of events, attitudes, and beliefs in antebellum America, as revealed by the participants in the Richmond conference, made 1861 an inauspicious moment indeed.

John and Charles Lockwood's *The Siege of Washington* extends the narrative through the first two weeks of the war. Such a close reading of a period that most historians glance over might seem an indulgent topic intended only for antiquarian interest. But in the Lockwoods' capable hands, what emerges is both a gripping narrative and more evidence for the fluidity of the moment. Their story covers April 13-25, 1861, moving from the aftermath of Fort Sumter to the arrival in Washington DC of enough infantry regiments to adequately defend the capital. Rather than the political and social uncertainty emphasized by most academic scholars of the era, the Lockwoods take the reader down to the ground, where physical facts–the location and route of railroads and telegraphs, the presence or absence of defensive fortifications, and the availability of both men and arms–shaped outcomes. The Lockwoods persuasively demonstrate the vulnerability of DC to Confederate attack in the war's opening days and the difficulties that Lincoln encountered in trying to bring soldiers in to mitigate that vulnerability.

If the timing of the war was poor so too was its location; Washington possessed a host of liabilities. The underdeveloped city made it easy to attack (the Lockwoods' experience in the city's local history enables them to bring the streets and buildings to life in the text). It sported no effective defensive facilities and no trained soldiers, and it was surrounded by slave states. A large body of pro-Confederate citizens in the city and the main rail line into DC ran through Baltimore, a stridently pro-secession city. Lincoln and Winfield Scott (who played a starring role in this opening scene of the war) realized these liabilities but labored mightily to alleviate them. A key moment came with the destruction of the federal armory at Harpers Ferry, which denied the stand of fifteen thousand arms from falling into the hands of Confederate Virginians who could have turned them on the capital. But the problem of receiving the first waves of volunteers from northern states did not recede. After the untrained First Pennsylvania made it through Baltimore and into DC on April 18, the second group (the Sixth Massachusetts) was attacked by a pro-secession mob and barely escaped. That story is told expertly here and highlights how reliant DC was on the Baltimore rail lines. Reports and rumors about the attack and the ensuing cut of both rail and telegraph lines effectively marooned Washington and inspired waves of panic among its residents. Each new rumor–of Virginians invading from the South or Marylanders from the North–compelled families to flee the city or barricade themselves inside. The pivotal days of what the Lockwoods call the "siege" of Washington were April 21-22, when two more experienced regiments were stranded in Annapolis and unable to reach the city.

The Lockwoods' narrative focuses almost exclusively on the North. This decision enables them to craft a compelling story and gives readers a visceral sense of the insecurity in the war's opening days. What we do not see is the complementary indecision and confusion that reigned in Richmond at the same time. Lincoln did not know that the nascent Confederate government was in as much disarray as his own and working hard to cement the loyalty of Virginia after the recent relocation of the Confederate capital. While knowing this today explains why most historians pass over this interval, it does nothing to diminish the importance of the Lockwoods' story. Real or imagined, the danger that Lincoln and his advisors perceived shaped their policies and behavior during

a crucial period and for years afterwards. Historians have long emphasized what some people regard as Lincoln's excessive concern for the fortification of the city. Knowing how vulnerable the town seemed in April 1861 makes his continuing anxiety more understandable. The Lockwoods' narrative also contextualizes Lincoln's order to Scott on April 25 to "adopt the most prompt, and efficient means to counteract [Marylanders' possible war against the Union], even, if necessary, to the bombardment of their cities." This order has drawn the recent attention of scholars of the Union's hard war.[2] The willingness of Lincoln to consider the razing of a town suggests unscrupulous warfare from the conflict's start, but it must be weighed against the insecurity of Washington, given its physical location, and the persistent calls for just such action from newspapers across the North, outraged over the treatment of U.S. troops by the gangs of Baltimore. The Lockwoods' story makes awfully compelling reading for the dog that did not bark. If this seems like backhanded praise it is not. As the Ayers and Martin and Thomas volumes all show, history and wars are full of silent dogs. Recognizing them and understanding what keeps them quiet as opposed to those we hear is what good history is all about.

Notes

[1]. Edward L. Ayers, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America, 1859-1863* (Norton: New York, 2003), xix.

[2]. Burrus M. Carnahan, *Lincoln on Trial: Southern Civilians and the Law of War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 1.

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