THE CAUSES OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR:
TRENDS IN HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION,
1950-1976

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

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Denton, Texas
May, 1992
Master of Arts (American History), May, 1993, 159 pp., bibliography, 97 titles.

This thesis examines the trends in historical interpretation concerning the coming of the American Civil War. The main body of works examined were written between 1950 and 1976, beginning with Allan Nevins' *Ordeal of the Union* and concluding with David M. Potter's *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861.* It also includes a brief survey of some works written after 1976.

The main source for discovering the materials included were the bibliographies of both monographs and general histories published during and after the period 1950-1976. Also, perusal of the contents and book review sections of scholarly journals, in particular the *Journal of Southern History* and *Civil War History,* was helpful in discovering sources and placing works in a time chronology for the thesis narrative.
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CHAPTER I

ALLAN NEVINS AND THE ORDEAL OF THE UNION

In 1954, Thomas J. Pressly published his major study on the causal historiography of the American Civil War, *Americans Interpret Their Civil War*. Pressly's book chronicled the shifting interpretations of Civil War causation from the end of the war itself to 1950. He focused in particular on six specific groups: the survivors of the war and their accounts; the Nationalist interpretations of Rhodes, Woodrow Wilson, Edward Channing, and others; the economic interpretations based on the work of Charles and Mary Beard; the "Vindicators of the South," particularly U.B. Phillips and other students of William Dunning at Columbia University; the Revisionist interpretations of Avery O. Craven and James G. Randall, which held that the war was an unnecessary, "repressible conflict"; and a group Pressly called the "New Nationalist Tradition" of post-World War II historians influenced by that conflict and best represented by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

In the forty years since Pressly wrote his dissertation, radical change has swept across the historical discipline. Through the diffusion of higher education from

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a few select schools, and competition engendered into the university system through the publication demands of tenure, there may never again be sharp, easily definable "schools" of historic interpretation on any aspect of American history as Pressly presented them. Larger social factors also have been influential. The campaign for racial civil rights, the national experience of Vietnam, and the Constitutional crisis of the Watergate scandal have left sustained influences on the way we perceive our past.

What makes the last forty years of historical interpretation all the more diverse is the lack of any one, great unifying national movement exerting its influence on the discipline. American wars since 1950 have generally been small and/or unpopular. Even the civil rights movement, the "Second Reconstruction," never gained the massive public support of events like the world wars. In short, there has not been a single large event to unify national commitment the way the Revisionists' critics believed they were influenced by the experiences of the First World War. The result has been sluggish, if any, movement toward a new, single interpretation of the Civil War's cause. However, despite the lack of any singular "school" of interpretation, research into most facets of the Civil War remained very brisk.
In 1950, Allan Nevins published volumes three and four of his projected ten volume history of the United States from 1848 to 1877, The Ordeal of the Union. This mid-century compendium was the most important work on the period since James Ford Rhodes' multi-volume History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850, published at the turn of the century. Nevins' work drew the inevitable comparisons and contrasts with that of Rhodes, and became, as it were, a measure of the progress in historical trends and interpretations over the previous fifty years. These volumes became immediate landmarks in the historiography of the American Civil War.

Pressly reviewed Nevins' four volumes at the conclusion of Americans Interpret Their Civil War. Their inclusion provided a sure-footed chronological conclusion to his work, but the critical atmosphere which surrounded Ordeal's publication gave Pressly's study of the Nevins volumes an imprecise interpretive conclusion. The tension created by the scholar's reactions made Pressly's already formidable task even more complicated. Two other factors also played upon

The prospect of ten volumes comes from the publisher's note on the book jacket. Several reviewers came up with a different total number of volumes.

Pressly's conclusion: (1) Harvard accepted Pressly's work, his 1950 dissertation, at roughly the same time volumes three and four of Nevins' work appeared, precluding any real sense of perspective; and (2) Scribner's published *Ordeal of the Union* at a time of great ferment in the historical discipline, when the singular confines of strict interpretations seemed to be coming apart.

The turbulence within the historical discipline at the time made any understanding of Nevins' volumes exceptionally difficult. Now, many years later, it is easier to perceive some harmony within what Pressly called, quoting Nevins, "The Confusion of Voices." To begin again a survey of the historical interpretations on the causes of the Civil War, one must start where Professor Pressly left off, with Allan Nevins' *Ordeal of the Union*, and attempt to find some order among the chaos he found.

For the purposes of this thesis, "cause" and "causal history" should be understood to mean the research and writing by scholars on the individuals and events, both political and social, which effected the Southern states of the United States to secede from the Union and form the Confederate States of America in 1861.

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*Pressly, Americans*, 338-45.
ORDEAL OF THE UNION RECONSIDERED

Ordeal of the Union was Allan Nevins' projected ten volume history of the United States covering the period from the end of the Mexican War in 1848 to the end of Congressional Reconstruction in 1877. Nevins' series eventually ended with volume eight and the conclusion of hostilities in 1865. The primary parts dealt with by Pressly, and considered here, are the first four volumes: Ordeal of the Union, published in 1947; and The Emergence of Lincoln, published in 1950.5

Through the course of the volumes, Nevins wrote about all the prominent aspects of the period: politics, industrialization, westward expansion, railroads, artistic and literary developments, and colorful illustrations of Washington social affairs. Volume one began with the fall of Mexico City in 1848 and the controversy surrounding the Wilmot Proviso. Volume two carried the story through the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas controversy, and the emergence of slavery into the mainstream of American political culture. The violence and issues surrounding Kansas-Nebraska, and the degree to which Nevins covered them, invested them with the impression that this was the major


turning point in the sectional struggle. *The Emergence of Lincoln* covered more social aspects of the era while chronicling the general decline of the political process. These volumes concluded with the secession of the Deep South and the inauguration of Lincoln.

Nevins' main sources were newspapers and the private papers of prominent individuals. Primary sources also constituted the majority of historical writings and biographies in his bibliography: Nicolay and Hay's biography of Lincoln, Mary Chesnut's diary, the memoirs of Alexander Hamilton, Jefferson Davis, James Buchanan, and others. Nevins made less use of secondary sources such as monographs or other scholarly writings. He rarely ever cited some of the more familiar secondary sources, such as Rhodes' history. In short, Nevins' volumes represent a thorough search of primary sources from the antebellum years.

His perspective, while mostly retaining the proprieties of disinterested scholarship, had a decidedly nationalist bias. This became most obvious in the footnote citations to his newspaper sources. The majority of these were published north of the Ohio River, from Chicago to Boston. This northern perspective comes into greater relief when the reader realizes that Nevins' account of the South centered almost entirely around angry slaveholders and secessionists.
The existence of southern Unionists and Whigs became important to the narrative only in terms of votes: presidential elections and controversial votes in Congress. Nevins did not give extensive coverage to those southerners opposed to secession until well into the fourth volume, after the schism of the Democratic Party at Charleston.

Nevins believed the primary cause for disunion was slavery. However, he did not believe that southern slavery in itself led to the break-up of the Union. To Nevins, the issue was much more than chattel servitude. What pushed the slavery issue to the point of causing secession was the much more significant issue of race:

The main root cause of the conflict (and there were minor roots) was the problem of slavery with its complementary problem of race-adjustment: the main source of the tragedy was the refusal of either section to face these conjoined problems squarely and pay the heavy costs of a peaceful settlement. Had it not been for the differences in race, the slavery issue would have presented no difficulties. But as the racial gulf existed, the South inarticulately but clearly perceived that elimination of this issue would still leave it the terrible problem of the Negro.  

In so stating, Nevins rejected the economic arguments of slavery in causal interpretation. Instead, he adopted an interpretation more closely related to U.B. Phillips and his concept of the "great fact of race." Race, without regard to slavery as anything other than an economic institution

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6Nevins, Emergence, 2:468.
and tool of social control, became a factor in itself. According to Nevins, what to do with the Negro was not just a dilemma of Reconstruction, but a timeless problem. Furthermore, Nevins made the point that this was not just a Southern dilemma:

"But the North was by no means without its full share, for the North equally refused to give a constructive examination to the central question of slavery as linked with race adjustment. . . . The North, like the South, found it easier to drift blindly toward disaster."

Despite this portrayal of the racial dilemma as national in character, Nevins still singled out the South as peculiar not only within the Union, but also within the whole of western civilization. Slavery and the Southern society which fostered it, according to Nevins, were in stark contrast to all the other tendencies of nineteenth-century Western thought.

To understand the era about which he wrote, Nevins believed it was imperative to have an understanding of the era's "zeal for reform," without which the period "defies comprehension."

One of the outstanding chapters in the entire work is "Slavery In a World Setting." By juxtaposing the South with emancipation movements in Great Britain and Latin America, Nevins reinforced the two most important

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7Ibid., 2:468; 2:469.

8Nevins, Ordeal, 1:114.
points of *The Emergence of Lincoln*: (1) slavery was an outdated labor system which demanded containment and gradual elimination; and (2) the end of Southern slavery would force the society to deal with a radical racial adjustment no other emancipation movement ever confronted. These two opposing points, and each sections' refusal to compromise with the other, led to an unavoidably violent conclusion:

The consequence of these two refusals -- the refusals of Southerners to treat slavery as a progressive and evolutionary system, leading by regular gradations to freedom, and the refusal of Northerners to acknowledge that in equity they must share the heavy burdens of racial adjustment -- was to place slavery in a position where it became more and more perilous to the body politic. It had to be moved to a new position, but neither side was willing to move it by gradual plan. Year by year a violent solution of the problem became more probable. The North was quite as much at fault as the South.  

By the time of the Kansas-Nebraska debates, it was clear to Nevins that slavery could no longer be ignored by the body politic: "The slavery question was in fact irrepressible."  

An interesting aspect related to Nevins' irrepressibility thesis, which critics failed to mention and which at times played an especially important role in *Emergence*, was

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11Ibid., 2:7-8.
Nevins' use of psychohistory. He believed that by the late 1850s a mob mentality had set in across the nation. Nevins portrayed the national psyche, as it were, as being in a universal state of paranoia:

[In early 1858] both North and South had now entered the sphere of hysteric emotions; prejudice warped and passion inflamed their minds; they were influenced by the memory of old affronts and the fear of future wrongs. Above all, fear actuated them. Because each section imputed aggressive designs to the other, every proposal became a plot and every act a menace.12

He made his most direct assertion of this in regard to the Southern temper after John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry. Nevins portrayed this as nothing less than psychotic:

It is a basic principle of social psychology that mob action readily appears in situations in which two or more opposed races, or social classes, or religious or political elements, stand in uneasy equipoise -- the resulting prejudices and fears quickly generating an explosive hatred. That situation existed in large parts of the South in 1859. Tension, conflict, and alarm were ready, on a slight impulse, to create a pathological state of mind -- in many places, actual hysteria. Inhibitions of custom and reason would go down; mob action would come to the front.13

While Nevins made his issues very clear, aspects of his narrative tended to muddle the more subtle insinuations in the work. When read and considered as one continuous narrative seemingly small inconsistencies emerge in the four

12Nevins, Emergence, 1:280-81.

13Ibid., 2:157.
volumes that would not appear particularly important if the volumes were read as independent of one another. One instance is his treatment of Stephen Douglas.

Nevins' portrayal of Douglas shifted subtly, then dramatically over the course of the volumes. The majority of The Emergence of Lincoln deals with the career of Douglas. Douglas, although initially portrayed in volume one of Ordeal as the mostly untrustworthy ruffian senator from Illinois and spokesman for the more militant Democrats of the Northwest, eventually emerged as one of the heroes of the Compromise of 1850.

In volume two Nevins characterized Douglas as the instigator and sponsor of that most ill-advised piece of legislation, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, displaying not only political ineptitude but also ignorance.\(^4\) By the conclusion of volume four, however, Douglas had come full circle to the role of martyr, having been frozen out of the Democratic Party by the Buchanan Administration (unflatteringly, and repeatedly, referred to as "The Directory" by Nevins) and robbed of the 1860 Presidential election by the secession conspiracy of William Yancey.

Nevins did not limit historical figures to any strict, singular interpretation, allowing for some of the more

subtle changes in individuals over time. It would have worked to Nevins credit had he helped to explain some of the changes in a complex man like Douglas. However, it served only to confuse the reader when he portrayed the shifts in Douglas' philosophy as separate events and not an evolutionary continuum from 1850 to 1860. Douglas may have been the only "electable" Northern Democrat in 1860 as Nevins stated; however the fact that Douglas espoused freesoil in 1850, shifted to popular sovereignty, with its placating overtones to slaveholders, in 1854, then effectively shifted back to a freesoil platform at Freeport are just as revealing of his "unelectability" in 1860. Nevins did not examine the implications of Douglas' philosophical shifts very thoroughly.

Another example of seeming inconsistency can be found in Nevins' use of the personal papers of James Buchanan. Nevins utilized Buchanan's observations of the political climate before he became president to illustrate the current of the times. However, in volumes three and four, Nevins portrayed Buchanan as a man immensely malleable to other people's will and practically incapable of acting as his own person. This revelation in volume three significantly diminished the currency invested in Buchanan in the first two volumes. If Nevins intended the use of these papers to expose the mind of a future president, he failed. As Nevins
reiterated again and again, Buchanan was not in control of his administration; it controlled him.

THOMAS PRESSLY AND ORDEAL OF THE UNION

Thomas Pressly characterized the critical reaction to Ordeal and Nevins' interpretation of causation as having a "persistent dualism."\textsuperscript{15} This dualism arises from Pressly's effort to integrate Ordeal into the previous interpretations he had covered. After immediately disqualifying the Beardian and Marxist interpretations, Pressly's main objective was to find some middle ground between the revisionists and the "New Nationalist" historians. He believed there was a "combination" of the two ideas, but not a "synthesis," as "those two sets of ideas were so different that it seemed impossible to assimilate them into one consistent and coherent pattern."\textsuperscript{16} Hence Pressly's perception of dualism.

Pressly based his argument for the revisionist half on Nevins' portrayal of the sectional conflict as a result of weak leadership and "emotional unrealities."\textsuperscript{17} He took Nevins' statement from the preface of volume one that the

\textsuperscript{15}Pressly, Americans, 346.
\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., 346.
\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., 348.
war "should have been avoidable" as another nod in the direction of revisionism.\(^8\) Nevertheless, after setting up these arguments, he turned to the belief that *Ordeal* contained much more "New Nationalist" ideology than it did revisionism. Nevins always kept his focus aimed on the essential differences between North and South, according to Pressly, and so deserved to be considered a "new nationalist" with certain revisionist tendencies.\(^9\)

This generated assimilation reveals the lack of perspective Pressly was forced to worked under. The "perceived dualism"\(^{10}\) that Pressly claims of *Ordeal* appears, in hindsight, to be much more an academic product of the times in which Pressly worked. In the mixture of post-World War II emotions, Pressly seemed to be attempting a balancing act between the emergent historians of the victorious postwar generation and the historians who emerged from the bitter experiences of World War I.

*Americans Interpret Their Civil War* appeared at a time of revisionist reconsideration, when a nationalist tradition was just becoming firmly established. Into this vacuum came Nevins' work, and confusion over interpretation was to be

\(^{18}\)Ibid., 347.

\(^{19}\)Ibid., 348.

expected. However, the confusion was not so great some forty years later, and while the claim of "dualism" might still exist, it existed for much different reasons.

CRITICAL REACTION TO ORDEAL OF THE UNION REEXAMINED

Pressly presented an exceptional overview of the critical reaction to Ordeal at the end of his book. It illustrates well the differences and dimensions among historians at the time of publication.

The questions for the critics should have been what were the primary motivating forces of the 1850s and how did they relate to the coming of the war? Few, if any, really addressed those questions. Instead, they resorted to sectional politics and personal prejudice. The criticisms of scholarly historical journals refrained from direct criticism of the work, save for pointing out numerous typographical errors in the first two volumes. It was in the larger-circulated press where critics, especially those with a nationalist ideology, expressed their more visceral emotions. The criticisms, while generally divided along a philosophic line, have a genuinely geographic angle.

To introduce the dichotomy between these sectional tendencies, the review of Henry Steele Commager is the best example. Commager, a co-writer with Nevins on America: The
Story of a Free People, began by stating that the "historical pendulum," long leaning toward the South, was beginning a swing back to the North. In line with this pendulum swing, part of a reaction against economic interpretations with their tendency toward a causal presentation of the war as Northern and capitalist, Commager claimed that the antebellum United States suffered from a "bankruptcy of statesmanship -- and particularly [the] South." While he pointed out that Nevins did not "wholly follow Rhodes," neither did he "swallow the apologies of Craven and Phillips." To Commager, Ordeal represented "a wonderfully balanced and judicious presentation" of the prewar period.

This perception of balance was also evident in Pressly's main example of New Nationalism, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. Schlesinger stated flatly that "fair-
mindedness" was the "great characteristic" of the work.\textsuperscript{26} The remainder of his review of Ordeal was written to show Nevins' "middle-of-the-road position,"\textsuperscript{27} and a correlation between the prewar eras of the 1850s and 1930s. Schlesinger believed the work presented the "basic historical motion" of the antebellum years as being "toward the unification of the country."\textsuperscript{28} This is a hard generalization to sustain, especially when the careful reader of Nevins knows the political history of his work is not nationalistic, but sectional. As previously pointed out, Nevins significantly minimized the role of Southern Unionists in comparison to that of the secessionists. In pursuing the chapters on national growth and expansion, the tenor was decidedly national. But politically (elections, Congressional votes) and socially (art and literature, social stratification), Nevins presented a society motivated by its sectional prejudices.

Another representative of the "Northern" or nationalist view was Oscar Handlin. His critique, as Pressly illustrated, revealed even more of the sectional division within

\textsuperscript{26}Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Review of Ordeal of the Union, by Allan Nevins, Saturday Review of Literature 30 (14 October 1947): 10.

\textsuperscript{27}\textit{Ibid.}, 9.

\textsuperscript{28}\textit{Ibid}, 9.
discussions of Ordeal. Handlin's review of Emergence betrayed a neo-abolitionist tendency in his criticism of Nevins' portrayal of the original abolitionists.

According to Handlin, Nevins lumped the Northern abolitionists and Southern fire-eaters into one group labeled "extremists." Adopting a personal, moralistic stand, Handlin arraigned Nevins, claiming that the author, writing with "bitterness, . . . has no comprehension that the content of their [Abolitionist] extremism differentiates these men from the Rhetts and Yanceys." 2

Handlin's contention was that the whole work was written on two levels, one social, the other political, and the mingling of the two was never addressed by Nevins. In fact, he believed the two never met. This is where Handlin began his criticism of the abolitionist presentation. His tone was condemning and unforgiving, revealing just as much, if not more, bias than he accused the author of having.

When Handlin's review of Emergence is compared to the review written by Avery O. Craven on the same volume, the sectional reception of Ordeal draws its sharpest contrasts.

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30 Ibid., 513-14.
Craven believed the volumes should be judged by "soundness of interpretation and grasp of fundamentals."\(^{31}\)

Nevins, claimed Craven, began with the old assumption of two separate civilizations: the nationalist and industrialized North, and the sectional and agrarian South. The South, controlled by a quasi-cabal of secessionists, plotted a course to entrench their peculiar institution through the Kansas-Nebraska Act, weak chief executives, and the Supreme Court. The Civil War resulted from failed leadership that did not force the South to alter its ways or force the North to accept some of the burden of social adjustment. Craven believed this was the "gist" of Nevins' interpretation. "He leaves no doubt," writes Craven, "as to where he stands."\(^{32}\)

Craven's review of *Emergence* reflected the general tone of critiques by the "Vindicators of the South," but it is perhaps the most incisive of all the critiques, raising questions of interpretation that transcend sectional limits. Craven admitted that Northerners expressed more zeal for federal aids to expand the supplies and markets of an industrial society because it was necessary for their economic survival. "But does that indicate a greater patriotism or more pride in national growth and accomplishment?"


\(^{32}\)Ibid., 723.
Enthusiasm for federal intervention may be a barometer of market success but not necessarily one of "a people's love for the nation."\textsuperscript{34}

Craven further questioned Nevins' supposition that the Supreme Court was a monolith exerting a pro-slavery dogma. Only one justice was a slaveholder and all of them remained loyal to the Union after 1861.\textsuperscript{35} He also turned around Nevins' theory on weak leadership, using instead his own theory of a failed democratic process that could allow nothing but weak leaders to rise in a "divided era."\textsuperscript{36}

The final twist in the Craven-Handlin contrast is the difference between each one's moral interpretation of the 1850s. Handlin believed Nevins failed to inject enough moral character into his presentation by not differentiating between fire-eaters and abolitionists. However, Craven believed that moral forces were what upset the political process in the first place.\textsuperscript{37} The social changes that were needed could not keep pace with the social demands, and the resulting lack of compromise led to war.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 724.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 724.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 724.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 725.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 725.
Robert H. Woody's much longer critique of *Ordeal* took a similar yet much less emotional approach to the same criticisms as Craven. He conceded admiration for Nevins' work but found it fatally flawed by an "attitude of mind."

Woody, who wrote his review in first person plural, believed "we are safe in saying that [Nevins] would accept John W. Burgess' admission that 'the Northern point of view is, in the main, the correct view'."³³ Woody also criticized Nevins for considering the issue of slavery, particularly the matter of carrying slaves into the territories, as "mere constitutional quibbling to serve special interest."³³

Woody even criticized Nevins' sources, generally praised by all critics, a "lesser matter" of dispute. Woody -- and whoever else he included in his all-embracing "we" -- believed it was "a lapse in historical method" to rely on "a notorious propaganda sheet" like the New York Weekly Tribune for "statements of fact about a subject which may be in dispute."³⁴ These specifics drawn up by Robert Woody, as well as the philosophical and rhetorical points of Avery Craven, represent the general reaction of the Southern defenders to Nevins' volumes.


³⁴ Ibid., 390.

³⁹ Ibid., 391.
There is something to be said for and against each reviewer. Pressly was entirely correct in pointing out that the climate in which John Ford Rhodes' published his volumes in 1900, was considerably less antagonistic than the climate Allan Nevins labored under in the late 1940s. The differences among the critics vaguely paralleled those in the generation Nevins' volumes chronicled: most reviewers engaged in a political and social battle of wills.

In general, the critics were correct: Nevins wrote from a perspective of nationalism that not only did not bow to the currents of Southern vindication, but also revealed in Nevins a muted animosity towards the South. Nevins wrote a history that supplanted Rhodes' turgid volumes in every way except for a truly national sensibility. This is evident if only in the realization that so many reviewers could sit down with the same books and come up with such wildly differing conclusions.

Allan Nevins' *Ordeal of the Union*, despite whatever flaws it might have, fully deserves the recognition it still receives. It marked, in many ways, the beginning of the pendulum swing Commager referred to. As the Civil War centennial approached, a full-scale re-evaluation of the American South past and present began. And the war, as its central feature, also gained a newer perspective. A perception decidedly more Northern than Southern.
CHAPTER II

THE REVOLT AGAINST REVISIONISM

The men Pressly noted as the primary revisionist scholars published their most important interpretations of the Civil War in the late 1930s and 1940s: James G. Randall's *Civil War and Reconstruction*; Avery Craven's *The Repressible Conflict* and *The Coming of the Civil War*; Roy Nichols' *The Disruption of American Democracy*; Kenneth Stampp's *And the War Came*. The core of the revisionists' interpretation was the idea that the Civil War was a "needless war," and they were known generally as the historians who blamed the war on a "blundering generation." Although other interpretations on the causes of the war still held currency among some scholars, the revisionists had become the strong, prolific center of interpretation.

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2 Craven, Avery O. *The Repressible Conflict* (University, La.: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1939).
Nevertheless, the reign of the revisionist philosophy was short-lived. Just as it appeared to gather its most authoritative expression, revisionism came under sharp critical attack from several quarters. Historians, scholars, and writers challenged the validity of its intellectual and social foundations, particularly the needless war and blundering generation ideas. This critique helped shape the form of Civil War studies and played an extremely important role in causal interpretation.

The single most important trend in Civil War causal history during the 1950s was its full-scale demise. However, scholarly work on the subject initially centered around the debate on revisionism. In the late 1950s the debate on revisionism, and the facts of the war's cause, generally subsided. Analysis of causal relationship theory in history replaced, and eventually submerged, the study of the war's cause itself.

From the end of World War II until the early 1960s, revisionist history, as well as the whole idea of causal history in general, withered under the assault of critics from within and without the historical profession. Some of the critiques stemmed from very personal points of view, revealing the trend Thomas Pressly had noted of the personal and political sectionalism of historians in the 1940s and
1950s. Among these critics were historians whose primary fields of knowledge was not even the Civil War.

BERNARD DE VOTO AND THE HARVARD HISTORIANS

The critique of revisionist theory concerning the origins of the Civil War began in earnest after the end of World War II. There had always been differing and even opposing theories to revisionism. However, the revisionist idea surrounding the coming and execution of the war, as well as postwar reconstruction, by and large held sway among the professional historians of the 1930s and early 1940s.

After the war, a group of historians from the Northeast, centered at Harvard University, began the revolt against revisionism within the profession. Coalescing around the leadership of the semi-professional historian Bernard De Voto, this group of historians would single-handedly begin the process of challenging the revisionists. This group's members and their role in the production of the first three, and most influential, articles of revisionist criticism are key to understanding how the new attitude toward revisionism took shape.

Within the group, the most important individual to understand from the perspective of causal history is Bernard De Voto. By profession, he was a writer of novels, histories, and essays. His reputation among the general reading
public was derived mainly from his position as essayist for Harper's Magazine. From 1935 until his death in 1955, De Voto was the essayist for the magazine's long-running feature, "The Easy Chair." Of his many writings, three historical works stand out as important contributions: *Year of Decision: 1846* (1943); *Across the Wide Missouri* (1947), for which he won the Pulitzer Prize; and *The Course of Empire* (1952). From 1929 to 1936, he served as an Instructor, Tutor, and Lecturer at Harvard. It was during this time that De Voto first came into contact with the men who would join the revisionist critique: eminent historians such as Samuel Eliot Morison, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., Carl Birdenbaugh, and Oscar Handlin became close personal friends of DeVoto.

When DeVoto left Harvard in 1936, he became editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature* and opened its pages for the first time to the writings of professional historians. DeVoto immediately revealed his passion for American history and historians when he joined the *Review*:

> The Civil War, the westward movement, the frontier took precedence over other aspects of American history, and American history took decided prefer-

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ence over all others. The Harvard group of historians, especially Samuel Eliot Morison, Arthur Schlesinger [Sr.], [Paul] Buck, and [Crane] Brinton, became members of the Saturday Review reviewing team.

They reinforced this symbiotic relationship several years later when the Harvard historians founded the New England Quarterly, and placed DeVoto on its board of editors.

The importance of these otherwise innocuous relationships becomes evident when we see the first three works discussed here from the perspective of a group. First are two essays written by DeVoto and published under the aegis of "The Easy Chair" in the February and March, 1946, editions of Harper's Magazine. These set forth DeVoto's own personal views on revisionism.

The second article is Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s "The American Civil War: A Note on Historical Sentimentalism," published in the Partisan Review in 1949. Schlesinger, Jr., like his father, was a close, personal friend of DeVoto. Wallace Stegner, in his biography of DeVoto, described Schlesinger, Jr., as "a favorite student of DeVoto's and still later one of his most active allies and admirers and coadjutors." Schlesinger expressed his own admiration for

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3Wallace Stegner, The Uneasy Chair (Garden City, N.Y., 1974), 179.
4Ibid., 105.
DeVoto in the *Partisan Review* essay, referring to him as "that illustrious semi-pro," and declaring his "Easy Chair" essays on revisionism "brilliant."\(^5\)

The third essay is Pieter Geyl's "The American Civil War and the Problem of Inevitability."\(^6\) This article, by the Dutch historian best known amongst European historians for his controversial interpretation of the sixteenth-century breakup of Belgium and The Netherlands, becomes critical in the context of DeVoto and the Harvard historians by virtue of its publication in their journal, the *New England Quarterly*, in June, 1951. A powerful critique of revisionism, it represented in some respects the ultimate achievement of those American historians interested in changing the interpretations of the Civil War. Although not the product of their own pens, it summed up very well their own philosophy, and is still to be found in bibliographies listing the most important works on the coming of the war.

**THE CORNERSTONES OF THE REVISIONIST CRITIQUE**

Wallace Stegner characterized DeVoto's "Easy Chair" essays as "calculated raids . . . against the revisionist


Civil War historians J.G. Randall and Avery Craven."

According to Stegner, DeVoto brought a strong, determinist sensibility to those essays on revisionism. Most of his ideas had been set forth in his 1943 book The Year of Decision: 1846, and would be the guiding force in his subsequent writings:

Manifest Destiny was what The Year of Decision was about, Manifest Destiny conceived as geopolitical inevitability . . . . The thesis was . . . that this year 1846 made the Civil War inevitable and at the same time made certain that the Union would win it."

Of DeVoto's published personal letters, only one involved the issue of revisionist history. This was a letter DeVoto sent to his publisher, William Sloane, in December, 1948, concerning Sloane's consideration for publication of a revisionist history. It included sharp personal criticisms of Douglas Southall Freeman, Dumas Malone, and Avery Craven, as well as the description of revisionism as a "filthy if belated piece of propaganda."

The immediate motivation behind the "Easy Chair" essays was the publication of Randall's Lincoln the President.

DeVoto claimed admiration for Randall's book, but the book

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7Stegner, Uneasy Chair, 289.
8Stegner, 238;239.
itself was not the primary focus of the article. It was, instead, "the book's frame of reference": ideas representing "a deterioration which has reduced the validity of general ideas in American history." DeVoto believed the critical job he undertook was "ungracious" and wished someone else would have done it.

To DeVoto, revisionism and its practitioners represented a bankrupt idea. Its genesis was in his opinion just as much a result of twentieth century experience as it was a philosophy of the past:

Historians who are now mature, . . . happened to be young and impressionable at a time when an intellectual fashion was developing the (erroneous) thesis that the United States could and should have stayed out of the First World War. . . Of that generation many who took up the study of the Civil War happened to be Southerners; that is, men who from their earliest childhood had been nourished on the most active of American social myths. Few if any of them have managed to work all the mythology out of their history.

DeVoto believed that Southerners created a "doughface" version of history. He concluded that the general ideas of Civil War revisionism "are less trustworthy today than they

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11 Ibid., 123.
12 Ibid., 123.
were a generation ago," and represented a "regression in history."\(^\text{13}\)

A consistent trend among the critics of revisionism throughout the 1950s was to break the philosophy down into a list of tenets. In DeVoto's case, he defined revisionism as a series of theorems and corollaries. First was the idea of the avoidable war, with corollaries that it should have been avoided, and therefore someone was to blame. An "accessory theorem" made Stephen Douglas a "tragic hero."\(^\text{14}\) The third theorem of revisionism held that a Republican conspiracy prevented any compromise to solve the problems that led to war. That the problems were not solved and war ensued was the "national failure" which DeVoto believed it was up to historians to explain. However, DeVoto believed the "dogma" of revisionism made an explanation of this failure less and less likely.\(^\text{15}\)

Slavery was the issue in which DeVoto perceived the greatest failure of revisionism, especially in regard to causation and secession. "It [slavery] was the core of the social, the economic, the political, and the constitutional

\(^{13}\)Ibid., 123.

\(^{14}\)Ibid., 124.

\(^{15}\)Ibid., 124.
conflicts," wrote DeVoto.\textsuperscript{16} For him, the issue which demanded explanation was why the slavery question was debated not on its own merits in the 1850s, but rather within the context of territorial settlement. DeVoto believed this a question of "illimitable importance," which should not be "impatiently shrugged away or dismissed with a denunciation of some agitators."\textsuperscript{17} DeVoto, in short, believed that such an interpretation must be removed and replaced:

To pass this [the issue of slavery in the territories] off as an irresponsible mischief of politicians on the make is to go so far astray that history is forced entirely out of orientation and nothing less than a new beginning is required.\textsuperscript{18}

"Revisionism," wrote DeVoto, "has developed a habit of understanding certain things and passing quickly over others;" it avoided the "fundamental reality" of the issues by avoiding the moral issue inherent in any debate of slavery.\textsuperscript{19} In doing so, DeVoto believed there was the possibility of forgetting that slavery, secession, and the war were even related. This was the disorientation of history which he felt Randall, Craven, and the revisionists were responsible for.

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., 125.
\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., 125.
\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., 125.
\textsuperscript{19}Ibid., 126.
With the end of the first essay, DeVoto ended his critique of revisionist causal history and proceeded to evaluate their history of the war. He revealed sharp erudition on the principles of revisionism. And although it is impossible to trace with any absolute conclusion, it is very likely that his impressions of revisionism and the war reached many readers, simply by virtue of the fact that he did not write for the limited readership of professional journals but for a general, large circulation national magazine.

Three years after DeVoto's essays and seven years after receiving the Pulitzer Prize for The Age of Jackson, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., brought his emergent influence to the question of revisionism. "The Causes of the Civil War: A Note on Historical Sentimentalism" was the second important article in the critique of revisionism. Schlesinger's approach was buttressed by his professional reputation, and was more objective and scholarly than DeVoto's essays. It also contained the underpinnings of the historical philosophy with which Thomas Pressly identified him, the "New Nationalism."

To Schlesinger, revisionism was part of a popular style. He tied the "vogue of revisionism" to the fashionable literary trends of the romantic South very prevalent at the time. He believed Margaret Mitchell's Gone With the
Wind and the Twelve Southerner's *I'll Take My Stand* best represented these trends:

I cannot escape the feeling that the vogue of revisionism is connected with the modern tendency to seek in optimistic sentimentalism an escape from the severe demands of moral decision; that it is the offspring of our modern sentimentality which at once evades the essential moral problems in the name of superficial objectivity and asserts their unimportance in the name of an invincible progress.¹¹

"Escape" is the operative word in this passage, and in gaining an understanding of Schlesinger's entire critique. It is in the desire to avoid moral judgments that he found revisionism most open to criticism. Thus Schlesinger, like DeVoto before him, considered slavery the most important factor in the debate.

Likewise, in a manner similar to DeVoto, Schlesinger presented the revisionist ideology based on three "tenets": (1) the war was caused by "irresponsible emotionalization of politics far out of proportion to the real problems involved;" (2) sectionalism was allowed to "develop into needless war by the inexcusable failure of political leadership in the fifties;" and (3) "the slavery problem could have been solved without war."²²

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¹¹Schlesinger, "Historical Sentimentalism," 969.

²²Ibid., 976.

²²Ibid., 972; 973; 974.
The main difference between DeVoto's and Schlesinger's list of revisionist tenets is primarily that of characterization. DeVoto's analysis was very personal, or active, drawing in individuals like Douglas or finding someone on whom to blame the war. Schlesinger's list was much more detached and passive. He did not name names or claim the search for any scapegoat on the part of the revisionists.

For the sake of clear examination, Schlesinger presented the problem of slavery as well-defined, either/or choices. Believing that the revisionists were not forthcoming with any new solutions to the historical dilemma of the slavery problem, he decided there remained only two essential alternatives to the slavery question: preservation or abolition. Assuming that the revisionists would not support preservation, abolition left only three alternatives: internal reform in the South, economic exhaustion of the institution, or compensated emancipation. Schlesinger pointed out that each of these alternatives was proposed, if not tried, in the 1850s and none worked.

"The hard fact," wrote Schlesinger, "is that revisionists have not tried seriously to describe the policies by which the slavery problem could have been peacefully resolved."23 In place of policy appeared "broad affirmations

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23Ibid., 975.
of faith," punctuated by statements like "if only," "some-
how," and "somewhere," but left unrooted in any sense of
morality.\textsuperscript{24} To Schlesinger, the moral factor was all-im-
portant. He devoted the last six pages of his article to a
plea for moral judgment in history. "A society closed in
the defense of an evil institution" left no room for compro-
mise or anything other than moral judgment, Schlesinger
claimed:

\begin{quote}
Such a society forces upon every one, both those
living at the time and those writing about it
later, the necessity for a moral judgment; and the
moral judgment in such cases becomes an indispens-
able factor in the historical understanding.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

The revisionist failure, according to Schlesinger, was
almost entirely moral. "Because the revisionists felt no
moral urgency," he wrote, "they deplored as fanatics those
who did."\textsuperscript{26} Without a moral explanation of slavery, the
revisionists did not acquire the "historical understanding
of the intensities that caused the crisis."\textsuperscript{27} Without
understanding these "intensities," Schlesinger claimed an
elementary understanding of the causes of the war was impos-
sible:

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{24}Ibid., 976. \\
\textsuperscript{25}Ibid., 977. \\
\textsuperscript{26}Ibid., 977. \\
\textsuperscript{27}Ibid., 978.
\end{flushright}
To reject the moral actuality of the Civil War is to foreclose the possibility of an adequate account of its causes. More than that, it is to misconceive and grotesquely to sentimentalize the nature of history.\(^3\)

The last of the three primary revisionist critiques is that of the Dutch historian Pieter Geyl. Professor of American history at the University of Utrecht, The Netherlands, and well known for his scholarship of causal relationships in history, Geyl turned his formidable skills upon the most debated causal event in American history with his article "The American Civil War and the Problem of Inevitability." This June, 1951, essay published in the *New England Quarterly* was the most influential of the three articles, and a harbinger of a significant trend in Civil War historiography away from causal examination. It remains an important work thirty years after it's initial publication.

Just as DeVoto and Schlesinger before him, Geyl focused his critique on the writings of Randall. However, his article has a much more philosophical tone than either DeVoto's or Schlesinger's. He admitted a lesser knowledge of the Civil War than Randall, but "venture[s] upon a discussion of his view" because he "feel[s] that his argument springs from a philosophy of history" against which Geyl is

\(^{3}\)Ibid., 981.
"tempted to pitch [his] own." As the article progressed, his argument became much clearer. The heart of his thesis was the question of historical "fact" and how it is used.

Randall established the center of his revisionism, the needless war doctrine, according to Geyl, with "inexhaustible energy and ingenuity . . ., largely of incontrovertible facts." Geyl, however, was uneasy with the way Randall alluded to his ideas: "realism" and "historical restoration." He believed this revealed Randall's strong faith in the realization of objectivity without any acknowledgement of subjective judgment. Geyl claimed this faith sheltered Randall from the fact that no matter how final some of his facts may be, interpretation was the inevitable result: "it is still his Civil War and his Lincoln." Geyl believed Randall based his conclusions on judgments governed by an "attitude of mind," leading to the unavoidable dilemma that "[e]ven incontrovertible facts can be used for arguments which are not equally acceptable to all of us." On this point, Geyl stood in stark contrast to DeVoto and Schlesinger.

\[\text{29} \text{Geyl, "The American Civil War," 149.}\]
\[\text{30} \text{Ibid., 150.}\]
\[\text{31} \text{Ibid., 151.}\]
\[\text{32} \text{Ibid., 151.}\]
Geyl revealed a very thorough knowledge of the three years preceding the war. For three pages he examined the events and philosophies of 1860 to reveal the fact that in his opinion there was, indeed, a possibility of avoiding war: "One seems to discern all sorts of sidepaths and ways out to a very different future from that of these four terrible years of war."\textsuperscript{[3]} Nonetheless, the war came, even without the will of a majority of the population. Geyl believed this was more a revelation that the majority does not, in fact, control the outcome of events rather than proof that the war was avoidable:

\begin{quote}
The instinctive aversion of the mass of people [to the war] is no evidence that it might have been avoided. It is possible to believe -- note that I am not saying one can prove -- that there were forces at work, stronger than individual desires or fears, or than their sum as resulting from the ballot box, which made it inevitable.\textsuperscript{[4]}
\end{quote}

The remainder of the article further revealed Geyl's knowledge of American history. He first set forth the notion, borrowed from a royalist historian of the French Restoration, that there is the possibility of having two histories: one being what should have happened, the other

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\textsuperscript{[3]}Ibid., 152-53.

\textsuperscript{[4]}Ibid., 155.
being what really happened. Geyl believed this same circumstance to be "the basis of Randall's work."³⁵

He lifted from Randall's essay "The Blundering Generation" the conclusion that Randall believed the people of the 1850s to be foolish. Geyl examined at some depth Kansas-Nebraska, the Lincoln-Douglas debates, and the Fugitive Slave Law. He recalled the issues involved, Randall's theory that most were carried out of proportion, and criticized the historian's use of historical fact as well as his "attitude toward historical figures":

This [Lincoln-Douglas debates] is indeed a striking instance of Randall's somewhat masterful attitude toward his personages. In effect, he tells the speakers of 1858 what subjects they ought to have treated. Is it not the historian's more obvious line simply to conclude from the enormous impression they made, that the country's mood was strained to the utmost by the Kansas-Nebraska complication?³⁶

Geyl concluded that Randall based his entire argument "from the bottom upward on faith," reason being the foundation of that faith.³⁷ Fortunately for the reader, Geyl stated his other conclusions at the end of the article. His first conclusion, on the issue of slavery as the central issue behind the war, was very close to Schlesinger's. He

⁴¹Ibid., 156.
⁴²Ibid., 158.
⁴³Ibid., 167.
believed that Randall, like the Beards before him, placed too much emphasis on "exclusively practical and reasonable terms," a situation under which "the importance of the moral problem "cannot" be done justice."\(^{38}\)

Of his second conclusion, on the inevitability of the war, Geyl walked a fine line. It isn't that he believed the war was inevitable. He believed, rather, that Randall's arguments for avoidability were "unconvincing."\(^{39}\) Geyl deduced that Randall's method of separating fundamental and artificial cause was "inadmissible" because he tended to lump together all factors that were not in accordance with majority will, defined by Randall "in accordance with the best rational standards."\(^{40}\)

However, the significance of Geyl's article transcended its' conclusions concerning Randall and revisionism. Indeed, Geyl's conclusions implied the newer, scientific trends toward history which had begun to take shape in Europe after World War II. Specifically, he questioned, from a philosophical basis, the validity of causal relationships in the study of history:

"The question of evitable or inevitable is one on which, it seems to me, the historian can never

\(^{38}\)Ibid., 168.
\(^{39}\)Ibid., 168.
\(^{40}\)Ibid., 168.
form any but an ambivalent opinion. He will now stress other possibilities, then again speak in terms of a coherent sequence of causes and effects. But if he is wise, he will in both cases remain conscious that he has not been able to establish a definite equilibrium between the factors. . . .

In short, the cause and effect debate in Civil War history, or history at large, is a moot point because it is an issue so vast and elusive that "the human mind will never have a complete command" of it. This is a situation caused by what Geyl described as the *imponderabilia*: passion, emotion, conviction, prejudice, and misunderstanding; issues which have "their own organic function." Because these "non-rational" factors are always present, and cannot be ignored or argued away with *ex post facto* wisdom, an understanding of cause and effect will always be incomplete.

Pieter Geyl's article began the most important trend in Civil War causal history in the 1950s. Philosophical reflection took priority over historical deliberation. After almost a century of study and writing on the causes of the Civil War, the basic relevance of the issue was now in doubt.

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41 Ibid., 168.
42 Ibid., 168.
THE CRITIQUE OF CAUSAL HISTORY

Professor Thomas Bonner published his article, "Civil War Historians and the 'Needless War' Doctrine," in the Journal of the History of Ideas in 1956.¹ This long paper, originally read at the meeting of the Mississippi Valley Historical Association in 1954, presented a very broad and thorough examination of the revisionist ideology from Jesse Macy's first arguments against slavery as the central issue in 1900, up through the writings of Nevins and Craven in the 1950s. One important aspect of his article which separates it from other writings on revisionism is its scope. Bonner traced the progenitors of revisionism, such as William Dodd and the Beards, as well as lesser-recalled exponents of the "needless war" doctrine: Nathaniel Stephenson, Max Farrand, and Mary Scrugham.

Another aspect that immediately separated Bonner from the previous critics of revisionism were his arguments against causal history altogether. His second paragraph is unequivocal in this judgment:

It should be pointed out . . . that the idea of historical causation itself rests on none too firm a footing. Most students of the problem seem to

agree that the concept of causality is too elastic to have any meaning, if not completely useless.\textsuperscript{44}

The "students of the problem" are inferred to be the two philosophers from whom Bonner drew this conclusion, Moritz Schlick and Fredric L. Paxson. For historians, who were never "much concerned with the conclusions of the philosophers,"\textsuperscript{45} the debate on cause was ill-defined and not rooted. "Most writers on the Civil War," Bonner wrote, "have not troubled to define terms in describing the background and causes of that struggle."\textsuperscript{46} Inexplicably lacking is any reference to Pieter Geyl's conclusive article, especially considering Bonner's flat statement that "no critical attention has been given even to such key concepts as causation and inevitability."\textsuperscript{47}

Having thoroughly dismissed the validity of causal history, Bonner began his exploration of the revisionist's causal history. His presentation was a largely objective series of quotations and explanations. He presented the Beardian economic theory as a midpoint in the rise of the "needless war" doctrine because of its shift in focus from slavery to economic factors as cause. The emergence of the "needless war" as a theory in its own right Bonner traced to

\textsuperscript{44}Ibid., 193.
\textsuperscript{45}Ibid., 193.
\textsuperscript{46}Ibid., 194.
\textsuperscript{47}Ibid., 194.
Avery Craven and the University of Chicago in the early 1930s. Bonner was also the first of the revisionist critics to point out the conflict between Craven and Randall, while revealing what he perceived to be sectional and intellectual bias:

Craven's motivation came more from sympathies for the South drawn from a North Carolina family background, while Randall's views reflected a deep rational distrust of emotion and an almost pacifistic aversion to the slaughter and uselessness of war.48

By the late 1940s, Bonner observed a new breed of revisionist arising. These were historians who generally accepted the tenets of revisionism except for one crucial factor: the avoidable war. Roy Nichols, and to a lesser extent Allan Nevins, represented this altered interpretation. But, after 1949, Bonner noted that there were "few unqualified restatements" of the old Craven-Randall revisionism.49

Bonner drew some exacting conclusions on the idea of revisionist causal history. Noting that revisionist theories on the causes of the Civil War and theories on the American entry into World War I rose, reigned, and receded on an almost identical course through World War II, he determined that revisionism "owes something to pressures

48 Ibid., 201.
49 Ibid., 210.
other than those arising from new findings and a clearer perspective." He labeled the revisionist claim that slavery was not important as a war cause "specious," while observing that the continued debate over the slavery question almost one hundred years after the war was the best argument for the irrepressibility of the moral question. On the revisionist claim of the "unimportance" of territorial issues, Bonner believed the geographical limit of slavery had been overemphasized.

Bonner also diminished the human element in revisionism's causal theory. The "failure of statesmanship" argument, he claimed, is "a non-historical concept and devoid of all meaning." The leadership failure resulted from a "policy of appeasement" under the "ambivalent leadership" of the Democratic Party. As for emotionalism, he believed the revisionists backed away from that argument. But in the end, Bonner's conclusions are completely in line with the Harvard critics, stressing the essential sectionalism of revisionism:

The waning attack of the revisionists is based at

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50 Ibid., 214.
51 Ibid., 215.
52 Ibid., 216.
53 Ibid., 216.
bottom upon differences in emphasis and semantics to accord with the national aversion of Southerners for a moral interpretation of the Civil War, and of us all for a view which exposes human helplessness in a web of our own making.54

Along a much more philosophical line were two more articles on causal relationships. The first of these was "Some Causal Accounts of the American Civil War," by William Dray, published in Daedalus in 1961. The article's chief motivation was to explore "the philosophical problems of the nature of causal judgments when it concerns a historical subject."55 In the article's socio-scientific idiom, the Civil War essentially became a case study in which the author explored relativism and value judgments.

Dray divided causal interpretation into three group: (1) the "conspiracy" theory, being the interpretation from the time during and immediately after the war; (2) the "conflict" theory, based on the idea of the irrepressible conflict, prevailing from the 1890s until the 1930s; and (3) the "revisionist" theory.56 Dray contended was that each theory included a singling-out of events and circumstances

54 Ibid., 216.
56 Ibid., 579.
in which "the historian's value judgment becomes an ingredient in his causal findings."\textsuperscript{57}

Interpretations from the first to the second theories involved the scope of blame. The conspiracy theorists sought cause in the actions of individuals and groups, while conflict theorists viewed the coming of the war from larger, irrepressible social factors. Revisionism, according to Dray, "loudly protests what it considers to be the moral flabbiness of the conflict theory" while lacking the "sectional type of partisanship" presented by conspiracy theorists.\textsuperscript{58} Having presented this scenario, Dray believed "it should now be clear why historians will never know 'objectively' what caused the Civil War":

> The reason lies in the concept of causation historians employ. They use the term "cause" in such a way that their value judgments are relevant to their causal conclusions. . . . As long as "cause" is not to mean "sufficient condition," there must be some reason for singling out one relevant condition of what happened from the others. In the cases we have examined, at least, the historian's reason appears to derive from moral considerations.\textsuperscript{59}

Although Dray made a solid attempt to rid causal study of its moral underpinning, he did not, even by his own account, fully succeed. He used the 1959 book \textit{Causation and}

\textsuperscript{57}Ibid., 580.

\textsuperscript{58}Ibid., 585.

\textsuperscript{59}Ibid., 587.
the Law by H.L.A. Hart and A.M. Honore in an attempt to escape the tangle. Hart and Honore had two criteria for selecting causal qualifications. The first was that causes are "abnormalities;" the second, that they were "voluntary human actions" not caused by themselves. Dray illustrated how abnormalities and voluntary human action could be easily applied to both conspiracy and conflict theories, but had to admit in the end that "voluntary" human action "is itself a quasi-moral concept" because "a fully voluntary action 'incorporates' judgments of value."

A third article, essentially two articles under a single title, took the scientific and philosophical argument against causation even further. "Causation and the American Civil War: Two Appraisals," was published in the first volume of the journal History and Theory in 1961. The first part of the article authored by Lee Benson, contained elements of the developing quantitative social science history. The second article, by Cushing Strout, dealt mainly with the idea of relativism of events in seeking causal explanations. Like Dray, Benson and Strout empha-

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60 Ibid., 588.

61 Ibid., 590.

sized the philosophical and theoretical, with the causal history of the war functioning as a case study. Benson and Strout, however, placed more emphasis on the historical event, whereas Dray's emphasis was more historiographical.

Benson developed his point very slowly. His segment of the article, twelve and one half pages of the entire piece, did not mention the Civil War until the seventh page. He devoted the first several pages to theory on causal dependence taken from E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* and Thucydides' writings on the Peloponnesian War. What came after this was largely a recapitulation of the research and conclusions Benson had developed earlier with Thomas Pressly in *Can Differences in Interpretations of the Causes of the American Civil War be Resolved Objectively?*.63

Benson wrote that although different historians develop different theories, the outcomes were generally all the same: "Opinions crystallize and the significant segments of the population living in the rival areas become increasingly antagonistic until the war climax is reached."64 Owing to the American institution of representative democracy, Benson discovered a "disproportionate ability of men (or groups) to


64Benson and Strout, "Causation," 171.
influence and control governmental decisions." 65 Extending from the representative democracy theory, Benson also believed public opinion was a "significant" cause of the war, although not an entirely sufficient cause on its own:

> It was recognized that certain men possessed disproportionate power to shape public opinion along lines most favorable to their convictions, interests, or prejudices. 66

In Benson's opinion, the weakness of American historiography in general was that the "traditional rules of historical method" did not work for the study of mass society, and have not been appreciably altered to compensate. The result has been that historians have had to use "procedures of dubious validity" to reach "equally dubious conclusions." 67 Thus having adjudged the general causal histories of the war to be weak, Benson's solution was that of the "new" history, the "social" history:

> Historians of the Civil War might progress most directly and rapidly if they applied the general logic of historical inquiry to the systematic, explicit, and concrete events, and, in the process, deliberately attempted to develop more powerful conceptual and methodological tools with which to reconstruct the behavior of men in society over time. 68

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65 Ibid., 171.
66 Ibid., 171.
67 Ibid., 173.
68 Ibid., 175.
Cushing Strout considered causality "a specter [that] haunts American historians." For him, causal history was the retrospective search that occurred when a "consequence" became known and "call[ed] out for a part;" looking back he discovered not a neat sequence of cause and effect, but rather a result "that takes it's life and form only from it's development." In this process, Strout believed there was not a point at which a historian may declare the Civil War "inevitable," although he could certainly perceive it to be "probable." To Strout, there was a definite difference between pursuing a real event and an artificial one:

Provided the historian maintains his primary interest in what actually did happen, he may with propriety, under certain conditions, ask what might have happened, or what would have happened... . To raise questions that cannot be reasonably answered is an exercise in futility unless they are treated only as the indirect means of drawing attention to elements of an actual situation.

In regard to Civil War causation, Strout believed that the "notorious disparity" in opinion revealed that there was "some fallacy" in attempting to draw out a cause of the war. Also, the historian's use of analogy, in particular

\[69\] Ibid., 175.
\[70\] Ibid., 177.
\[71\] Ibid., 180.
\[72\] Ibid., 181.
by comparing his present condition to past historical events, might make his history more accessible, but tended "to blur the important nuances of difference between a past age and his own."\textsuperscript{73}

Strout believed the only way to avoid such traps in Civil War causality was to admit that the story is "committed to the 'logic' of drama."\textsuperscript{74} The idea was to set up two opposing sides and "recreate the strife" that led to war:

The connective tissue of his account then has a dialectical form: a person or group takes a position and performs an action because of and in relation to the position or action of another person or group. The historian's story becomes a narrative of this reciprocal response.\textsuperscript{75}

This process, which sounds like little more than a simple, objective retelling of the events, thus allows the history to be "humanly understood" instead of "scientifically explained," and brings to an end the need for a "causal" history:

The general causal question remains at worst an irrelevant basis for interminable disagreement, at best a generator of hypothesis to stimulate research which may promote understanding by leading to a richer, more coherent story.\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 183.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 184.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 184.

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 184.
By the early 1960s the question of cause in regard to the American Civil War was a dying issue. Nothing in terms of a "new" interpretation arose to replace what had been there before, and contemporary social issues such as civil rights began to change the focus of the war back towards the single issue of slavery. However, the historians who had, in the main, developed the revisionist philosophy remained active in the profession. Their burden for those same years was to defend, and/or revise, those philosophies upon which they had built their careers and reputations.
CHAPTER III

REVISIONISTS IN THE WANING YEARS, 1950-1969

Once the reaction against revisionism began, it progressed largely unopposed. The revisionists failed to actively rebut their critics, and the result of this assault was the eventual modification of the original revisionist thesis. From the publication of Allan Nevins' *The Emergence of Lincoln* in 1950, to the publication of the revised edition of James G. Randall's *The Civil War and Reconstruction* in 1969, the two central themes of revisionism, the "needless war" and the "repressible conflict," would be challenged and eventually cast aside. Thus, without its most defining characteristics, revisionism became another amorphous, unobtrusive way of interpreting the American Civil War.

The reassessment of causal history played a considerable role in undermining the revisionist philosophy. As already noted, the entire concept of causal relationships in history was criticized from a philosophical perspective in the 1950s. So thorough was the critique that in 1961 David Donald could look back on the 1950s and write that causal history was no longer an intellectually challenging field of
study for emerging scholars. This reassessment would be particularly damning to revisionism because its basic philosophy was inextricably rooted in the causes of the war. That the war was unnecessary, avoidable, or brought about by misguided leadership, was a more important consideration than issues such as postwar nationalism, industrialism, or emancipation.

The primary revisionists, in both literary reputation and as the targets of critics, were James Randall and Avery Craven. Additional revisionists included David Donald, Roy Nichols, and Kenneth Stampp. These last three historians were not as orthodox in their revisionism as Randall and Craven, and the range of their studies would carry them into other research areas unencumbered by the revisionist label. Randall and Craven, on the other hand, could not escape the revisionist label, and by default became its primary defenders.

THE LAST WRITINGS OF JAMES G. RANDALL

Randall would not have the chance to respond to his critics at any great length. He focused his attention during the last years of his life on the Lincoln presidency rather than on the background of the war. He was in the

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process of writing his four-volume *Lincoln the President* when he became terminally ill. In April and May, 1952, he began to suffer the effects of leukemia, from which he died in February, 1953.²

Two short pieces Randall wrote in the early 1950s revealed some of his attitudes toward causal history at that time. The first was his introduction for the revised edition of his book *Constitutional Problems Under Lincoln* (1951). In the introduction he addressed the claim that Lincoln provoked war with the South at Fort Sumter, an idea Randall did not accept:

> The present writer is not impressed with the argument that [Lincoln's] statements constituted a trick or maneuver, that Lincoln had cryptic or hidden purposes, that his motives were "provocative," and that his solemn declarations were a kind of deception.

He quoted Lincoln, emphasizing the president's intention to move toward "a peaceful solution to the national troubles," and denounced any claim that Lincoln provoked the war.

In particular, he criticized Charles Ramsdell's claim, in "Lincoln and Fort Sumter," that Lincoln provoked a confrontation. His criticisms appeared to have been directed

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at southern historians, but addressed all critics who, in his opinion, ignored the president's statements in drawing their conclusions on the coming of the war:

To take bodies of evidence showing Lincoln's peaceful appeals and efforts and wave them aside by the too-easy assertion that the President did not mean what he was saying, or intend what he was doing, is simply to color the whole treatment by an author's interpretations and conjectures.4

The second piece is Randall's Presidential address to the American Historical Association titled "Historianship." Randall did not attend the conference, but the paper was read in late December, 1952, and published in the American Historical Review in January, 1953. His paper addressed the role and purpose of the historian. "Historians," wrote Randall, "can perform no service more useful to society than to expose the faulty or vicious generalizations about history that continue to mislead mankind."5

One of Randall's major points concerned the study of causal relationships in the history of war: "There is more to be done by historians in studying, though not merely by diplomatic documents, the causes of wars."6 To study war in the modern age, he argued, the historian must take into

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4Ibid., xv.


6Ibid., 257.
account all factors including "the irresponsible and the capricious," although he admitted this "is not always done in historical writing or military narrative." 

In the case of rigid historical doctrines such as economic determinism, causal factors were limited because events had to be forced into a preconceived framework. Randall found these doctrines unacceptable because a war provoked by factors like "militaristic megalomania or a perverted sense of bigness" did not always fit into doctrinaire theories and limited the full expression and explanation of an event:

In that case one cannot write grandly, broadly, and elementally, of great surging movements that need only to be "understood." It may be that too little attention has been given to war-making factors that are abusive, abnormal, pathological, whipped-up, stupid as to ideas, artificially staged as to pretext, and criminally aggressive. 

Having written this, Randall began the only real, succinct defense of revisionist history. His was a counter-assault on the revisionist critics and their "unhistorical notions": the "alleged inevitability" of the war; Schlesinger's "log-jam" corollary; the "fallacy" of "preventive war." What aggravated Randall the most was that these 

\[7\text{Ibid., 257.}\]

\[8\text{Ibid., 257-58.}\]

\[9\text{Ibid., 258.}\]
historians had concluded that the war was "inevitable" without having first disproved it was avoidable:

It has not yet been proved that the tensions of that time exceeded the possible resilience of the American people or the potential elasticity of the Union. Tensions can be shown, but to note a dispute is not equivalent to explaining or justifying a war. There is much to be said of North and South as of North versus South.10

To believe the war was inevitable was to believe peace was impossible, according to Randall. He maintained that a study of America's "intelligent leaders" would show they worked to prevent war; to accept the inevitability doctrine makes preventing war impossible.11 This is in line with David Donald's characterization of Randall in the Dictionary of American Biography:

Randall's belief that the war should have been avoided was not, as in the case of some other revisionists, the consequence of disillusionment with Wilsonian idealism, for Wilson always remained one of his heroes... Rather, it was the result of Randall's temperamental aversion to any deterministic interpretation of history -- particularly the economic interpretation popularized by Charles A. Beard -- and it reflected his ingrained distrust of public figures who assumed rigid ideological positions.12

10Ibid., 258.
11Ibid., 258.
Both the introduction and the presidential address reveal James Randall's willingness to face the intellectual and philosophical challenge the revisionist critics posed. But his death one month after publication of "Historianship" ended the last great revisionist debate on causal history. The depth and dimension that debate might have taken is left to conjecture.

THE NEW DIRECTION OF AVERY O. CRAVEN

Avery Craven did not accept the challenge to revisionism as Randall did. From the late 1940s until his last published monograph in 1969, Craven beat a steady retreat from revisionism and its causal doctrines. A large part of the work he produced in those years contained a philosophically defensive tone, and revealed a twenty year attempt to rearrange, to some degree, his earlier career.

In his 1936 article "The Coming of the War Between the States: An Interpretation," Craven put forth an explanation of the war as irrational. War did not occur because of agricultural and industrial sectionalism, exploitation of slave and free labor, or manifest destiny. The war arose from the sectional tensions created by men with self-appointed "moral sanction" attaching "dishonorable symbols" to their rivals. These simple, obvious differences became the fuel of passion that ignited the war:
Each side, in the end, fought the other for principles and the glory of God, for the preservation of civilizations, for the maintenance of honor. The conflict was the work of politicians and pious cranks! The people knew little of each other as realities. They were both fighting mythical devils.  

But by 1952 and publication of his article "The Price of Union," Craven's emphasis had changed considerably:

It is probably true that Negro slavery was the fundamental factor in producing the American Civil War, and it is probably safe to make the assertion that if there had been no such thing as slavery, civil war might have been avoided.  

Despite semantic subtleties, Craven's interpretation of Civil War causation had shifted from the idea of repressible disagreement to inevitable conflict.  

There does not appear to be, or at least Craven never made obvious, any particular influence which caused him to alter his interpretation. This dramatic reversal began in 1947 with publication of his article "The Civil War and the Democratic Process," in the Abraham Lincoln Quarterly.  

In this article Craven first developed his oft-repeated idea that the war was caused by "the failure of the democratic  

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process," a "process" Craven defined as the ability of men to reason together:

Rational discussion of issues, compromise of differences, and delay in action where adjustment is not reached constitute a procedure by which groups that vary as much as did the colonies of Massachusetts and South Carolina could live and work in unity forever.  

In this new interpretation Craven moved the differences between the sections from the realm of propaganda into the world of philosophical politics. He dramatized the discord between North and south using the two primary documents of American democracy, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and their contravening influences. The Constitution, framed to *establish* a government," became the South's defense of its peculiar institution, while the Declaration, "framed to *justify* revolution against a government," became the foundation of Northern political revolt.  

This philosophical dichotomy, along with rapid national growth and the issue of slavery expansion, led to the collapse of the democratic process. With the capacity to reason within the process gone, the sections broke into open physical and emotional hostility. The South lined up behind

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16 Ibid., 270.

17 Ibid., 274.
the protection of the Constitution; the North lined up behind the Declaration with its concomitant ideas of a "higher law" and "natural rights." Southerners considered this treason, while Craven himself concluded that the appeal to the Declaration and higher law "marked the end of orderly government."18

This very partisan level of hostility is what doomed the system in Craven's estimate. It was one thing for such attitudes to be held by reformers, but when politicitans began embracing these partisan concepts it led directly to "the end of national parties and the building up of sectional parties pledged to action," or more succinctly put, "a conflict of civilizations."19 Craven portrayed the larger consequences as even more ominous. "What stands out in this story," Craven wrote, "is the simple fact that issues dealing with right and wrong and issues that have to do with the fundamental structure of society do not lend themselves to the democratic process."20

This doctrine became the central theme in Craven's work thereafter. He reaffirmed this stance in 1950 with "The 1840s and the Democratic Process;" in 1952's "The Price of

18 Ibid., 289.
19 Ibid., 290.
20 Ibid., 291.
Union," and 1959 with "Background Forces and the Civil War." It remained essentially intact all the way through to his last monograph, *Reconstruction: The Ending of the Civil War*, in 1969. Expansion and industrialization in the Northeast caused the democratic process to "falter" as the section began to emphasize its interests. In the book's summary of the war's causes, Craven boiled this theory down into its most basic statement:

[The war] resulted from an accumulation of problems which had not been frankly faced or solved, and which had at length found expression in sectional differences between the North and South symbolized by the institution of Negro slavery. In that form differences could not be rationally discussed or compromised.

Tracing the historiography of Avery Craven's career is mildly bewildering. This is because there are, in fact, two separate parts to it. In his early career, from the 1920s through about 1942, Craven was the primary proponent of the idea of a "repressible conflict." He made this explicit by

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13Ibid., 2.
titling his 1939 book *The Repressible Conflict*. But from 1947 on, he adopted the principles of institutional failure and collapse of the "democratic process." Perhaps the only reason this shift attracted so much attention was its timing. Craven broke from the tenets of the revisionism, which he was so closely associated with, just at the time that criticism of revisionist causal history had begun to gain its momentum.

Craven severely undercut the validity of his later work by his attempts to portray it as his lifelong philosophy. In 1969, he wrote that his book *The Coming of the Civil War* was "never an attempt to state the causes of the Civil War or to say whether it was needless or necessary." In his preface to the second edition of *Coming*, in 1957, he claimed the idea for the book came from a suggestion by Professor Carlton J. Hayes to write a history of American democracy. It was during this work that he discovered the "democratic process" failure. He did not give Professor Hayes the same credit in the preface of the first edition.

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25Ibid., iii.

On occasion, Craven's reaction to critics took a flatly bitter tone. In the preface to his 1952 book *The Growth of Southern Nationalism, 1848-1861*, he felt compelled to explain the book's final chapter, titled "Some Generalizations." He did not intend it as an explanation on the causes of the war, he claimed, but rather "an attempt to explain a few general impressions" on how events progressed to where they could not be managed within the democratic process. Craven caustically anticipated that some readers would not understand his interpretation:

That some people cannot see the difference between such an effort and one attempting to state causes, the author from previous experience well knows. He has, nevertheless, felt the obligation to try again. Only in that way can any benefit from the study of this central period in American history be gained.27

Even more defiant was his preface for the 1959 book *Civil War in the Making, 1815-1860*. "No historian," Craven wrote, "is ever permitted to grow or change his mind. An opinion once expressed [by a historian] must be lived with as a permanent conclusion for the rest of his life." According to Craven, the job of explaining why a historian wrote or said what he did belonged not to the historian, but to those who "regardless of qualification" wrote historiog-

raphy. And any historian who did change had committed "the unpardonable historical sin of inconsistency." Craven asserted that accepting parts of other writer's conclusions that do not contradict an individual's own personal conclusions may be acceptable, although their use could mistakenly leave the impression that the writer had experienced a total reversal of opinion. "That," wrote Craven, "would be an even greater historical crime."

It was not until 1964, with the publication of a collection of his essays entitled An Historian and the Civil War, that Craven seemed to come to terms with his past. When he finally brought together many of his most important works and viewed them as a body he obliquely admitted to some elementary inconsistencies. Writing of himself and his contemporaries in the third person, he lightly admonished his generation:

Conscious of the fact that they were breaking new ground and differing with revered predecessors, they probably overstressed certain points to make their position clear. As I have read some of these early essays I have often wished to change many statements, but I have not done so. That would have destroyed the purpose of republishing.

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28 Avery O. Craven, Civil War in the Making, 1815-1860, (), v.

29 Ibid., vi.

This was as close as Avery Craven ever came to admitting that some truly drastic changes had occurred in his work. Admitting the urge to alter the early essays was pregnant with the impression of recanting at least some of his early revisionist roots. In the end this would reveal in its barest form the true differences between James Randall and Avery Craven, the principal Civil War revisionists. Randall was willing to define and defend his scholarly ideas to the end. Craven's ideas, while equally scholarly, were more visceral, less clearly defined, and always defensive. In the end Randall stood by his ideas. Craven did not.

ROY NICHOLS AND KENNETH STAMPP

Roy Nichols produced only one additional work on the causes of the Civil War after his 1948 work *The Disruption of American Democracy* and before his death in 1973. *Stakes of Power, 1845-1877* (1961) essentially restated the conclusions of his earlier work. Pressly used Nichols' own word, "hyperemotionalism," to describe the causal interpretation of *Disruption*. The same psychological emphasis is

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present in Stakes, from which Nichols concluded that the Civil War was an inevitable conflict.

Nichols described the romantic state of the American imagination in the 1840s and 1850s as "part of a psychological situation characteristic of Western civilization," a state that "had much to do with the crisis and conflict." The entire conflict, in Nichols' opinion, was pitched against this background of romanticism, not Southern romanticism, but romanticism permeating all of Western civilization, which made the war inevitable.

The political power struggle also made for an inevitable conflict. The growth of Northern business made that section resentful of Southern political power. The South was jealous of its position and fearful of losing it. The result was political frustration. "And such frustration," wrote Nichols, "was bound to make an explosion of some sort inevitable." The explosion came with the Kansas-Nebraska Act. However, Nichols did not equate this explosion with any human element. Whatever it might be, the explosion's provocation was beyond human control:

Some element in our history appears to have decreed that a series of twenty-year cycles would shape the pattern of nineteenth-century American politics. Every double decade produced some sort

\[^{33}\text{Ibid., 32.}\]
\[^{34}\text{Ibid., 52.}\]
of political reshuffling. The Whigs and Democrats had been at it for twenty years, and a fundamental change was due. The time was ripe.  

The ripe time was 1860. In the wake of financial panic, religious revivalism, and Harper's Ferry, the nation had another election. Right at that moment, the "stakes of power, never before so huge, were to be placed at hazard." With the shift of power from Democrat to Republican, the South, compelled to act out of honor, seceded.  

David Donald, in his introduction to Stakes of Power, based the book's causal interpretation on Northern frustration with Southern power and the attempt to overcome it. Donald, however, failed to note the very real element of psychohistory in Nichols' work. In a very loose sense, as Pressly argued, the emotional element in Nichols' interpretation connected him to the revisionist school of interpretation. It would perhaps be more accurate to associate Nichols with Lee Benson and the social science historians. His causal study in Stakes of Power de-emphasised the role of individuals in the drama in exchange for the larger "movement," i.e. the Mexican War, Western settlement, Northern enterprise. Nichols' connection to revisionist causal

35 Ibid., 54.
36 Ibid., 78.
37 Ibid., 87.
38 Ibid., vi.
history in the late 1940s had been tenuous at best and was even less apparent by the early 1960s.

Considerably less suggestive of revisionism than Nichols in his Civil War causal history are the works of Kenneth Stampp. Pressly based his decision to include Stampp among the revisionists on the conclusion that Stampp's point of view in his 1950 book *And the War Came* was "fundamentally in accord with the 'revisionist' tradition." That interpretation was that the war could and should have been avoided at any cost, even peaceful separation.

However, in the preface to his 1980 collection of essays *The Imperiled Union*, Stampp stated flatly that he opposed revisionism and most other interpretations on the causes of the war:

> Though I do not accept the conclusions of the economic determinists, or of the school known as revisionist, or of those who stress profound cultural and ideological differences between North and South, my interpretation is in part a synthesis of other strains of thought about the causes of the Civil War.  

What Stampp appeared to do was take only what he wanted from each interpretation and create his own rendition of the

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39 Pressly, *Americans Interpret*, 325. Pressly believed Stampp's conclusions in his 1952 article "What Caused the Civil War" were inconsistent with both revisionist tenets as well as the conclusions in his 1950 book. See *Americans Interpret*, page 326, note 77.

causes of the war. And while he denied any great break with recent interpretation, he aloofly "trusts" that his discussion would "make it clear that many historians disagree sharply with my point of view."41

Interpreting causal history of the war was not the emphasis of Stampp's work after 1950. His historical reputation had come to rest on two major works: The Peculiar Institution and The Era of Reconstruction.42 His other major work was a 1969 anthology of revisionist writings on Reconstruction, anchored by his essay from The Era of Reconstruction, "The Tragic Legend of Reconstruction."43

His only work on causal history was also an anthology. The Causes of the Civil War was a collection of primary and secondary sources on the subject. This book was published four times: first in 1959; revised in 1965; revised again in 1974; and in a 1986 reissue of the 1974 edition. He covered all the subjects influencing the onset of the war including slavery, states rights, nationalism, majority rule

41Ibid., xi.
and minority rights, cultural conflict, and economic sectionalism. Unlike the Reconstruction anthology, there was no contribution from Stampp himself. By its nature, the book offered no interpretation on cause per se, but included works from all the major interpretive trends.4

Stampp's ultimate personal statement on causal history was his lengthy essay "The Irrepressible Conflict," written specifically for The Imperiled Union. The fifty-five page piece is part historiography, part revisionist critique. The causal interpretations of the Civil War, as delineated by Stampp, fall into three categories: the slavery-cultural interpretation, the economic determinist theory, and revisionism. "Slavery-cultural interpretation" is the name Stampp gave to the basic idea of the sectional conflict with all its moral and political motivations. From the late nineteenth century to the present, this had been the generally accepted interpretation of the Civil War. The first real challenge to it came with the vogue of Beard's "economic determinist history." Despite the popularity of the Beardian interpretation, it did not substantially change the basic tenets or influence of the slavery-cultural interpretation.

Revisionism brought the next challenge. Stampp traced the needless war doctrine to two possible sources: disillusionment over the First World War and/or Southern sympathy. However, he warned against accepting these or any other "obvious but simplistic explanations" when it comes to "problems of human motivation" in history. Of the two possibilities, though, Stampp appeared to embrace the sympathetic Southern idea, for the revisionists "as a group" tended to "show considerable affection for the Old South."  

Once he established its conception and role, Stampp began an assault on revisionism reminiscent of the critics of the 1950s. He considered the revisionist's style heated and intemperate. But worse than that was the flaw he perceived in the basic reasoning of the interpretation:

More important than style, however, was a logical inconsistency that lay at the heart of their argument. Revisionists advanced a highly deterministic explanation of how slavery would have been abolished if the Civil War had not occurred.  

The revisionist inconsistency for Stampp was this deterministic factor. The revisionists had no problem with a deterministic belief that slavery would end, but did with a deterministic belief that the war was inevitable. Stampp further

45Stampp, Imperiled Union, 214.
46Ibid., 218.
47Ibid., 222.
placed the work of the revisionists in the realm of "counterfactual history": "informed speculation about how things would have been if certain other things had not happened." 48

Stampp considered the revisionist's ideas on the end of slavery extremely dubious. When he measured the prospect of a half million casualties in the war against the possibility of four million slaves remaining in bondage for another forty years, Stampp called the moral implications "profound." And with their acceptance of the needless war doctrine, the revisionist's conclusion would be obviously pro-Southern. "Given their characteristic view of southern slavery," Stampp wrote, "their resolution of this moral dilemma was logical enough." 49

Another weakness of revisionism, according to Stampp, was its tendency to blame the abolitionists for sectional agitation. In that conclusion the revisionists had found fault with the wrong source:

The abnormal irritant that created sectional tensions and placed so great a burden on the American political structure was the persistence of southern slavery far into the nineteenth century. . . . This would require a rather radical reformulation of the problem as revisionists customarily perceived it, for much of the responsibility for avoiding sectional confrontation

48 Ibid., 220.
49 Ibid., 221-22.
would be transferred from the North to the South.\footnote{Ibid., 228; 230.}

For the South to have avoided an irrepressible conflict on Stampp's terms would require four basic steps: (1) Southerners would have to avoid "aggressively proslavery postures;" (2) reform the institution of slavery in the areas most vulnerable to abolitionist attacks; (3) accept slavery as restricted to the fifteen states which had it in 1846; and (4) open-mindedness and temperate response to anti-slavery criticisms and proposals for manumission.\footnote{Ibid., 231; 232; 234; 235.}

But, Stampp confessed, in the end these are just as one-sided as the conclusions he attributed to the revisionists. To set forth this counterfactual history of what the South could have done ignored the "special set of problems" created by southern slavery:

\textit{Slavery . . . injected not one but two ineluctable realities into southern life: first, the large economic interest is represented, and, second, the emotion-laden race issue which deeply concerned slaveholders and nonslaveholders alike.}\footnote{Ibid., 241.}

All together, Stampp's conclusion was that there is no conclusion. Just as Randall seemed to accept Lincoln's assertion that the war was avoidable, Stampp accepted Seward's assertion that it was not:
The interplay of these proslavery and antislavery forces, not the irresponsible blunders of northern or southern politicians, or economic conflict, or irreconcilable cultural differences, brought on the irrepressible conflict about which Seward spoke.  

While Stampp has a solid reputation as a Reconstruction revisionist he is not among the Civil War revisionists. Despite the lengths Thomas Pressly went to accommodate him to the revisionist philosophy, it is now obvious that Kenneth Stampp's views on causal history were much more in line with the New Nationalists as defenders of the reform spirit and strong unionism and openly anti-revisionist.

Stampp was the last historian Thomas Pressly considered in his chapter on revisionism. After his book only one more scholar came to prominence on the receding influence of revisionist history. This was David Donald, student of James Randall.

DAVID DONALD & THE FINAL REVISION

The last major figure in the declining years of revisionist causal history was David Donald. He merits inclusion at the end of the section not so much because of his own impressive works, but rather because of his modifications to the work of James Randall, under whom he worked and studied.

53 Ibid., 245.
The year 1960 was the most productive of David Donald's career, for he turned out a phenomenal amount of product. He authored *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War*, and edited *Why the North Won the Civil War*. He also produced two important articles on Civil War causal history: "American Historians and the Causes of the Civil War," and *An Excess of Democracy: The American Civil War and the Social Process*. The following year his revision of the first half of Randall's *The Civil War and Reconstruction* appeared under the title *The Divided Union*.54

Donald was the first to argue succinctly that the age of the old great debate on Civil War causation was beginning to ebb. The old sectional tensions which had kept the debate lively at a minimum and fierce at the extreme well into the twentieth century had been breaking down for the previous twenty-five years. This, as well as the tendencies of intellectual fashion, were changing the approach to history and its use.

His long essay *An Excess of Democracy* is an example of these changes. His thesis was more an explanation of what led to the national schism than an exploration of what actually "caused" the war. National trends as opposed to sectional trends dominated his interpretation. In doing this he took the old debate and approached it from a different angle, using the theories of the social sciences while not necessarily depending on their techniques. He cited diverse sources for his study. These sources included works by the Europeans Alexis de Tocqueville and Walter Bagehot, the nineteenth century Southern writer James G. Baldwin, and the twentieth century novelist William Faulkner.

Donald based his interpretation on the "newness of American life," characterized by its novelty, plentifulness, and rapid social mobility. Donald claimed social, not political, forces were the motivation behind the schism:

> The Civil War, I believe, can best be understood neither as the result of accident nor as the product of conflicting sectional interests, but as the outgrowth of social processes which affected the entire United States during the first half of the nineteenth century.\(^{55}\)

These processes, according to Donald, left the country with a fundamentally flawed approach to society:

> In nineteenth-century America all the recognized values of orderly civilization were gradually

being eroded. Social atomization affected every segment of American society.  

Every institution which claimed a right to power was "challenged and overthrown." Donald included as examples the disestablishment of religion, the end of primogeniture, the Anti-Rent Wars, and destruction of the Second National Bank. But it was the realm of American politics which faced the fiercest rebellion, and right at the moment that popular participation and extension of the ballot was growing. Donald believed extension of the franchise "was only one aspect of the general democratic rejection of authority."  

The result of such an "excess of liberty" was that the nation as a whole grew incapable of arriving at "reasoned, independent judgments" on the problems of society. Donald claimed there was a possibility that this "disorganized society" might eventually have worked out solutions, but the series of crises that shook the nation in the 1850s, the time when the nation could least adjust to them, made that impossible. However, the characteristics which made adjustment impossible were some of the traits considered

56 Ibid., 13.
57 Ibid., 16.
58 Ibid., 17.
59 Ibid., 18.
60 Ibid., 21.
uniquely American by many outside observers: individualism, growth, progress, and an expansive, or "excessive," democratic tradition.

With that broad, general theory laid out, Donald turned his attention to the specific question of causal history in his short historiographical criticism "American Historians and the Causes of the Civil War," published in the South Atlantic Quarterly in 1960. The motivation behind the article was his discovering the paucity of books directly addressing the causes of the war written during the 1950s. Avery Craven was the only "professional" historian to produce a new book on the subject, but even that was "a restatement of long-held beliefs."\(^1\)

Admitting that any speculation on the topic would be "subjective and tentative," Donald presented four possibilities as to why Civil War causal history appeared to be waning. First was the consideration that the topic had been thoroughly studied, if not totally exhausted. Second was the practical consideration that students had neither the time nor the finances to do the detailed research in archival and manuscript sources advanced knowledge would demand. Furthermore, he believed the modern student did not have "the required patience and industry" to undertake such

study. His third point was that the subject was "mined with semantic boobytraps." In addition, the recent writings on the role of cause in history had brought the importance of the issue into doubt.

Finally, he concluded that the causal history of the war had become "an intellectually unattractive topic" to the new generation of scholars. The trends in history at that time were towards consensus and away from conflict. This "homogenization of American history," as Donald called it, inclined more toward trying to prove that Federalists and Anti-Federalists had much more in common than their names might imply. A subject as divisive as the causes of the Civil War floundered in such an atmosphere. "To the historians of consensus and continuity," wrote Donald, "so appalling an aberration is inexplicable, easiest to pass over in silence."

With this background, and Donald's knowledge of the historiographical trends, he executed what could be considered the symbolic end of the old, original revisionist trend in Civil War causal history. This occurred with the publi-

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62 Ibid., 353.
63 Ibid., 354.
64 Ibid., 354.
65 Ibid., 354.
cation of the complete revised edition of James Randall's *The Civil War and Reconstruction* in 1969. Donald undertook the peculiar job of revising the book after Randall's death on the request of Ruth Randall and the publishers, D. C. Heath. The result, while a fine book, leaves important questions about just who should receive credit as author of the final work.

Donald explained his processes in the Preface. He admitted that his revision "differs both in tone and interpretation from its predecessor." The new edition "is a less personal document" than the original. Personality and intent seem to be the reasons for those changes:

Professor Randall, a very great scholar doing pioneer work in the field, felt it necessary to give his considered verdict on all the disputed points in the Civil War story. My purpose, instead, has been to indicate the present state of research and, where the scholars are in disagreement, to sketch the nature of, and reasons for their controversy.

But beyond altering the tone and perspective of the original work, Donald removed the discussion on those most essential cornerstones of Civil War revisionism, the needless war and the repressible conflict:

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67 Ibid., vii.

68 Ibid., vii.
A second major difference will be found in the elimination from the present edition of most of the discussion as to the repressibility of the Civil War. To the present generation of historians the question of the inevitability of the conflict seems largely a semantic one, ... 63

Such editing and reformation with only a sense of what the original author might have done, or intended to do, makes the true authorship of the second edition dubious at best. To change the tone of the narrative constitutes simple revision; to eliminate old sections and delete interpretations in favor of new ones constitutes rewriting. This is perhaps why the 1969 edition gave authorship credit to both James Randall and David Donald.

Thus, 1969 marked the ending of the original revisionist movement in Civil War historiography. It was the year Avery Craven published his last historical work. To the end he disclaimed his role in the birth of the revisionist movement. It was also the year Donald revised Randall's standard text on the war and rid it of its revisionist tenets. As the "new" histories and quantitative research became the academic trends of the 1970s, revisionist history by and large became history itself, retiring to library shelves with all the other interpretations they once so defiantly challenged.

63 Ibid., vii.
CHAPTER IV

CAUSAL HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE NEW LEFT

For the sake of continuity and convenience, the historians discussed in this section are grouped together under the rubric of the New Left. They share in common a frame of reference in time and a vaguely similar philosophy. Their work appeared, for the most part, in the 1960s and 1970s during a period of intense tumult within the university. The transformation of the university in the 1960s is a well-known aspect of recent American history as well as pop culture. The shift from liberal social conscience to highly-charged political radicalism was an extremely fertile period during which ideas would germinate and mature within relatively short periods of time.

Such was the case with the liberal sensibility in history. Spurred on particularly by "socialist/Marxist" historians such as William Appleman Williams and Eugene Genovese, New Left history became a popular trend in historiography. The suddenness of its arrival might best be illustrated by comparing New Left history to the other intellectually fashionable trend of the era, the new quantitative history. The statistical approach to history began
in the 1940s and grew during the 1950s and 1960s. It came to the historical fore most decisively with the publication of Stanley Engermann's and Robert Fogel's controversial study of slavery, *Time On the Cross*, in 1974.¹

The New Left history of the South and the Civil War began to emerge in the early 1960s with the work of Williams, and found its strongest voice in Genovese. Ten years after William's *The Contours of American History* (1961), Genovese published *In Red and Black: Marxian Explorations in Southern and Afro-American History*,² his very popular explanation of the social and scholarly position of New Left history. In other words, New Left history made its significant impact on the discipline in about half the time the quantitative history did.

The New Left historians did not share any singular sort of interpretive method as did their quantitative counterparts. There are, in fact, almost as many leftist interpretations as there are leftist historians. The names with which they label themselves are equally vague and misleading. Some call themselves Marxist, but qualify that title


so many ways that it ends up with little resemblance to either Karl Marx's philosophy or those of the Marxist movements of the early twentieth century. Some call themselves Socialist historians. Genovese uses "Socialist" and "Marxist" interchangeably. All share a common rise to prominence during the period of liberal and left wing political activism at the university, and tend to be grouped together by historiographers as New Left historians.

Social history is effectively the main path of study for these scholars, particularly the history of class struggle. Considering the larger political actions as results of societal forces, they essentially write socio-economic history, or what the historian Howard Zinn called "people's history." They generally take their influence from the revisionists, plus Allan Nevins in particular, in challenging the older interpretations of the war.

Another interesting aspect of their work is an implicit pro-Southern sympathy. While several of these writers had active experience with the civil rights movement and do not acquiesce to slavery on any grounds, they are also generally unwilling to accept slavery as the cause of the war. The primary criminals in the drama are industrialism and the men behind it. The North represented for them the voracious nature of capitalism, while the South, in a distorted way, represented the neatly controlled social order. None of
these writers could be misconstrued as defenders of the South, like some of their revisionist predecessors, but none could also be misconstrued as having the same moral indignation toward the South as Bernard DeVoto or Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

One more general statement about this group can also be made. The New Left historians did not concentrate on events like the Civil War as did many of their predecessors. None of the historians in this section are "Civil War historians" in the manner of Rhodes or Randall. Their histories are much more general in scope and idea, and they do not expend great energy on the war, much less its causes. What there is to learn from them is to be gleaned usually from one or two books, although some have written many. The New Left historians are, in a way, the crossroads of the historical discipline: the place where the general historian and the specialist intersect. They were one of the first fruits of the ultra-specialization of the discipline.

WILLIAM APPLEMAN WILLIAMS

One of the most controversial of American historians is William Appleman Williams. While a professor of history at the University of Wisconsin, much of Williams' work focused on American foreign policy and diplomatic history, with particular emphasis placed on military and economic aspects.
His one general study of the United States, *The Contours of American History* (1961), is an economic interpretation viewing the nation's history as a shift from British mercantilism to American corporate capitalism. This major work has been just as controversial as it's author. The House Un-American Activities Committee subpoenaed the manuscript before it was published. Then, after publication, Oscar Handlin wrote a review noting several of the book's factual mistakes. Despite the book's unfavorable reputation, it remains William's only concise statement on the whole of American history.

Williams has a favorite term which recurs in several of his works: *weltanschauung*. This is a German phrase which Cassell's German-English Dictionary defines variously as a philosophy of life, world outlook, view, creed, and ideology. He used this weakly translated phrase in conjunction with a more common and equally dubious phrase: *laissez faire*. Williams did not define either phrase in the strict sense, leaving the reader to deduce the author's implicit meanings instead of following his explicit idea. Instead, he just explained them.

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William's "Weltanschauung of laissez faire" was "individualized free competition in an open and fair society," the result being "specific happiness and general welfare." If domestic society was left "sufficiently balanced and unfettered" to generate creative conflict, the market expanded, and if foreign nations followed these same principles, "competition would generate progress." These values were first successfully politicized in 1848 with the Free Soilers: easterners who united "economic, political, and religious morality into an antislavery, pro-business outlook" which "defined laissez-faire in terms that excluded the south."

This was the motivation Williams saw being behind the beginning of the Civil War. Unlike some New Left writers, Williams stated exactly what he believed caused the Civil War, albeit in his own, esoteric terms:

The basic cause of the Civil War is the Weltanschauung of laissez faire. Unwilling to compete within the framework and under the terms of the Constitution, northern anti-slavery advocates of laissez faire finally undertook to change the rules in the middle of the game -- and in the middle of the continent -- by denying the south further access to the expanding market place.

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5 Williams, Contours, 246-47.
6 Ibid., 280-81.
7 Ibid., 286.
Within this statement is contained Williams' belief that all aspects of the war are economic in nature.

The period immediately preceding and following the war was the pivotal phase in the struggle between the old mercantilist economy and the new laissez faire capitalism. Williams believed the last concerted attempt to check the rise of laissez faire capitalism had been Henry Clay's mercantilist American System. Its last real opportunity for success was in 1840, with the election of William Henry Harrison, although it had adherents all the way up to the beginning of the war. Nonetheless, even the limited success of Clay's Whig coalition, Williams argued, "laid the foundation" for the east-west laissez faire alliance.¹

Slavery was merely an issue tied up in the question of expansion according to Williams. At the time of the Texas annexation he believed most people, North and South, were "willing to accept a quid pro quo between Northern and Southern expansion" on the slavery issue.² This later developed into a question of economic competition in the west, engendered mainly among the "farmers, small entrepreneurs, and mechanics" who "demanded protection in an expand-

¹Ibid., 267.
²Ibid., 269.
ing market place against the competition of slavery."^{10}

The western farmer most desired internal improvements and protection from the Indians which, for Williams, defined the farmer's abolition sentiments:

Whatever his religious or secular concern for the slave, . . . the farmer was not an abolitionist. He was against slavery on practical grounds: it was tough competition. Therefore he had no desire to check it in a way that would only multiply his troubles. Hence Free Soil meant a land free of liberated Negroes as well as slaves.\(^{11}\)

This made the function of abolitionism, in the terms of William's causation, almost secondary. "The role of abolitionism in causing the war," he wrote, "was much larger in the south than in the north."\(^{12}\) Despite these conclusions, he gave antislavery a prominent role in the rise of laissez faire. It became the "dominant theme" in attempting to "establish a proper moral framework for laissez faire," although abolition devotees, "preferring to ignore the moral implication of the freedom to starve," never considered "their own responsibilities as liberators."\(^{13}\)

\(^{10}\)Ibid., 293.

\(^{11}\)Ibid., 291.

\(^{12}\)Ibid., 299.

\(^{13}\)Ibid., 254.
The spur to secession was the election of Lincoln and the "revolutionary coalition" bent on destroying Southern interests:

Southerners insisted that the Constitution guaranteed minimum protection against any political economy. Its leaders interpreted Lincoln's election quite accurately as the victory of a movement to alter the Constitution and abrogate that compromise, literally in the sense of applying all the principles of a political economy in all the country.†

Thus, while avoiding much of the traditional language, Williams produced one of the more interesting interpretations of the coming of the war. It is an uneven mix of Marxian theory and Beardian economic determinism, a trait shared by many New Left historians.

EUGENE GENOVESE

Eugene Genovese is the most thematically centered, as well as the best known, of the New Left historians. His writings address the Civil War and its causes in a mostly tangential fashion. Very little of his writing deals directly with politics or the Civil War, which he refers to as the War for Southern Independence. His work is almost solely in the field of slavery, both in the United States and throughout the world.

†Ibid., 297.
Genovese derived his inspiration from the revisionists. He did not necessarily accept their tenets so much as he admired their tenacity. "The work of the revisionist historians," he wrote, "has forced every honest opponent of theirs to rethink his position many times and to try to raise the level of analysis."\(^{15}\) The main achievement of revisionism, in his estimation, was the assertion that moral imperatives alone were not the cause of the war. The work of the revisionists forced "traditionalist" history to depend almost solely on a moral interpretation of the causes of the war, completely negating any "profound material antagonism."\(^{16}\) Genovese believed it was possible to accept the moral issues involved in slavery as only one facet of the complex social problems that led to the war.

Genovese's revisionism came more from the writings of later revisionists, particularly Allan Nevins, for he does not accept a repressible conflict theory. He believed the Civil War was the inevitable conflict resulting from a failed institutional structure:

> From the moment that slavery passed from being one of several labor systems into being the basis of the Southern social order, material and ideological conflict with the North came into being and had to grow worse. . . . The slaveholder's pride,


\(^{16}\)Ibid., 6.
sense of honor, and commitment to their way of life made a final struggle so probable that we may call it inevitable without implying mechanistic determination against which man cannot avail. 17

The goal of his work was to "rebuild the base on which a materialist interpretation of an irrepressible conflict may rest." 18

Genovese presented his most thorough study of Civil War causation in Chapter Ten of his first book, The Political Economy of Slavery (1965). His argument derived not so much from slavery's political economy, but rather it's political power. Slavery represented a social as well as an economic investment for the slaveholders. The retention of their authority over the South was part and parcel of slavery's perpetuation. As slavery became less and less profitable the necessity for expansion became greater. That, however, was opposed by all the non-slaveholding elements outside the South. The result was that it became necessary for the slaveholders to take the South out of the Union in an attempt to stave off the inevitable loss of their power.

Slaveholders were not in a position to flex politically or economically. The nature of the institution made industrial expansion and crop diversification much less socially

17Ibid., 8.
18Ibid., 9.
profitable. The South created some industry, but only industry which fit within, and depended upon, the slave economy. "Industry made some progress;" wrote Genovese, "industrialization, understood as a self-propelling process, did not."  

The necessity to expand slavery, according to Genovese, resulted from the only successful agrarian reform the South attempted. The agricultural revival of the Upper South, fueled by the breakup of large land holdings and liquidation of slave assets, created the need to sell slaves South. This led to the necessity of expansion to insure slavery as a part of the social system, as well as protecting a wasteful agricultural process.  

Genovese made his argument for expansion by summarizing and dissecting the opposing idea. He took Ramsdell's natural limits thesis and broke it down into fifteen parts, revealing what he believed was its inherent fallacy. He claimed that the thesis was based on a "self-contradiction" -- "slavery was nonexpansionist and it would have perished without room to expand" -- unbalanced but ultimately revealing of the very problem the slaveholders faced:

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19 Ibid., 244; 245.  
20 Ibid., 246.  
21 Ibid., 247.
If it could be firmly established that slavery needed room to expand but had none, then we should have described a society entering a period of internal convulsion. The decision of most slaveholders to stake everything on a desperate gamble for political independence that would have freed them to push their system southward emerges as a rational, if dangerous, course of action.\textsuperscript{22}

Even if the slaveholders had succeeded in securing new land for slavery, progress would have been both slow and, to some extent, repressive. There was no future in expanding to Kansas, Genovese claimed. The true desire of expansionists were the rich mineral rights to be found in the southwest and Mexico, an endeavor in which slavery historically had proved profitable.\textsuperscript{23} However, even with the right to expand, slaveholders needed more than federal protection. They also needed an absolute political control. This would require consolidation of power by the proslavery advocates as well as keeping out free-soilers. In such a scheme a territory would develop slowly, population would not quickly multiply; and resources would go underdeveloped. Genovese did not consider that an important part of the equation: "the question of political power necessarily had priority over the strictly economic questions."\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{22}Ibid., 255.
\textsuperscript{23}Ibid., 256.
\textsuperscript{24}Ibid., 261.
Thus Genovese concluded that power and control were at the heart of the secession crisis and led to war. He had put his own socio-economic, left wing spin on the old idea of clashing civilizations; a "materialist interpretation" of the romantic Old South. Had the South's social system and ruling class not been so distinct, Genovese claimed that a shift of power there would have been no more unsettling than it had been in New England. But the decision to secede was not one with which Genovese found fault. It was, in fact, a decision he defended:

The slaveholders might, of course, have resigned themselves to Lincoln's victory, . . . faced the impending crisis of their system, and prepared to convert to some form of free labor. . . . Such a choice would have spelled their death as a ruling class and would have constituted moral and political suicide. Many contemporaries and many historians ever since have thought that they should have agreed to do themselves in. With this view I do not wish to argue. Neither did they.25

ZINN, WASSERMAN, AND THE "PEOPLE'S HISTORY"

Howard Zinn presented another aspect of New Left history. He earned his PhD in 1958 from Columbia while he was a professor of history at Spelman College. Of all the subjects in this discussion, Zinn was the most prolific writer during the rise of the New Left in the 1960s. Zinn

25Ibid., 248.

26Ibid., 247.
wrote on, and was active in, the southern civil rights movement during his tenure at Spelman. He authored the book *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*\(^27\) as well as several other books and pamphlets on civil rights and in opposition to the war in Vietnam.

It might be a consequence of his active career in political movements that Zinn based his approach to history less on consideration of the past than on influences of the present. The intricacies of events in the past are of little significance to Zinn except in cases which allow him to explicate some special aspect of his presentation. For instance, in his book *A People's History of the United States* (1980), he reduced the background of the Civil War to two paragraphs. Secession occurred after "a long series of policy clashes":

The clash was not over slavery as a moral issue. . . . It was not a clash of peoples, but of elites. The Northern elite wanted economic expansion. . . . The slave interests opposed all that. . . . So when Lincoln was elected, seven Southern states seceded from the Union. Lincoln initiated hostilities by trying to repossess the federal base at Fort Sumter, South Carolina, and four more states seceded. The Confederacy was formed; the Civil War was on.\(^28\)


This is Zinn's history of the conflict. It is from his chapter on slavery, and provides the only background for the subsequent chapter titled "The Other Civil War," covering the anti-rent wars and draft riots in New York. This is "people's history," explaining "the Civil War as seen by the New York Irish."  

Unlike other New Left historians, Zinn had no use for causal relationships in history. "To ask 'what caused the Civil War?' as a general question," Zinn wrote, "leads us nowhere. It is meaningless because it is infinite in its meanings."  

Although Zinn's complaint was along the same lines as other critics of causal history, he approached it from a unique, presentist perspective:  

There are questions about the past whose answers are useful only to the past. "Why did the Civil War come?" is such a question, because the Civil War is a unique unrepeatable event, and to know why that particular war of 1861-65 came about is to tell us nothing useful today.

Zinn's entire historical focus is the present. Emphasis or emotion placed in the study of history was, in his opinion, wasted:  

My point is not to grieve for the victims and

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29 Ibid., 10.  
31 Ibid., 364.
denounce the executioner. Those tears, that anger, cast into the past, deplete our moral energy for today.\textsuperscript{32}

From this perspective, Howard Zinn represented a more radical strain of New Left history than either Williams or Genovese. In addressing the Civil War specifically, he had altered the role of events. Whereas the war itself is usually treated as the significant event, with emancipation and draft riots being effects of it, Zinn gave emancipation and riots more relevance by placing the war in a secondary, or even tertiary, role. This is the basis for Zinn's place among the New Left historians: his almost unmitigated belief that the Civil War itself is irrelevant to the present.

Harvey Wasserman is an instructor of history at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts. Along with Zinn a writer of "people's history," he has approached the Civil War in a less radical but equally unorthodox fashion. Wasserman's theories bear some resemblance to those of Williams. The war, and all of American history for Wasserman, takes the form of an imperialistic capitalist system devoted to empire both domestic and foreign. Although most of his writing concerns issues of the industrial

\textsuperscript{32}Zinn, \textit{People's History}, 10.
revolution and ecology, he has touched on the issue of the war in terms of its later influence.

In his first published book, Harvey Wasserman's History of the United States (1972), he began the first chapter with this line: "The Civil War made a few businessmen very rich." He did not elaborate on this idea for eleven years, until the 1983 publication of America Born and Reborn. In this book Wasserman set up his own version of the Hegelian dialectic. He called his thesis "The Indians" and his antithesis "The Calvinists." As thesis and antithesis clashed in the cycles of history, though, they did not result in a synthesis, as they do in the traditional Hegelian dialectic. The "Indians" and the "Calvinists" never merge into a new, integral whole. Instead, Wasserman weaves a tale of conquest, writing of the Calvinistic triumph over the Indians and the expansive power of the City on a Hill.

Wasserman divided American history into six cycles, each one characterized by five phases: a "burst of energy," an "awakening," a "war," a "reaction" after the war, and a final "aftermath," leading into the next cycle. Each cycle began with a presidential election and ended with either economic panic, recession, or depression. The Civil War was

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the third phase of the second cycle, "Manifest Destiny, 1828-1896." With such a process and framework thus created, it followed that Wasserman would not enumerate causes, or even a single cause, for the war. In a system like his, conflict and war were merely part of a natural process, seemingly unstoppable by human intervention. So without terrible risk it is safe to consider Wasserman an adherent to the theory of an irrepressible conflict.

Within the discussion of Manifest Destiny, though, he did make some general statements on the nature of the war. In particular, he tied its background to the same argument of territorial expansion as did Genovese. Overworked Southern lands and the future of slavery made the fight for the west critical:

Westward expansion thus became as crucial to southern slaveowners as it was to northern industrialists and farmers. The sections became imperial rivals, fighting over control of the federal government, trade policy, and the lands west of the Mississippi.  

The power swing in the contest Wasserman traced directly to Buchanan's veto of the Homestead Act in 1860. He believed this "may have sealed the fate of the Union":

The westerners in general had identified with their fellow agrarians in the South, to whom they sold produce. But they wanted cheap prairie land and did not want to compete for it with slave-

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holders. Buchanan's veto threw them into the arms of Northern industrialists, who also wanted the West free of slavery, though for other reasons.\textsuperscript{35}

The writing of "people's history" never developed into the intellectual fashion Zinn had hoped it would. It's lack of focus and derivative style doomed it to a brief and ineffectual role. Today, for the most part, it is relegated to the entertaining sidetracks of the historical discipline. The unwillingness and/or inability of it's practitioners to address the larger questions of history on anything other than the small scale is probably the reason it is generally ignored today.

JOHN ROSENBERG AND A "NEW REVISIONISM"

In his article "Toward a New Civil War Revisionism," John S. Rosenberg offered an even more presentist approach to the Civil War than Zinn. A graduate student at Stanford University when he wrote this essay, Rosenberg claimed the war was, in terms of 1969 America, completely unjustified:

The recent behavior of the United States does not inspire certainty that its preservation was worth whatever sacrifices other generations were called on to make. Arguments that nearly any amount of death and suffering one hundred years ago were justified to preserve the United States because of

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 82.
its moral attributes can no longer be maintained, if, indeed, they ever could. 36

Rosenberg's proposal, by his own admission, "is not really history at all; it is a new way of evaluating the Civil War, not of explaining it." It was motivated by "the lingering plight of American Negroes and the destructive impact of American nationalism on the rest of the world." 37

Rosenberg's new revisionism was unconcerned with causal aspects of the war. "A new revisionism," wrote Rosenberg, "would be concerned with current attitudes and not with the old question of historical inevitability." 38 The simple secession of the South was not a cause for war in Rosenberg's opinion. He considered retention of the Union by force as unjustified and contrary to all the values of self-determination. He perceived the actions of the North as similar to more recent American interventions in foreign civil wars where America's national interests negated claims of self-determination. 39 Nonetheless, this did not change Rosenberg's belief in the inevitability of the war, only its justification:

37 Ibid., 259.
38 Ibid., 260.
39 Ibid., 271.
One may believe, as I do, that the Civil War -- or more accurately, a civil war -- was unavoidable and still believe that it was a tragedy that cannot be justified either by contemporary war aims or by the results it achieved. A new revisionism, then would not deduce justifiability from inevitability.40

Rosenberg's approach to history, like that of Zinn, represented an interesting permutation of the traditional, yet still ended up trapped by the limitations of its generation. His interpretation, or evaluation, was inextricably tied to the social impasses of Vietnam as well as both the civil rights and black power movements. Thus Rosenberg's thesis is more history itself than historical scholarship. It tied interpretation to one particular moment, and is permanently trapped by that moment.

BARRINGTON MOORE, JR.

Although not a historian by training, one writer closely associated with the New Left historians is Barrington Moore, Jr. He earned his PhD in sociology from Yale University and wrote extensively in the 1950s on the politics of the Soviet Union. During the 1960s he was an associate of the Marxist social critic Herbert Marcuse, with

40 Ibid., 261.
whom he and Robert Paul Wolff co-wrote *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*. 41

Moore wrote an insightful, yet not oft-cited, chapter on the Civil War in his book *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, published in 1966. "The American Civil War: The Last Capitalist Revolution" presents a complex and self-confessed contradictory approach to studying the war. Moore's basic premise is that the war arose from both moral and economic influences, although each one alone was not provocative enough to lead to war. But, as the chapter heading betrays, his emphasis is decidedly economic.

The book examines violent, armed revolution as a catalyst for social change. The American revolution he discounts for the lack of revolutionary change it brought to the society. The Civil War, with various considerations and exceptions, he counts as the true revolution:

> The conclusions, reached after much uncertainty, amount to the statement that the American Civil War was the last revolutionary offensive on the part of what one may legitimately call urban or bourgeois capitalist society.42

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The causes of the war, according to Moore, can be reduced to the notion of dual civilizations. The industrial North and the agrarian South developed different forms of the capitalist system with "incompatible stands on slavery." His basis for studying the moral aspects comes almost solely from Allan Nevins. Moore believes that the slavery question was largely a means of stirring up the anxieties and tensions of the different economies. In that argument, Moore hopes to have "done justice" to the revisionist interpretation that the conflict was a "politician's war" or an "agitator's war."

The real issues lay in economics. In his argument, Moore makes the best case of New Left writers opposed to deterministic economic interpretation. He believes the northern and southern economies were codependent. The northern industries, especially textiles, were dependent on southern agriculture, particularly cotton, for their livelihoods. Thus, the western farmers are the pivotal force in his interpretation. Alliance with the west meant either perpetuation of a plantation-slave economy, or an industrial-free labor economy.

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43 Ibid., 141.
44 Ibid., 137.
Early western sentiments rested with the South, which bought most of the west's surplus and stood with it against the indifferent Washington politicians. But as the east expanded, demand for food increased, railroads crossed the country, and free soilers with antislavery tendencies moved west, a new alliance arose:

The demand for farm products gradually transformed the social structure and psychological attitudes of the West in such a way to make a new alignment possible. The outlook of the individualist and small-scale capitalist, characteristic of the Northeast, spread to the dominant upper stratum of the Western farmers.

The result of this political and social union was the prevention of what Moore describes as "the classic reactionary solution to the problems of growing industrialism": a union of northern industrialists and southern planters against farmers, industrial workers, and slaves.

In the alignment of West and North both moral and political elements fused to cause the war. Moore theorizes that economic differences between North and South were "very probably negotiable," while the moral issues were "incomprehensible without the economic structures that created and

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45 Ibid., 127.
46 Ibid., 128.
47 Ibid., 131.
supported them." But even the alignment of West and North was not necessary for secession, as Moore maintains the South did not consider secession an "unreasonable proposal" because "the South did not need much that the North really had to offer." In the end, though, it was the North/West alliance that brought on the war:

The link between Northern industry and Western farmers, long in preparation if sudden in its arrival, for the time being did much to eliminate the prospect of a straightforward reactionary solution of the country's economic and political problems on behalf of the dominant economic strata. For the very same reason, it brought the country to the edge of Civil War.

CONCLUSION

The New Left historians, although still active, by and large have moved on to subjects other than the Civil War. Genovese still writes and teaches on slavery and the South, but with less emphasis on the issues of the war. Williams' work remained rooted in the study of foreign policy and diplomatic history; he did not write another general history of the United States after Contours. Barrington Moore continues to write social commentary and philosophy. According to Contemporary Authors, he was in the process of

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48 Ibid., 134; 136.
49 Ibid., 136.
50 Ibid., 132.
writing a "moral history" of Industrialism at the age of seventy-three.\(^5\) Zinn, Wasserman, and Rosenberg, on the other hand, are even more obscure now than when they initially worked.

The major contribution of New Left scholars may be the tenacity they brought to their work. The Marxist perspective has waned to some degree, but the impact of those scholars is still present at the university in the form of the many programs which emerged from their activism: black studies, women's studies, and similar specialized programs. They belong to a larger movement, begun by some of the revisionist critics, that finds less value in traditional history than in its alternatives. Hence it is a curious twist of fate that the New Left historians are profoundly responsible for one of the things they wanted so much to avoid in their own work: the present importance placed on moral aspects of historical study, for instance the renewed emphasis on the role of race in American history.

"The supreme task of the historian, and the one of most superlative difficulty, is to see the past through the imperfect eyes of those who lived it and not with his own omniscient twenty-twenty vision. I am not suggesting that any of us can really do this, but only that it is what we must attempt." 

-- David M. Potter, 
The South and the Sectional Conflict

What caused the Civil War? Many people, as we have seen, have had divergent ideas about the answer to that question. Each one had some sort of concrete basis for his conclusion, and more than a few had a very presentist sensibility inherent in those foundations. But to what end does this present sense avail the question? The Civil War, as we know it historically, will never happen again. The issues from which it came are settled: slavery is illegal, the territories are now states, and transcontinental railroads have come and gone. The political terrain and motivations behind the turmoil are irretrievably past. So what does it

profit us to study the causes of the war in terms of the 14th Amendment, or Populism or Progressivism. These issues do not explain to us why the American Civil War occurred.

David Potter understood this clearly. An endless number of people can look back and develop an endless number of reasons for the war's development, but they are all hindsight. The truth of the history lays in its historical moment. That is the driving sensibility behind Potter's historical work. That thesis, as well as a superlative literary skill, combined to make Potter one of the most significant American scholars of the twentieth century.²

Potter was born in Augusta, Georgia, in 1910. He earned his AB from Emory University in 1932. At Yale, he received his MA in 1933 and his PhD in 1940. He was an instructor in American history at the University of Mississippi and Rice Institute before becoming an assistant professor of history at Yale in 1942, where he remained for nineteen years. From 1961 until his death in 1971 he served as Coe Professor of American History at Stanford. During his thirty-three year career, Potter's literary output was phenomenal: forty-three essays and articles, as well as 102

reviews of 133 books. He published five books of collected articles as well as three books of original scholarship. And although his major line of study was Lincoln and the sectional crisis, his work ranged widely among intellectual interests from subjects like the nature of national character to the methods of modern commercial advertising.

POTTER'S METHOD OF HISTORICAL STUDY

To understand Potter's writings the reader must first have some understanding of his philosophical approach to history. Unlike many historians of his generation, Potter labored to close the gap between himself and his subject. He was rarely, if ever, among the fray during the years of bitter intellectual rivalry between revisionists and new nationalists. His absence was remarkable primarily because he was one of the foremost historians of the period, and he was a native Southerner working during a period when sectional scholarship was reasserting itself.

Potter's detachment can be traced back to his method, a process he elaborated on in his essay "Why the Republicans Rejected Both Compromise and Secession." At a conference

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3Ibid., 370.

at Stanford in March, 1963, Potter presented the empirical case for his detached approach to scholarship. In an analytical manner he described the reasons for looking at history through the "imperfect eyes" of the past.

First, he separated the concepts of principle and priority. "Historians," Potter wrote, "have a habit of explaining the important decisions of the past in terms of principles." This presents a dilemma, in that principles often come into conflict with one another. Instead of holding on to one principle and discarding another, men like to believe that these conflicts can be reconciled. Thus, Potter believed the key to understanding the actions of historical participants is to understand how and why they prioritized their beliefs and principles as they did.

Potter illustrated this with the principle of antislavery. If you accept antislavery as a guiding principle, there would be little or no difference between abolitionists and Free Soilers. We do not see the significant differences between them until we scrutinize the priority each group gave to the principle. The leading abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, claimed he wanted "no union with slave-

\footnote{For an alternative view, see Kenneth Stampp's comments and criticism of Potter's approach in George Harmon Knoles, ed., The Crisis of the Union, 1860-1861, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1965), 107-13.}

\footnote{Ibid., 243.}
holders." But Lincoln, leader of the Free Soil Republicans, declared his "paramount objective" was not to end slavery but rather to save the Union. Under this framework anti-slavery becomes another variable within society and not the historically misleading constant of the Northern idealism.  

Corollary to this is realizing that what the historian looking back can see as clear alternatives did not necessarily appear as such to the participants. Potter believed that historians operate with what they "foolishly believe to be the advantage of hindsight." He, however, believed hindsight a "disadvantage in understanding how a situation seemed to the participants." The war itself presents the best example of this. The historian knows that Congress and the Republican Party did not accept secession or compromise and the war followed. Looking back after the fact makes it possible to delineate three alternatives to the crisis: compromise, separation, or war. Potter believed merely stating this makes clear its fallacy because nobody in the crisis at any point made a conscious decision to begin that particular war, with its own particular purpose, at that particular moment.

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7 Ibid., 244-45.
8 Ibid., 245.
9 Ibid., 246.
Potter claimed that by making war an alternative, the historian credited the historical players with actively choosing war and guiding it to a predetermined conclusion, even though they could not possibly foresee the vast scope into which ultimately the war developed. Several variable factors could have changed the war's course. Potter mentions the possibility of ending the war before Lincoln's emancipation of the slaves, or even the prospect that the South might have gained its independence. In such an instance, Potter concluded, historians would be in the position of explaining how the rash, inflexible policy of the Republicans prevented a peaceful reunification of the United States.¹⁰

POTTER'S CRITIQUE OF CAUSAL HISTORY

In 1962, Yale University Press reissued David Potter's first book, Lincoln and His Party In the Secession Crisis.¹¹ For the new edition, Potter wrote a preface digesting some of the work which had been done on the topic since the book's 1942 publication. This preface stood in place of a complete textual revision, with Potter pointing

¹⁰Ibid., 246.

out his book's strengths and weaknesses. He also addressed the revisionist/new nationalist contest and attempted to show where he stood on the field of debate.

On the subject of avoiding the war (Potter strictly avoided the issue of "cause" per se) Potter revealed his beliefs most clearly in his study of the Crittenden Compromises. He wrote in the 1962 preface that he still believed Lincoln's support might have secured passage of the compromise articles.\(^{12}\) Potter thought this made his own opinion explicit:

This, of course, means that I believe there was a possible alternative to war in 1861. It does not mean that I regarded the crisis as an artificial one, or the sources of sectional antagonism as being in any sense superficial. It does not mean that I subscribe to the doctrine that conflict was "needless" or "repressible." . . . Yet to say that the fundamental source of the friction was bound to cause deep antagonism is not, I think, the same as to say that this antagonism had inevitably to take the form of armed combat.\(^{13}\)

Potter also criticized those historians who regarded compromise as "stopgap" politics. The historian who insists that issues of the past should have been "faced up to" should likewise not believe in "the expediency of peace in the present. If an interval of peace, without any fundamental solution of issues, is worth something today, it was

\(^{12}\)Ibid., xix.

\(^{13}\)Ibid., xix.
worth something in 1861." Potter based his belief that the war was avoidable on evidence that the majority of Southerners did not support disunion and the majority of Northerners did not want to pursue the issue of territorial slavery.15

Concerning the possibility of secession, Potter argued that Republicans had a "growing skepticism" of secession cries. They viewed them more as a "political game" in which "Northern Union-savers" and "Southern disunionists" effectively frightened their way into office. Republicans reinforced their beliefs by finding common cause with Southern Unionists, whose attitudes toward the secessionists was similar to their own.16

POTTER'S THE IMPENDING CRISIS

Potter's magnum opus was The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861, a volume of the New American Nation series, published in 1976.17 He began work on the book in 1954 but never completed it. Upon his death in February, 1971, Potter's colleague at Stanford, Don Fehrenbacher, edited the eighteen

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14Ibid., xx.
15Ibid., xxii.
16Ibid., 15.
completed chapters and wrote the last two chapters for publication.\textsuperscript{18} This dramatic change of authors after 513 pages is very smooth. It interferes with neither the narrative nor the interpretive method. Thus, while the book is technically eighteen chapters of Potter and two chapters of Fehrenbacher, it retains great unity from beginning to end.

In general, \textit{The Impending Crisis} is a political history of the period with its focus on the territories, slavery, and the party system. What separates Potter's work from the other orthodox histories of the same era is his philosophical basis. Everything in Potter's work is present in Nevins' volumes. In almost every instance Nevins covers each subject with greater space. Potter, however, gives the issues a succinct, thorough presentation. Instead of flat interpretations, Potter's presentation takes a more probing form intended to draw out aspects without stating them bluntly. There is no simple causal history in Potter's \textit{Impending Crisis}, only the author's presentation of the nation coming apart, emphasizing the sectional and territorial issues, but viewed through a more complex lens.

\textbf{SECTIONALISM AND THE CONFLICT OF VALUES}

An example of his spare and insightful method is his presentation of the sectional conflict. Potter toned down

\textsuperscript{18}Carleton, "David M. Potter," 366.
the conventions of Southern nationalism and civilization in favor of the more direct conclusion that there was a basic conflict of values between the sections. Historians who argued the cultural differences, according to Potter, over-emphasized differences and deemphasized similarities. Economic differences, on the other hand, were unreliable as a measure because history could also display periods when such differences promoted harmony between the sections.

The sectional differences on race illustrated Potter's process well. The South, of course, was proslavery. The North and West were overwhelmingly antislavery. But all sections shared in common a profound anti-Negro attitude. Southerners kept blacks in slavery while Free Soilers kept them out of the territories and abolitionists talked of colonization. The real difference between them came down to the nature of liberty, a question of slavery or freedom, and Potter perceived this as a value choice. That the North "differed profoundly" from the South on the question of slavery Potter did not deny. It was his way of observing the issue that set his conclusion apart:

Thus, from this point of view, a conflict of values, rather than a conflict of interests or a

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19 Potter, Impending Crisis, 32.
20 Ibid., 33.
21 Ibid., 38.
conflict of cultures, lay at the root of the sectional schism."

On a practical level Potter did not agree with those historians who argued that the South would have abolished slavery on its own. He based this opinion on the three main considerations of an expanding Cotton Kingdom, heavy traffic in the Southern slave markets, and the venomous nature of antislavery attitude toward the South:

One should not accept the apologia that the South would itself have got rid of slavery if this indiscriminate onslaught had not compromised the southern emancipationists, but it does seem valid to say that, in the face of such bitter condemnation, white southerners lost their willingness to concede that slavery was an evil.

Potter also offered his own estimation of the idea of Southern nationalism. "Southern nationalism," Potter wrote, "was born of resentment and not of a sense of separate cultural identity." He believed that what Southerners wanted all along was simply "recognition of the merits of southern society and security for the slave system." Had these elements been provided, the impetus of the sectional movement would have been blunted. Potter did not deny that

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122 Ibid., 41.
123 Ibid., 460.
124 Ibid., 469.
125 Ibid., 469.
southern nationalism existed, but he believed it was more a consequence of "the shared defeat" of the Civil War:

The Civil War did far more to produce a southern nationalism which flourished in the cult of the Lost Cause than southern nationalism did to produce the war.  

TERRITORIAL POLITICS & THE KANSAS DISASTER

Potter believed the territorial debate between 1848 and 1861 was defined by four primary positions: (1) the terms of the Wilmot Proviso; (2) the doctrine of noninterference with slavery in the territories as set forth by John C. Calhoun; (3) extension of the Missouri Compromise to the Pacific Ocean; and (4) the idea of popular sovereignty as first put forth by Lewis Cass. Regardless of what merit each plan possessed, Potter portrayed the continuing debate on the territories as a situation in which any plan or decision tended to further negate the possibility of compromise. There was, in Potter's estimation, very little compromise of any type at all. Even the Compromise of 1850 he claimed was "a truce perhaps . . . but not a real compromise." His chapter on the subject was entitled "The Armistice of 1850."

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26 Ibid., 469.
27 Ibid., 54-61.
28 Ibid., 113.
One group's successful policy struggle would bring compromise to an end. For instance, Potter wrote that there remained a significant chance that the Missouri Compromise line would be extended in 1848. But the organization of the Oregon Territory "killed it [36 30'] as a political possibility" because after Oregon was free soil, extension "offered far more advantage to the South" than the North.\(^2\)

He wrote the same of Kansas-Nebraska. "The doctrine of popular sovereignty," according to Potter, "was respectable until the repeal of the Missouri Compromise linked it with the goals of slavery expansion."\(^3\) To reveal the damage, we need only to compare these two results to Potter's four positions. Oregon killed extension of the Compromise line. Kansas-Nebraska killed popular sovereignty. This left only the principles of the Wilmot Proviso and noninterference, the two most uncompromising philosophies in the territorial dispute.

Kansas-Nebraska and the actions of Stephen Douglas represented the ultimate failure of the compromise process for Potter. "Few events have swung American history away from its charted course so suddenly or so sharply as the

\(^2\)Ibid., 76.

\(^3\)Ibid., 192.
Kansas-Nebraska Act," he wrote.\(^1\) It was "America's fiercest congressional battle," and revealed how issues otherwise not sectional came to bear the national dissention and the burden of slavery.\(^2\) Potter invested his study of Kansas-Nebraska with the same lucidness characteristic of all his work. His discussion centered on three topics: (1) the role of Stephen Douglas, (2) the role of slavery, and (3) the ultimate consequences.

Potter's objectivity became pronounced in his treatment of Stephen Douglas. It was almost surgical compared to Nevins' good guy/bad guy portrayal of the senator. Potter wrote that the idea of the Compromise of 1850 was "a rewarding line of inquiry" for Douglas, attempting to organize the territories for railroad expansion, but it was a "tour de force of logic" at which he unwillingly arrived due to "inexorable circumstances."\(^3\) But by the settlement of the Kansas-Nebraska crisis, Potter believed that Douglas was not "really in command of the situation." The senator "lost the initiative" when he could not stop his allies from "defining the objectives" and his opponents from "defining the issue

\(^{1}\)Ibid., 167.

\(^{2}\)Ibid., 163; 145.

\(^{3}\)Ibid., 157; 158.
on which he won. After January 24, 1854, Kansas-Nebraska was no longer a railroad issue according to Potter. This was when the Independent Democrats challenged Douglas and his proposal in the *National Era*.35

Potter claimed Douglas had "suffered historically" from the fallout of Kansas-Nebraska. He described Douglas "functionally" as an antislavery man, but not in the sense of William Seward or Salmon Chase. Douglas trusted what would later be called the natural limits against slavery, such as climate and settlement patterns, to keep it out of the territories. Chase and Seward did not.36 Furthermore, his goal was not to open the territory to slavery so much as it was to change the form of control exercised over slavery there.37 What troubled antislavery men of the Seward/Chase variety, according to Potter, was the shift of slavery from a national to a local issue. The "national preference for freedom over slavery" established by the Ordinance of 1787 would be lost in favor of local determination.38

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34Ibid., 168.
35Ibid., 163.
36Ibid., 172.
37Ibid., 171.
38Ibid., 172.
In the end, the most lethal consequence of Kansas-Nebraska was the schism of the Democratic Party. It ended the party's "uneasy truce" of 1850, and saddled the Pierce Administration with the burden of Bleeding Kansas.\(^3\) Worst of all was the imbalance it created within the party. It ruined the Democrats in the North, where the Know-Nothings and Republicans organized, and gave Southerners more party control.\(^4\) Kansas-Nebraska was, in Potter's estimation, the grandest of failures. "In an age of futile measures," he wrote, "the Kansas-Nebraska Act approached the apex of futility."\(^5\) It was a hollow victory: the railroad bill it was intended to serve did not pass and slavery never entered the territory.\(^6\)

**THE COMPROMISE FAILURES OF 1860-61**

Finally, in the last two chapters, Fehrenbacher essentially vindicated Lincoln and the Republicans. On the compromise issue, Fehrenbacher largely based the history on Potter's "Why the Republicans Rejected Both Compromise and Secession." The reality of secession "tended to change the

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\(^3\) Ibid., 167.  
\(^4\) Ibid., 176.  
\(^5\) Ibid., 173.  
\(^6\) Ibid., 173.
whole nature of the sectional conflict." At that point the issue shifted from slavery to national survival and the right of popularly elected government, an issue which the Republicans could not concede. Fehrenbacher also answered directly the old perennial question of the first shot: "Lincoln, in short, did not choose to initiate hostilities, but he did refuse to accept the Confederate terms for peace." 4

For a more explicit look at Potter's history of the five months before the firing on Fort Sumter we return to his first book, Lincoln and His Party In the Secession Crisis, and the effort of the Crittenden Committee to create a peaceful solution and avoid war.

Concerning the attempts of John J. Crittenden and the Committee of Thirteen to arrange a compromise, Potter believed their efforts were essentially sound. The committee predicated its resolutions "upon a recognition of the important distinction between slavery as such, and the issue of impingement of Federal jurisdiction upon slavery." While this would not end sectional antagonism on the whole, it would relieve the tension of its strongest foundations. Its major weakness was the inattention it paid the "ethical

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4Ibid., 527.
4Ibid., 579.
5Potter, Lincoln and His Party, 105.
problem" of slavery and would therefore be unacceptable to those who considered slavery a moral issue. ⁴⁶

Potter discerned three specific advantages in the Crittenden Compromise which previous national compromises lacked. First, it was "comprehensive," presenting a solution to both present and future sectional crises. Second, it was "final" in that it moved toward permanent as opposed to temporary solutions. And finally, it was "potentially acceptable" because it offered the South terms by which it could give up disunion and have "security in the Union." ⁴⁷ The ultimate failure of the compromise Potter assigned to the Republicans. In both the Senate and the House of Representatives, every vote in opposition to the compromise was Republican while none of the votes in favor were Republican:

Consequently, it remained true . . . that the Republicans let the secession movement go unchecked by any effort on their part to reassure or conciliate the South. ⁴⁸

CONCLUSION

Alexis de Tocqueville in 1835 wrote about historians whose work revolved around the search for great general

⁴⁶Ibid., 109.
⁴⁷Ibid., 110.
⁴⁸Ibid., 302.
causes. His words resonate through the whole debate on Civil War causal history:

M. de La Fayette says somewhere in his memoirs that an exaggerated belief in a system of general causes is wonderfully consoling for mediocre public men. I would add that it is the same for mediocre historians. It always provides them with a few mighty reasons to extricate them from the most difficult part of their task, and while indulging their incapacity or laziness, gives them a reputation for profundity. 49

Alexis de Tocqueville's statement defines the very characteristics which set David Potter apart from several of the other historians of the Civil War causal debate. Potter avoided the causal tug of war by never addressing the issue of cause as such, but told the history through the imperfect eyes of the past. Potter never brought the Civil War into post-World War II society or the civil rights movement. He left it in its own historical home, observed it as a part of time and not a process all its own. In this way he brought the level of discussion, examination, and understanding of the coming of the war to a new level. Potter's work is one of the milestones of American historiography.

CONCLUSION

This thesis began with Allan Nevins' first four volumes of *The Ordeal of the Union*, published in 1947 and 1950, and essentially concludes with David Potter's *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861*, published in 1976. I chose these works for two reasons. First, Thomas Pressly concluded his study of causal history with Nevins' work, making it an obvious place to begin. Secondly, *The Impending Crisis* was the last large-scale study on the period leading up to the initiation of the war.

A number of noteworthy scholars published books and articles concerning the Civil War during those twenty-nine years and after. Some of the most popular did not fit into the context of this thesis. For instance, Bruce Catton and Shelby Foote wrote landmark books on the war itself but not on the political and social factors leading up to the war. There were also numerous texts of American history which cover the period in a general manner but not so exclusively as to make them "causal" histories.

The same may be said for the years after 1976. The intensified demand for publication has resulted in many more books, for the most part variations on the old themes. Two
of the more significant new volumes on the Civil War, published six years apart, were by the same author. And as for causal history in the tradition of previous years, there was practically none.

With the emergence of black studies on an epic scale came endless books and articles on slavery. These works, for the most part, were not connected with causal history. One writer, Richard Sewell, addressed the topic, laboring under the supposition that slavery had ceased to be the essential background of sectional strife. He wrote of his own book:

This short history . . . seeks to refocus attention on slavery as the taproot of sectional discord and civil war. . . . Of course slavery was not the only item on the political agenda in the troubled 1850s, but it was, I think, the most important.

John Barnwell wrote his study of the first secession crisis in South Carolina with the same premise, and Robert Durden's


book viewed antebellum Southern history as determined by white supremacy.¹

One work which did bring slavery and causal history together was William L. Barney's *The Road to Secession*.² Part of a series entitled "New Perspectives in American History," it was the first major synthesis of the Marxist/New Left causal history. Like the work of Williams and Zinn before him, Barney's book was very loosely documented, and he tended to use vast generalizations in place of detail. Furthermore, he approached cause from the sole perspective of racism and slavery expansion. As a work with a limited foundation, Barney's book has a limited usefulness.

Along the lines of the old Beardian economic histories was Bruce Collins' *The Origins of America's Civil War*, which he described as "an economic historian's attempt to analyze and 'make sense' of the economic and political factors that

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produced the conflict we call the Civil War."  

Many articles of this type, which touch on causal history, appeared in the scholarly journals *Agricultural History* and the *Journal of Economic History*. These did not tend to follow or create any specific interpretive trend in causal history.  

Most of the books published in the seventeen years since *The Impending Crisis* reflect the further constricting of academic writing. They attempt to boil down the cause of the war into elements which can be examined in one single event like the Virginia slavery debates of 1832 or the Panic of 1857.  

George Forgie gave causal history the, then academically fashionable, psychohistory treatment in 1979.

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It appears that William Freehling's proposed three-volume *The Road to Disunion* will be a peculiar mesh of this new, constricted method and the old, vast scope of general history. Only the first volume, *Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854*, has been published. In the book's introduction, Freehling explains his plan:

> While Yankees frequently people and lend perspective to this story of the southern road to disunion, my focus rarely deviates from the slaveholders' domain.

It may be unfair to critique this work until the series is completed, but two things seem worthy of note at this point. First, the same essential work was done in the first six volumes of the ten-volume *A History of the South* at Louisiana State University. Second, is it truly possible to follow the "road to disunion" from a perspective that does not claim to study the entire sectional conflict? In his

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10. Ibid., viii.


own way, Freehling is attempting to fuse the modern specialist with history on the grand scale. The result remains to be seen.

Along this same line is John McCardell's *The Idea of a Southern Nation*, a strictly sectional study of "the development of Southern nationalistic thinking from 1830 to 1860."\(^{12}\) He placed his emphasis on the intellectual evolution of seventeen men in particular as opposed to the general events of the period. McCardell's book could more accurately be considered an intellectual history of the section immediately before the war than as causal history.

Perhaps the most prolific writer on the Civil War since the publication of *Impending Crisis* has been William C. Davis. He comes out of the tradition of Bruce Catton more than the other writers considered. Davis, managing editor of *The Civil War Times Illustrated*, has produced a prodigious amount of product. He was editor of the National Historical Society's extensive *Images of War* project and contributed several individual volumes in the Time-Life serial history of the Civil War. His most thorough individual work was his two-volume *The Imperiled Union*.\(^{13}\) He resembles Catton in many respects: he is a journalist-


historian, enamored of multi-volume works on military history, and does not delve deeply into causal aspects of the war.

For whatever reason, these writers and their works have not surpassed the accomplishments of their predecessors. Nevins started with, and expanded on, the work of James Ford Rhodes. Eugene Genovese took the old economic history and approached it with his own peculiar Marxian perspective. And Potter used those "imperfect eyes" to give his history a refreshing immediacy. The range of Nevins and the keen insight of Potter have not been reproduced in the past sixteen years. This point might be further illustrated by taking a closer look at two more works in particular. The first is Michael F. Holt's The Political Crisis of the 1850s; the other James M. McPherson's Battle Cry of Freedom.¹⁴

Holt is a political historian involved with the behavioral and ethnocultural aspects of research. His emphasis is thus with the issues concerning such things as voting habits and the tilt and sway of public opinion, instead of the more traditional study of people and events. With this background the student would be inclined to expect a new

McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom.
twist on the old causal debate: a history more in line with Lee Benson's conclusion that public opinion was a significant cause of the war.\(^\text{15}\)

By his own account, Holt was well on the way to such a work. He began by using his behavioral studies background as the foundation for his work. Along the way, however, he found it necessary to incorporate aspects of "republican ideology" in the research. The result, as every reviewer made note of, was an almost complete, nearly identical restatement of the old revisionist thesis. It is a strange result altogether, a fairly concise restatement of forty year old ideas buoyed by the modern behavioral scientific research.

"The key to Civil War causation," wrote Holt, "is to be found in the reasons why the American political system could no longer contain the sectional conflict, not in the conflict itself."\(^\text{16}\) Conflict is the key to Holt's argument, for he argued the complete inverse of Avery Craven's version of a failed process. To Holt, failure occurred not when the opposing parties lost a consensus, but when they found it:

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\text{If conflict sustained the old two-party system, what destroyed it was the loss of the ability to}
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\(^{16}\)Holt, Political Crisis, 3.
provide interparty competition on any important issues at any level of the federal system. Because the political system's vitality and legitimacy with the voters depended on the clarity of the definition of the parties as opponents, the blurring of that definition undid the system. What destroyed the Second Party System was consensus, not conflict.¹⁷

On the slavery issue, Holt wrote in a similar fashion. He decentralized slavery in the causal argument and gave it a more ephemeral, symbolic role. "The sectional conflict over slavery had been crucial in causing the Civil War," he wrote. "But the basic issue had less to do with the institution of black slavery than has been thought."¹⁸

While he admitted the war would probably not have occurred without the institution of slavery, it did give sectional politicians an issue over which to debate. Still, Holt believed that these national crises and the debates they stirred had less to do with black slavery than they did a philosophical idea of republicanism:

Those clashes, in turn increasingly caused the constituents of those politicians to view people in the other section as enemies of their rights, and as they worried about their own rights they shifted their focus away from the institution of black slavery itself. . . . The slavery that was important to them was an abstract status men hoped to escape, a status they equated with the end of republican government.¹⁹

¹⁷Ibid., 13.
¹⁸Ibid., 258.
¹⁹Ibid., 258.
Thus it was the struggle over "republicanism," and not the issue of slavery, which Holt believed proved central in the causes of Southern secession. Instead of debating more practical political matters, politicians engaged in high-intensity philosophical combat. Slavery merely exacerbated the tensions to a final showdown in which the Republicans and the secessionists vied for the title of defender of republican government.

In comparing Holt to classic revisionism one encounters the secondary role of slavery in causal events, which harks back to the revisionists' most prominent tenet. Holt's ideas on the political process after the Second Party System, when compared to Craven's theory on the "decline of the Democratic process," are not, of course, identical concepts, but their similarities are more than passing. Craven saw the North justifying its political philosophy with the Declaration of Independence and the South justifying itself with the Constitution: the two most elemental American political documents used to defend diametrically opposed positions. Holt, in a similar vein, recounted how North and South, with opposing foundations, each considered itself the final repository of republican government.

On the issue of who turned the political process into what it became in the 1850s, Holt's professional politicians bear more than a passing resemblance to the same manipula-
tive power brokers Randall called a "blundering generation."

Holt might disagree with the comparison to Randall, but he himself admitted to at least a tentative agreement with revisionist philosophy:

> While I agree with revisionists that the individual decisions of politicians were important in exacerbating the situation, my emphasis is less on their ineptitude or the fanaticism of agitators than it is on the mechanics or dynamics of the political system itself.  

But even this disclaimer is not wholly successful, for the "mechanics or dynamics" of the system did not, and still do not, ultimately run themselves. Their wheels were greased by the human element, and the political system's results derived from man's manipulation of it.

These similarities between Holt and the revisionists would seem to suggest the revival of the revisionist school of interpretation. However, not such revival has occurred in the intervening fifteen years since Holt first published. The problem is that by 1978, classic revisionism was dead and gone, altered significantly in the intervening years and superseded by newer trends. This is why Holt's *Political Crisis of the 1850s*, as fine a work as it is, remains one of the loose ends of my causal historiography.

Any explanation of James M. McPherson's role in causal historiography requires much more caution. McPherson has

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20 Ibid., 3.
achieved the rare dual distinction of being a highly-regarded scholar and a best-selling writer. In other words, he is good and popular. So it stands to reason that he should figure in any study of Civil War historiography. However, McPherson did not delve deeply into the matter of the Civil War's causal aspects, particularly in *Battle Cry of Freedom*. The primary point of his antebellum coverage was slavery, which he seemed to accept without much reservation as the primary thrust behind the coming of the war. In this regard he most resembled the new nationalist historiography, and the similarity is driven home precisely when he stated in *Battle Cry* that the question of slavery expansion made the war "irrepressible."\(^1\)

McPherson's ideas on the causes of the war are difficult to explain because he never wrote precisely about cause *per se*. In fact, to get a true feel for his ideas on the subject one has to go back beyond *Battle Cry of Freedom* to his earlier Civil War history, *Ordeal By Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction*.\(^2\) While he did not specifically write about cause in this work either, he did put forth an idea for the coming of the war in an economic interpretation reviewers and critics called his "modernization" theory.

\(^1\) McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 41.

"Modernization" held that the North developed in a rapidly growing industrial mode while the South retained its older, agrarian society, including slavery. American modernization was based on the value system McPherson called the Puritan, or Protestant, work ethic. These values, "hard work, thrift, sobriety, reliability, self-discipline, self-reliance, and the deferral of immediate gratification for long-range goals," he believed were "strongest among New Englanders in general and among Congregationalists, Unitarians, Presbyterians, and Quakers in particular." The South, on the other hand, was hamstrung by slavery, which "helped cause the technological lag in Southern agriculture." 24

This dichotomy was the ruling principle in the nation. Slavery, according to McPherson, became the main focus of national politics in 1844, with repeal of the House of Representatives "gag rule" banning antislavery petitions, and remained so until the war. 25 However, the modernization theory did not end there. McPherson also believed there was some relation between the Puritan ethic of modern

23 Ibid., 14.
24 Ibid., 36.
25 Ibid., 51.
progress and the abolitionist movement, both of which were products of New England society:

The abolitionist-entrepreneur coalition was no coincidence. The capitalist ideology was a free labor ideology. It held that the internalized self-discipline of the Protestant ethic created more efficient workers than the coercive external discipline of slavery.\(^2\)

McPherson described the reaction in the South as "siege mentality: unity in the face of external attack and vigilance against the internal threat of slave insurrections."\(^2\) McPherson's conclusion to the causal issue in *Ordeal By Fire* revealed the truly economic nature of his interpretation. "In short," he wrote, "slavery and modernizing capital were irreconcilable."\(^3\)

Most of this interpretation and theory are gone in *Battle Cry of Freedom*. By 1988, McPherson simply explained that the conflict was "irrepressible."\(^4\) However, he had not completely surrendered his general notion that American society was in the process of industrial modernization. In reference to the 37th Congress, McPherson quoted the best-known economic historians of them all, Charles and Mary Beard, who credited the 37th Congress with bringing down the hegemony of planter aristocracy and replacing it with "cap-

\(^2\)Ibid., 44.

\(^2\)Ibid., 46.

\(^2\)Ibid., 44.

talists, laborers, and farmers."3 Aside from this, though, McPherson's second work bore little resemblance to the first on the question of the war's causes.

In *Battle Cry of Freedom*, he returned to the basics of the old central theme of slavery. On this he was specific:

> The greatest danger to American survival at mid-century, however, was neither class tension nor ethnic divisions. Rather it was the sectional conflict between North and South over the future of slavery. . . . The slavery issue would probably have caused an eventual showdown between North and South in any circumstances. But it was the country's sprawling growth that made the issue so explosive."11

One moderate variation from *Ordeal* to *Battle Cry* was the emphasis on the politicization of the slavery issue. The first book left the distinct impression that Southern recalcitrance to modernization led to conflict. In 1988, McPherson stated that it was the antislavery movement's entrance into politics at midcentury that had "begun to polarize the country."12

Only once did McPherson seem to let his scholarly guard down and reveal some partisan sentiment. He wrote that "Jefferson's Empire for Liberty had become mostly an empire

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10 Ibid., 452.
11 Ibid., 7; 8.
12 Ibid., 8.
for slavery."[3] This was a peculiar statement in that the last state admitted to the Union as a slave state, Texas, joined before McPherson's narrative began at midcentury. The South, i.e. the "empire for slavery," was not expanding. It stood still. Territorial expansion was being made on free-soil principles despite the proslavery policies of the Compromise of 1850, Kansas-Nebraska, and Dred Scott. A good example of this would be the rejection of the Lecompton agreement by Kansas voters. Thus from a larger, less partisan perspective, one could argue that Jefferson's vision of an Empire for Liberty was becoming more and more of a reality.

Thus, in the matter of Civil War causal history, James McPherson's two major works differ substantively. First, he developed a causal theory, then seemingly abandoned most if not all of it eight years later. Why he did this is a matter of speculation. It could be that the Oxford History of the United States, the larger series for which McPherson wrote *Battle Cry*, placed various limitations on him. It also is possible that McPherson decided to write more of a narrative history than an interpretive one. In addition, there is the possibility that he wrote the book for a general, not an academic, audience, and consequently did not

[3] Ibid., 51.
include such academic matters as the finer points of causation.

McPherson's apparent abandonment of causal theory also might have something to do with the critical response to *Ordeal By Fire*. While the book received favorable reviews overall, the modernization theory received a mixed response. James C. Mohr, in his review for the *Journal of American History*, considered the theory "conceptually frail but pedagogically effective," and was very accurate in revealing that the term "modernization" had an "all-inclusive nature" that "comes frustratingly close to being a functional synonym for 'change'." It could also be synonymous with "progress" or "industrialization."

While not having stated it as such, no historian has ever denied that modernization, change, or progress was central in the coming of the Civil War. Whether the issue was slavery expansion, territorial expansion, industrialization, the rights of minority states, or any of the other issues, the aura of change permeated them all. Had the populace been at ease with the national situation and not demanded some element of change, the war *as we know it* would almost definitely not have occurred.

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Whether these or other reasons prompted him, the fact remains that between 1982 and 1988 the causal element in James McPherson's history changed significantly and all but disappeared. He replaced his theory with that one word that carries so much interpretive force in Civil War causal history: irrepressible.

Thus, in spite of the many works published in the last seventeen years, major work in this specific aspect of Civil War historiography, its causes, ended with David Potter's *The Impending Crisis* in 1976, and no truly significant work on the subject has ventured into the void that has been there ever since. As shown, there has not been a dearth of effort or published works, most of which come out of the various genres of research. What is lacking is the powerful testament of the struggle in the narrative form.
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REVIEW


