

William J. Cooper, *We Have the War Upon Us: The Onset of the Civil War, November 1860–April 1861* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012). Pp xv, 332. Maps, illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$30.00.

The sesquicentennial of the American Civil War has produced a new wave of scholarship on the origins of the conflict. In *We Have the War Upon Us*, William J. Cooper adds to this literature by examining the five critical months from Abraham Lincoln's election in November 1860 to the opening shots at Fort Sumter. Rather than concentrating solely on the steps that led inexorably to war, Cooper takes a different tack. Instead, he focuses on why sectional compromise—supported by many in both regions—failed on this occasion when it had repeatedly succeeded in the past. Cooper notes that while Americans today tend to view the secession crisis as a necessary step toward the ultimate preservation of the Union and the destruction of slavery, participants in the conflict did not know of these developments and many strove to prevent the rupture at all costs. To fully understand their worldview, Cooper argues, we must attempt (quoting historian David M. Potter) to “see the past through the imperfect eyes of those who lived it,” rather than with 20–20 hindsight (xiii).

To answer his question of why compromise failed, Cooper examines the views of a wide range of Northerners and Southerners and to some degree divides them into almost diametrically opposite pairs. Not surprisingly, Abraham Lincoln plays the central role in the narrative, and the author offers a critical view of the president-elect. Cooper portrays Lincoln as unwilling to reassure the South and wary of compromise, and he identifies three reasons for this. Ensnared in Springfield, Illinois, Lincoln lacked contact with Southerners throughout his career, and therefore genuinely did not understand them or their profound fear of the Republican Party. As a result, he mistook the gravity of the secession crisis. Beyond this, Cooper maintains that Lincoln was a political partisan who feared splitting his young party at the moment of its greatest triumph to date. Compromise might have alienated members of the Republican “left” who wanted no part of appeasing the South. Finally and most important, Lincoln possessed “a much deeper, more visceral hatred of slavery” than William Seward and others who favored compromise (80). Defending his stance on no expansion of slavery into the territories, Lincoln explained that to do otherwise “acknowledges that slavery has equal rights with liberty” (71).

Counterbalancing Lincoln was Seward, who, Cooper argues, desperately sought ways to accommodate the South following the 1860 election. A veteran of Washington politics, Seward, assisted by his ally Thurlow Weed, was willing to waive no expansion of slavery to buy time to let the emotionalism of secession die down and allow calmer heads to fashion a compromise. Seward also looked to the future and hoped to expand the Republican Party by attracting Unionists in the Upper South and border states, such as those who had voted for John Bell in 1860.

Cooper maintains that while Lincoln somewhat moderated his stance as he traveled east and arrived in Washington—even suggesting that he would evacuate Fort Sumter if Virginia would not secede—it was not enough. In the end, Lincoln maintained his party's position on no expansion and attempted to resupply the beleaguered fort in Charleston Harbor. In doing so, he demonstrated that he headed the party, not Seward, and other Republicans ultimately took their cues from him. While serving on committees in both houses of Congress, Republicans consistently obstructed a range of compromises. These included extending the Missouri Compromise line to the Pacific Ocean, amending the Constitution to guarantee slavery, and admitting New Mexico as a slave state. Cooper notes that such tactics convinced Jefferson Davis and other Southern moderates that the possibility of “an honorable peaceable settlement” no longer existed (111).

Cooper provides equally insightful analysis of the complex situation in the South as fire-eaters or “immediatists” sought to overcome “cooperationists” and take their states out of the Union. Fire-eaters, such as Robert Toombs, opposed compromise because Lincoln's election provided them with an excuse to secede, something that they had long advocated. Cooperationists—although this is a term encompassing several meanings—generally opposed quick secession, arguing that the president-elect had done nothing to harm the South and lacked the power to do so. Still, Cooper notes that Alexander Stephens and other cooperationists in the Deep South lacked the fire-eaters' energy and were resigned to defeat. As Stephens commented, “I am inclined to let those who sowed the wind reap the whirlwind, or control it if they can. . . . It does seem to me that we are going to destruction as fast as we can” (127). Cooperationists proved more resilient in the Upper South and border states, however, and resisted calls for secession prior to Lincoln's inauguration.

While Southerners disagreed on the pace of secession, Cooper maintains that they universally agreed on two other important points. First, no Southerner would “submit” to the Republican Party. Such a term had strong

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connotations of slavery, and even cooperationists agreed that Republicans should not mistake their patience for weakness. Additionally, Southerners believed that secession was constitutional and that the federal government had no authority to coerce states to prevent it. These facts caused the Upper South to secede following Lincoln's call for volunteers, and several border states considered it.

We Have the War Upon Us offers readers much more than a study in personalities. Cooper includes interesting analyses of the voting patterns for secession delegates in the Deep South, the creation of the Confederate government, and the peace conference of the states. He also thoroughly covers the debates about Forts Pickens and Sumter, beginning with James Buchanan's administration and ending with the decisions that led to war. Strongly grounded in the writings of the key actors, the book draws heavily upon contemporary newspapers in both the North and the South and incorporates the latest scholarship. Overall, Cooper has written a highly readable and thought-provoking book about the tricky balance between achieving political compromise and maintaining principles.

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