



Dwight T. Pitcaithley. *The U.S. Constitution and Secession: A Documentary Anthology of Slavery and White Supremacy.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2018. 400 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7006-2626-7.

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Dwight Pitcaithley's *The U.S. Constitution and Secession: A Documentary Anthology of Slavery and White Supremacy* offers valuable insights to an array of audiences. Pitcaithley, former chief historian of the National Park Service, tapped into his public history instincts to produce a volume that will inform specialists, undergraduates, and lay people alike. For readers who are not yet 100 percent clear on the causes of the Civil War, the primary sources in this collection leave no room for confusion: "In total, the documents included here illustrate the central role of slavery and white supremacy in the fracturing of the nation over the winter of 1860-1861" (p. xviii). The volume begins with a substantial sixty-page introductory essay. This review will revisit the introduction at the end, in light of the documents, but its goals are to organize and contextualize the Southern grievances of the Secession Winter. The three main areas of debate were the future of slavery in the territories, the fugitive slave crisis, and the right of "sojourn," or the right of slaveholders to bring slaves into free states.

The U.S. Constitution and Secession first presents two speeches from December 1860: President James Buchanan's final address to Congress, and a speech by Kentucky senator John Crittenden. What is remarkable from these addresses is

the extent to which, beyond partisan politics in Congress, both men lament the popular discord behind the sectional conflict. The Union, according to Buchanan, "must one day perish" if it "cannot live in the affections of the people" (p. 74). The next section consists of four Declarations of Secession issued by states in the Deep South between early January and early February of 1861. Pitcaithley notes that "the declarations directed their protestations not against the federal government but against the "anti-slavery sentiment of the North" (p. 94). In the context of this volume, it is notable that the Constitution's provisions or character are not a central grievance in the declarations. The Deep South, instead, attacked Northern manipulation and violation of a Constitution that they thought would have otherwise protected them quite well. Moving from the Deep South to the nation's capital, Pitcaithley next presents the Report of the Committee of Thirty-Three and the selections from its several Minority Reports. These reports ultimately shed light on the lacking middle ground between the sections, particularly on the perceived failures of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law.

The most substantial portion of the volume is sixty-seven amendments proposed to the Constitution by various elected officials, between De-

ember 1860 and the outbreak of war in April 1861. The most easy-to-spot collective takeaway from these sixty-seven proposals is the centrality of slavery. A few other patterns catch the reader's attention. Whether dealing with slavery in the territories or the fugitive slave crisis, the sheer range of—and contradictions within—these compromises leaves the reader with a sense that there would be no viable middle ground. The fifth and final section of primary sources in *The U.S. Constitution and Secession* features three speeches from Congress during the Secession Winter that effectively represent the range of opinions during the era. The first is a speech from Ohio Republican Owen Lovejoy. In the face of secession, he calls on his fellow Republicans to stand with “unity, firmness, decision” (p. 286). The other extreme is encapsulated in Texas Democrat Louis Trezevant Wigfall's final address to the Senate. Wigfall agrees with Northern senators on just one topic: that the sectional disagreement “cannot be compromised” (p. 326). The Republican Party “represents two million men who hate us, and who, by their votes for such a man as they have elected, have committed an overt act of hostility” (p. 335).

Taken together, these sources carry some clear lessons. While proposed solutions varied, Southern grievances were consistent and coherent. They responded to a clear set of Republican policies that threatened Southern slavery in clear ways. Furthermore, the Northern responses documented in the volume show that these fears were material; neither side, in these volumes, appears to have left room for compromise. In this light, Pitcaithley's introductory essay falls short. He considers every piece of the sectional debate: slavery in the territories, the fugitive slave crisis, the rights of sojourn, the *Dred Scott* decision, et cetera, but misses the essential, *constitutional* issues that connected them: fundamental disagreements over the existence of a national right to slaveholding and the basic rights of citizenship for black Northerners. Instead of portraying secession as the result of mutually incompatible po-

litical and constitutional convictions, then, he irrationalizes the sectional conflict. The Republican antislavery agenda was “symbolic” and the Southern perception of a threat to slavery “incorrect[t]” (pp. 36, 25). To read the body of sources compiled in *The U.S. Constitution and Secession* and find little more than symbolism and collective irrationality is puzzling. These critiques aside, the sources compiled in *The U.S. Constitution and Secession* offer students and scholars alike the chance to consider the sectional crisis in a new light. The fraught efforts at compromise compiled in the volume refocus the political spectrum of the late antebellum era and reveal the fundamental nature of the conflict over slavery.

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