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Disunion!: The Coming Of The American Civil War, 1789-1859 (Littlefield History Of The Civil War Era)



Synopsis

In the decades of the early republic, Americans debating the fate of slavery often invoked the specter of disunion to frighten their opponents. As Elizabeth Varon shows, "disunion" connoted the dissolution of the republic--the failure of the founders' effort to establish a stable and lasting representative government. For many Americans in both the North and the South, disunion was a nightmare, a cataclysm that would plunge the nation into the kind of fear and misery that seemed to pervade the rest of the world. For many others, however, disunion was seen as the main instrument by which they could achieve their partisan and sectional goals. Varon blends political history with intellectual, cultural, and gender history to examine the ongoing debates over disunion that long preceded the secession crisis of 1860-61.

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Customer Reviews

Highly readable political, social, and intellectual history at its best. . . . Highly recommended.--Choice[A] very important book. . . . Well-written and carefully documented and will be imminently useful to undergraduate and graduate classrooms alike.--The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and BiographyIn scope, authority, and lucidity, this book . . . deserves to be ranked alongside some of the landmark studies of Civil War causation. . . . As good an account of the worldview of antebellum Americans as one can read.--H-Civil WarAn ambitious book that seeks to reimagine the causes of the Civil War. . . . Original and valuable.--Journal of American

HistoryDeeply enriches our understanding of the causes of the Civil War. . . . [Varon's] insights on the gendered nature of disunion discourse are especially valuable. . . . Extremely readable.--Maryland Historical MagazineA compelling argument about the political significance of language. . . . Speaks to specialists and remains approachable for undergraduates, scholars in other fields, and general readers.--Common-PlaceA solid contribution to antebellum political history [that] offers a new and interesting viewpoint on sectionalism.--Journal of Southern HistoryBreathes new life into our understanding of the antebellum era. . . . Varon's work proves that this history, one that marries rhetoric to events, can illuminate dark corners of the antebellum narrative and carry lessons into the present day.--Journal of American StudiesVaron fulfills her goal of distinguishing disunion from secession and exploring the multifaceted meanings of the term. . . . She eminently succeeds in showing how disunion evolved from a 'prophecy' that no one wanted fulfilled to the fire-eaters' 'program.'--American Historical ReviewVaron's success in setting her analysis of disunion rhetoric against a comprehensive historiographical backdrop is exceptional. Meticulously researched and beautifully assembled, Disunion will become a standard text for students and scholars interested in this tumultuous chapter in American history.--North & SouthOne of the most innovative aspects of this book is the weaving of race and gender into the narrative. . . . It is a cliché, but it is nonetheless true that a short review cannot do justice to this nuanced and beautifully written study.--American Historical ReviewMasterful. . . . Varon skillfully blends race, gender and social history to fashion a political chronicle of the period. . . . An excellent and well-designed book.--Civil War NewsA stimulating and extremely fluent study, bringing together a multitude . . . of voices offering their particular perspective on, proscriptions against, or prescriptions for disunion.--Georgia Historical Quarterly[A] well-reasoned study of the long war of words and ideas predating the open bloodshed of the Civil War.--The Midwest Book ReviewImpressive in scope, as well as in breadth and depth. . . . A masterful synthesis of the predominant primary and secondary literature on the antebellum period. . . . Accessible in both structure and style, and will be especially valuable for students in an upper division course on antebellum America or the Civil War. . . . Varon excels at weaving together the multiple discourses of disunion.--Louisiana HistoryBlends political history with intellectual, cultural, and gender history to examine the ongoing debates over disunion that long preceded the secession crisis of 1860-61. . . . A valuable addition to your Civil War/Confederate library. . . . Excellent.--Lone Star Book ReviewA broad study. . . . Strong both in illuminating operative gender and racial perspectives and in presenting in some detail the views and methods of presentation and activism of many figures who will be unfamiliar even to most American historians, but who, as this book demonstrates, should not be ignored.--Reviews in American HistoryAn excellent history that is

well balanced and fairly presents all sides. . . . Recommend[ed] . . . to all Civil War readers as an essential foundation to understanding why the war came and many of the decisions of 1860 to 1862.-- James Durney, independent Book Reviewer

Expertly tackles a substantial body of historical literature while weaving the growth of disunionist rhetoric through the traditional landmarks on the road to Civil War.--Southern Historian

New works periodically appear that significantly contribute to our understanding of that deep national schism. Elizabeth Varon's *Disunion* is one of those studies. . . . Utilizing a wide range of source material, Varon has crafted a fascinating study that examines not just leaders but a wide array of voices. She does an excellent job of providing the appropriate context for the issues discussed so that readers have both a good understanding of the issue at hand and this work's place within the historiography." --North Carolina Historical Review

This is a very interesting book and important in helping to understand the underlying political causes of our American Civil War. . . . This is a valuable addition to your Civil War / Confederate library.--The Lone Star Book Review

Definitive . . . explain[s] the effects *Disunion* had upon the various political groups and the citizens from our founding fathers and later on. . . . Balanced history at its very best.--The Midwest Book Review

Installs [the premise of disunion] by weaving the country's beginnings with the immediate, and profound, philosophical differences that existed between the agrarian, slaveholding South and the industrialized North.--The Anniston Star

A cogently reasoned intellectual history of a frequently misunderstood historical term. . . . Varon successfully weaves together political debates, contemporary journalism, literary fiction and nonfiction, sermons from pulpits of the nation's leading churches and other sources of popular culture.--Civil War Times

Highly engaging. . . . Makes good use of recent historical literature to produce a synthetic and balanced account of the politics of disunion in the American republic.--Civil War Book Review

This exciting book puts North and South, politics and ideas, abolitionists and secessionists into conversation across the entire era between the Constitution and the Civil War--and by doing so explains a crucial part of American history. This is a story of great importance, powerfully told.--Edward L. Ayers, president, University of Richmond

From the moment the American union was created in 1789, threats and fears of disunion pervaded the polity. At the root of these fears lay the paradox of a slaveholding nation founded on a charter of freedom. With great clarity, Elizabeth Varon shows how sixty years of disunion rhetoric centered on slavery set the stage for secession and war.--James M. McPherson, author of *Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander in Chief*

After reading *Disunion*, I have a much better understanding of the attitudes that prevailed in both the

North and South prior to the Civil war. The attitudes, on both sides, led to events that escalated the controversy that spiraled into the Civil War. It has always been a conflicting concept to me, that the North was anti-slavery which implies sensitivity to the plight of the slave. The truth is, as revealed in Disunion, the Northern public was racist but opposed slavery because it was seen as an affront to the freedom and liberty spelled out in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Of course, there were varying opinions on the slavery question in the North, with some being extremely racist and supportive of slavery and other calling for its immediate abolition. The same range of opinions were present in the South. It important to keep in mind that the wealthy plantation owners who also controlled the state governments in the South had a far greater influence on Southern opinion than their numbers represented. Many issues were in play and Disunion reveals that there was thirty years of bickering between the North and South over the slavery question and survival of the union. Instead of slavery gradually declining, the thirty years prior to the Civil War saw the disagreement gradually escalate until it reached full scale warfare. Disunion was both enjoyable to read and very informative. I recommend it to all who have an interest in American history.

Excellent primer on the seeds of disunion planted when the colonies just began and rampant throughout our history as a country. Telling warnings by the founding Father's that it would all happen.

Very informative; definitely excellent window into history, especially journalistic history; offers readers a sense of the "times" and the "issues" of the day--both past and present.

Scholarly and thought provoking.

The book fills us in on the politics and passions leading up to the Civil War. it is well researched and contributes to one's body of knowledge. I was less than thrilled with the way the material was presented.

I read 2-4 books per month. Mostly on 19th century America. This is perhaps the best written account of the events leading up to the Civil War that I've seen. Varon does an excellent job at presenting the facts and issues in such a manner that they are clear and concise. She argues that the word "Disunion" had been brandished about from the start of the union until the Civil War and not just by the South. There were plenty of Northerners who felt that supporting slave states was a

stain on Northern hands and that the only way to be cleansed would be to cut the south off. She argues that the word itself was used in several manners: 1) As a prediction of things to come. 2) As a threat to achieve one's goal 3) As a means to forcefully remove a state from the body. 4) As a procedure to peacefully remove another from the Union. 5) As an insult or attack on other people. It covers a number of characters whose roles in this process might have been forgotten/overlooked. It also helps provide a clearer understanding as to why the Republican Party had become such firm Unionist leading up to Lincoln. Since the Democrats had cornered the political market on preserving the Union, they used the Abolitionist bent of the Republican party as an attack to drive people away from them. As a result, the Republican Party found itself defending itself as pro-Union. Preserving the Union became one the primary messages of the Republican Party, so while they might have opposed Slavery, their first mission was to preserve the Union. When the South seceded, Lincoln had very little choice but to go to war based upon the stance the party had taken.

A masterful account of the sociopolitical circumstances that lead to the unthinkable: the coming of the American Civil War. Varon, an astute historian, writes in engaging, clear, prose that is well-suited to a general but interested readership however her research is heavy enough to make this book an essential one for serious scholars of the Civil War, too. Moreover, Varon considers the concepts of "disunion" and "secession" in a robust way that entertains all aspects of states' rights and how the feelings of both political leaders and general citizens brought about an easy association with the concept of loyal leanings to the state but less powerful feelings--or even understanding--of the union of states. A lot of Varon's emphasis is on play-by-plays and detailed, personal, accounts from first-person sources of what was happening prior to the Civil War: the feelings of planters, politicians, and others about economic and governmental issues. This is the stuff the casual reader expects to find in his turkey, but for the more serious student of history Varon also provides a very well-crafted, innovative, and original analysis of what she sees as the epistemology of disunion. She is not a revisionist, but she does broker in the language of the post-structural scholar in places, albeit in a watered-down way. Her tenor is always one of exploration, but she does lay out a five-point thesis of what she considers "disunion" to be and from there explores how it was manifest prior, and during, the American Civil War

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