Review Essay

Revisiting the Irrepressible Conflict

JOHN ASHWORTH


After many years of comparative neglect the origins of the Civil War now are central to the concerns of American historians. A consensus on the matter remains, however, as elusive as ever. And although new understanding has been gained, to some extent the old controversies persist. Was the war inevitable, in William Seward’s famous word “irrepressible,” or was it instead the product of accident, the result of a series of “contingent” events or occurrences that might easily not have happened and without which the outcome would have been quite different? These are issues about which Americans have disagreed for generations. Indeed the controversies go back to the Civil War itself, when on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line there could be found ardent advocates of compromise as well as those who insisted that compromise was futile and fruitless.

William Cooper’s most recent book, though it rather curiously disavows the goal of explaining “why the war came” (xiv), is in fact full of implications for the war’s origins, as the author doubtless intends it to be. Cooper’s previous work has been largely concerned with the antebellum South and especially with its politics. Here he deals with a shorter period, essentially the months between Lincoln’s election and the outbreak of hostilities some five months later. He covers a wider geographical canvas, however, since he treats northerners as well as southerners.

Although Cooper provides a highly readable narrative of the momentous events that he treats, his work is heavily flawed by the assumptions that underlie it. In his schema those who are for “compromise” on the
great questions that were dividing North and South are the heroes. The villains, then, one might assume, are those who reject compromise. As we shall see, however, this is only partly true. Cooper’s entire approach to the sectional crisis incorporates some value judgments that are, to say the least, controversial, without his apparently being aware of the fact. Moreover, he is not even-handed. It turns out that a large portion of the Republican Party, with President Lincoln at their head, are indeed among the guilty for squandering opportunities for compromise. These Republicans were insufficiently “conservative.” But Cooper glosses over southern complicity in the outbreak of hostilities. He thus offers a highly tendentious interpretation of the events of the secession winter.

It is obvious that the Civil War represented a gigantic sacrifice in terms of lives, of human suffering, of social dislocation and economic destruction. Was it worth it? Was the single largest consequence of the war, the freeing of four million slaves in the 1860s, together with the innumerable millions who were spared enslavement in later decades, worth the price that was paid? The answer of the “moderate,” one would have thought, would be that we do not know. We do not know how long slavery would have lasted had the Civil War not erupted. Even if we did know, how would we weigh the appalling suffering of millions of African American men and women against the deaths of perhaps three quarters of a million, mostly white American males? These are difficult questions.

At one time, a large number of historians believed they knew the answer. Prior to World War II many scholars agreed with Ulrich B. Phillips that African Americans were racially and biologically suited to slavery. From this premise it would reasonably follow that if the war’s main achievement was to emancipate these African Americans then assuredly it was not worth the cost. The Phillips approach has now thankfully disappeared from mainstream historical writing. But the agnosticism about the value of the war that should have resulted from its disappearance has not yet, it appears, triumphed. Thus in Cooper’s pages many of those whose actions contribute to the outbreak of war between North and South, again with Lincoln at their head, are roundly criticized while those who seek compromise are praised.

Republicans, and especially Lincoln, earn Cooper’s wrath. Even the terms used to describe them are loaded. He refers to the radicals within the party who wanted to abolish slavery as a “gang” (62). They were men who “did not think nationally, only sectionally” (62). To object to the removal of slavery, and thus to facilitate its perpetuation, is, for Cooper, to think “nationally.” He does not hesitate to condemn the
broad mass of Republicans (Lincoln very much included) for adhering to the platform on which they had been elected; indeed the Chicago platform for them “became a secular Ten Commandments” (61). Later the Republicans were to be found “arrayed atop the monument of the Chicago platform chanting the shibboleth of ‘no territorial compromise’”(111). So much for fidelity to campaign promises.

At the start of his book Cooper emphasizes the importance of seeing events through the eyes of their participants. But as far as the Republicans are concerned, he fails utterly to achieve this goal. Frequently he finds them emphasizing the need to maintain their party. He notes, quite correctly, that this motive was partly responsible for the refusal to depart from the Chicago platform. Such a departure, many Republicans (including Lincoln) believed, would destroy party unity. What are we to understand by this?

In fact concern for party unity is itself an ambiguous motive. It may, in theory, denote one of two underlying goals. The first is simply to maintain the party regardless of principle: this aim can be summarized as party-rather-than-principle. The second is to maintain the party as a vehicle for principle; this is party-to-promote-principle. Every time Cooper finds a Republican stressing party unity he concludes, without any supporting evidence or argument, that he has found an example of party-rather-than-principle. But for the Republicans themselves, these were invariably instances of party-to-promote-principle. Many, probably most, Republicans believed with Lincoln that their party was indispensable to the struggle against slavery and the Slave Power. This was a plausible view and one that the historian should dismiss only with a good reason. Cooper has found none.

Still more remarkable is Cooper’s sectional partisanship. His heroes are not the most extreme southerners, the fire-eaters, but instead those who worked for compromise or those who called for compromise but did not get it. Thus John J. Crittenden’s proposals, which called on Republicans to repudiate the key plank in the platform on which they had just been elected, represented an “eloquent plea for conciliation” (209) and for the preservation and safeguarding of slavery into the indefinite future. True to his fundamental assumptions (about the needlessness and futility of war) Cooper finds no fault with them on this score.

This is not to say that the Republicans were morally blameless or that they did not make mistakes. Nor is it to deny that Republican actions played a large part in plunging the nation into war. Cooper devotes dozens of pages to an analysis of the reasons for Republicans’ refusal to accept compromise (on the territorial question in particular),
and there can be no doubt that that refusal, together with the actions taken as a result of it, were vital steps on the road to conflict. Thus Lincoln’s decision to send in supplies to Fort Sumter was absolutely central (given the failure of compromise), and Cooper rightly attaches great importance to it. But what of the Confederate decision to open fire, an equally significant stepping stone on the path to war? This consequential move is covered in two pages, and Jefferson Davis, who made that decision, receives no censure for it.

Indeed Cooper’s treatment of Davis and of those who thought and acted like him is extremely generous, in sharp contrast to his view of Lincoln and Davis’s other antislavery antagonists. Since Davis advocated secession with some regret and as a last resort, rather than enthusiastically (the fire-eaters’ approach) he earns praise for being “fundamentally conservative.” (Lincoln meanwhile is condemned for being insufficiently sensitive to the pressures placed on poor Jeff and his ilk! [76].) From this analysis one could all too easily forget that these southerners were quite prepared to break up their nation so that slavery might last into the indefinite future. It is striking that in a book where praise is frequently bestowed and blame frequently allocated this attitude should escape all criticism.

None of this, however, is to argue for an approach that simply stands Cooper’s treatment on its head, that applauds Republicans and censures southerners, that celebrates the war and chastises those who worked for compromise. Once a historian has recognized the need for a healthy dose of agnosticism about the ultimate value of the war, it should then be much easier for her or him to achieve an empathic understanding of all the contending groups and factions, pointing out and seeking to explain the errors they made and showing how their beliefs (and many of those errors) were related to the ideologies to which they subscribed. Cooper’s work is far from achieving this. He is so concerned with allocating blame that he ignores the longer-term structural considerations that propelled the nation toward war both before and during the secession winter. By the time Lincoln’s election came about, one side, with the president-elect at its head, was insisting that slavery be placed on the path to “ultimate extinction” and would prefer war to an abandonment of that principle. The other side was equally insistent that slavery not be given a death sentence (even with a significant stay of execution), and would break up the nation—by force of arms if necessary—rather than surrender that principle. If a compromise solution was possible here, a real compromise that did not involve a capitulation of one side or the other, Cooper, along with every other like-minded scholar, has yet to tell us what it was.
Rachel Shelden’s book *Washington Brotherhood* is also, as she informs us in her opening sentence, “about the coming of the Civil War” (1). The treatment, however, is very different from Cooper’s. Where Cooper discusses the months of the secession crisis, Shelden instead looks at the “Washington fraternity,” the political elites who formed a distinctive community in the nation’s capital. These elites were mainly but not exclusively senators, representatives, and presidents, and Shelden carefully describes the ways in which they communicated, interacted, and socialized in the final two decades of the antebellum Republic. She deals with the familiar issues and events of the sectional conflict in the 1840s and 1850s—the Wilmot Proviso, the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, “Bleeding Kansas,” and “Bleeding Sumner”—and ends with a discussion of the secession crisis.

Shelden presents, in palatable form and from extensive research, lots of detail about social gatherings, dinner parties, living arrangements, and friendships within this community. She takes pains to show that some statesmen formed friendships that cut across party or sectional loyalties and that sometimes seemed to contradict their political faces. Public hostility and private affection sometimes went together. Thus William Seward, for example, the bugbear of proslavery southerners, was nevertheless a favorite with many politicians from below the Mason-Dixon Line and formed a close friendship with Jefferson Davis, despite their diametrically opposed stances on virtually all sectional questions. Shelden finds many other instances of unexpected cordiality and warmth, as well as the more predictable examples of intraparty, interparty, intersectional, and intrasectional animosity.

How important are these facts? While Shelden’s findings are mildly interesting, they do not give rise to the conclusions that she derives from them. Her general claim is that the “social and cultural life” she describes “was a critical part of the way that politicians engaged with the sectional and ideological struggles of the antebellum era” (2). What is meant here by “critical”? Is the claim that the outcome of various crises would have been quite different without this distinctive “social and cultural life”? Shelden does not always spell out her argument as clearly as she might.

In the case of the Compromise of 1850, however, she appears to be explicit. Virtually all scholars acknowledge that there was a real crisis at midcentury and that the success or failure of the Compromise measures was enormously important. Why did compromise prevail? According to Shelden, “while the political and cross-sectional nature of Washington social life was not the only factor in passing
the Compromise of 1850, settlement was likely impossible without it” (94–95).

This is a bold claim: she is telling us that “Washington social life” saved the nation certainly from breakup and possibly from Civil War in 1850. But the claim may rest on a fundamental confusion in the author’s mind. Initially northerners and southerners were unable to agree on a package of proposed legislative acts. But as in almost any process of negotiation or compromise there was enough communication and interaction between the two sides to put together a set of measures that sufficient numbers of legislators either welcomed or at least tolerated. Some of this interaction was indeed necessary to the success of the Compromise of 1850: compromises usually require some engagement with the opposing side, some attempt to understand what the other will and will not accept. But this is not an insight; it is little more than a truism. It in no way demonstrates that the specific characteristics of “Washington social life” that she has described were responsible for the success of the Compromise of 1850.

Instead other factors were the critical ones. How do we know? Because the response to the measures of 1850 was based largely on a pattern of sectional loyalty and party affiliation that long preceded the midcentury crisis and was still discernible after it. Shelden provides no reason to believe that the decisive votes for compromise came as a result of the social arrangements she describes. Instead geographical location was vital; it entailed not merely the obvious division between North and South but a more subtle one that saw the Upper South and the Lower North giving disproportionate support to the Compromise. Party affiliation was also essential in that some groups (southern Whigs and northern Democrats) were the Compromise’s strongest supporters. Finally one must refine these categories further and note that conservative Whigs in the North, for example, were far more likely to support compromise than the more liberal elements within their own ranks and states. When all these factors are taken into account, the alignment of 1850 and the support for, and thus the success of, the Compromise are largely explained. If Washington social life was a key factor, one would expect it to cut across these long-term patterns; Shelden provides, and attempts to provide, no evidence that this occurred. Indeed the more one seeks to emphasize the role of her favorite factor, the more one reduces the patterns described above to coincidence.

Similar problems are in evidence when Shelden considers the events of the secession winter of 1860 and 1861. She argues that the politicos who lived in Washington were somewhat insulated from the rest of the
nation. They were surprised by the speed at which secession progressed. When they found that the crisis was real, many of them sought to persuade the seceding states to return to the Union. From this response she concludes that “Washington’s sociability, therefore, defined both the successes and the failures of federal policy making” (4).

Here the term “defined” is far too strong. Even the word “influenced” would be problematic. As we have already noted, by 1860 the room for compromise was impossibly narrow, given that one side was adamant that slavery must be put on the path toward “ultimate extinction” and the other equally adamant in its opposition to such an outcome. It was this polarization that “defined both the successes and the failures of federal policy making” in 1860 and 1861. The patterns of friendship between politicians at Washington, their living arrangements, the dinner parties, and the other social events they attended were, in reality, of little consequence here.

In a sense therefore, Shelden, here as elsewhere, overreaches. The material she has assembled about Washington social life is of interest. But it cannot support the conclusions she derives from it.