
A Flawed Defense of the South

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When in the Course of Human Events: Arguing the Case for Southern Secession, by Charles Adams. *Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000. xiv + 229 pp. + notes, bibliographical essay, index. \$24.95.*

This work is a spirited polemic whose central aim is to condemn the North's subjugation of the South between 1861 and 1865. Asserting that the Civil War was at its heart a "fiscal conflict," Charles Adams, a libertarian and prominent historian of taxation, seeks to demolish the "Northern interpretation" of the war, which holds that the conflict was a great moral crusade to preserve democracy and rid the nation of slavery. Adams suggests instead that the leaders of the United States Government decided to use force to coerce the Southern states to remain in the Union because they believed that secession would drain the federal treasury of a valuable source of revenue. At bottom, Adams contends, it was avarice and not altruism that motivated the Lincoln Ad-

ministration to take up arms against the rebellious states.

A significant portion of the national government's revenues, Adams points out, was derived from taxes on imported goods, and most of these were shipped to the South through Southern ports, such as Charleston. That city's harbor was home to Fort Sumter, hardly the "useless fort" often depicted by historians, but rather a key military installation, controlling the flow of commerce into the city. If Fort Sumter and other such forts had fallen into Southern hands, the United States would have been forced to try to collect revenues off the coast through an extensive and expensive blockade. In addition, it became clear that, if it controlled its own ports, the Confederacy would enact

a low tariff, thereby channeling foreign goods away from the North and undercutting Northern industry. Northern businessmen who initially favored letting the South go in peace, Adams contends, quickly changed their minds when these economic implications of Southern independence became clear.

As evidence for his thesis, Adams relies largely on the opinions of the protagonists in the conflict. Lincoln himself is alleged to have asked, when faced with the secession of the South, “What then will become of my tariff?” and in his first inaugural address he declared that he would collect “the duties and impost” as mandated by law (27, 22). Indeed, Lincoln is the central villain of this story; the author depicts him as a mentally unbalanced, power-hungry tyrant bent on filling the federal coffers at the price of the South’s independence and at the expense of the freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution. In addition to Lincoln’s own words, Adams also cites those of Northern editorial writers, who pointed out the economic dangers to the North posed by secession. Three chapters are devoted to British reaction to the conflict, and Adams cites at length the views of the great Charles Dickens, who held that “the love of money is the root of this as of many other evils” (91).

In placing economics at the heart of the conflict, Adams is eager to dismiss slavery as a factor in the coming of the war. Indeed, he claims that the protection of slavery—though often cited by Southerners as justifi-

cation for secession—was a counterfeit issue, mere “political cant” designed to rally Southerners more effectively than economic issues would accomplish (4). The peculiar institution, Adams argues, was in fact much more secure while the South remained in the Union, for the Constitution, the Supreme Court, and Lincoln’s own words guaranteed its protection. “There is nothing the South could have asked for the protection of slavery that wouldn’t have been gladly provided,” Adams avers, “just as long as the South remained in the Union” (4). But this was hardly the case, as many Northern states, for example, passed personal liberty laws in an attempt to undermine the efficaciousness of the federal fugitive slave law. Even if one concedes that in reality “slavery simply was not in jeopardy” (5), it is difficult to dismiss *in toto* the sundry and protracted cries of concern for slavery raised by so many Southerners during the antebellum period. But for Adams to admit that many Southerners believed the institution to be in danger on the eve of the war would damage his claim that the issue was irrelevant.

For Adams it is imperative that slavery be a spurious issue in the coming of the Civil War, for he apparently assumes that if slavery played any genuine role in the onset of the conflict, then the war could be justified on moral grounds—and this is something Adams cannot allow. This *non sequitur* leads him to reject all but economic motivations in the North’s decision to use force to co-

erces the South, and by so doing, Adams believes that he has made an unassailable moral argument condemning the North's aggression as an act of greed. But he fails to see that admitting the importance of slavery in the conflict does not necessarily imply that the North's attempt to keep the South in the Union was morally defensible. And Adams's underlying assumption—that a war fought on economic grounds, even when national survival is at stake, can never be morally justified—is certainly open to debate. In fact, it is possible to accept his economic interpretation of the war and yet reject his conclusions regarding the morality of the conflict.

Nevertheless, Adams makes a convincing moral case against the North in several areas. He persuasively argues that Lincoln and the leading Northern military commanders, such as William Tecumseh Sherman and Philip Sheridan, were guilty of war crimes because of their conscious decision to make total war against Southern property and civilians. Adams also points out that because of its refusal to exchange prisoners, the Lincoln Administration shares much of the responsibility for the horrors of Andersonville Prison. And perhaps Adams's best chapter is that in which he deals with the United States Government's attempt to bring Jefferson Davis to trial, an effort that was eventually aborted when it became clear that Davis and the South had the Constitution on their side and would win the case.

But in constructing his indictment

against the North, Adams turns a blind eye to some of the South's sins. Most glaring is his failure to see that the South was guilty of the central charge that he brings against the North: Southerners, by enslaving blacks, also denied self-determination to a people through the use of force. In addition, though he makes a convincing case that Lincoln violated the civil liberties of American citizens who opposed the war, Adams fails to point out that Southern states in the antebellum period denied rights not only to slaves and to free blacks but also to whites who advocated abolition; for example, the Virginia legislature passed a law in 1836 that made advocating abolition a felony.

As an outspoken apologist for the South, Adams appears at first to be the prototypical angry, unreconstructed right-winger and thus easily dismissed as a fanatic. Indeed, his disturbingly sympathetic portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan adds credence to such a view. For example, Adams writes paternalistically that the KKK's intimidation of blacks had unintended benefits, for it "caused many blacks to turn away from lawlessness, and many of the idle ones returned to the fields in which they had once worked" (152). But Adams reveals a liberal bent in his advocacy of pacifism; he brands the atomic bombing of Japan as immoral and bemoans the United States Government's "genocidal" war against the American Indians. And the heavy economic emphasis of his central proposition is reminiscent of that of

Marxism; in fact, Adams cites not only the progressive historians Charles and Mary Beard but also Karl Marx himself in support of his thesis (82, 79).

More disconcerting than his eclectic political philosophy is Adams's conversational writing style and numerous grammatical liberties. For example, Adams asserts that during the Civil War "democracy in America was on the line" (72). Phrases such as "after secession got rolling" pepper his writing and become tiresome (214). There is also much repetition of ideas and even duplication of lengthy quotations. Another annoyance is his gratuitous editorializing. "Gone is the government," Adams superfluously opines, "that is 'cheap and free from debt,' nor are the 'taxes . . . light.' But to this editor, those were the keys to America's greatness" (71-72). Citation is also a problem, as many broad statements are made without documentation and even a few quotations are set forth without attribution; for instance, an unnamed biographer of Charles Dickens is quoted on page 86 as is an unidentified "Northern historian" on page 217.

More egregiously, in his zeal to condemn the North, Adams makes several questionable claims. Though his indictment of the United States Government's violation of civil liberties is convincing, was Lincoln truly the moral equivalent of Vladimir Lenin, as Adams charges (2)? He also blithely asserts that "slavery was doomed" in the United States in the nineteenth century, implying that it

would have died a natural death even if the war had not brought a sudden end to it (129). This conclusion may derive from Adams's wish to prove that the North's coercion of the South had no beneficial consequences, but the idea that slavery was unprofitable is a controversial claim and has been challenged by several historians, most notably, Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman. More tenuous is Adams's sweeping and unsubstantiated claim that "no slave was human rubbish like the disabled or elderly workers in the free societies of that day" (86). And though it was true that the North was more industrialized than the South, Adams's assertion that "the South hardly had the ability to manufacture a frying pan" (216) is utterly ridiculous. Under the direction of Josiah Gorgas, the Chief of Confederate Ordnance, the Confederacy constructed dozens of arsenals and foundries that produced vast quantities of war materiel for the Southern cause.

Adams's acceptance of the idea of a conflict between an industrial North and an agrarian South is a logical consequence of his economic theory of the war, which follows the example of Charles and Mary Beard, who advanced their interpretation in the 1920s. More recently, several historians, particularly those of the neo-Confederate school, such as Frank L. Owsley and Ludwell H. Johnson, have also emphasized financial factors in the North's desire to prosecute the war. These historians have echoed the arguments of

contemporary Southerners such as John C. Calhoun and Jefferson Davis, who made similar economic arguments against the North. Clearly then, Adams's thesis is not new, but it is perhaps the most forceful articulation of the economic argument. Still, though never less than entertaining and thought-provoking, this work is flawed because of its scanty

documentation and the author's tenuous conclusions, and, as a consequence, it ultimately fails to offer a serious challenge to the school of interpretation—embodied in the writings of such historians as James G. Randall and Kenneth Stampp—that emphasizes slavery as the primary cause of the Civil War.