

FROM THE NEW YORK TIMES OPINIONATOR

FEBRUARY 5, 2011, 7:00 PM

The Strange Victory of the Palmetto State

By *MANISHA SINHA*

Disunion follows the Civil War as it unfolded.

Less than two months separated South Carolina's decision to secede from the United States and the creation of a new country, the Confederate States of America. In that time six other states, comprising the entire Deep South — Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana and Texas — had followed.

While each state had its share of secessionist fire-eaters, observers on all sides laid the blame firmly at the feet of the Palmetto State. Reverend R.J. Breckinridge of Kentucky, the pro-Union uncle of the southern rights Democratic candidate in the 1860 presidential elections, blamed secession fever on “the chronic hatred of South Carolina to the national Union.” Edmund Ruffin, an ardent Virginia secessionist, argued that it was natural for South Carolina to lead the secession movement because “the people of S.Ca. have been schooled and in training for 30 years in their political doctrines.” Republican party newspapers like the New York Times went so far as to call the seceded Lower South states the “Calhoun states” of America.

Though actual secession occurred quickly, South Carolinian leaders had indeed been pushing the idea for decades, without success. Criticized widely for its political distemper throughout the antebellum period, South Carolina remained immune to the charms of Jacksonian democracy and guided by the stern proslavery constitutional logic of John C. Calhoun. The state had gone to the brink in the 1830s, but the rest of the South held back; regional unity proved too thin to justify swift action. That changed over the next three decades, though — and in 1861, after nearly 30 years of resisting the siren call of secession from South Carolina, the cotton states followed its lead. What had changed?

Above all was a new sense of regional unity. When South Carolina seceded, emissaries from Alabama and Mississippi were on hand to commend the decision. There was also an element of strategy: immediately after it seceded, South Carolina sent secession commissioners to the other Lower South states, urging disunion. It cleverly assigned fire-eating secessionists like Leonidas W. Spratt, father of the southern movement to reopen the

African slave trade; A.P. Calhoun, the son of John C. Calhoun; and Milledge Luke Bonham, later replaced by fellow Congressman Armistead Burt, to the more radicalized states of Florida, Alabama and Mississippi. But it sent the more moderate, Democratic politicians James L. Orr and John L. Manning to Georgia and Louisiana, respectively, where Unionist sentiment still ran high. Many of these men had either lived in the states they were sent to or like, Manning and Calhoun, owned plantations there.

The Carolinian commissioners urged the speedy creation of a southern nation and conveyed a united message in their speeches to the secession conventions of the cotton states. The North and the Republicans stood for “the social principle that equality is the right of man,” according to Spratt, but the slave South embodied the “social principle that equality is not the right of man, but the right of equals only.” Similarly, John McQueen, the state’s commissioner to Texas, argued that the “policy” of the “Black Republicans” was “the elevation of our own slaves to an equality with ourselves and our children.”

As in South Carolina, most of these conventions were elected with large secessionist majorities. Only in Texas was the decision to secede ratified post facto in a statewide referendum. Following South Carolina’s prompting, representatives of the seceded states met in Montgomery, Ala. on Feb. 4, and they adopted a provisional constitution that explicitly recognized racial slavery on Feb. 8.

Another factor contributing to regional unity under South Carolina’s leadership was the changing nature of North-South politics. A faction of South Carolinian planter-politicians had been crying secession at least since the Nullification Crisis of 1828 to 1832. Under Calhoun’s political tutelage, they argued that tariff laws formed a precedent for the federal government to interfere with the South’s “domestick institution” of slavery, and threatened to leave the Union unless they were allowed to “nullify” federal laws within the state.

But the rest of the South wasn’t convinced the Union was a bad deal for the region. After all, the long national ascendance of Virginia’s revolutionary dynasty of Washington, Jefferson, Madison and Monroe, as well as the resounding victory of Tennessee’s Andrew Jackson in the 1828 presidential election, showed the South could exert significant power over national affairs. Moreover, Jackson’s presence in the White House during the

Nullification Crisis pulled many Southern states into the Unionist orbit and away from South Carolina.

Change was already afoot, however. With the rise of the abolition movement in the 1830s and the sectional controversy over the expansion of slavery in the aftermath of the Mexican War, South Carolinians began to appear more in the garb of far-seeing prophets than fringe radicals to proslavery advocates in the rest of the region.

During the debates over the Compromise of 1850, a fairly strong secession movement arose not just in South Carolina but also in Alabama, Mississippi and Georgia. Invoking and simultaneously subverting Patrick Henry's famous revolutionary slogan, the South Carolinian Edward Bryan proclaimed, "Give us slavery or give us death!" But a new split emerged, one between single-state secessionists, who believed in Calhoun's notion of absolute sovereignty that would allow any individual state to secede from the Union, and cooperationists, who argued that the South should secede as a whole. The latter won in 1850 and secession talk abated; 10 years later, the former won the day.

Why the flip? The Lower South states, with their large slave and slaveholding populations, started resembling South Carolina in more ways than one during the 1850s: with the demise of the Whig Party, they became one-party states and breeding grounds for Southern extremism. Slaveholders in those states became more receptive to radical ideas, like the Carolina-led movement to reopen the African slave trade. And they agreed with the contention by South Carolina's leaders that the opposition by newly formed Republican Party to the extension of slavery was the first step towards general emancipation.

South Carolina not only inspired its fellow Lower South states to follow suit, but those states in turn worked on getting the Upper South to fall in line. Mississippi and Alabama dispatched emissaries to North Carolina, Maryland, Kentucky and Missouri urging secession, though they took particular aim at Virginia. On Feb. 13, three commissioners from South Carolina, Georgia and Mississippi arrived simultaneously in that state. South Carolina's John S. Preston, who had earlier argued, "Slavery is our King — Slavery is our Truth — Slavery is our Divine Right," now told Virginians that the election of Lincoln meant the "annihilation" of Southern whites. But what had worked elsewhere failed here, and Virginians voted to stay within the Union.

But only for the moment. Indeed, it was hardly a coincidence that a military showdown on Carolinian soil precipitated the secession of four Upper South states. South Carolina had already fired the first shot of the Civil War In January 1861, when artillery gunners opened fire on the ship Star of the West, sent to reinforce federal forces marooned at Fort Sumter, forcing it to turn back. When Confederate forces commenced bombardment of the fort on April 12, 1861, the Upper South had to choose sides. Virginia, Tennessee, Arkansas and North Carolina rapidly seceded.

Despite their central role in fomenting secession, South Carolinian politicians did not dominate the Confederate government; in fact, Virginia, though it entered the Confederacy late, soon became home to its capital. Nevertheless, the Palmetto State had fulfilled the historical mission it had been rehearsing for years. As the unionist Reverend James W. Hunnicutt said of his native state, “The *honor, the imperishable glory, of secession and inaugurating Civil War* was reserved for South Carolina!”

*Manisha Sinha is an associate professor of Afro-American studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and the author of “**The Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina.**” She is writing a history of abolition.*