

CRUCIBLE OF
THE CIVIL
WAR



Virginia
from Secession
to Commemoration

Edited by Edward L. Ayers, Gary W. Gallagher,
and Andrew J. Torget

University of Virginia Press • *Charlottesville and London*

University of Virginia Press

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

First published 2006

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Crucible of the Civil War : Virginia from secession to commemoration / edited by Edward L. Ayers, Gary W. Gallagher, and Andrew J. Torget.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-8139-2552-3 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Virginia—History—Civil War, 1861–1865. 2. Virginia—History—Civil War, 1861–1865—Social aspects. 3. Secession—Virginia. 4. Group identity—Virginia—History—19th century. 5. Confederate States of America—Historiography. 6. Slavery—Virginia—History—19th century. 7. Virginia—Race relations—Political aspects—History—19th century. 8. Reconstruction (U.S. history, 1865–1877)—Virginia. 9. Memory—Social aspects—Virginia. 10. United States—History—Civil War, 1861–1865—Social aspects. I. Ayers, Edward L., 1953– II. Gallagher, Gary W. III. Torget, Andrew J., 1978–

E581.C78 2006

975.5'03—dc22

2006002243

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Unions of Slavery

Slavery, Politics, and Secession in the Valley of Virginia



Andrew J. Torget

Abraham Lincoln took great care in crafting his message to the special session of Congress on July 4, 1861. More than simply recounting the momentous events that had occurred since his inauguration, Lincoln wanted to explain why the nation's legislature had "convened on an extraordinary occasion." Lincoln blamed the secession crisis on a minority of Southerners who had overtaken their respective state governments, reiterating his position that the Union was older than the states and indissoluble. Rebels unsatisfied with a fair election, he insisted, had created the crisis and purposefully forced the Federal government into a war. "The assault upon, and reduction of, Fort Sumter, was, in no sense," Lincoln argued, "a matter of self defence on the part of the assailants." A minority of Southerners bent on secession, he believed, had forced the clash at Fort Sumter and pushed Southern Unionists into rebellion. Yet as he laid out the first draft of the war's history, Lincoln did not dwell on the events in South Carolina. "The course taken in Virginia was the most remarkable," he asserted, "perhaps the most important."¹

Few historians have quarreled with Lincoln's assertion of Virginia's central importance in the secession crisis. As the largest slaveowning state in the American South, as well as its most populous and industrial, Virginia was pivotal to the allegiance of Upper South states during the crisis. Without Virginia in the Union, with her strategic resources and symbolic

value, Unionists in Tennessee and North Carolina had little hope of keeping their states allied to the North. The border region would determine how secession redefined the country, and Virginia was the keystone of border state allegiance. Lincoln, and historians since, understood that the Old Dominion's decision on the question of secession would fundamentally shape the course of the coming civil war.

Historians of Virginia's secession, however, seem to have agreed on little else. Virginia, with the rest of the Border South, did not follow the lead of South Carolina and the Lower South states in leaving the Union immediately upon Lincoln's election in November 1860, resisting secession until April 1861. The Old Dominion's delay in joining the Confederacy has prompted some to assert that slavery was less important to Virginians by 1860 than it had been in years past. Arguing that "how deeply slavery had penetrated a given region" was the best indicator of how that region would react during the secession crisis, these historians claim that Virginia proved reluctant to secede because of the decreasing percentage of slaves in the state.² Virginia resisted secession, they contend, because Virginians were less committed to defending slavery than Lower South states. While these historians are correct to concentrate on the crucial role slavery played in the crisis, it nevertheless seems unlikely that residents of the state with the largest number of slaves and slaveholders in 1860 believed they had little stake in the future of the institution.

Other historians have sought to explain Virginia's resistance to secession in terms of the political system. Unlike states in the Lower South, they contend, the robust operation of party politics in the Upper South left Virginians with faith that the checks and balances of the American political system would protect them from the dangers of a Republican presidency, until the clash at Fort Sumter convinced them otherwise. While the political system had collapsed in the Lower South by the time of Lincoln's election, they assert, it was the continued strength of two-party politics, the very resilience of old party distinctions in the Upper South, that explained Virginia's delay in secession.³ These historians are right to focus their attention on the role that politics played in Virginia's decisions on secession. They underestimate, however, the role that slavery played in the crisis, as well as the power of the institution to shape and reshape local politics.

At the heart of these disputes among historians are disagreements over the respective roles that slavery and politics played in the secession of Virginia. Newspapers, as the political centers of nineteenth-century communities, offer the best places to examine slavery's role in shaping the political

debates of Virginians during the secession crisis. As the recognized voices of local political parties and interests, newspapers document most clearly the changing political tones and concerns that swirled within Virginia's counties during the secession crisis. The shifts in county political sentiments that they illuminate, moreover, are borne out by the returns from the November 1860 election, the February 1861 election for delegates to the Virginia state convention, and the enthusiasm for secession expressed by early April 1861. Within the pages of their local newspapers, Virginians struggled with one another over the place of slavery in the commonwealth and the wisdom of remaining in the Union with Abraham Lincoln.

Newspaper accounts and editorials emanating from the Valley of Virginia during the secession crisis paint a different portrait of secession-era Virginia than most historians have suggested. Commonly known as the Shenandoah Valley, the region sat in the heart of the Old Dominion, cradled on either side by the Blue Ridge and Allegheny mountains. The Valley was a twenty-mile-wide swath of rich farmlands and mineral resources, making its lands some of the most prosperous and profitable in the nation. The Valley itself stretched as far north as Vermont, but its heart in Virginia lay in the center of the state, in the three contiguous counties of Rockingham, Augusta, and Rockbridge.⁴ "In this glorious 'Old Augusta,' in noble Rockbridge, and in Union-loving Rockingham," crowed one Valley newspaper, people were united by similar economies, a rich history, and the promise of a profitable future.⁵

The Valley found itself at the center of the secession crisis. Lincoln's election had divided Virginians into three groups: unconditional Unionists, who believed in preserving the Federal Union above all else; ardent secessionists, who saw Lincoln's election as a harbinger of the end of Virginia slavery; and conditional Unionists, who remained wary of Lincoln's Republicans while also fearful of what secession could bring. Comprising the majority of Virginia's voters, conditional Unionists held the balance of power during the crisis. Without them neither the Unionists nor the secessionists could succeed. Although present in all areas of Virginia, conditional Unionists found particular strength in the Shenandoah Valley, and in their hands rested Virginia's pivotal decision.

The secession crisis struck Rockingham, Augusta, and Rockbridge counties hard. The crisis atmosphere quickly collapsed the older, long-standing divisions that had marked antebellum politics in the counties, as local Whigs and Democrats abandoned traditional two-party politics and temporarily shifted to a new kind of politics—one centered on protecting their common interest in Virginia slavery from outside threats.

Rather than battling one another, local politicians and newspapers in the counties began to show remarkable uniformity in their politics and interests during the secession crisis. By the time of the February 1861 election of delegates to the Virginia secession convention, Rockingham, Augusta, and Rockbridge had entirely abandoned their old political ways, uniting around a new politics grounded in the defense of Virginia slavery.

Before the crisis began, however, the three counties had been anything but united in political matters. Rockingham, the northernmost of the three, had been a citadel for the Democratic Party in nearly every election since Andrew Jackson gained the White House in 1828. Agriculture dominated the county's economy, and its farmers embraced the Democratic ticket. Harrisonburg, the county's only sizable town, proved a party stronghold and helped make Rockingham one of the most staunchly Democratic counties in the entire state. Democrat James Buchanan had swept the county in the 1856 presidential election with an overwhelming 84 percent of the vote. In Virginia's 1859 gubernatorial election, Democrat John Letcher took a similarly lopsided 77 percent of the county's votes, with his American Party opponent barely registering among voters.⁶ The Democratic Party dominated Rockingham's politics.

Although it shared Rockingham's southern border, Augusta County did not share in its political thinking. Augusta had a more urban population, centered around the growing and bustling county seat of Staunton, with smaller towns and villages scattered throughout the countryside. While Buchanan had easily taken almost every vote in Democratic Rockingham, he had been soundly defeated in Augusta. Augusta had always been a strong Whig county, and the American Party candidate Millard Fillmore easily won the county's 1856 presidential contest over Buchanan with 56 percent of the vote. After the national dissolution of their party, ex-Whigs continued to oppose Democrats in Augusta County elections and, unlike in Rockingham, Democrat John Letcher lost the county in his 1859 bid for the Virginia governorship. A full 60 percent of Augusta voters supported the Opposition candidate over Letcher and, though the national Whig Party itself had faltered, the anti-Democratic voting patterns of Augusta remained steady.

Rockbridge, to the immediate south of Augusta, was a political amalgam of the other two counties. Lexington was its only real town, but villages dotted the county's landscape. Rockbridge often vacillated between Democratic and Whig candidates, usually leaning toward the Whig Party. The county endorsed Buchanan in the 1856 election by a margin of only 88 votes out of more than 2,000 cast. In the 1859 contest for governor, the

county gave the American Party candidate a razor-thin 22-vote victory over Democrat John Letcher out of 2,438 votes recorded. Letcher was a resident of Rockbridge, but even that proved insufficient to marshal any sort of clear majority out of Rockbridge's mixed voting patterns. While Rockingham remained a Democratic stronghold, and Augusta staunchly Whig, Rockbridge straddled the middle ground between the two as a moderately Whig county.

True to old patterns, the 1860 presidential election began with partisan bickering and fighting within all three counties. Rockingham once again put its full faith in the Democratic Party. The county's two newspapers, each published out of Harrisonburg, endorsed Stephen A. Douglas as their choice for president. Augusta found itself split in its loyalties. No clear "Opposition" candidate had emerged for the 1860 contest and the county's newspapers divided their loyalties between the Democrat Douglas and the Constitutional Union candidate John Bell. Bell was as close to an anti-Democratic candidate as Augusta could find, and most in the county stood behind his candidacy. Rockbridge experienced a split similar to Augusta's: one of the county's newspapers endorsed Douglas, while the other touted Bell as the county's best choice for president. In alliance with their past Whiggish tendencies, Rockbridge voters tended to favor Bell over Douglas.

As summer faded into fall, however, the political prospects for both Stephen Douglas and John Bell appeared bleak. Abraham Lincoln's campaign, running against the hopelessly fractured Democratic Party, seemed poised to capture most of the North and thereby the presidency. Hamstrung by the Southern Democrat John Breckinridge's efforts in the South, Douglas remained unable to attract the national support necessary to defeat Lincoln. Bell's campaign had proven itself unable to establish any meaningful following beyond the border states and seemed to be siphoning votes away from the Democratic candidates rather than Lincoln. The fractured opposition appeared likely to guarantee Lincoln's election.

By October 1860, most county newspapers in the Valley conceded that Lincoln's election appeared almost certain. "The elections which have recently taken place in the Northern States, have resulted disastrously to the Democratic party, and indicate the election of a Black Republican President on the 6th of November," reported a paper from Rockingham. Some in the Valley prayed that either Bell or Douglas could still muster a miracle defeat of Lincoln, or that somehow the political splintering of the country would force the election into the Southern-controlled U.S. House of Representatives. County newspapers promoted their candidates right

up to Election Day. But hope dimmed as November neared, and every Valley editor acknowledged the "almost certainty of defeat."⁷

With Lincoln's victory seemingly unavoidable, Valley editors began writing editorials for purposes other than electing Stephen Douglas or John Bell president. Redirecting their efforts at producing majorities in their counties for Unionism over sectionalism, the local newspapers began to focus their political energies on preventing the secession of Virginia. The editors continued to champion either Stephen Douglas or John Bell, but rarely denigrated the other candidate. Rather, Rockingham, Augusta, and Rockbridge newspapers hurled their political barbs almost exclusively against John Breckinridge, whose supporters advocated the secession of slave states should Lincoln win the presidency. If they were going to lose the presidency to Lincoln, the local newspapers hoped Election Day would produce enough Union votes in Virginia to preempt secession in the state and send a warning to the Lower South about Virginia's Unionist intents.

The Southern sectional appeal of Breckinridge, the newspapers argued, was even more sinister than the Republicans' attempt to win without the South. There was nothing overtly unconstitutional about Lincoln's probable election, yet the Breckinridge campaign proposed to sunder the Union nevertheless. "To break up the Government under these circumstances, simply because Lincoln should be elected, would be adding madness to treason.—The danger is in the Cotton States, and not in the North," argued Augusta's *Spectator*. Secession hardly seemed like a safeguard to people living along the border with the North, and Valley residents feared what a war would produce. The prospect of a Republican president was ominous, but no more so than the realization that the "aim of the leaders of the Breckinridge movement in the South is Revolution . . . and involving the country in bloody war."⁸

One newspaper spelled out people's fears with unusual clarity. "Be not deceived by this insane cry" from the Breckinridge campaign, Rockingham's *Valley Democrat* urged. "Slavery institutions are in no peril. Congress cannot force or reject slavery against the will of the people."⁹ Indeed, people in Rockingham County knew they could hardly afford threats to Virginia slavery. At the time of the election, slaves made up 10 percent of the county's population.¹⁰ Slavery was integral to Rockingham's agricultural economy, and farmers in the county had invested nearly \$3 million in the slaves who made their farms and fields so profitable.¹¹ Augusta and Rockbridge held similar stakes in the institution. With twice the slave population of Rockingham, Augusta's farmers had almost \$7 million invested in their enslaved laborers. Rockbridge was the smallest of the three

counties, but boasted the highest percentage of slaves per capita of all three. Slaves made up 23 percent of the county's population and represented an investment of nearly \$5 million.

Between them, Rockingham, Augusta, and Rockbridge counties had more than \$14 million invested in their collective slave workforce, and profitably managed more than \$26 million worth of developed farmlands. Rockingham was more rural, Augusta more urban, and Rockbridge more industrial, but the three counties shared the same economic foundation. Agriculture based in slavery was the mainstay of each, and a civil war could destroy it all.

Valley editors exhorted people to vote against Breckinridge sectionalism. "A heavy majority cast for Bell and Douglas over Breckinridge," argued one Valley newspaper, would demonstrate that the state could not easily be dislodged from the American Union. Local politicians scrambled to ward off Virginia's secession before it could begin, and Rockingham's *Valley Democrat* declared the election "a contest between . . . Union and Disunion." Nothing would so surely destroy Virginia slavery, they believed, as jettisoning the Constitutional protections of the institution and enveloping the country in a bloody civil war. In the last days before the election, the Rockbridge *Valley Star* urged its readers, "Never, never let it be said that the Bolters had ever a resting place among us. We want a majority that will silence forever the cry of Disunion."¹²

Far more than a majority of voters turned out on Election Day. Despite Lincoln's almost certain victory, Democratic Rockingham saw nearly two-thirds of its voters record their voices in the contest. True to the predictions of the two county newspapers, Stephen Douglas won handily. The final count gave Douglas 1,354 votes, followed by a strong showing for Bell with 883 votes, and 676 for Breckinridge.¹³ As expected, Rockingham produced a solid Democratic victory for Douglas. Yet the strength of the non-Democratic candidate John Bell over Breckinridge signaled an important shift in the county's politics. Despite Rockingham's historical antipathy to any non-Democrat, the Unionist appeal of Bell now held more weight for county voters than Breckinridge's party affiliation as a Democrat. The combined votes for Douglas and Bell demonstrated that almost 78 percent of the county voted against sectional candidates. Rockingham still endorsed a Democratic candidate, but voters' interest in preserving the Union allowed John Bell to best the other Democrat on the ballot.

Voting against sectionalism required no change in Augusta's voting patterns. About three-quarters of the eligible white men of Augusta made their way to the polls on Election Day and registered their interests

overwhelmingly with Bell. Bell garnered 2,553 votes to the 1,094 cast for Douglas, and a mere 28 recorded for Breckinridge. The two newspapers of the county had split their support between Bell and Douglas, but Bell's powerful victory demonstrated that voters in Augusta remained true to their past Whig voting patterns. Moreover, those in the county who voted Democratic overwhelmingly chose Douglas over Breckinridge, and the Bell and Douglas campaigns accounted for fully 95 percent of Augusta votes.

The results in Rockbridge mirrored those in Augusta. There was no razor-thin victory in the historically undecided county; three-fourths of Rockbridge's eligible voters gave Bell a dominating margin of victory similar to Augusta's. Overall, Bell had taken 1,231 votes in the county, with Douglas drawing 641 and Breckinridge attracting only a paltry 361. Though the two Rockbridge papers had split their support between Bell and Douglas, the county's tradition of moderate-Whig voting gave Bell the victory. Rockbridge's *Lexington Gazette* reveled in the news, printing the Bell and Douglas returns for the county under the banner: "Union majority."¹⁴

When "the smoke and dust sufficiently cleared away," the Valley learned that Abraham Lincoln had been elected president.¹⁵ John Bell had won Virginia and only two other states, Tennessee and Kentucky, both of which were facing the same difficult situation as the Old Dominion. Despite his relative strength in the Valley, Stephen Douglas had made a poor showing both in Virginia and across the nation. Rockingham was one of only four counties in Virginia that Douglas won, and nationally he had only taken Missouri outright, splitting New Jersey with Lincoln. Worse, John Breckinridge had swept the Lower South and demonstrated considerable strength even in Virginia.¹⁶ With a Republican about to become the nation's president and Breckinridge's supporters threatening immediate secession, Valley residents braced for the coming storm. "We are upon the heels of a crisis," cried Rockbridge's *Valley Star*, as many in the Valley felt trapped between unstable extremism to both their north and south.¹⁷

In the immediate aftermath of Lincoln's election, political leaders in the Valley preached calm. "Let the true and patriotic people of Virginia . . . patiently and dignifiedly await the development of events," counseled Augusta's *Vindicator*. As unsettling as Lincoln's election was, editors urged the counties' citizens to retain composure in the wake of his election. "The election of Abraham Lincoln is a calamity," acknowledged a Rockingham paper, but "it is the duty of all good citizens to submit to an election fairly conducted under the forms of the Constitution." No laws had been bro-

ken; and while repugnant, Lincoln's election was still constitutional. Until the Republicans committed an overt breach of the law, most in the counties agreed, "We can well afford to wait."¹⁸

People in the Valley took consolation in the fact that the national elections had not brought total victory to the Republicans. Democrats sympathetic to the South still held the sway of power in Congress and would be able to prevent the new Republican president from meddling with slavery. "They have the Executive, but no other branch of the Government, and will, consequently, be impotent for mischief . . . however much disposed they may be to do so," an Augusta newspaper reassured its readers. "We have the Senate, the House of Representatives and the Supreme Court in our favor, either one of which would of itself be a sufficient protection of our rights."¹⁹ It would be impossible for the Republicans to attack Southern institutions with two-thirds of the Federal government under Southern control.

"The danger is in secession," warned the *Spectator*. Only if the Lower South forced a political fight with the Republicans, agreed the Valley newspapers, would Virginia stand in jeopardy. "If several of the Southern States secede, they will leave us in a minority in Congress, where we now have a safe majority," warned the Augusta newspaper. The possible secession of South Carolina, and any number of other Lower South states who chose to follow her out of the Union, would immediately dissolve the political safeguards that currently protected Virginia from overbearing Republican legislation. Many in the Valley feared that South Carolina and her cohorts intended to use that leverage to force Virginia to join the Lower South in secession. "They think that if they secede and leave us at the mercy of a Black Republican majority in Congress, that we will secede likewise," grumbled the *Spectator*. "This is the way in which they expect to drag us into a like destiny with them."²⁰

Despite their shared stake in slavery, the people of the Valley saw fundamental differences between their own economic interests and those of the Lower South. "Cotton is not king in the border States" explained Rockingham's *Valley Democrat*. "Wheat, corn, tobacco, hemp, cattle &c., are the monarchs here, and demand to be consulted before they are precipitated into revolution." Even their interests in slavery differed markedly. Geographically isolated from the North, the Lower South states had little reason to fear that secession would imperil their investment in slavery. If Virginia seceded, however, there would be no way for the state to recover slaves who slipped into the North; the proximity of freedom would spark a mass exodus among the enslaved. "The negro property of the border

States will be worthless" if Virginia were to secede, warned one Valley paper; "every facility will be afforded the negro to escape."²¹

While politics remained at the center of Valley life in the first months after Lincoln's election, parties and elections carried a different tenor than in years past. For the first time in decades, the newspapers of Rockingham, Augusta, and Rockbridge spoke with a single voice. Democrats and ex-Whigs in the counties found themselves preoccupied with Virginia's particular geo-political interests in the crisis, temporarily ignoring what had previously divided them. Partisan squabbling hardly seemed important to Virginians facing the possible dissolution of their nation. "From the beginning of this movement," remarked the *Lexington Gazette*, "there has been a very general disposition to ignore party differences and to act as one people."²² Local politics were no longer about particular parties for voters in the Valley, but about their common cause in defending Virginia slavery.

The pace of the new Valley politics did not slow in the aftermath of the 1860 election. Citizens in each of the counties held Union meetings throughout November and December to decide how best to defuse the threat of secession to Virginia. "The Court House was literally packed" one early December day in Rockbridge as "some gentlemen of Lexington" assembled "to discuss the affairs of the nation." As at most Union meetings throughout the Valley, men stood to make speeches and argued over tactics, but nearly all agreed that their energies were "for saving the Union."²³ Passing resolutions in support of the Union, Valley residents hoped to save Virginia from secession.

Most of the Union meetings determined that the practical solution to the current crisis would be "a Convention of all the States." Sectionalism, arising from both the North and South, had caused the crisis. A sectional convention, such as the Southern convention proposed by the Lower South, would do nothing to alleviate the problem. "The more rational and statesmanlike policy of a *National* Convention," Augusta's *Vindicator* argued, was the best means for defusing the explosive situation.²⁴ The Rockbridge *Valley Star* threw its support behind the call of Virginia governor John Letcher for a national convention. Rockingham and Augusta newspapers quickly voiced their agreement. If all the states could compromise together, perhaps disunion and civil war could be averted.

In the meantime, South Carolina edged closer toward secession. Since the election, residents of the Valley had followed with rapt attention as the Palmetto State put the machinery of secession into motion. Daily telegrams were reprinted as they arrived in the Valley newspapers, detailing South Carolina's convening of a state convention. While South Carolina

held its own convention, several Lower South states proposed holding a convention of all slaveholding states, hoping to present a unified front to the incoming Republican administration. Citizens in the Valley, however, soundly rejected such proposals as a thinly veiled effort to force Virginia and the border states into "the glittering delusion of a Southern Confederacy."²⁵ For the Valley, joining a Southern Confederacy would be the first step toward their own ruin.

South Carolina's secession, however, changed the political calculus of the Valley. "ONE STAR LESS!" ran the headline in one Valley newspaper when word reached Virginia in late December that the long-anticipated event had finally arrived.²⁶ South Carolina's exit from the Union surprised no one, but it forced the Valley to face a gritty new reality. With one state already gone, and the rest of the cotton South preparing to follow, the Valley counties realized that Virginia could no longer count on Southern strength in Congress to check the anti-Southern whims of a Republican president. Every seceding state that followed South Carolina's lead left Virginia more at the mercy of the incoming Republican administration. Democrats in the Valley, moreover, now had to abandon any hope that a reunited national party base could remove the Republicans from power in 1864. The political safeguards that made a Republican presidency bearable were being dismantled one Southern state at a time.

As the crisis dragged into 1861, reports poured in over the telegraph wires of states that had either left the Union or were preparing to do so. No national conference of states appeared to be materializing, and the stream of seceding states made such a conference increasingly unlikely. Union meetings cropped up throughout each county as Valley residents began looking for other solutions. Some discussed the possibility of holding a border state conference. Others put their hopes into compromise legislation. The conciliatory efforts of Kentucky's Senator John Crittenden drew each county's particular attention. His proposal offered the South a guarantee that slavery could expand west, while also prohibiting it from entering the northern part of that new region, giving ground to both Southern desires and Republican ideology. Newspapers from all three counties embraced the proposition, and in early January a Rockingham paper reported with optimism that soon "Senator Crittenden will propose his resolutions in the Senate."²⁷

In the meantime, Virginia's state legislature finally met for the first time since Lincoln's election in November. As widely expected, one of their first acts was to call for a state convention to determine Virginia's course of action in the national crisis. Legislators announced that a special elec-

tion would be held in early February in which the counties would select representatives for a state convention. The election would also determine whether the decisions of the state convention would be referred back to the voters for final approval, or if the convention would have a free hand to decide the actions of Virginia in the crisis.

The legislature's call for a state convention divided opinion in the counties. "What can a Convention do at present more than the Legislature can do, except it be to declare us out of the Union?" asked a man in Rockingham. Many in the Valley shared this voter's fear that the convention was simply a ploy by Breckinridge supporters to sweep the commonwealth out of the United States under the guise of popular sentiment. Others in the counties believed that a state convention should meet "at the earliest possible period," arguing that the state needed to act in a unified and swift manner rather than allow outside events to determine its destiny.²⁸ Augusta's *Vindicator* and Rockingham's *Register* applauded the calling of a state convention and wanted action taken by Virginia before Lincoln's inauguration on March 4, 1861. The Rockbridge papers and Augusta's *Spectator*, while equally frustrated, argued against holding a state convention, but agreed that if one were called its decisions must be subject to the voters' final approval.

The debates within the counties over the merits of a Virginia state convention revealed the extent of political change in the Valley since the previous November. Partisan identification had in large measure ceased to influence political issues in Rockingham, Augusta, and Rockbridge. While almost all previous elections had elicited arguments over the true platforms of particular parties, people now debated politics almost exclusively in terms of Virginia's interests and geographic position as a border state in the crisis. The Valley counties found "common interests and a common necessity" among themselves far more politically compelling during the secession winter than shared party allegiance with white men in Maine or Mississippi.²⁹ Politics still mattered, perhaps more so now than ever before, but the Valley's focus had shifted profoundly since November 1860. Past partisan identification, while never fully discarded, had to be subordinated.

The Valley newspapers, long recognized as the engines of party loyalty in the counties, abandoned partisan rhetoric. By January, the newspapers evaluated political options solely in regard to "the perpetuation of the Union." The Rockbridge *Valley Star* urged its readers in early January to focus on "the rights and interests of Virginia before all other considerations."³⁰ By the time of the legislature's call for a special election, news-

paper editorials in Rockingham, Augusta, and Rockbridge had ceased to argue the party ideals that had consumed them for decades, concerning themselves now entirely with Virginia's place in the Union.

Men throughout each county stepped forward during January to announce their candidacy for delegate to the upcoming state convention. Potential representatives dashed back and forth within each county during the month-long campaign, debating one another in taverns and courthouses. Some argued that, without the Lower South, Virginia could no longer depend upon the safeguards of the Union against Republican intrusions and stated bluntly that the commonwealth should "stand alongside of our sister States of the South." Other candidates counseled that Virginians "can obtain redress for our present grievances, and security against further aggressions without resorting to secession." These candidates accused their secessionist opponents of "resorting to revolution."³¹ The contest quickly divided between those who would take Virginia out of the Union and those who still saw hope within it.

White men in Rockingham, Augusta, and Rockbridge swarmed the polls on February 4, 1861, and an overwhelming majority gave their votes to Unionist candidates. The margins of victory were staggering. Unionist candidates defeated secessionists with more than 74 percent of the vote in Rockingham, 87 percent in Augusta, and 91 percent in Rockbridge.³² "The delegates elect are all conservative *Union* men," the *Rockingham Register* announced triumphantly, and the Valley rejoiced that voters had soundly rejected candidates urging secession.³³ Equally heartening, the counties learned that voters had produced even more lopsided margins in favor of referring the decisions of the state convention back to the voters.³⁴ Any effort to withdraw Virginia from the Union would now have to gain final approval from the state's voters. Augusta's *Spectator* reveled in the news, exclaiming, "Nearly the whole people are with us, working to 'harm' the schemes of the disunionists!"³⁵

In Rockingham, historically one of the most staunchly Democratic counties in Virginia, voters had even elected ex-Whig John Lewis over secessionist Democrats as one of the county's three convention delegates. The *Rockingham Register* attributed the anomaly to the fact that past "politics were ignored in the canvass." Similarly, Whig-dominated Augusta elected the Democrat George Baylor to represent them. Baylor himself recognized that his election was the product of changed Valley politics. "It has been my fortune . . . to belong to a party in politics that was always in a minority in the county of Augusta," he told the convention in Richmond. "But for the fact that my people rose above party in electing delegates

here, your humble speaker never would have been honored with a seat in this body."³⁵

While all of the elected delegates from the Valley, and indeed most across the state, favored preserving the old Federal Union, sentiment was changing in the three counties. The Valley continued to support Unionism out of fear that secession would imperil Virginia's interests, the heart of which was the continued security of slavery. "As [Virginia] wishes to preserve slavery, she wants to preserve the Union," observed the *Lexington Gazette*, although many Virginians had begun to question the wisdom of entrusting the institution's future to Abraham Lincoln. During the campaign for the state convention, Unionist candidates had voiced their virulent opposition to any Federal attempt "to coerce a State by force of arms" to rejoin the Union, demonstrating their growing fears of Lincoln's intentions.³⁶ Almost every elected delegate had predicated his Unionism on a peaceful solution to the crisis, which would be based on a conciliatory Republican Party. Yet the Republicans had made no apparent effort to ward off the continued flight of Lower South states, and the incoming administration seemed to be taking no steps to ensure peace.

Wariness settled over the Valley, despite the recent election results. "I think the times have changed since the Presidential contest," wrote one man to Augusta's *Vindicator*. "If they have not, I for one have."³⁸ Many in the three counties shared his growing concern for the Valley's future. The *Vindicator* itself had developed a more pessimistic tone concerning efforts to preserve the American Union and by February was near advocating Virginia's secession. Frustrated by the failure of conference initiatives and the lack of Republican efforts to calm Southern fears, the newspaper and its editor had become convinced that the incoming Republican administration would likely pose greater threats to Virginia's interests than secession would.

The failure of compromise legislation had given them little reason to believe otherwise. The entire Border South had embraced John Crittenden's proposal, yet "hardly any Republican of stature would accept the Crittenden Compromise." Lincoln himself continued to have little to say publicly on any issue, and the Republicans who were talking had little good to say about most of the compromise legislation. "The fate of the Crittenden Resolutions in the Senate ought to satisfy any reasonable man of the slightness of a hope of a satisfactory settlement of affairs before the inauguration of the new President," wrote the *Vindicator*.³⁹ Several other compromise measures appeared destined for similar fates, and, though the counties followed all compromise proposals with hope, the Republi-

cans seemed determined not to compromise anything at all. While they had rejected immediate secession in the February election, Rockingham, Augusta, and Rockbridge were no longer certain their safety lay within the Federal Union.

The Virginia state convention began in mid-February in Richmond, but the Valley found itself far more concerned with the impending presidential inauguration. Abraham Lincoln would take office in fewer than two weeks, and his inaugural speech would be the new president's first public address since the crisis began. People across Rockingham, Augusta, and Rockbridge counties braced to see whether Lincoln would take a conciliatory stance in his speech that would calm the nation, or betray his intent to forcibly reclaim the seceded Lower South and thereby inaugurate a sectional war. "The gist and marrow of the question that now threatens to plunge our country into civil war, will be settled in a very short time," predicted Augusta's *Vindicator*. "It is whether the doctrine of coercion or secession is to be recognized by Lincoln's administration."⁴⁰

Inaugurated with Federal sharpshooters scanning from surrounding rooftops for possible assassins, Abraham Lincoln took the oath of office and finally broke his silence on the issues that had enveloped the nation's attention for the last four months. Lincoln acknowledged Southern fears "that by the accession of a Republican Administration their property and their peace and personal security are to be endangered," but he tried to assure them that he had no intention of interfering with slavery in any of the states where it already existed. Lincoln maintained, however, that no state had the right to secede from the Federal Union, and he denied that the United States had been broken. He promised "to hold, occupy, and possess the property and places belonging to the government, and to collect the duties and imports" of the Federal government in the seceded states. Lincoln's message promised peace, but couched the promise in terms that sounded threatening to Southern ears. "In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow-countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war," he warned. "The Government will not assail you. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors."⁴¹

Lincoln's speech cast a long shadow over the Valley. For many, his vow "to hold, occupy, and possess the property and places belonging to the Government" foretold a military approach to secession that shot fear into their hearts. Few in Rockingham, Augusta, or Rockbridge could find assurances of peace in a message promising that Republicans would directly challenge the sovereignty of the seceded states. The Lower South's new government had already espoused its willingness to defend Confederate

independence, and many residents of the three counties believed that the Republicans were now purposefully moving the country toward civil war. The prospect of Republicans using the crisis as a pretext for marching Federal troops against the slaveholding South shook even the staunchest Valley Unionist.

For many, the fundamental threat to Virginia slavery had shifted north with Lincoln's speech. "War has been declared against us of the South by Abraham Lincoln," screamed the *Rockingham Register*. The newspaper bristled at Lincoln's language, believing that a military clash between the Federal government and the seceded states would be soon in coming. The address had "realized the worst apprehensions of those who dreaded the inauguration of a Black Republican President," and the newspaper bemoaned that it had "hope no longer for a favorable result." Augusta's *Vindicator* took a similar line, predicting that "Lincoln will proceed, without delay, to adopt hostile measures against the South." For the *Vindicator*, the only question that remained was whether this would "grow out of an attempt to collect revenue at the South, to reinforce Forts Sumter and Pickens, or retake other places."⁴² Neither paper made any attempt to distinguish Virginia from the seceded states, believing that all slave states were now in danger.

Augusta's other newspaper, the *Spectator*, tried to spin the peaceful message underlying Lincoln's address. "We cannot believe that any President would willingly involve the country in civil war," the paper reasoned. But even the *Spectator* was unsure that peace would be anywhere in Virginia's future, stating that no one could conclusively know the intentions of Lincoln until "the policy of the administration shall be more clearly indicated by its acts." In Rockbridge, the *Valley Star* tried to tread neutral ground, only offering the bland comment that "we fear there are squatty times ahead." But the newspaper's editor omitted Lincoln's pointed statement that there could be "no conflict" without Southerners being "the aggressors" when the paper reprinted his speech, belying the newspaper's outwardly calm response.⁴³

Over the next few weeks, compromise measures continued to be discussed and discarded, with little hope remaining that they would resolve anything. The Rockbridge *Valley Star* reported the death of the Peace Conference compromise with a hint of the inevitable: "So ends that effort to adjust our difficulties." Virginia's state convention had yet to act in any concerted manner and most people had no expectation that that would change. In the weeks following Lincoln's address, the convention seemed bogged down in endless speechmaking rather than taking active steps to

influence Virginia's course in the crisis. "The Convention has as yet come to no conclusion," reported a frustrated *Rockingham Register*, "and will probably come to none for a considerable time."⁴⁴

The frustration in the counties toward the convention was not due to a lack of effort by their delegates. Since the convention began, representatives from the Valley had made numerous speeches in hopes of preventing Virginia's secession. Underlying every Valley delegate's argument was a preoccupation with the preservation of slavery in Virginia. Augusta's George Baylor asserted that Virginia's interest in its slaves and economy should be considered apart from those of the cotton South. "We have at least half a dozen Kings here," Baylor announced. "We have got King Wheat, King Corn, King Potatoes, King Tobacco, King Flax and King Hemp" and "when you put all these Kings together, they far over-ride King Cotton, with all the powers that he may possess." Samuel Moore of Rockbridge did not bother to bring economics into his defense of Virginia slavery. "I have been satisfied upon reflection that a greater blessing was never conferred, by kind Providence, upon any portion of the African slaves," he proclaimed, "than in establishing the institution of slavery as it exists in Virginia."⁴⁵

When Augusta's John Baldwin took the floor of the convention three weeks after Lincoln's inaugural, he cut to the heart of the matter. "There is but one single subject of complaint which Virginia has to make against the government under which we live," he thundered, "a complaint made by the whole South, and that is on the subject of African slavery." For Baldwin, any threat to slavery—whether it came from Lincoln, secession, or another quarter—could not be tolerated. "As a Southern man, as a slaveholder in Virginia," Baldwin declared, "I never can consent that this great interest, this great institution of the South, shall be placed under the ban of government." While the Valley's delegates voiced their unbending support for slavery's future in Virginia, that did not translate into support for secession. Baldwin's fellow delegate from Augusta, Alexander H. H. Stuart, summed up the shared perspective of the Valley representatives. "In my opinion," he told the convention, "secession is not only war, but it is emancipation; it is bankruptcy; it is repudiation."⁴⁶

The Virginia convention, however, failed to take any action. Indeed, by late March none of the options that had seemed so promising in November appeared to offer any more hope for the white residents of Rockingham, Augusta, and Rockbridge. Neither national nor border conferences had ever materialized. Political safeguards that would have checked threatening Republican ambition had dissolved with the secession of the Lower

South. The Valley's repeated calls for compromise measures had died at the hands of Republicans apparently too stubborn to yield anything for the good of the Union. Their final prayer had been for Lincoln to adopt a conciliatory and nonconfrontational approach in the crisis, thereby avoiding a military clash with the Lower South that would produce war. But Lincoln's speech made even that seem unlikely and added the specter of an invading Republican army. The Valley's particular geo-political interests in the crisis now appeared to be threatened by the very Union that once seemed their best protection. For the three counties, "everything has failed and the question now is shall we unite with the prosperous South—or shall we starve with the Northern Black Republicans?"⁴⁷

In Rockbridge, the attitudes of the residents shifted away from Unionism faster than those of Lexington's *Valley Star*, which continued to argue against secession as April approached. On March 28, the owner of the newspaper—apparently under pressure from readers—ceased writing Unionist editorials and hired a new editor more in line with the shift in popular opinion that had occurred since Lincoln's speech. In his first editorial, William McCorkle announced the newspaper's changed perspective with a plain reference to slavery: "It is very plain to our mind that the interests of Virginia does not lay in the direction of the free States. The course of this paper in the future, therefore, will be in accordance with the interests of Va."⁴⁸ By late March, the newspaper had determined that Virginia's interest in slavery would best be protected outside of the Federal Union.

Rockingham and Augusta had experienced a similar change, and the county newspapers reflected the mood of the Valley. "There is but one way to prevent universal war and destruction too horrible to contemplate," argued Rockingham's *Register*. "And that one course is for Virginia and every border slave state, *at once* to unite with the States of the South." The paper reported the appearance in late March of a secession flag floating over the Exchange Hotel in Harrisonburg, "the work of a portion of the *gallant fair ladies of our town*, who are in favor of joining the Confederacy." In Augusta, the *Vindicator* had long ceased any arguments favoring the Federal Union and now urged its readers that "separation is our only safety." The benefits of Unionism had lost their luster for many in the three counties who believed that a powerful and aggressive Republican president meant that war was eminent, despite all their efforts to prevent it. "The golden hour, when all this train of horrors could have been avoided," concluded the *Vindicator*, "has been lost."⁴⁹

A few still held out desperate hope that secession and war could be avoided. Rockbridge's *Lexington Gazette* reiterated its position that secession would mean the end of Virginia slavery. "Our opposition to Virginia's going into a Southern Confederacy, has been on account of the institution of slavery," the paper explained. "We are devoted to that institution." The newspaper still believed there was no surer way to destroy Virginia slavery than to abandon the protections of the Constitution and involve Virginia in a civil war. "We have believed from the first, that if the Southern States unite together in a Southern confederacy," the paper maintained, "slavery will be driven out of Virginia." But even the *Gazette* had become disillusioned with Lincoln and the Republicans, fearing that soon "we shall come to the conclusion that separation is inevitable."⁵⁰

The other holdout, Augusta's *Spectator*, agreed. "Nothing that has occurred," the paper argued, "has served to change or even shake the conviction, that we have interests in the Union which are paramount—interests that the Cotton States have not." The *Spectator* still believed that secession was the surest road to slavery's extinction in the Valley, and the paper continued to hold out desperate hope for a peaceful end to the crisis. But that position no longer held for most in Rockingham, Rockbridge, or even Augusta. By early April, most in the Valley would have agreed with the *Vindicator's* gloomy pronouncement: "We pray we may be mistaken, but we do not see a hope—a ray of light—a straw to grasp at."⁵¹

The Valley region still disapproved of the Lower South's sectional approach to the 1860 presidential election. It still believed the secession of South Carolina with six other Gulf-Coast states had been rash and imprudent. But by early April 1861, the Valley had also come to believe that their slave-based economy could not coexist with a Republican president willing to wage war on slaveholders. For Rockingham, Augusta, and Rockbridge it had become clear that Lincoln would force a war by provoking the Lower South, and Valley newspapers began to fill with calls for militias to be formed in defense of the state.

The clash that Valley residents had been bracing for came in the pre-dawn of April 12, 1861. Confederate general P. G. T. Beauregard ordered his men to fire on Fort Sumter in response to Lincoln's attempt to re-supply the fort's beleaguered Federal troops, inaugurating the American Civil War. In the immediate aftermath, Rockingham, Augusta, and Rockbridge embraced statewide calls for secession, and meetings sprang up in each county, where "an overwhelming majority declared enthusiastically in favor of immediate Secession." Any timidity about secession had long

since passed, as people of the Valley showed their fervent support for the new Southern Confederacy. "Another large and imposing secession flag now floats from atop of the Exchange Hotel," the Rockingham newspaper proudly reported. Below them in Rockbridge, the stars and stripes had been removed from the Lexington courthouse and replaced with a secession flag, "amid the cheers of the assembled multitude."⁵²

There had been nothing short of a revolution in the sentiment of Rockingham, Augusta, and Rockbridge since November 1860. Decades of partisan rancor had dissolved over a period of five and a half months as the counties united in defense of their particular geographic and economic interests in protecting Virginia slavery. In the wake of Lincoln's election, each county had fought zealously to prevent the secession of the Lower South from dislodging Virginia, believing their homes, property, and rights would be protected by a united nation but destroyed by a sectional war. Yet throughout the secession winter those safeguards had been lost and the Union had been sundered. Every state that seceded left Virginia increasingly at the mercy of the incoming Republican administration; every compromise measure that failed demonstrated to the Valley that Republicans could not be trusted. By late March, the Valley had come to believe that Unionism was now Virginia's greatest threat and secession their only recourse.

The political transformation within the three counties had been extraordinary. Nearly every past election had divided Rockingham, Augusta, and Rockbridge along deeply entrenched party lines. But the presidential contest of 1860 and the crisis that followed it had produced an entirely new political climate within the Valley. The Valley had not embraced Unionism at the start of the crisis out of an ingrained faith in the second party system or out of a loss of faith in slavery, as some historians have claimed, but out of self-interest and dedication to the endurance of Virginia slavery. As one Augusta newspaper observed, "everything like old party lines was obliterated" by the time of the February elections for state convention delegates.⁵³ For the people of Rockingham, Augusta, and Rockbridge, political options had come to be judged not on the basis of tired party rhetoric, but on the ability of those options to preserve the basic pillars of their lives.

Indeed, if anything characterized the Valley during the crisis it was the cautious nature with which the counties approached their political choices. No single event jarred the Valley into secession. They chose first to embrace the Union, and then later to reject it, only after careful calculation. Taken separately, the secession of the Lower South, the failure of

any conference to materialize, the Republican rejection of compromise proposals, or Lincoln's inaugural promise to challenge the Lower South would not have dislodged the three counties from their commitment to the Union. But taken together, the Valley counties came to believe they could not ignore the growing dangers of a Republican presidency. The shelling of Fort Sumter and Lincoln's call for troops did not shock Valley residents; it merely validated what they had already come to believe. Though it eventually destroyed everything they had hoped to save, the Valley's zealous desire to protect their investment in slavery had produced its own logic. For Rockingham, Augusta, and Rockbridge, slavery was placed above both partisanship and the Union.

In the last weeks before the firing on Fort Sumter, only Augusta's *Spectator* and Rockbridge's *Gazette* had maintained any hope that a peaceful solution was still possible. The clash at Sumter, however, convinced even them that life with Republicans would be intolerable, allowing the newspapers to join the secession consensus that predominated the three counties. Within weeks, J. S. McNutt, editor of the *Lexington Gazette*, declared himself a candidate for the Confederate Virginia legislature.⁵⁴ The *Spectator* greeted secession with the enthusiasm of a new convert, prompting the paper to predict in late April: "This county, we have no doubt, will send more [Confederate] soldiers to the field than any county in the State, though Rockingham and Rockbridge will nobly do their duty. These three counties, we venture to predict, will furnish more soldiers than any other three adjoining counties in the State."⁵⁵

For the Valley, there was no more need for talk of saving the Federal Union; they saw nothing left for Virginians in a pact that tied them to Republican whims. Secession was not what voters in the Valley wanted, but they believed they had been given no other choice. For Rockingham, Augusta, and Rockbridge, the time had come to unite with the Lower South and face the Republicans with a unified and common front. "Let all stand together," shouted the *Spectator*. "We are still for Union—a Union of brave and patriotic men for the defence of our State."⁵⁶

Notes

I would like to thank Ed Ayers, Gary Gallagher, and Alexandra Torget for their careful and insightful readings of earlier drafts of this essay. Tom Torget, Vanessa May, Calvin Schermerhorn, and Erik Alexander also gave valuable advice on revising and sharpening the arguments.

1. Michael P. Johnson, ed., *Abraham Lincoln, Slavery, and the Civil War: Selected Writings and Speeches* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), 126, 129.
2. William Freehling, *The South vs. The South: How Anti-Confederate Southerners Shaped the Course of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 42. Freehling is the most vocal proponent of this perspective on Virginia's secession, stressing the role that the steady "draining" of slaves out of Virginia to fill the labor needs of plantations in the Lower South states played in Virginia's approach to the secession crisis. The steady decrease in the percentage of slaves relative to the white population, Freehling argues, made the long-term endurance of the institution less important to Virginians by 1860 than it was for Lower South states, producing a Virginia that was less willing to take extreme measures—such as secession—to protect the institution than places like South Carolina or Mississippi.
3. See Michael Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), and Daniel Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989). Holt is the leading proponent of the political perspective on Virginia's secession, arguing that slavery was far from the primary catalyst in the secession crisis. Holt asserts that the breakdown of the second party system in American politics dissolved the Lower South's faith in the political system, prompting the region to secede upon Lincoln's election. In Virginia and other Upper South states, however, Holt argues, two-party politics remained in place as late as 1861—albeit in beleaguered form—and prevented the border states from seceding with the Lower South. Daniel Crofts takes a similar line. Concentrating on the plight of conditional Unionists during the secession crisis, Crofts attributes Virginia's resilience against secession to the continued presence of two-party politics within the border states. On the second party system in Virginia, see William Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion: Virginia and the Second Party System, 1824–1861* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995).
4. The Valley of Virginia consisted of many more counties, most of which lay to the north of Rockingham, Augusta, and Rockbridge. This essay, however, concentrates on Rockingham, Augusta, and Rockbridge as representatives of the diversity of the Valley. Each of the three counties differed in political affiliation, population densities, and the amount of manufacturing in their local economies. Thus while all references to the Valley in this essay refer specifically to Rockingham, Augusta, and Rockbridge, their experiences suggest processes that were likely also at work in the northern Valley counties.
5. *Staunton Spectator*, February 12, 1861, page 2, column 2. All quotations retain their original grammar and spelling, unless bracketed for clarity. All quotations from the *Staunton Spectator* and the *Staunton Vindicator* are taken from the online archive *The Valley of the Shadow: Two Communities in the American Civil War*, <http://valleyvodh.virginia.edu>.

6. All county vote totals for 1856 in this and the following two paragraphs are from the *Richmond Enquirer*, November 18, 1856, page 2, column 2. All county vote totals for 1859 are from the *Richmond Enquirer*, June 14, 1859, page 2, column 2. For Rockingham, Augusta, and Rockbridge's historical voting patterns, see William Shade, *Democratizing the Old Dominion*, 138–42. Shade attributes the historical political differences between the counties to the different ethnic groups that originally settled each county: Rockingham was dominated by Germans; Augusta by the Scotch-Irish; and Rockbridge by a mix of Scotch-Irish, English, and Welsh.
7. *Valley Democrat*, October 19, 1860, page 2, column 1; *Rockingham Register and Advertiser*, October 12, 1860, page 2, column 1. During the nineteenth century, state and local elections were often held earlier in the year than the national elections and were carefully observed as indicators of how well the national candidates would fare in November.
8. *Staunton Spectator*, October 23, 1860, page 2, column 4; *Valley Democrat*, November 2, 1860, page 2, column 1.
9. *Valley Democrat*, November 2, 1860, page 2, column 1 (emphasis is the *Valley Democrat's*).
10. Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, "Historical, Demographic, Economic, and Social Data: The United States, 1790–1970," <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census>, accessed May 19, 2004. All census statistics for 1860 taken from the Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research study based on the U.S. decennial censuses.
11. The capital invested in slaves for each county was calculated by multiplying the aggregate number of slaves by the average slave price in 1860 of \$1,200: Rockingham, \$2,864,400; Augusta, \$6,739,200; Rockbridge, \$4,782,000.
12. *Lexington Gazette*, November 1, 1860, page 2, column 1; *Valley Democrat*, November 2, 1860, page 2, column 2; *Valley Star*, October 25, 1860, page 2, column 1.
13. The 1860 vote totals for Rockingham, Augusta, and Rockbridge in this and the following two paragraphs are from the *Rockingham Register and Advertiser*, November 16, 1860, page 2, column 2.
14. *Lexington Gazette*, November 8, 1860, page 2, column 2.
15. *Valley Star*, November 15, 1860, page 2, column 1 (emphasis is the *Valley Star's*).
16. Breckinridge garnered almost as many votes in Virginia as Bell, even winning some counties in the northern part of the Shenandoah Valley. Whereas the residents in Rockingham, Augusta, and Rockbridge hoped to send a message to the Lower South with a strong showing for Union candidates in the counties, it seems that Virginians who voted for Breckinridge were trying to send a similar message of warning to Abraham Lincoln rather than endorsing the possible secession of Virginia from the Union. Indeed, the widespread support for Unionist

candidates in the February 1861 election for delegates to the Virginia state convention suggests that the support Breckinridge enjoyed in November 1860 was not indicative of support for Virginia's secession upon Lincoln's election. In both cases, Virginians attempted to preempt threats to Virginia slavery by sending a political message to those whom they considered to be the greatest threat to slavery in the state, hoping to prevent a crisis that could force Virginia to leave the Union.

17. *Valley Star*, November 29, 1860, page 2, column 1.
18. *Staunton Vindicator*, November 16, 1860, page 2, column 3; *Rockingham Register and Advertiser*, November 9, 1860, page 2, column 2; *Valley Star*, November 29, 1860, page 2, column 1.
19. *Staunton Spectator*, November 13, 1860, page 2, column 1.
20. *ibid.*
21. *Valley Democrat*, December 21, 1860, page 2, column 2.
22. *Lexington Gazette*, December 5, 1861, page 2, column 1.
23. *Valley Star*, December 6, 1860, page 2, columns 1, 2.
24. *Valley Democrat*, December 21, 1860, page 2, column 1; *Staunton Vindicator*, November 23, 1860, page 2, column 2 (emphasis is the *Vindicator's*).
25. *Valley Democrat*, December 21, 1860, page 2, column 1.
26. *Rockingham Register and Advertiser*, December 28, 1860, page 1, column 6.
27. *Rockingham Register and Advertiser*, January 4, 1861, page 2, column 2.
28. "C" to *Rockingham Register and Advertiser*, January 4, 1861, page 2, column 3; *Rockingham Register and Advertiser*, January 4, 1861, page 2, column 4.
29. "A" to *Staunton Spectator*, January 22, 1861, page 1, column 5.
30. *Rockingham Register and Advertiser*, January 4, 1861, page 2, column 1; *Valley Star*, January 3, 1861, page 2, column 1.
31. Robert Bowman to *Rockingham Register and Advertiser*, January 25, 1861, page 2, column 2; Samuel Coffman to *Rockingham Register and Advertiser*, January 25, 1861, page 2, column 5; John F. Lewis to *Rockingham Register and Advertiser*, January 25, 1861, page 2, column 5.
32. Interestingly, the percentage of slaves in each county corresponded to the percentage of votes in favor of Unionist candidates, with the higher percentage of slaves in the county corresponding to higher votes in favor of Unionists.
33. *Rockingham Register and Advertiser*, February 8, 1861, page 2, column 1 (emphasis is the *Register's*).
34. The county returns in favor of reference were 80 percent in Rockingham, 93 percent in Augusta, and 90 percent in Rockbridge.
35. *Staunton Spectator*, February 12, 1861, page 2, column 2.
36. *Rockingham Register and Advertiser*, February 8, 1861, page 2, column 1; George Baylor, February 28, 1861, quoted in George Reese, ed., *Proceedings of the Virginia State Convention of 1861, February 13-May 1*, 4 vols. (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1965), 1:272.

37. *Lexington Gazette*, February 7, 1861, page 2, column 2; John F. Lewis to *Rockingham Register and Advertiser*, January 25, 1861, page 2, column 5.

38. "Augusta" to *Staunton Vindicator*, February 8, 1861, page 2, column 7.

39. Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates*, 199; *Staunton Vindicator*, February 8, 1861, page 2, column 2.

40. *Staunton Vindicator*, March 1, 1861, page 2, column 4 (emphasis is the *Vindicator's*).

41. *Lexington Gazette*, March 7, 1861, page 2, column 2; *Valley Star*, March 14, 1861, page 1, column 1; *Valley Star*, March 14, 1861, page 1, column 2; *Staunton Vindicator*, March 8, 1861, page 3, column 1.

42. *Rockingham Register and Advertiser*, March 8, 1861, page 2, column 1 (emphasis is the *Register's*); *Staunton Vindicator*, March 15, 1861, page 1, column 3. Rockingham's other newspaper, the *Valley Democrat*, had been absorbed by the *Register* during February and its editor now worked for the *Register* as a correspondent at the Virginia state convention.

43. *Staunton Spectator*, March 12, 1861, page 2, column 3; *Valley Star*, March 7, 1861, page 2, column 6; *Valley Star*, March 14, 1861, page 1, column 4.

44. *Valley Star*, March 7, 1861, page 2, column 1; *Rockingham Register and Advertiser*, March 29, 1861, page 2, column 2.

45. George Baylor, March 1, 1861, quoted in Reese, ed., *Proceedings of the Virginia State Convention of 1861*, 1:289; Samuel Moore, March 1, 1861, quoted in Reese, ed., *Proceedings of the Virginia State Convention of 1861*, 1:278.

46. John Baldwin, March 21, 1861, quoted in Reese, ed., *Proceedings of the Virginia State Convention of 1861*, 2:139; John Baldwin, March 23, 1861, quoted in Reese, ed., *Proceedings of the Virginia State Convention of 1861*, 2:216; Alexander H. H. Stuart, April 16, 1861, quoted in Reese, ed., *Proceedings of the Virginia State Convention of 1861*, 4:16.

47. *Valley Star*, March 28, 1861, page 2, column 1.

48. *Ibid.*, page 2, column 2. The owner of the *Valley Star*, Samuel Gillock, had acted as the newspaper's editor during the entire crisis until late March. No reason for hiring a new editor was given in the newspaper, but the abrupt shift in editorial style and the fact that Gillock remained the proprietor of the paper strongly suggests that the new editor, William McCorkle, was hired to appease readers who no longer agreed with Gillock's Unionism. Most likely, Gillock made the change in order to appease the base of subscribers and advertisers who allowed the newspaper to remain profitable.

49. *Rockingham Register and Advertiser*, March 8, 1861, page 2, column 1 (emphasis is the *Register's*); *Rockingham Register and Advertiser*, quoted in John Wayland, *A History of Rockingham County, Virginia* (Dayton, Va.: Ruebush-Elkins Company, 1912), 132-33 (emphasis in the original); *Staunton Vindicator*, April 5, 1861, page 2, column 5; *Staunton Vindicator*, April 12, 1861, page 2, column 2.

50. *Lexington Gazette*, March 7, 1861, page 2, column 1; *Lexington Gazette*, March 14, 1861, page 2, column 2.
51. *Staunton Spectator*, April 2, 1861, page 1, column 6; *Staunton Vindicator*, April 12, 1861, page 2, column 2.
52. *Rockingham Register and Advertiser*, April 19, 1861, page 2, column 2, and page 2, column 1; *Valley Star*, April 18, 1861, page 2, column 2.
53. *Staunton Vindicator*, February 22, 1861, page 2, column 1.
54. *Lexington Gazette*, May 9, 1861, page 2, column 1.
55. *Staunton Spectator*, April 23, 1861, page 2, column 1.
56. *Ibid.*

"I Owe Virginia Little, My Country Much"

*Robert E. Lee, the United States Regular Army,
and Unconditional Unionism*



Wayne Wei-siang Hsieh

Douglas Southall Freeman, perhaps Robert E. Lee's greatest biographer, has called Lee's decision to wage war against the Federal flag he had so faithfully served before the Civil War the "Answer He Was Born to Make." Freeman's biography remains a monumental work of scholarship, and popular perceptions of Lee's secession rarely deviate from Freeman's unquestioning acceptance of Lee's decision. For example, on January 19, 1907, Charles Francis Adams, son of the wartime American minister to England and himself a former officer in the Army of the Potomac, delivered to Washington and Lee University an address marking the centennial of Lee's birth that absolved Lee of the charge of treason, for "I do not see how I, placed as he was placed, could have done otherwise."¹ Lee's presumably guiltless course also excuses by extension all of the serving and retired U.S. Army officers who drew their swords for the Confederate banner. Nevertheless, from the perspective of the U.S. government, Lee's resignation from its service and immediate commission in the army of a hostile government can only be described as treasonous. Although Freeman and Adams cited Lee's Virginia loyalties as reason enough for his conduct, many other Virginians with regular army backgrounds stayed loyal to the government that they had all at one point or another sworn to serve. These Unionist officers raise important questions about whether or not we can cite regional origin to explain and, at times, to justify an