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Charles B. Dew. *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001.

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Historians have debated the cause of the American Civil War since before the guns fell silent at the end of that conflict. They proposed and examined multiple theories and hypotheses, but regardless of the theory, historians cannot ignore the issue of slavery. Advances in historiography in that era's history have emphasized examinations of the primary sources from that period. Charles Dew, a Southerner who described his background as one that embraced the notion of state's rights as the primary cause of the Civil War, explained how his research involving primary documents in Confederate records brought up sources that challenged what he had been told about the war and its cause. This inspired him to look at the subject to determine the answer for himself.

The result of his analysis was a study into the letters and speeches of the secession commissioners from the first states that seceded to the remaining slave-owning states and their attempt to form a new nation. Dew's analysis of these documents revealed what the leading figures of the South and the secession commissioners said were the reasons for secession in the speeches they gave at every secession convention. The study served as the reason he wrote *Apostles of Disunion*, wherein he presents both the primary documents he examined and his conclusions. The result is a concise assessment of the secession commissioners and their beliefs; what they wrote and said concerning the issue of secession both privately and publically; the reactions to their words by their audiences; and the conclusions Dew drew from his research.

Instead of trying to speak for the commissioners, Dew chose to let their words and actions speak for themselves. He detailed the personal history of each commissioner as well as the context of the situation in the various states the commissioners spoke. This gave the words of these commissioners a setting in which they could be understood for what they were instead of just words on paper. Dew drew attention to the rhetoric of slavery and race that the commissioners prominently mentioned multiple times in each address to the secession conventions. This was a sharp contrast to the views long held by some historians

and interested others that the war was not about slavery or race, but instead about states' rights, economic differences, or constitutional arguments. Dew pointed out that when the commissioners brought up these political and economic points, they did so fleetingly while they spoke at length about slavery and race.

He also described the reactions to the commissioners' addresses from both individuals and newspapers, all of which focused on the issues of race and slavery, and not on any other issue. The major drawback to Dew's book was that he did not explore the conventions or the makeup of the delegates beyond that of a cursory examination. In many cases, the commissioners' speeches were merely exhortations to openly receptive audiences—while others failed to sway their audiences into outright secession. Dew noted that the speeches given in the Lower South brought on wild cheering while speakers in the Upper South encountered muted applause on most occasions. Even when people acknowledged a speech with great applause in the Upper South, like John Smith Preston's address in Virginia, it failed to move the majority of the delegates into voting for secession. This revealed a significant difference in the makeup of the conventions and their delegates, a difference Dew failed to analyze in this book.

The result is a slim tome in which Dew showed that the fear of slavery's elimination and acceptance of racial equality was the primary cause of the war, because that was what the commissioners focused on in their speeches. Dew filled in a gap in the historiography of the months prior to the war by limiting the book's scope to that of the secession commissioners and an analysis of their own words, which speak for themselves to explain why many in the South desired secession. He includes two speeches in the appendix to serve as examples of what the commissioners said, but it is obvious that he should have included more. The endnote section makes it easy to see where he looked for his sources, and it provides many resources for other historians to follow up his work and examine what the people of that era said as the nation found itself divided. It is clear that *Apostles of Disunion* is merely the tip of the iceberg for historians to examine what commissioners said at the secession conventions—especially the way in which it reveals how the secessionists used the racial rhetoric of the era in their speeches in order to influence the delegates to vote for secession.