

***Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina.* By Steven A. Channing (1970) New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970 pp. 293, ISBN 671-20516-1 (hardcover) \$7.95 U.S.**

“Secession was a revolution of passion and the passion was fear” (p. 293). Dr. Steven Channing’s political-historical drama analyzing the power of fear in South Carolina’s political society prior to the Civil War is a well-written and engaging. The South was gripped in paralyzing fear deeply rooted in guilt and apprehension over their human chattel. The South was dreadful of the liberal democratic changes embodied in the emerging Republican party of the 1840s and 50s. Southern politicians masterfully capitalized the root fears to generate a powerful political base and inordinate national influence all focused on protecting the South’s primary interest: slavery. The fires of fear were built and fuelled to an unquenchable flame that spilled over into war as a direct result of Republican victory in 1860.

Published in 1970, Dr. Steven A Channing’s text offers a powerful early entry into revisionist history. It reflects trends of the late 1960s and early 70s in American history careful re-examination of the histories of darker periods of the history of the United States. When published, this book was well-received and won the prestigious Allan Nevins History Prize. Channing received his PhD from the University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill and has taught at the University of Kentucky, Stanford University, Duke University, and the University of Genoa, Italy and was a research fellow at Johns Hopkins University. He has published several Civil War era texts and since the 1980s has gained recognition as an Emmy award-winning filmmaker. Presently, he is the head of Video Dialog, Inc. a production studio focused on developing high-quality, historically-focused films. From his varied background and writing in *Crisis of Fear* he exposed few overt biases and admirably

approached his investigation of South Carolina's political leaders with a commendable degree of objectivity given the sensitivity of the topic he examined.

In two parts and across nine chapters, Channing consistently developed his central thesis that fear drove the South to secession. The untitled Part One of the text builds the case for a showdown in 1860 by examining the Southern political climate and psychology as a reactionary, ultra-conservative, fearful place and way of thinking. He argues the fear was fanned by the John Brown Raids. "John Brown had plunged a knife deep into the psyche of Southern whites, and life would never be quite the same again" (p. 23). The absolutist terms Channing uses indicates his perception of Southern mentality at the time. He successfully argues that Southerners collectively reached the point of absolutism and the crisis was boiled down to black and white, anti-polar extremes. To feed the fears of a general slave uprising, he cites the role of increased vigilance patrols, arson claims and fears, and increased violence towards slaves, free blacks, and outsiders. Channing exposes the reactionary nature of the South and examines Southern failure to acknowledge the true root of their fears: slavery and the guilt and hypocrisy born of slavery.

Channing's strength lies in his ability to deftly perceive the Southern psychology. His second chapter deals with the memories and thoughts of the South leading up to 1860. He convincingly tells of a society growing increasingly paranoid about its stability. In the face of the total collapse of its societal order, the South grows almost despondent and blindly accepting of the upcoming war. He tells of a South that was "aware that some day the ultimate question would be fairly drawn – Union or slavery ..." (p. 67). Southerners were caught in a contradictory whirlwind that would ultimately prove to be a self-fulfilling prophecy and lead to war. Northern efforts trying to placate Southern fears were answered

with the ire of Southern leaders. Northern efforts at postponement or appeasement provided ample opportunity for South Carolina's political radicals to raise the stakes higher and expand the hysteria and, therefore, their political influence. Channing balances the radicals' thirst for power and fear mongering with an overly cautious and conciliatory Unionist and cooperatist sentiment from South Carolina's moderates. Because of the moderates' norms of caution, they were unable to answer the radical's popular advance. Channing describes a Southern political culture where open debate is stifled and reaction to contradicting views carried harsh penalties.

In Part Two, Channing relays the events leading to war. His comfortable style of writing imparts the feeling of chaos, helplessness, and acceptance leading to war. His story is much like that of a massive head-to-head train collision. The South is in a position to avoid it, but it decides to watch the ensuing wreck instead. Channing's depiction of the demise of the Democratic Party over the course of the party conventions during the summer of 1860 shows the complete failure of rational thinking that gripped South Carolina's leadership that summer. Further complicating the story and contributing to the tragedy, South Carolina found itself in the unfortunate position of wanting revolution but not wanting to be the leaders of that revolution. Instead, they wanted to be the first among the backers of secession. When Alabama, Mississippi, or Virginia decided they did not want the responsibility of leading the revolution, South Carolina found itself in the position of having to start the revolution as a result of the hysteria they directed. Channing describes a self-induced disaster.

South Carolina so effectively whipped up fear of its black inhabitants in a fight to protect the *status quo* that it backed itself into a corner and, Channing argues, had to resort

to war immediately upon a Republican victory. By November 1860 secession, and to a very real extent war, was a foregone conclusion. The political leaders essentially tipped the first domino and the rest fell with a chorus of popular support, the noise of which prevented any parties from withdrawing from the precipice of war.

This well-written book offers much insight into the South Carolina mind and opens much debate about the control of the political class over the populace. It also encourages debate on what sort of democracy the South exercised in the mid-1800s. Channing summarized it best when he said, “Plebiscitary democracy triumphed in South Carolina” (p. 285). In plebiscitary democracy there is a fine line between ordered democracy and mob rule. Channing’s warning is clear: mob rule comes at a tremendous cost. The book is well-written and a worthy read. It is representative of impressive study in 1970 as it undoubtedly informed and impacted a generation of historians emerging from the historiographical challenges of the 1970s and 80s. In 2010, the text informs the reader of the collective psychology of a complex society and subsequent work could benefit from more complex approaches while leveraging this solid foundation. With forty years of historiography and research to build upon, there lies an opportunity to examine Channing’s thesis with a far deeper exploration into the complexities, contradictions, and dualities of Southern political science.

Regardless, the text was extremely well researched, pulling from a vast archive of personal, political, and professional correspondence and reporting to paint a picture of the South. By leveraging the somewhat reluctant leadership of South Carolina to tell the story it magnifies the crime of secession in its tragedy. The people of the South were led to believe secession was possible and was good and that an independent South would

prosper. No true leadership rose to prepare the South to go alone. South Carolina ended up starting a fight it only wanted to instigate, not actually lead.

Ultimately, this text should be included in any Southern historian's library and is a foundational part of his understanding. As a part of a larger study, text could benefit from more modern approaches in an effort to paint the fullest possible picture, but taken as a forty-year old work, it is a superb starting point.

George Mason University

Carl Allard Young