More than 150 years after Confederate forces fired on Fort Sumter, historians continue to debate the causes of the Civil War. Some claim that the conflict was the inevitable consequence of irreconcilable differences between the North and the South, primarily over slavery and state's rights. Others assert that a "blundering generation" of politicians allowed a small band of extremists to take the nation into war.

In "We Have the War Upon Us," William J. Cooper, a professor of history at Louisiana State University and the biographer of Jefferson Davis, allies himself with the latter school of thought. Examining the five months following the election of 1860, Mr. Cooper argues that the conflict was not "irrepressible." After all, he indicates, a majority of Americans in every section of the country (including moderates in the Upper South and Border States, who exhibited more courage and commitment than anyone else) supported compromise and conciliation. The action and inaction of radical Republicans and Southern fire-eaters, however, brought the nation "to the precipice and finally over it." Much of the blame, according to Mr. Cooper, should be laid at the feet of an "inflexible" and "tone deaf" Abraham Lincoln.

"We Have the War Upon Us" is provocative. It is not persuasive. Lincoln did not "unequivocally oppose compromise even as the Union fell apart." And Mr. Cooper's analysis of his motives -- ignorance of the South, militant partisanship, and "visceral" anti-slavery commitment -- is incomplete and misleading.

Mr. Cooper presents no evidence, for example, to buttress his claim that because Lincoln did not understand "how deeply slavery had become embedded in Southern society" he "dismissed the seriousness of secession." Indeed, Mr. Cooper acknowledges that the "careworn and anxious" president-elect wished he could take the oath of office immediately because every hour was adding to the difficulties he would have to address.

Far from disdaining compromise, moreover, Lincoln embraced it. Although he viewed human bondage as a grievous wrong and did not believe that the nation could endure if it remained half-slave and half free, he supported an amendment to the Constitution protecting slavery, in perpetuity, in the states where it already existed.

Lincoln was, of course, unwilling to countenance an extension of slavery to the territories already controlled (or those acquired "hereafter") by the United States. Mr. Cooper disagrees with this decision.
Convinced that population growth, geographic expansion and the escalating economic power of the free states would eventually "overpower slavery," Mr. Cooper implies that Lincoln should have accepted some version of the Crittenden Compromise, which extended the Missouri Compromise to the Pacific Ocean, allowing slavery in territories south of the line 36°30'. He seems to believe as well that Lincoln should not have sent provisions to the beleaguered federal forces at Fort Sumter -- and that after the Confederates attacked them, he should have declared "that the practically bloodless explosion in Charleston Harbor provided a last opportunity, even a requirement, for Americans on both sides to turn from employing arms to searching for a peaceful solution."

Had Lincoln taken this advice, a civil war might have been averted in 1861. But for how long? And at what cost?

Protected by the Constitution, slavery would have survived, perhaps for many generations. And Southern extremists, who would have in essence undone the results of the presidential election, would have demanded more concessions.

Appeasement, alas, is a much-overused term. But it may be appropriate to apply it to the thesis of "We Have the War Upon Us" -- and to conclude that Lincoln was right in insisting that the crisis had been precipitated by secessionists and in resisting their extortionate and (politically and morally) unjustified demands.

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