

# Sympathy for the Devil

Reviewed by *W. Barksdale Maynard*

SINCE THE 1960S, HISTORIANS have heartily condemned the antebellum white Southerner as racist, reactionary, un-American, even genocidal. So it is surprising to find a new account of the Civil War era—by an academic, no less—that dares give this stock villain a new hearing. In *America Aflame*, David Goldfield, a historian at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, tries in a sincere way to get inside the mind of the slave owner, to understand what he was thinking and why he felt so threatened by the North that he was ready to go to war.

Without condoning slavery for a second, Goldfield paints a portrait of white Southerners as rightfully proud of the role their ancestors had played in forging a new nation, even as they watched in dismay as the political clout of their region diminished before an expanding North. Worse, they endured no end of verbal abuse for participating in the slave economy—an economy they had found themselves heirs to, and dependent upon, without easy alternatives; that remained perfectly legal under federal law; and in which Northerners themselves participated abundantly by buying cotton goods. From the white Southern perspective, none of this seemed fair.

As abolitionists grew increasingly belligerent in the 1840s, slave owners foresaw nothing but humiliation for themselves in the country that Virginians George Washington and Thomas

**AMERICA AFLAME:**  
How the Civil War  
Created a Nation.

By *David Goldfield*.  
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Jefferson had heroically established. Southerners “were Americans too,” Goldfield reminds us, even though “the North came to believe that only by excluding the South would there be a future for America.”

Goldfield even hints that something other than blood lust for slavery lay at the heart of Southern motivations: “Throughout the increasingly acrimonious debates of the 1850s, this was at the core of the South’s concerns: to be treated equally in a confederation of equals.” In this assertion is audible a faint echo of the old “states’ rights” thesis—relegated to the academic wastebasket in recent decades—that argued that Confederates fought for the democratic right to govern their own destiny more than they fought to defend slavery. Many Southerners still believe this. In a January Harris poll, two-thirds of whites surveyed in the former Confederate states indicated that the preservation of states’ rights, not slavery, was the main rea-



Confederate soldier

son that the South fought in the Civil War. A reader of Goldfield might feel inclined to give these numerous dissenters a second hearing.

Provocatively, Goldfield points an accusing finger at Protestant evangelism for self-righteously pushing the nation toward a holocaust that killed more than 620,000. And he concludes that the Old South was more sinned against than sinning in this regard. He opens his book with a scene in which a mob torches a Catholic convent in Boston in the 1830s. With apocalyptic rhetoric, Northern evangelicals ferociously assailed not only slave owners but the one million new immigrants from Ireland putatively beholden to Rome, evidence of many American Protestants' all-consuming obsession with "individual freedom as a threatened legacy from the Revolutionary era." An alarmed Daniel Webster warned against politicization of "religious sentiments," only to find himself branded a "fallen angel."

Then God told John Brown to invade Virginia in 1859. This act of terrorism at Harpers Ferry (in what is now West Virginia) triggered a revulsion in the South akin to what many Americans felt toward Al Qaeda after 9/11—and imagine if we learned that Mohamed Atta had been cheerfully bankrolled by six upstanding citizens of our own country, as Brown was by a secret committee in Massachusetts. Adding to the insult, the new Republican Party sent "shock troops of younger voters" called Wide-Awakes into Northern streets in quasi-military midnight demonstrations to the martial strains of "The Freedom Battle Hymn." Caught up in this evangelical tide, Lincoln himself grew portentously "messianic," Goldfield says. In debate with Stephen Douglas, he uncompromisingly declared the sectional dispute "not less than a contest for the advancement of the kingdom of Heaven or the kingdom of Satan."

Among today's professoriate, the Old South is generally about as popular as George W. Bush, Fox News, and waterboarding, so it

is rare to find a book that doesn't instantly and utterly condemn it. Surely Goldfield is gutsy to attempt a balanced look at the Civil War era from a perspective he calls "neither pro-Southern nor pro-Northern." He is no Southern apologist, mind you, but a fair-minded scholar trying to understand the past on its own terms, not ours—and so he gives an ear to the grievances of those old cardboard-cutout devils, the antebellum whites who whistled "Dixie."

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## A Moral Question

*Reviewed by Christopher Clausen*

READERS OF THE *NEW YORK Times* and *Washington Post* online op-ed pages were surprised late last year when the two newspapers began blogging a series of events that had taken place a century and a half earlier, starting with the secession of South Carolina in December 1860 and leading within a few months to the Civil War's first shots at Fort Sumter. Although mostly written by professional historians, these blogs resembled their political counterparts in the sense that they tended to be militantly one-sided. Their authors seemed to feel the need to stand with the North against disunion and, above all, against slavery.

It may seem a quaint moral affectation for historians to line up indignantly against a long-vanished and thoroughly discredited institution at this late date, but academic historiography of the Civil War has been moving in that direction since the civil rights movement of the early 1960s, which coincided with the war's centennial. Many older historians believed that eventual reconciliation between North and South had led to the United States'

**1861:**  
The Civil War  
Awakening.

By Adam Goodheart.  
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