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PROPAGANDISTS FOR SECESSION: EDMUND RUFFIN OF VIRGINIA AND ROBERT BARNWELL RHETT OF SOUTH CAROLINA

WILLIAM K. SCARBOROUGH*

DURING THE DECADE OF THE 1850S, AND EVEN BEFORE IN SOME cases, a small but vocal group of southerners launched a campaign for southern independence. Angered by the virulent abolitionist onslaught against slavery, and fearful for the security of their slave property as the economic and political power of the North gradually increased, these men concluded that secession was the most viable option to guarantee the continuance of their slaveholding society and the preservation of southern rights. Although they came from diverse backgrounds and had somewhat different political agendas, all of these so-called fire-eaters were united in their quest for separation from the existing Union. While historians differ slightly in their definitions of these rabid secessionists, most agree that Robert Barnwell Rhett of South Carolina, Edmund Ruffin of Virginia, William Lowndes Yancey of Alabama, and John A. Quitman of Mississippi were the most notable fire-eaters.[1]

What alleged grievances motivated these southern radicals to seek a separation from the North? For Rhett, the so-called "Father of Secession," alienation from the federal government began with the tariff controversy of the early 1830s. Indeed, it was the nullification crisis that contributed to the uniqueness of South Carolina and propelled that state down the disunionist path from which it never deviated. In addition to the protective tariff, the Second National Bank also was a target of Rhett's ire. In an undated political piece entitled the "Northern Money Power," Rhett argued that the National Bank should have been "a contingency of the Treasury—under its control and responsibility" rather than an agency "totally independent of the Treasury." The protective tariff, which he termed "the other grand instrumentality of the money power in the North," was, he charged, an instrument designed "to use the Government of the United States, to promote its strength and aggrandizement, at the expense of the People of the United States." If differences over economic policy initially estranged Rhett from the North, slavery was the issue that finalized that estrangement. As early as 1851, the South Carolinian observed that "the Slavery question is still festering in the body politic north

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[1] Eric H. Walther, *The Fire-Eaters* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 3–6.

eties that continued to resonate within the state of South Carolina and influenced its course of actions leading up to the Civil War.

Barbara Bellows's article, entitled "Of Time and the City: Charleston in 1860," describes how, on the eve of secession, Charlestonians harkened back to the late eighteenth century, when their city was a vibrant and transformative place that produced powerful politicians who helped to forge the United States. Eighty years later, the city's national influence had declined precipitously, and it had been eclipsed in many categories by other cities. Bellows describes this political nostalgia through the lens of the Pinckney family, the descendants of two signers of the U.S. Constitution (Charles and Charles Cotesworth) and two Federalist candidates for the presidency (Thomas and Charles Cotesworth). Reaction to the city and state's loss of status resulted in the Pinckney progeny advocating for the destruction of the thing that their revered ancestors had worked so diligently to create. Together, the articles by Powers and Bellows provide needed perspective on the mindset that led South Carolinians to throw caution to the wind in hopes of securing a better future for their state.

The publication of this special issue of the *South Carolina Historical Magazine* marks a fitting conclusion to the first phase of South Carolina's Civil War Sesquicentennial. As the state's oldest journal of history, the *Magazine* has been the source of well over a century's worth of informative articles regarding the Civil War. This issue is noteworthy because it offers further proof that South Carolina has taken a solid step toward putting aside, forever, interpretations of the war's causes and outcomes in which race or slavery play only a cursory role. The end result will no doubt be that the Palmetto State, like the rest of the nation, finds within its own archives the war's "true" history, of which so many have spoken.

& south," and he predicted that it would lead eventually to a dissolution of the Union.[2]

Rhett, of course, was correct. For it was concern over the security of slavery and the right of slaveholders to carry their property into federal territories—not the bank, the tariff, or even states' rights—that primarily motivated the fire-eaters, all of whom were militant and uncompromising defenders of the "peculiar institution." The issue of the expansion of slavery first surfaced between 1819 and 1821 with the controversy surrounding the admission of Missouri to the Union. The resulting compromise settled the question for a generation until the acquisition of territory from Mexico reopened old wounds. This time compromise was more difficult because of the rise of the radical abolition movement in the 1830s. During the middle of that decade, Theodore Dwight Weld and his Ohio group began to flood the southern mail with abolitionist propaganda and bombard Congress with anti-slavery petitions, leading to the passage in 1836 of the controversial Gag Resolution in the House of Representatives. As the years passed, anti-slavery agitation increased in intensity until, according to ardent South Carolina secessionist William D. Porter, it "infected larger bodies of men," forcing itself "upon popular assemblies" and invading "the school room and the school book, the pulpit and the prayer." The movement reached a climax in 1852 with the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's heart-tugging novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a work that southerners contended created a very distorted image of slavery.[3]

The rise in abolitionist activity was accompanied by a series of events that further alienated southerners and provided fodder for the agenda of the fire-eaters. Among the most significant of these were the Wilmot Proviso, which would have banned slavery in any new territory acquired from Mexico; the Compromise of 1850 that admitted California as a free state, thereby ending forever the carefully crafted balance between slave and free states; the failure of every northern state to abide by the provisions of the new federal Fugitive Slave Law; the activities of the New England Emigrant Aid Society and like organizations in financing the migration of free-soil settlers to Kansas; the massacre of proslaveryites at Pottawatomie Creek, Kansas, by John Brown and his followers; the defiant reaction of the North to the Dred Scott decision; northern support of John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, Virginia—an act that Edmund Ruffin fervently hoped would "stir the sluggish blood of the South"; and finally, the election of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency in 1860.

[2] Robert Barnwell Rhett, MS on "Northern Money Power," n.d., box 357, folder 4, Rhett to Matthew Foster, [February 1?], 1851, box 358, folder 3, Robert Barnwell Rhett Sr. Papers, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston (hereafter cited as SCHS).

[3] William D. Porter, "State Sovereignty and the Doctrine of Coercion," 1860 Association Tract No. 2 (Charleston, S.C.: Evans and Cogswell's Steam-Power Presses, 1860), 21 (quotations).

Ruffin summarized succinctly the significance of that election as viewed through the lens of the fire-eaters. While preparing to depart for the courthouse to cast his vote for the Breckinridge-Lane ticket, he penned this entry in his diary: "This is the day for the election of electors—the momentous election which, if showing the subsequent election of Lincoln to be certain, will serve to show whether these southern states are to remain free, or to be politically enslaved—whether the institution of negro slavery, on which the social & political existence of the south rests, is to be secured by our resistance, or to be abolished in a short time, as the certain result of our present submission to northern domination."[4]

Not only did the southern extremists believe that secession was an imperative necessity, but they also were convinced that such an act was legal and constitutional. The right of secession, Porter wrote, was based upon the premise "that the States, before the adoption of the Constitution, were sovereign and independent; that the Federal Union is a union of States, and that the Constitution is a covenant or compact between them and the fundamental law of their Union; and that inasmuch as the covenant or compact was between sovereigns, and there is no umpire or common interpreter between them, each has the right to judge for itself... infractions of the contract, and to determine for itself the mode and measure of redress." It followed therefore that "any State, which conceives herself aggrieved beyond endurance, may, at her sovereign will and pleasure, shake off the bonds of a broken covenant and seek her safety in a separate nationality." Any effort to coerce a state back into the Union from which it had voluntarily withdrawn would render that state "no longer a voluntary or an equal member" of that Union, but "a subjugated province" and "the captive" of the remaining states. Such was the rationale for peaceable secession.[5]

Let us turn now to a closer examination of the careers of two of the leading fire-eaters, Edmund Ruffin and Robert Barnwell Rhett. Born in 1794, the son of a prominent James River planter, Ruffin was destined to achieve distinction as perhaps the greatest agricultural reformer in the antebellum South and notoriety as an apologist for slavery and rabid secessionist. After attending William and Mary College and serving briefly as a private in the War of 1812, he returned to his inherited plantation at Coggin's Point on the James River and began a career as a gentlemen farmer. When his early efforts failed, he inaugurated a series of experiments in 1818 with marl, a shell-like deposit rich in calcium carbonate, which could be used to neutralize the excessive vegetable acidity in the worn-out lands of eastern Virginia. After these experiments proved successful, he publicized his findings, first in *An Essay on*

[4] William K. Scarborough, ed., *The Diary of Edmund Ruffin*, 3 vols. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972–1989), 1: 349, 482.

[5] Porter, "State Sovereignty," 6, 19.

Calcareous Manures (1832) and then in his celebrated but short-lived agricultural journal, the *Farmers' Register* (1833–1842). The following year, at the request of Governor James H. Hammond, he conducted an agricultural survey of South Carolina, where he found the political atmosphere quite congenial despite doubts from agriculturists about the efficacy of marling. In 1844 Ruffin acquired a one-thousand-acre plantation on the Pamunkey River just northeast of Richmond, which he appropriately named Marlbourne, and proceeded to transform it into a model estate. Later, he was instrumental in reviving the Virginia State Agricultural Society and was four times elected president of that body.[6]

After retiring from the active management of his agricultural operations in the mid 1850s, Ruffin turned his attention almost exclusively to politics. Strongly opinionated, uncompromising in his views, and sharply critical of a democratic system that he believed pandered to demagogues and rewarded mediocrity, he eschewed active participation in politics, serving only an abbreviated term as state senator in the 1820s. By the 1840s, however, he had become alarmed and angered by the increasingly intemperate attacks upon southern institutions by the abolitionists and their allies in the North. Sufficiently moderate in 1831 to have interceded on behalf of a slave wrongfully implicated in the Nat Turner uprising, Ruffin later assumed an inflexible proslavery position. Convinced that slavery was the very cornerstone of southern society and that its future could not be guaranteed within the Union, he became an outspoken secessionist. He was particularly upset by the Wilmot Proviso of 1846, which posed a threat to the future expansion of slave territory. His already pronounced admiration for John C. Calhoun was heightened when the dying old warrior fought against the Compromise of 1850 and pleaded with the North for substantive constitutional guarantees to protect southern interests.

It was during the late 1850s that Ruffin's crusade for disunion became most intense. Lacking the oratorical skills of fellow fire-eater William Yancey or the political influence of Barnwell Rhett, Ruffin resorted instead to personal conversation and the power of the pen to influence the course of events. Just as he had earlier promoted the gospel of marl, so now he proselytized for his dream of southern independence. In hotel lobbies from Washington to Charleston, at the Virginia Springs, at the Southern Commercial Convention in Montgomery, Alabama, on trains and steamboats—everywhere he traveled—Ruffin was indefatigable in his zeal to persuade southerners that their only salvation lay in separate nationhood. Even more important were his voluminous writings. In addition to numerous articles and editorials pre-

[6] Scarborough, *Diary of Edmund Ruffin*, 1: xviii–xx; *Encyclopedia of the Confederacy*, ed. Richard N. Current et al. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), s.v. "Ruffin, Edmund."

pared for newspapers in Richmond and Charleston, these works included three lengthy pamphlets and two major articles, one of them serialized in *De Bow's Review*, as well as a 426-page political novel, *Anticipations of the Future*, which was inspired by John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry. The latter took the form of a series of letters purportedly written by an English correspondent of the London *Times*, which commenced with William H. Seward's election to a second term as president in 1868 and were designed to "show how extreme oppression may be inflicted on the southern states, & their virtual bondage to the north, without any infraction of the federal constitution." In the end, driven to desperation by a constitutional amendment abolishing slavery and the imposition of high protective tariffs, the South finally seceded and in a brief but costly war achieved its independence and enjoyed a return to prosperity.[7]

While attending the Southern Commercial Convention in Montgomery in May 1858, Ruffin enlisted Yancey's aid in organizing the League of United Southerners, an association of private individuals that would attempt to sway public opinion toward secession through "discussion, publications, & public speeches." However, the movement gained little momentum in the face of conservatives who desired to remain in the national Democratic Party and feared that the proposed league would injure the prospects of potential southern candidates for president in 1860. The culmination of this abortive campaign was reached in the summer of 1860, when sundry newspapers published Yancey's response to Stephen Douglas supporter James S. Slaughter of Alabama, who had charged that Yancey and Ruffin were leading a secret conspiracy through the league to destroy the Union. In his response, Yancey counseled southern resistance to northern transgressions through the League of United Southerners rather than a national or even sectional political party. In his diary, Ruffin remarked ruefully that he only wished Slaughter's fears about "the progress & operations of the 'Southern League' were true. . . . but if there have been any such operations or effects, I am entirely uninformed."[8]

As the months passed, Ruffin became increasingly discouraged by what he termed the submissionist atmosphere in the South, particularly in his native state of Virginia, where his views were distinctly unpopular. In another effort to arouse secessionist fervor, he wrote an article entitled "Cassandra—Warnings" that was published in the Rhett paper, the *Charleston Mercury*, on July 21, 1859. After reciting the usual litany of complaints against the North,

[7] *Encyclopedia of the Confederacy*, 3: 1349–1351; Scarborough, *Diary of Edmund Ruffin*, 1: xxiii, 408 (quotation); Avery O. Craven, *Edmund Ruffin, Southerner: A Study in Secession* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966), 188–189.

[8] Scarborough, *Diary of Edmund Ruffin*, 1: 195–196 (first quotation), 220–221, 444 (last quotation); Craven, *Edmund Ruffin, Southerner*, 162–163.

he proceeded to unveil the argument later reiterated in his novel *Anticipations of the Future*—namely, that within a very few years the admission of additional nonslaveholding states would give the North the necessary three-fourths majority to abolish slavery by constitutional amendment. There were presently thirty-three states in the Union, of which only fifteen were slave states, and one of those (Delaware) had few slaves and was more closely identified with the North. In view of the mounting opposition to slavery expansion and the prospect of a Republican president, it seemed likely that all new states would be free states. If the border states of Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri joined with Delaware and passed into the antislavery camp, the number of slave states would be reduced to eleven, and the admission of a like number of free states would give the North the requisite majority to abolish slavery by constitutional means. "Can any one [*sic*] suppose that this increase of the number of States and of power to abolition fanaticism will not occur within the next fifteen years?" asked Ruffin. "And can any southern statesman and patriot be so credulous as to believe that, when this power shall be legally possessed, it will not be exercised and fully enforced by those who have heretofore steadily worked for the same end of general emancipation, while directly in opposition to the laws and constitution of the United States"?[9]

Once again, Ruffin's rhetoric seemed to have little effect on the public mind, and by mid October 1859, he had become so discouraged that he was contemplating suicide. Thus, he closed his diary entry for October 18 with these words: "I have lived long enough—& a little more time of such unused & wearisome passage of time will make my life too long." The following day, however, he was re-energized by early reports of the exciting events in Harper's Ferry. When later information confirmed "that the outbreak was planned & instigated by northern abolitionists . . . with the expectation of thus starting a general slave insurrection," his spirits soared as he discerned correctly that this event would have a profound effect on the southern psyche. By the end of November, he was on his way to the "seat of war," traveling first to Harper's Ferry and then on to Charlestown, where he enlisted in the corps of cadets of the Virginia Military Institute for one day in order to witness the execution of John Brown. He admitted that at age sixty-five, he must have presented a "very amusing, & perhaps ludicrous" appearance as he marched within the ranks of the teen-aged cadets to and from the execution ground. After witnessing the courageous manner in which the revolutionary abolitionist met his death, Ruffin was forced to admit grudgingly that Brown had

[9] "Cassandra—Warnings," app. D in Scarborough, *Diary of Edmund Ruffin*, 1: 627–632 (quotation on p. 631). Computations are by the author, correcting Ruffin's faulty arithmetic.

few equals in his display of "physical or animal courage, or the most complete fearlessness of & insensibility to danger & death."[10]

Before leaving Harper's Ferry, the exuberant Ruffin decided to dramatize the infamy of Brown's plot by sending one of the pikes seized from the conspirators to the governor of each slave state with the exception of Delaware, where he did not think the gift would be appreciated. He affixed the same inscription to all of the pikes: "Sample of the favors designed for us by our Northern Brethren." He also included with each shipment a letter to the governor, requesting that the weapon be displayed conspicuously and permanently in the state capitol "as abiding & impressive evidence of the fanatical hatred borne by the dominant northern party to the institutions & the people of the Southern States, and of the unscrupulous & atrocious means resorted to for the attainment of the objects sought by that party."[11]

At the dawn of the new year, events began to move rapidly in the direction toward which Ruffin had long campaigned. During the early months of 1860, Ruffin became convinced that at least one state—South Carolina—would secede if Lincoln were elected president. Though the Palmetto State might stand alone at first, he was confident that other states would follow its lead. For the first time in his life, Ruffin began to receive the public adulation that heretofore had eluded him. Although he was given compliments and tributes wherever he traveled outside of Virginia, it was in South Carolina that he was most honored. Thus, immediately after casting his presidential ballot on November 6, he departed for that state, where he spent the next two weeks. Following his return to Virginia in late November, he remarked that "the time which I have spent in South Carolina . . . & elsewhere since I left home on the 6th inst. has been to me the most gratifying of my life. . . . In addition to the exciting & important, & most gratifying political events, of the progress of secession, I have myself been made the subject of kind feeling & favor, & of general appreciation, such as I had never before experienced, & never expected to receive."[12]

In mid December, Ruffin again returned to the Palmetto State, this time to witness the act of secession and participate in the subsequent celebration. He then proceeded to Florida, where, much to his delight, he was present when the convention of that state voted overwhelmingly for secession on January 10. He returned to Virginia in mid January and anxiously followed the news during the next month and a half as five more Deep South states seceded from the Union. He had hoped that his native state would soon follow suit, but he became increasingly disgusted with the inaction of the Virginia Convention,

[10] Scarborough, *Diary of Edmund Ruffin*, 1: 348 (first quotation), 349 (second quotation), 361, 368 (third quotation), 369–370, 371 (last quotation).

[11] Ibid., 1: xxxix.

[12] Ibid., 1: xl, 505 (quotation); *Encyclopedia of the Confederacy*, 3: 1349–1351.

which was, he remarked sarcastically, "taking as much time to elect door-keepers . . . as the Convention of S.C. used to dissolve the Union." Finally, on the eve of Lincoln's inauguration, he left once more for South Carolina, vowing never to return "until Va shall also secede, & become a member of the Southern Confederacy."[13]

After arriving in Charleston, he spent much of his time touring harbor fortifications in the company of such dignitaries as General P. G. T. Beauregard and a bevy of South Carolina ex-governors and other state officials. As the controversy over the federal occupation of Fort Sumter reached a climax in early April, the venerable old Virginian enlisted as a private in the Palmetto Guard and, in that capacity, was granted the honor of firing one of the first shots at Fort Sumter on the morning of April 12, 1861.[14]

The notoriety engendered by Ruffin's role in the Sumter engagement elevated him to the status of a popular hero in the South. Rejoining his South Carolina unit, the Palmetto Guard, in time for the Manassas campaign, the aging fire-eater once again performed symbolic military service for his beloved Confederacy, firing several artillery rounds at the fleeing Yankees as they retreated toward Washington. However, plagued by physical infirmities and wartime tribulations, he was soon reduced to the role of passive observer of the bloody war that he had helped to instigate. Family properties were pillaged during the successive federal operations against Richmond, and Ruffin was eventually compelled to seek refuge as an exile, finally going to Redmoor, a small farm situated about thirty-five miles west of the capital. Despite the deteriorating military situation, the increasingly embittered Ruffin remained steadfast in his commitment to the cause of southern independence until that dream was shattered forever at nearby Appomattox.

With the demise of the Confederacy, Ruffin no longer had any reason to live. Despondent over the deaths of family members and his own declining health, reduced to virtual destitution by enemy depredations during the war, and fearful lest he become both a political and pecuniary burden to his eldest son, Ruffin had long contemplated suicide. After the fall of Richmond, his resolve became fixed, and for more than two months, he planned methodically for the act of self-destruction, which he carried out shortly after noon on June 17, 1865, just nine weeks after Robert E. Lee's surrender. In his last living utterance, Ruffin declared his "unmitigated hatred to Yankee rule—to all political, social & business connections with Yankees—& to the Yankee race."[15]

[13] Scarborough, *Diary of Edmund Ruffin*, 1: 510–513, 528, 534–549 passim, 550 (first quotation), 557 (second quotation).

[14] Ibid., 561–562, 565–567, 573–574, 582–588.

[15] *Encyclopedia of the Confederacy*, 3: 1349–1351; Scarborough, *Diary of Edmund Ruffin*, 2: 88–89, 3: 946 (quotation).

Fellow fire-eater Robert Barnwell Rhett exercised more political influence than Ruffin, but even in his home state of South Carolina, he was regarded as an extremist. Rhett, termed the "Father of Secession" by his initial biographer, became a disunionist at least a quarter-century before his fellow Carolinians crossed the Rubicon. Born in December 1800 to James Smith, an English barrister and rather unsuccessful Beaufort District rice planter, Rhett had no formal education before the age of seventeen, but he studied law and was admitted to the bar in 1821. He soon entered politics, serving in the South Carolina House of Representatives from 1826 until he was elected attorney general of the state in November 1832. Subsequently, he served six terms in the U.S. House of Representatives (1837–1849), was a member of the Nashville Convention, succeeded his mentor and close friend John C. Calhoun as U.S. senator following the latter's death in 1850, and was a member of both the South Carolina Secession Convention and the Confederate States Provisional Congress. In 1837, just before taking his seat in the U.S. Congress, the South Carolina firebrand, along with his five surviving brothers, changed their surname from the rather common Smith to Rhett, the name of a favorite ancestor.[16]

Rhett's political extremism first manifested itself during the nullification crisis of 1828 to 1833. No other elite slaveholder—perhaps no other southerner—denounced the protective tariff more bitterly or more consistently than Rhett. "How is it possible," he exclaimed, "that in a free Country where all men" are equal under the law, "the Government, under the pretext of levying Taxes can establish a system of rule, by which some citizens are taxed for the benefit of others—and the property of one man is taken and given to another." He was so vociferous in his opposition to the Tariff of 1832 that he urged armed resistance should President Andrew Jackson attempt to use military force in the collection of tariff duties.[17]

In addition to his political activities and his proprietorship of the *Charleston Mercury* from 1858 to 1868, Rhett, like Ruffin, was a planter. At one time or another, he owned plantations in all four of the coastal rice-producing districts, but by 1850 he had consolidated his holdings to Colleton District,

[16] *Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774–1961* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1961), 1512; Alexander Moore, ed., *Biographical Directory of the South Carolina House of Representatives*, vol. 5, *1816–1828* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 224–226; Rhett Family Papers, SCHS; Laura A. White, *Robert Barnwell Rhett: Father of Secession* (1931; repr., Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1965).

[17] Rhett, "Northern Money Power" (quotation); William K. Scarborough, *Masters of the Big House: Elite Slaveholders of the Mid-Nineteenth-Century South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 254; William C. Davis, ed., *A Fire-Eater Remembers: The Confederate Memoir of Robert Barnwell Rhett* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), xi.

where he owned 306 slaves in Saint Bartholomew's Parish. By contrast, Ruffin owned 127 slaves on his two plantations in the same year.[18]

In view of their proprietary interest in slavery, it is not surprising that both men believed in the inherent inferiority of their enslaved property. Thus, after reading an address delivered in Monrovia, Liberia, by a black graduate of Cambridge University, Ruffin conceded grudgingly that he "would not deny the possibility of one negro in a hundred thousand cases being capable of receiving a college education, & being competent to write a commonplace address," but that was the rare exception. Pointing to the examples of Liberia and Haiti, he contended that they afforded "the clearest evidence that the negro will not work, nor take care for his support, unless ... compelled by a master of the white race." Rhett exhibited an even more virulent form of racism. Remarking that "slavery has existed in all ages and negro slavery was common in Egypt 5,000 years ago," he asserted that "the history of the Negro Race is simply a page of natural history." The race had no intellectual history, he continued, "because God had not endowed it" with the necessary faculties. "From the 'Great Desert' to the 'Cape of Good Hope' the true land of the negro," concluded Rhett, "not a vestige of civilization [is] to be found." Arguing that mental capacity could not be improved through education, he asserted that "the intellectual & physical characters of the different races were the same five thousand years ago as they are now."[19]

In light of these views, it is not surprising that Rhett should assume an even more radical political posture as the threat to slavery intensified. Hence, like his dying mentor Calhoun, Rhett was bitterly opposed to Henry Clay's compromise proposals in 1850. As one of the South Carolina delegates to the first Nashville Convention in June 1850, he hoped to rally support for cooperative secession by the beleaguered slave states. That hope faded, however, when a more moderate faction at the meeting voted merely to endorse an extension of the Missouri Compromise line to the Pacific Ocean and adjourned to await the outcome of the Clay compromise. Subsequently, Rhett was a delegate to the second (or rump) Nashville Convention, which met in November and denounced the Compromise of 1850 as an abject capitulation to the North. That body then called on the slave states to convene individual state conventions to determine an appropriate course of action.[20]

[18] Davis, *A Fire-Eater Remembers*, xiv; Moore, *Biographical Directory of the South Carolina House*, 5: 224–226; manuscript U.S. Census returns for Colleton District, S.C., Hanover and Prince George Counties, Va., 1850 (Schedule 2: Slave Inhabitants).

[19] Scarborough, *Diary of Edmund Ruffin*, 1: 102 (second quotation), 277 (first quotation); R. B. Rhett, "Essay on Slavery," n.d., box 357, folder 22, Robert Barnwell Rhett Sr. Papers, SCHS.

[20] Scarborough, *Masters of the Big House*, 265–267.

Several states responded affirmatively to the call from Nashville and scheduled conventions. With virtually no Unionist sentiment in South Carolina, the contest there was between the separate-state secessionists, led by Rhett, and the cooperationists, who favored secession only in concert with other slave states. The struggle began auspiciously for Rhett and the other immediate secessionists when they scored a decisive victory in the February 1851 election of delegates to a state convention to be held the next year. Yet their jubilation was fleeting: in a dramatic reversal of sentiment, the cooperationists swept to victory eight months later in the election of delegates to a proposed southern congress. "Has God indeed, forsaken our land?" cried Rhett's devoted wife, Elizabeth. "After all your noble exertions, your generous self-sacrificing devotion to this ungrateful, cowardly, stupid State," she continued bitterly, the submissionists have "thus disregarded . . . all your warnings & entreaties that they should act like men." From Camden, Joseph B. Kershaw, later a major general in the Confederate army, congratulated Rhett for his "fearless denunciation of the Grand Dama of political idolatry . . . the Compromise." Kershaw was thankful that at least one senator remained "whom neither fear nor interest" could silence. The people had spoken, however, and when the state convention finally assembled in April 1852, it merely affirmed the right of secession while declaring the action inexpedient at the present time. Consequently, the day after the convention adjourned, a disgusted Rhett resigned his seat in the Senate.[21]

But the determined South Carolinian would not be silenced, and he continued seizing every opportunity to proselytize for secession. Fourth of July celebrations were a particularly appropriate venue for his fiery rhetoric. Thus, when delivering an oration at an Independence Day gathering in Grahamville in 1859, he called for secession if a Republican were elected president the following year. Asserting that for twenty years he had done all in his power "to preserve this Union, by keeping it within the limits of the Constitution," he had "at last, in despair . . . turned to" his "home," his "native land," and proclaimed "to the South—Liberty, Justice, and an independent Government." In July 1860, Rhett addressed a mass meeting of citizens of the Charleston congressional district called to approve action by South Carolina's Democratic delegates at what has been dubbed the "Seceders' Convention" in Richmond and endorse John C. Breckinridge for president. "Had you acted eight and twenty years ago," he reminded the crowd, "and put it down in plain terms as did your ancestors, that you would have your rights or dissolve the Union, you would have had them." But, alas, such was not the case. Now, there was no alternative but to threaten disunion in order to claim

[21] Ibid., 270–274; Elizabeth W. Rhett to "My dear Husband," October 17 [1851], box 358, folder 4, J[oseph] B. Kershaw to R. B. Rhett, December 22 [1851], box 358, folder 12, Robert Barnwell Rhett Sr. Papers, SCHS.

their just rights. Reiterating that he and others of like mind actually preferred union to disunion, Rhett declared nevertheless that "we cannot submit to the government of a sectional party. We cannot submit to a majority totally irresponsible to us. We cannot submit to an irresponsible, limitless government by which our property may be" taken from our use, "and this great country be convulsed."[22]

Six months later, shortly after the election of Lincoln, Rhett was a member of the South Carolina Secession Convention that voted unanimously and without a word of debate to sever the Palmetto State's ties with the Union. Shortly thereafter, he was chosen as one of eight South Carolina representatives to the provisional Confederate Congress that convened in Montgomery on February 4, 1861, to organize the new government. In the provisional Congress, which met in five sessions (first in Montgomery and later in Richmond) until February 1862, Rhett chaired both the standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and the committee charged with drafting a constitution for the new nation. In this latter capacity, Rhett was instrumental in securing the adoption of a number of changes from the old U.S. Constitution. Chief among these were the following provisions in the permanent Confederate Constitution: Congress could levy tariffs for revenue only, and there were to be no bounties to promote any branch of industry (Art. I, Sect. 8); there were to be no appropriations for internal improvements except for navigational aids in harbors (Art. I, Sect. 8, Clause 3); the president and vice president were limited to one six-year term and were not eligible for re-election (Art. II, Sect. 1), although Rhett would have agreed to make them eligible for re-election after a one-term interval; and finally, upon the request of three or more states, Congress was obliged to call a convention to consider amendments to the constitution (Art. V). Rhett contended after the war that if the latter provision had been part of the original federal constitution, "the vast discontents which preceeded [*sic*] the War, and made it inevitable, would have been easily arrested and allayed; and the States assembled in Convention, would have settled amicably all their differences."[23]

Disappointed at not receiving a prestigious office in the government he had helped to create, Rhett and his son, through their organ the *Charleston Mercury*, mounted a vitriolic assault against President Jefferson Davis throughout the war, denouncing his appointments, his military strategy, and even his reluctant proposal near the end to arm the slaves in a desperate effort to save the beleaguered Confederacy. Four of Rhett's sons served as officers in the Confederate army, and the youngest, Lieutenant Robert Woodward Rhett of

[22] *Charleston Daily Courier*, July 6, 1859, July 11, 1860.

[23] Scarborough, *Diary of Edmund Ruffin*, 1: 512; *Charleston Daily Courier*, February 1, 1861; R. B. Rhett to [nephew] T. Stuart Rhett [1868], box 358, folder 16, Robert Barnwell Rhett Sr. Papers, SCHS; Scarborough, *Masters of the Big House*, 299.

the First Regiment, South Carolina Volunteers, was mortally wounded during the Peninsula Campaign in June 1862. Rhett himself barely escaped the clutches of the enemy in a desperate midnight flight from General William T. Sherman's army in the closing days of the war.[24]

Several years after Appomattox, Rhett provided his retrospective analysis of why the South had chosen to secede. According to Rhett, "The Southern States had seceded from the United States, on account of one cause only—the usurpations of the Northern States, upon the Constitution of the United States." There had been no disagreement between the sections over the *express powers* granted by the Constitution. Rather, the problem lay with the *inferential powers* claimed by the North, which the South "had opposed, as usurpations on the Constitution—beginning with Banks, alien and sedition laws, Tariffs, and internal improvements—finally ending with slavery, and sectionalism." The South, asserted Rhett, had always been satisfied with the U.S. Constitution, but when the usurpations by the North transformed that instrument from a limited government to a "limitless despotism," the southern states had no choice but to secede.[25]

Left virtually destitute by the war, Rhett journeyed to New York in the summer of 1867 in a quest for credit, but he found the bankers cold and reluctant to support anything southern. "They not only will not put out money in the South," he confided to his wife, but they "will not lend it, on any Southern Securities, personal or material. . . . In this condition of things," he added, "seeking to obtain money by a Southerner, is like seeking obligations." Terming the experience "most humiliating," he returned home empty-handed. Later that year, he moved to the residence of his daughter and son-in-law, Colonel Alfred Roman, in Saint James Parish, Louisiana, where he remained until his death on September 14, 1876.[26]

One final point should be made about the propagandists for secession. None of the living fire-eaters (Quitman died in 1858)—Ruffin, Rhett, Yancey, Louis T. Wigfall, and others—held any important office in the government they had labored so long to create. In the end, their misguided efforts succeeded only in bringing tragedy to themselves and the society they had fought to protect.

[24] Ezra J. Warner and W. Buck Yearns, *Biographical Register of the Confederate Congress* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975), 206; Davis, *A Fire-Eater Remembers*, ix–xiii; Rhett Family Papers, SCHS; *Charleston Daily Courier*, July 3, 1862; Catharine Rhett's Account of Flight from Yankees, n.d., box 357, folder 22, Robert Barnwell Rhett Sr., Papers, SCHS.

[25] R. B. Rhett to T. Stuart Rhett [1868], box 358, folder 16, Robert Barnwell Rhett Sr. Papers, SCHS.

[26] R. B. Rhett to "My Dear Kate," June 9, 1867, box 358, folder 15, Robert Barnwell Rhett Sr. Papers, SCHS; *Biographical Directory of the American Congress*, 1512.