

# Showdown in Virginia

**The 1861 Convention  
and the Fate of the Union**

*Edited by William W. Freehling  
and Craig M. Simpson*

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Sir, the destiny of Virginia is committed now to our hands. . . . Don't let us distract the people by submitting to them alternate propositions. We are sent here to tell them what we think they ought to do, not to throw upon them the decision of a military or other question which ought to be considered here with closed doors. Whether the State would be benefited by co-operation or separate action, we are the people to decide. We know the grounds upon which to decide. We have the information, and they look to us for advice; and, in my judgment, we should be wanting in our duty to them, if we failed to indicate to them the line of policy which, in our judgment, they ought to pursue. . . .

**Alexander H. H. Stuart's Open-Ended Unionism** *For two months Alexander Hugh Holmes Stuart had been surprisingly less important in the convention than his fellow Staunton resident, law partner, cousin, and brother-in-law, the less wealthy John Baldwin. Although Baldwin had only previously served in the state legislature's lower house, Stuart had sat in the state senate, Congress, and Millard Fillmore's cabinet. But at the convention Baldwin became the family's star performer, and Stuart usually applauded from the shadows.*<sup>2</sup>

*The shadows were no place for the Shenandoah Valley's most famous Unionist, not after he joined the convention's commission to Lincoln, listened to the president threaten to reinforce Fort Sumter, and then heard George Wythe Randolph and Henry Wise rattling the swords. Sandy Stuart, joining his brother-in-law in representing Augusta County (20.2 percent enslaved), answered Randolph and Wise by declaring that Virginia must not seize federal military installations before its citizens approved secession.*

*Stuart also alarmed secessionists by suggesting that a border conference might lead to an independent border state confederacy. More alarmingly still, he denied that the Virginia convention need adopt a contingency plan if a border conference failed. This was unionism opened to the skies, with no prospect of joining the Confederacy in sight.*

2. Gaines, *Biographical Register*, 72; ANB; Alexander Farrish Robertson, *Alexander Hugh Holmes Stuart, 1807-1891: A Biography* (Richmond, 1925).

. . . I was so entirely taken by surprise by the appearance of the proclamation, that I did not for a moment believe that it was authentic. I believed that it was a sensation document, gotten up by some mischievous persons; and such was my confidence of that fact, that as soon as I read the document yesterday, I repaired to my room, prepared a despatch to the Secretary of State, to ask him whether it was genuine or fabricated. I received a response from him late last night that it was genuine. . . . I therefore think . . . that there is no hope of an amicable arrangement with the Administration. . . . My hopes in the perpetuation of the Union, as it now stands, have [also] been greatly weakened, if they have not been entirely destroyed.

In this emergency, . . . three lines of policy . . . lay before us: One is to remain in the Union as we are, and to lend our forces and our arms to the subjugation of our Southern sisters, . . . without . . . guarantees of protection . . . consistent with the interest and the honor of the Commonwealth. Sir, if we remain as we are we abandon, in my judgment, all hope of obtaining any such guarantees; we abandon all hope of security, and we lend ourselves to the purposes of a dominant, sectional majority. I am not, then, sir, for adopting that line of policy.

But there are two . . . [alternatives]. One is to secede immediately, and the other is to ask the co-operation of our sister States which have not yet seceded. . . .

Here is a war waging. Here is an immense preparation made on the part of the United States Government for carrying on that war. The present seat of that war is at a remote part of the Union. It is now confined to the region about the city of Charleston and the city of Pensacola. . . . What would be the effect of the immediate secession of Virginia? It would be to transfer the seat of war from the Gulf of Mexico, and from the extreme Southern part of our Atlantic coast, to the bosom of Virginia. . . .

I could not conceive of any greater favor that you could confer upon this Black Republican administration. . . . The miasma arising from the swamps of Florida, and the swamps that surround Charleston, would sweep out of existence more of the [federal] invaders than the [soldiers] . . . of the . . . Confederate States. All the provisions for the support of the Northern armies would have to be transported thousands of miles, at great expense; and it is under great difficulties that they could be supplied at all.

But, sir, by Virginia's seceding you transfer the seat of war to this fertile

and salubrious country. You transfer it to a country that furnishes every supply that is necessary for the support of the troops; to a climate that is entirely salubrious to the Northern troops who would be engaged in prosecuting the war. Yes, sir, you bring it home to your own fair cities and families.

You go into this war without any aid from any quarter. We have no alliance with the Confederate States, nor [with] our sister border States not yet seceded, and Virginia would stand alone between the Federal Government and the Confederate States of the South. She would be the battle ground. Her fields would be laid waste, and her citizens would become the victims of the conflict.

And, sir, what is our state of preparation? Where is our ordnance? Where is our musketry? Where are our rifles? Where, in fact, are any of the munitions of war, which are indispensable for our security? . . . My friend over the way, from the city of Richmond [Mr. RANDOLPH] has suggested the idea of the capture of the Navy Yard at Gosport, and of the Armory at Harpers Ferry. Let me call his attention, and that of the Convention, to the relations which we now bear to the Federal Government.

An ordinance of secession does not terminate our relations with the Federal Government. An ordinance passed by this body . . . goes forth simply as a matter of advice to the people; and, without the ratification of the people, it is not worth the paper on which it is written. What, then, are we to do? Are we acting under the obligation of an oath to support the Constitution of the United States, as I venture to say almost every man in this body is? I ask gentlemen, under these circumstances, if they are prepared, in view of the obligation of that oath, to make, as it were, a flagrant and unprovoked war upon the Government of the United States by seizing upon these public arsenals? . . .

In my opinion, secession is not only war, but it is emancipation; it is bankruptcy; it is repudiation; it is wide-spread ruin to our people; nay, sir, it must be more. It may result . . . in another dissolution, . . . more painful, even, than the overthrow of the Union itself. It may result in a dissolution of the bonds which bind together the different great slopes of the State. . . .

Here we have our State divided into two great mountain shoots—one sloping to the Atlantic, and the other to the Ohio. We find the trade and the social relations of that [westward] mountain slope intertwined and associated with the great West. We find almost all their relations connected

with the non-slaveholding States of the great West. These people, then, will be called upon to sever connections of the most intimate character—connections which affect vitally every interest which they have—connections which are indispensable to their enjoyment, their social happiness and prosperity. . . .

But, sir, there is another aspect of the case. We have already held out to our sister States that have not yet seceded, the idea that we intended to cooperate with them. . . . How would we be regarded, if . . . we should now precipitately rush ourselves out of the Union without consulting them? Did we not all complain of the action of South Carolina, in going out of the Union without consultation with any of her sister States? . . . Now, sir, I for one am not for following the example of South Carolina. . . .

Here is Virginia surrounded on three sides by States that have not seceded, and on the other side bounded by the Atlantic ocean. How would we stand if North Carolina, Maryland, Kentucky and Tennessee refused to secede? . . . If a nation is going to war, does it not always seek . . . alliances offensive and defensive? When we were struggling for our independence did we not seek an alliance with France to aid us in our struggle for liberty? . . . But if we have this conference, if these other States should come into line with us, if we show an unbroken front, then I cherish the hope that the North, according to the argument which has been urged by our friends, the secessionists, will see that it is a hopeless task to attempt to subjugate these eight States, in addition to the seven seceded States; and that, instead of the bloody war which we now expect, we might have a peaceable adjustment of our difficulties.

Sir, I am in favor of making this appeal. . . . I am in favor of addressing this invitation to our sister States to meet us in Conference at Frankfort on the 27th of next month. I want to have a full and fair interchange of opinion in secret session with them there. . . . I believe that the relations of business interests and those social ties which connect the Border States, on either side, will exercise the most potent influence on either side of the dividing line; and I would be willing to tender to Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York and New Jersey, such amendments to the Constitution, or such a new Constitution as we are willing to live under. I would invite their aid and concurrence. I would invite them to join us under a new Constitution, framed with such guarantees as would give to us effectual security for all our rights. I would invite them to disconnect themselves from the extreme North and North-west, and, unlike some

of my friends, my information leads me to believe that such an appeal would be responded to by these States.

Sir, fanaticism is a great evil, and I would avoid contact with it as I would a plague; but business relations, private interests, social ties, the ties of brotherhood, the ties of intermarriage and of communication, in every form and shape in which they can take place, must, to a great extent, counterbalance this odious fanaticism; and in severing those political ties, I would seek to withdraw these States from their allegiance to the Federal government—I would seek to induce them to become part and parcel of our new government. I would seek to have a tier of friendly States between the slaveholding States and the States of the extreme North and North-west. By pursuing this policy we would, I believe, ultimately effect a reconstruction of the Union upon such terms as we would dictate. We could compel the young States to come . . . [in on] our terms or to remain outside of this great Central Confederacy. . . . Our Southern sisters would quickly unite with us; because . . . they would feel there would be security from every foe, external and internal. . . .

Sir, pass the Ordinance of Secession now, and you incur another hazard. You incur the hazard that the people themselves, not quite as sensitive to the highest notions of chivalry as the members of this Convention, but looking with a more unimpassioned view at the practical results, the interruptions to business, the burthensome taxation, the onerous military service, all the privations of every description which they are to suffer, might be induced to vote down the Ordinance of Secession. And where would you then stand? The gentleman before me [Mr. MORTON] says forcible revolution would follow. Revolution against whom? . . . The gentleman would not be willing to turn his sword against his brother, who, cherishing a feeling of attachment to his country, might entertain a different notion of what is best for its interest. . . .

Mr. MORTON: Will the gentleman permit me to ask him a question?

Mr. STUART: Certainly.

Mr. MORTON: The gentleman, I understood, in . . . [his] first proposition, . . . repudiated the idea of continuing in this Union.

Mr. STUART: Yes, sir.

Mr. MORTON: The gentleman has not told us what would be his course in the event of a rejection or the abortion of the Border Conference. Suppose the Conference should fail, what position would he then have Virginia occupy?

Mr. STUART: I might answer the gentleman in the language of the Scripture: "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof;" but I will say that his conclusions are so remote, so nearly relate to an impossibility, as scarcely to need any discussion. If we treat our sister States with ordinary respect, I can hardly look to such a contingency, or deem any measure necessary to provide for that contingency.

**Even the Trans-Allegheny Divided: John Jackson Again Answers William Ballard Preston** *Despite Alexander H. H.*

*Stuart's oratory, his erstwhile Unionist colleague William Ballard Preston, of the southern Trans-Allegheny, introduced an "Ordinance of Secession," to "take effect . . . when ratified by a majority of the votes . . . cast at a poll . . . on" May 23.<sup>3</sup> The northern Trans-Allegheny's John Jackson was again first to protest against a Preston initiative. Jackson's latest protest demonstrated anew that the Trans-Allegheny suffered from its own north-south split. Jackson stormed not only at his ex-Unionist colleague's secession ordinance, not only at the southern Trans-Allegheny's disregard for the northern Trans-Allegheny's plight, not only at the dangers of disunion, but also at the evident plot afoot to seize forts before the people had spoken on Preston's ordinance.*

I have done . . . all that lies in my power in order to effect reconciliation and restore peace and unity. I have now been conducted by gentlemen upon this floor to the brink of a yawning gulf, and I feel to-day as if I was at . . . the funeral of my country; aye, sir, a funeral which must be but the forerunner of many a disaster, and much suffering.

I have no heart; no, no, sir—none whatever. I stand here an old man; I have loved my country; I have served my country; I have served this Commonwealth long, faithfully, earnestly— . . . with my whole heart. . . . I stand here to-day having taken the oath to support the Constitution of the United States twenty-seven times. . . . Was it of no consequence that I called the eternal God to witness that I would be true to the Constitution of Virginia as well as the Constitution of the United States? . . . In a few years more I expect to be confronted with Him. . . . Is it compatible with

3. Reese, *Proceedings* 4:24–25.



state of things, I apprehend that, with the disruption of interests which will follow the act of secession, deep and bitter dissatisfaction will prevail among them upon the consummation of this act of dissolution.

Now, sir, I have been in favor of a Border State Conference. Why, sir? Because if Virginia moved and Maryland would not, the mountains and hills which, until within the last few years, have shut us out from the world, would again encircle us, and the only outlet which we have had would be effectually blocked up. We would be shut out from every market, and our condition would be no better than was that of the primitive settlers of that vast North-western region. . . . Universal bankruptcy will spread all over my country. . . . Not the least of the evils . . . will be, as I very much apprehend, the manumission of every slave in our midst by the enemy.

I am a Virginian in every aspiration, and feeling, and sentiment. I stood by you at all times in defending your rights. I would like to do so now. I would like to see a united Virginia, and to that end I should have been pleased to see you pay some attention to our interests; for it is only in that way that you can reconcile our people to the sufferings and disadvantages to be entailed by dissolution. Why not now adopt some measure upon which we can all unite? Will you save us by adopting the border State Conference proposition, or hand us over to a heartless enemy by passing the ordinance of secession? . . .

**John Hughes's Conversion** *At this final precession moment, only one Trans-Allegheny speaker sought disunion. John N. Hughes, representing Randolph and Tucker counties (together 3.2 percent enslaved), explained one last time why Lincoln's proclamation had shattered the Unionist coalition.*

. . . Heretofore, I have co-operated with the Union party on this floor. I have had an earnest, abiding faith that all our difficulties might be amicably settled, and that peace and quiet might once more reign throughout the borders of this noble old Commonwealth. I have clung to the last broken plank of our once noble ship of State, until it has sunk beneath me; and I have now but one remedy left. . . .

An emergency has arisen which compels . . . prompt, immediate, decisive action. . . . I am opposed to making any more propositions to a tyrannical and overbearing foe that desires to make slaves of me and you. . . . I can submit no longer. . . .

Look, if you please, at the action of the last Black Republican Congress, sixty-seven members of which signed a recommendation in favor of the notorious Helper book, which advised our slaves to rise up and cut our throats.<sup>1</sup> . . . [Look too] at a proposition introduced into the Congress of the United States that the Black Republican party must not interfere with slavery in the States; and what do you find in the teeth of this movement? I blush to state the fact—that almost 100 Black Republicans in that Congress voted against that proposition, . . . [in] effect . . . declaring war upon slavery in Virginia and the South. . . .

Notwithstanding all this, I was willing still to compromise, still to adjust our difficulties, still to meet them in a spirit of brotherly love. . . . [Yet] while we showed to Abraham Lincoln that there was a majority of this Convention who were determined to preserve this Union; while we were engaged in this good work of seeking to effect an adjustment, Lincoln . . . adds insult to injury; he makes a requisition upon Gov. Letcher for Virginia's quota of troops to make war upon the Southern States. When that is the case, after having done all that, as an honorable man, I think I can do . . . to adjust these difficulties—I feel compelled to give my vote in favor of action—decisive and immediate action. . . . [A] declaration of war upon our people . . . [compels a] vote in favor of the Ordinance of Secession.

**Chapman Stuart's Warning** *As the convention's vote on secession approached, Chapman Stuart explained one last time why a secessionist military strike before the voters' verdict on the convention's decision might help provoke a western rebellion.*

. . . [Gentlemen ask], were we Western Virginians and not Virginians! Let me say to that gentleman that I am a Virginian. My great ancestor

1. Hughes here refers to the Republican congressmen who endorsed Hinton R. Helper's *The Impending Crisis in the South: How to Meet It* (New York, 1857). Helper, a North Carolina racist nonslaveholder, intended to arouse slaveless whites, not enslaved blacks, against the slaveholders. But whatever his intention, angry Southern politicians called his antislavery appeal an incendiary menace to racial peace. They would not allow an endorser of *The Impending Crisis* to become Speaker of the national House of Representatives. Their intransigence led to the two-month-long Speakership crisis in late 1859–early 1860. The same apprehension about Southern antislavery agitators, if supported by Northern Republicans, provoked the secessionists' concern, evident in some speeches above, that President Lincoln would use federal patronage to build a Helper-like Southern Republican Party.