

Britain's failed plot to smash the Union

by H. Graham Lowry

America in 1857: A Nation on the Brink

by Kenneth M. Stampp

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It must be said at the outset that this latest historical work by Kenneth Stampp is a very *relevant* book—and a British-inspired fraud. Now professor emeritus of history at the University of California at Berkeley, the old revisionist has taken the theme of “a nation on the brink,” to set forth the disastrous events of 1857 in the United States as an implicit projection of its doom in the 1990s.

Completed in late 1989, Stampp's work stresses the destructive shocks suffered by the American Republic in 1857 as “the political point of no return,” making the “violent resolution” of the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 virtually inevitable. The abuses heaped on Americans in 1857 have a familiar ring: outright trampling on the Constitution by the President and the Supreme Court; a “free market” trade policy which battered the American economy; the collapse of an underregulated banking system; massive real estate and paper speculation leading to a financial panic; nationwide industrial shutdowns and farm foreclosures; skyrocketing unemployment and homelessness; organized riots and lawless mobs.

An historical work devoted to alerting us to the mistakes of the past, especially to prevent their repetition in a similar time of crisis, is always valuable. But Stampp's *America in 1857* is a deliberate effort to make those errors both unknow-

able and inevitable again. His veneer of scholarly competence is supplied by noting tens of thousands of trees, without ever identifying the forest. But Americans of the time were not so lost in the woods as Stampp suggests. Enough of them knew that they were in a battle for survival against Britain, their historic adversary, and had to defeat it once again.

The American Revolution had nearly ended British dreams of a world empire. America's nation-building surge begun in the 1820s, under the principles of the American System of political economy, threatened to extinguish those imperial ambitions entirely. What followed was a series of British-sponsored coups d'état, beginning with the fraudulent election of the traitor Andrew Jackson to the presidency in 1828, and his destruction by veto of the Bank of the United States and federal internal improvements.

Outright violence was employed to bolster the main base of the British enemy within—the slave-based “Confederate” oligarchy of the Southern states—by undoing Virginia's attempted constitutional emancipation of slaves through fomenting Nat Turner's rebellion in 1831. To the same end, Jackson ordered the barbarous denial of assimilation and citizenship to the Cherokees, leading to their forcible removal from their Southern lands, and the infamous death-march to Oklahoma over “the trail of tears” in 1838.

In 1840, American patriots—led by Henry Clay's Whigs—mobilized to end the ruin imposed by Jackson and his successor Martin Van Buren, the first man ever appointed minister to our despised enemy, Great Britain. Whig candidate William Henry Harrison, hero of the War of 1812, was elected President—only to be murdered quietly by White House physicians a few weeks later. The assassination in-

stalled his vice president, John Tyler of Tennessee, who promptly broke with Whig policies and reimposed British-Confederate rule.

The list could go on and on, including the first of many British efforts to use the United States as its “dumb giant”—and on behalf of the slave power—in the 1846 War with Mexico. But suffice it to say, by the 1850s, the future Confederate States of America was *already* controlling the government of the United States, and the British plan for the destruction of the Union was close to completion.

For a reader with some idea of the forest he is entering, Stamp’s work unintentionally provides more than sufficient evidence, that the intended fatal blows of 1857 were directed from London.

The slave-based Confederacy

At the United States Military Academy at West Point, there is a spectacular overlook of the broad Hudson River which also provides an important historical lesson. Upon this high point of land, a long row of captured Confederate cannon are still on display, aiming north onto the river. From the foundry markings, every single one of them is identifiable as made in Britain. Nearby monuments recite the deeds and sacrifices of the Union armies in the “War of the Rebellion,” as the Civil War was then properly known to defenders of the Union. It is as though the cannon are arrayed in proud defiance of British efforts to destroy the republic, recalling the British attempt during the American Revolution to attack from Canada, down the Hudson, and split the new nation virtually in two.

The British-backed Confederacy was entirely based on the oligarchical system of slavery. And between the New England secessionists of the War of 1812 and the Southern slave interests, the British grip on the affairs of the United States gained the upper hand. This was especially true after the disastrous Compromise of 1820, which mortgaged the expansion of the nation to the admission of another slave state for every new free state admitted from the Western territories. By 1852, the year with which Stamp begins setting the stage for his work, the power of the slave interests and their Northern allies was enormous.

The election of 1852 installed as President Democrat Franklin Pierce, a Confederate “ringer” from New Hampshire who narrowly won the popular vote against Whig hero Winfield Scott, but carried the South to take the Electoral College by 254-42. He was an 1824 graduate of Maine’s Bowdoin College, where he became the close friend of Nathaniel Hawthorne, the romantic “transcendentalist” writer and peddler of cultural pessimism, who wrote his presidential campaign biography. “Almost from the outset,” Stamp acknowledges, Pierce “fell under the influence of the Southern wing of the party, especially the state-rights extremists such as [future Confederate President] Jefferson Davis of Mississippi, whom he appointed secretary of war.”

Pierce was the willing instrument of every British pro-slavery policy during his term. He backed the schemes of slavery expansionists to detach Cuba from Spain, and “looked benevolently” on Tennessee-born William Walker’s brief seizure of the government of Nicaragua. In 1854, he took the pro-slavery side in support of Stephen Douglas’s Kansas-Nebraska Act, which legalized slavery in the territories and set off the violence in “Bloody Kansas.” He endorsed the rigged election in 1855 of a pro-slavery legislature for the Kansas Territory, and supported it with federal troops and pro-slavery judicial appointees.

A Queen’s favorite in the White House

Pierce’s successor as President, the infamous James Buchanan of Pennsylvania, was narrowly elected in 1856 over John C. Fremont of the fledgling Republican Party, and—like Pierce—owed his office to the slave power. Nearly two-thirds of his electoral votes came from slave states. Buchanan also came with direct British training for the job, having served as minister to Great Britain under Pierce. While being groomed at the Court of St. James, Buchanan enjoyed the hospitality of Queen Victoria at Windsor Castle.

He later reciprocated, just before the fateful election of 1860, by inviting the young Prince of Wales to the United States as his personal guest. This unprecedented homage to the British monarchy, extended to the future King Edward VII and great-grandson of King George III, included a joint visit to George Washington’s tomb at Mt. Vernon! Stamp omits the tale, of course, since it did not happen in 1857.

In 1854, while serving in London, Buchanan helped frame the so-called Ostend Manifesto, urging the Pierce administration to acquire the slave colony of Cuba from Spain, by force if necessary. As President-elect, Buchanan’s most trusted advisers were led by Louisiana Sen. John Slidell, later Confederate minister to Britain. In selecting his cabinet, Buchanan was advised to “yield pretty generously” to the South by his long-time aide, John Appleton of Maine, who had been his secretary in London. “Buchanan heeded the advice,” Stamp notes, “and wrote a friendly letter to Jefferson Davis, who responded cordially to his wish to renew their ‘old relations of friendship and confidence.’ ”

Early in 1857, the lame duck Congress put through a tariff bill, which seriously weakened what remained of the American System’s protections for domestic manufacturing, especially the iron industry—so vital to national security. Largely the work of Virginia Sen. R.M.T. Hunter, a rabid state-rights slaveholder, the measure was signed into law by Franklin Pierce as one of his last acts as President. Some Northern congressmen predicted the measure would lead to a “financial panic”—and it did.

James Buchanan was inaugurated the next day, March 4, 1857. He apparently knew his mission was the destruction of the Union, for he made the unusual announcement in his inaugural address that he would not be a candidate for

reelection. He had also engaged in a secret correspondence with members of the Supreme Court, urging a delay in rendering the *Dred Scott* decision until after his inauguration, and a ruling to overturn the Missouri Compromise's restriction on slavery in the territories.

Chief Justice Roger Taney, appointed by Andrew Jackson in 1835 to succeed John Marshall, issued the decision on March 6. The abominable ruling by the pro-slavery majority went so far as to declare that Negroes were not citizens, whether slave or free—*nor could their descendants ever be, even if emancipated by state law!* Taney argued that the Constitution excluded members of the “negro African race” from citizenship, and that the “inalienable rights” of “all men” in the Declaration of Independence did not apply to the descendents of slaves, since Negroes were “so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect.” On this British racial policy, James Buchanan founded his administration.

The plot to smash the Union

The *Dred Scott* decision added tremendous fuel to the intensifying “sectional conflict,” which patriotic Americans recognized as a war over the founding principles of the republic. The Southern oligarchy had already threatened to secede if the Republicans won the White House in the election of 1856—and would do so again in 1860. The destruction of the Union—not Southern “freedom”—was always its objective. One of Stamp's useful but scarce notes on its opposition is a comment by the *Chicago Tribune*, nearly a month before *Dred Scott*, that the sectional conflict was “no accident,” but sprang “from the contest between non-slaveholders and . . . the Oligarchs who rule upon *Slave Labor*.” Following the infamous decision by the Supreme Court, Henry C. Carey's Philadelphia paper, the *North American*, urged Northern voters to “rally as one man . . . for the overthrow of the Oligarchy and its allies in the free states.”

With their power consolidated through Buchanan, the British, meanwhile, were preparing to smash Northern industry and agriculture. During the railroad boom of the 1850s, the companies sold stocks on Wall Street “to foreign, especially British, investors,” Stamp notes in passing. Federal land grants of millions of acres fed enormous land speculation along railroad right-of-ways. Railroads in Wisconsin and other Midwestern states persuaded farmers to buy stock, with personal notes secured by mortgages on their farms. The mortgages were then sold to Eastern bankers to finance building the railroads.

The end of Britain's adventure in the Crimean War in 1856 returned Russian wheat to the European market, shutting off a large part of America's grain exports. By the spring of 1857, declining imports further reduced freight traffic and railroad earnings. Textile sales by New England's mills dropped off; and in July, Stark Mills of Manchester, New Hampshire, became the first of many to close its doors.

Meanwhile, the Bank of France, weakened by losses from the Crimean War, was forced to draw upon the Bank of England. London then jacked up interest rates, and British investors dumped their American stocks in favor of the higher return at home. Prices on the New York Stock Exchange fell, and bank assets declined with them. In late August, the failure of a private brokerage house triggered a crash. Banks ran out of specie to cover depositors' claims, and a series of bank failures swept across Pennsylvania and New Jersey in late September. A run on all the New York City banks began on Oct. 13, and every one of them closed within two days. The banking collapse struck New England a day later, spreading shortly to the West and South.

The Panic of 1857 wiped out more than 5,000 American businesses. With credit short, farmers went under with the collapse in land values and commodity prices; one railroad after another fell into receivership. Industries ordered mass layoffs or total shutdowns, and 20,000 men were out of work in New York City within two weeks. By November, 40,000 were out of work in Philadelphia, and 20,000 Pennsylvania iron workers lost their jobs.

Had they the capability for a modern-day strategic bombing attack, the British could hardly have done a better job of flattening the U.S. economy. Historian Stamp almost chortles over the results, and restricts his account of the mobilization to restore the American System to a total of three pages. “Democrats ridiculed Whigs,” he declares, “for their pathetic attempt to revive an idea as obsolete as the chartering of another Bank of the United States.” Henry Carey's extensive campaign, including a long series of open letters to Buchanan on the necessity of a protective tariff, is dismissed in three sentences.

Buchanan proceeded to heap further atrocities on the nation. He defended the *Dred Scott* decision and determined to bring Kansas into the Union as a slave state. In December, he defended the infamous Lecompton constitution, which imposed slavery on Kansas by fraud and thuggery, as “in the main fair and just.” Of Buchanan's argument before Congress, Stamp says, it “went well beyond the rights given the slaveholders in the *Dred Scott* case, for the court did not question the authority of a territory, when ready for statehood . . . to abolish whatever slavery might then exist within its borders. In effect, his novel doctrine denied the right of *any* territory where slaveholders had chosen to settle to become entirely a free state regardless of the wishes of the majority.”

While Stamp has to differ with Buchanan's outright pro-slavery stand, he nonetheless calls the traitor “one of the best trained Presidents the country has ever had.” *Americans* had other words for him, however; and even Stamp concedes that some of Buchanan's actions so enraged them, that he ensured a republican mobilization to save the Union *before* 1860, producing the election of Abraham Lincoln and the defeat of Britain's Confederacy.