

Week in Review

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2010

The New York Times

Gone With the Myths

By Edward Ball

NEW HAVEN

ON Dec. 20, 1860, 169 men — politicians and people of property — met in the ballroom of St. Andrew's Hall in Charleston, S.C. After hours of debate, they issued the 158-word "Ordinance of Secession," which repealed the consent of South Carolina to the Constitution and declared the state to be an independent country. Four days later, the same group drafted a seven-page "Declaration of the Immediate Causes," explaining why they had decided to split the Union.

The authors of these papers flattered themselves that they'd conjured up a second American Revolution. Instead, the Secession Convention was the beginning of the Civil War, which killed some 620,000 Americans; an equivalent war today would send home more than six million body bags.

The next five years will include an all-

Edward Ball, the author of "Slaves in the Family," is writing a biography of the photographer Eadweard Muybridge.

you-can-eat special of national remembrance. Yet even after 150 years full of grief and pride and anger, we greet the sesquicentennial wondering, why did the South secede?

I can testify about the South under oath. I was born and raised there, and 12 men in my family fought for the Confederacy; two of them were killed. And since I was a boy, the answer I've heard to this question, from Virginia to Louisiana (from whites, never from blacks), is this: "The War Between the States was about states' rights. It was not about slavery."

I've heard it from women and from men, from sober people and from people liquored up on anti-Washington talk. The North wouldn't let us govern ourselves, they say, and Congress laid on tariffs that hurt the South. So we rebelled. Secession and the Civil War, in other words, were about small government, limited federal powers and states' rights.

But a look through the declaration of causes written by South Carolina and four of the 10 states that followed it out of the Union — which, taken together, paint a kind of self-portrait of the Confederacy — reveals a different story.

From Georgia to Texas, each state said the reason it was getting out was that the awful Northern states were threatening to do away with slavery.

South Carolina: "The non-slaveholding states ... have denounced as sinful

The South split the
Union to defend slavery,
not states' rights.

the institution of slavery" and "have encouraged and assisted thousands of our slaves to leave their homes."

Mississippi: "Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery — the greatest material interest of the world. ... There was no choice left us but submission to the mandates of abolition, or a dissolution of the Union."

Georgia: "A brief history of the rise, progress, and policy of anti-slavery and the political organization into whose hands the administration of the Federal

Government has been committed will fully justify the pronounced verdict of the people of Georgia."

Several states single out a special culprit, Abraham Lincoln, "an obscure and illiterate man" whose "opinions and purposes are hostile to slavery." Lincoln's election to the White House meant, for South Carolina, that "the public mind must rest in the belief that slavery is in the course of ultimate extinction."

In other words, the only state right the Confederate founders were interested in was the rich man's "right" to own slaves.

It's peculiar, because "states' rights" has become a popular refrain in Republican circles lately. Last year Gov. Rick Perry of Texas wondered aloud whether secession was his state's right in the aftermath of laws out of Congress that he disliked.

In part because of this renewed rhetoric, in the coming remembrances we will likely hear more from folks who cling to the whitewash explanation for secession and the Civil War. But you have only to look at the honest words of the secessionists to see why all those men put on uniforms. □