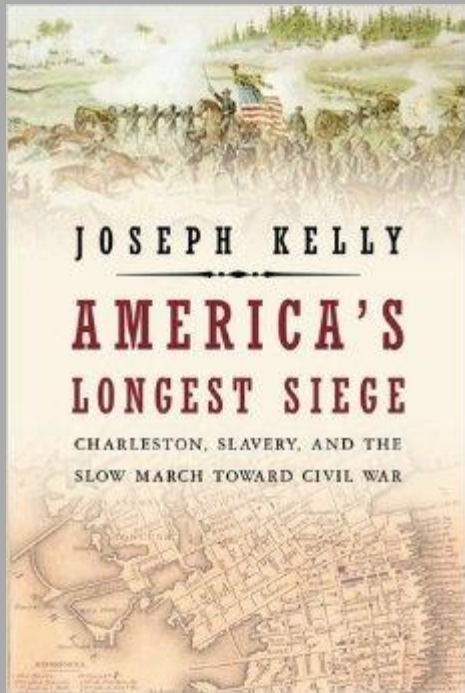


Book Review

*America's Longest Siege:  
Charleston, Slavery, and the Slow March toward the Civil War*

By Joseph Kelly

(2013) New York: Overlook



As much as I appreciate the valor, gallantry, and skills of the soldiers, and the study of the strategy and tactics, and the fascination with the personalities of many of the Civil War figures, the most important and profound lessons stemming from the Civil War concern the question of how did we come to the cusp of almost destroying ourselves as a nation? I'm obviously not a trained historian but it seems to me that we, especially our leaders, might be better prepared to address, and possibly resolve, many of our internal issues if we had a better idea of the root causes and dynamics of the antebellum politics that unfortunately led to the Civil War.

Sometimes when someone will ask about my activities, and I mention that I like to read and write about the Civil War, and that I'm involved with our local roundtable, or that I've attended a number of seminars and/or been on various tours, that other person will deign

to volunteer to inform me in a very confidential tone that "You know, the Civil War really wasn't about slavery." If I've managed to retain my cool, I'll ask "Oh, what *was* it about?" The answer will then might be states' rights, or the tariff, or even maintaining a certain Southern way of life.

Depending upon the circumstances of the conversation, I might ask where'd they get that information and will almost always be told they don't really remember but it might have been something they learned in school, or something a close relative might have said, or perhaps it was something they read somewhere in a book or article. Invariably their eyes begin to glaze over in disinterest if I then inquire whether they've read pre-war statements by Aleck Stephens ("Who?") or by Jefferson Davis, or the instructions to the commissioners from South Carolina sent to recruit other states to the secession, or even the C.S.A. constitution. I seldom even get around to mentioning Chandra Manning's 2007 book, *What This Cruel War Was Over*, that William C. Davis has called "history at its best," reviewed elsewhere on this website.

Now Joseph Kelly's book gives me another arrow in my quiver in support of my conclusion made several years ago that slavery was the root cause of the Civil War. Kelly describes the very beginning of Charleston in 1670 when its proponents knew slavery was a crime perpetuated against a conquered people, and how that attitude changed over the course of almost three centuries until Charleston was the veritable hotbed of the slaveholding ideology. When marching through South Carolina in 1865 Sherman's soldiers knew, and to a considerable degree resented, that the rebellion had begun in South Carolina. That realization has faded from memory with the passage of 150 years but Kelly adroitly reminds us how and where it all began.

Although Kelly is not a professional historian, instead being a professor of literature at the College of Charleston, his narrative is filled with historical facts showing how a benign attitude about Blacks and slavery eventually and gradually changed to maximize economic opportunities, especially in South Carolina's coastal lowlands where large plantations were owned and operated. Not only did the invention of the cotton gin make cotton more profitable but the construction of the Santee Canal helped Charleston develop as a major export center and in 1803 Charleston opened its ports once again to the African slave trade. By the Nineteenth Century slaves were being viewed and treated as commodities rather than as human beings.

Other factors intervened to justify the imposition of tougher slave legislation. For instance the Denmark Vesey Rebellion in 1822, which was not an actual rebellion as much as it was some careless verbiage followed by rumors running amok followed in turn by total disregard for objective investigations and/or due process, justified the contention that slavery ought to be perpetual. Moreover conservative Whites began to argue that Northern Congressmen caused the insurrection, thus planting the seeds for regional discord.

The slaveholding ideology was further buttressed by John C. Calhoun's assertion that the South's peculiar institution was a positive good, which Calhoun introduced as a creed during a Senate speech in 1836. Although Calhoun's notion should have been absolutely absurd on its face, it nevertheless provided fodder for the fire eaters in years to come, and unfortunately still resonates in the minds of some to this day.

Although Kelly focuses upon Charleston's elite, including the plantation owners, the lawyers, and the merchants, he also offers a brief explanation about why the non-slave owners, in other words subsistence farmers in the Upcountry, fought for the South. Often we forget there is a difference between what caused the war on one hand and why men fought on the other but Kelly's explanation is the non-slave owners fought because they wanted to protect their interests against the invaders from the North.

Kelly describes in reasonable detail how human bondage, its opposition to and defense of, was the wedge that caused ever widening and seemingly irreconcilable, ostensibly unsolvable chasms between the opinions and politics of the nation's two major regions. As Kelly narrates the events throughout the first six decades of the Nineteenth Century it was almost inevitable that the first actual shots of the war would occur in and around Charleston's harbor. Reading Kelly's book is an outstanding way to gain insight and understanding about major circumstances and factors that propelled the nation into a war that changed much of its heritage forever. It is valuable history that needs to be studied, analyzed, and understood by anyone who cares about not just about our nation's heritage but more importantly its future as well.