

## Book Reviews

*Cry Havoc! – The Crooked Road to the Civil War, 1861*

Nelson D. Lankford

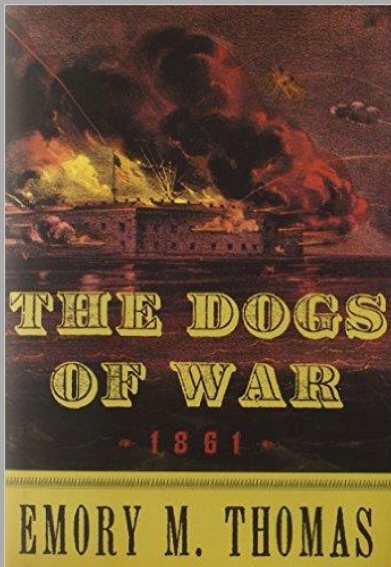
Viking (2007)

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*The Dogs of War -- 1861 --*

Emory M. Thomas

Oxford University Press (2011)



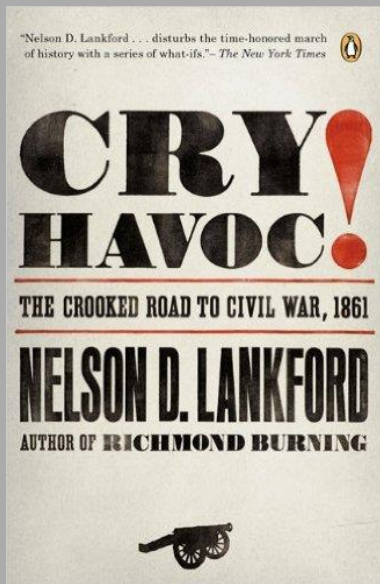
Shakespeare fans may recognize the origin of these books' titles as Mark Anthony's speech "Cry 'Havoc!' and let slip the dogs of war ..." from Julius Caesar, act 3, scene 1. Beyond the common origin of their titles, these books have a similar theme, that is to say the period between the presidential election of 1860 when Lincoln was elected and First Bull Run was fraught with false assumptions, mutual misunderstandings, faulty calculations, and little appreciation of what lay ahead once the first shots were fired.

The Thomas book, although the shorter of the two, covers the longer period, starting with Lincoln's election and his naive attitude about the threat of secession. Thomas, who has written other books about the Confederacy, describes the mistaken views each side had about the other's determination and capacity to fight. He shows how politicians, editorial writers, and local spokesmen such as preachers consistently argued how their side occupied the moral high ground while predicting any war would be over after one major battle. Thomas also notes that the military voice was limited almost to Winfield Scott, but few, including Lincoln, wanted to listen to his opinion that any war would not only take years to resolve but would also extract a high cost of lives.

Thomas criticizes Lincoln for wrongly assuming the nonslave holding Southerners would not follow the planters who presumably had the most to gain from the preservation of slavery. Lincoln believed the majority of Southerners had strong ties to the Union. He was also operating under the belief that the crisis was not deep but could be resolved by reason and common purpose, pretty much as had occurred throughout the nation's relatively young history. Unfortunately Lincoln's civilian advisors, especially William Seward, his Secretary of State and principle counselor, were even more misguided about the root and nature of the crisis and how it might be avoided and/or settled.

Thomas characterizes the rhetorical lead up to and firing upon Fort Sumter as being part of "an astonishing amount of downright stupidity." This of course was followed by Lincoln's call for 75,000 troops to suppress the rebellion, the secession of four more states, and the total isolation of Washington City from the nation it was ostensibly governing. And so both sides floundered under the same mistaken assumptions until they attempted a quick, decisive victory at Bull Run which of course settled nothing. Beauregard, the Confederate commander, was on the cusp of issuing an order to withdraw when he spotted the retreat of the Federals. Following a conference among Jefferson Davis, Robert Lee, and Beauregard the Confederates decided not to pursue the fleeing Federals back to Washington, thus fuelling one of the ongoing debates from the Civil War, that is whether the Confederates missed an opportunity to end the war almost as soon as it started.

Perhaps the outstanding value of Thomas's book is that he shows war's unpredictability is not limited to just our Civil War, for instance reminding us of the civilian predictions in 2003 of a short, nearly bloodless strike in Iraq. Thomas concludes with the observation that: "Those dogs of war, once loosed, seldom go where we want them to go. Once slipped, they run wild."



Nelson Lankford's book, *Cry Havoc!*, provides a short telling of some of the more important events that lead up to that critical period. Lankford begins his story with a prologue, describing the immediate aftermath of John Brown's raid upon Harper's Ferry in December 1861. Lankford then tells us that his "is the story of the unfolding of this events as Americans experienced them, not knowing the outcome any more than we can know the outcome of events in our own day before they happen."

The chapters in *Cry Havoc!* are divided in chronological order, beginning with Lincoln's inauguration in March 1861. By that time, of course, seven of the slaveholding states from the Deep South had already seceded from the Union, and had met earlier in February to form the Confederate States of America. During the so-called winter of secession various futile attempts had been made to find a compromise that would satisfy both sides to save the Union, with few of the sectional frictions being abated in large part due to the ineffectiveness of President James Buchanan.

Following Lincoln's inauguration the parties began a four-week period of posturing, each attempting to protect their respective interests while maneuvering the other side into the role of aggressor. Lincoln was not even aware of the seriousness of Fort Sumter's predicament until a day or two after he was inaugurated yet was being given a diverse, often conflicting variety of advise about how to proceed. Different historians have taken different views about the issue of who actually caused the firing

upon Fort Sumter; Lankford merely lays out the historical facts and lets the reader decide who was responsible for those first artillery bombardments.

Following those first shots, in the words of Alexander Stephens, Confederate Vice President, "Events transpire so rapidly now that it is useless to speculate two days ahead." In short order Lincoln issued a call to all the remaining states for 75,000 volunteers to subdue the rebellion, and four of the eight remaining slaveholding states, including most importantly Virginia, -- not wanting to bear arms against their southern brethren -- voted to secede. Virginia militia quickly seized Federal arms depots at Harper's Ferry and at Gosport Naval Yard, where the James River flows into the Chesapeake Bay.

Maryland was one of the four slaveholding states that failed to secede but initially it was hardly a neutral state, leaning heavily in favor of its southern neighbors. The trouble was Northern militia regiments coming from Boston and New York tried to transverse through Baltimore in order to reach Washington City. There probably would have been presented little difficulty if the units could have stayed in the railroad cars but it became necessary to march afoot several blocks between train stations. Unfortunately the first regiment encountered a violent mob resulting in the deaths of three soldiers and twelve civilians.

After that incident Baltimore officials refused to allow any more troops to be transported into or through the city. Furthermore railroad bridges were burned and telegraph lines were cut, effectively cutting off any communications to and from the nation's capital. Given the geography of Washington City, not only was the capital isolated from the nation it ostensibly governed, it was also virtually defenseless and vulnerable to attack from almost any direction. Lankford's account is a clear, concise, cogent narrative of that critical two-week period upon which the fate of the Union was teetering on a delicate balance.

Both books are relatively easy reads, amply footnoted and sourced, and should be must readings not only for the Civil War devotee but also for anyone generally interested in one of the most critical period in American history, especially as how that period might have lessons for today's challenges throughout the globe.

Other books covering the same era:

Freehling, William W., *The Road to Disunion \*Volume II\* Secessionists Triumphant, 1854-1861*, Oxford University Press (2007)

*Throes of Democracy – The American Civil War Era, 1829-1877*, McDougall, Walter A. Harper (2008)

*Dissonance – The Turbulent Days Between Fort Sumter & Bull Run*, Harcourt (2006)