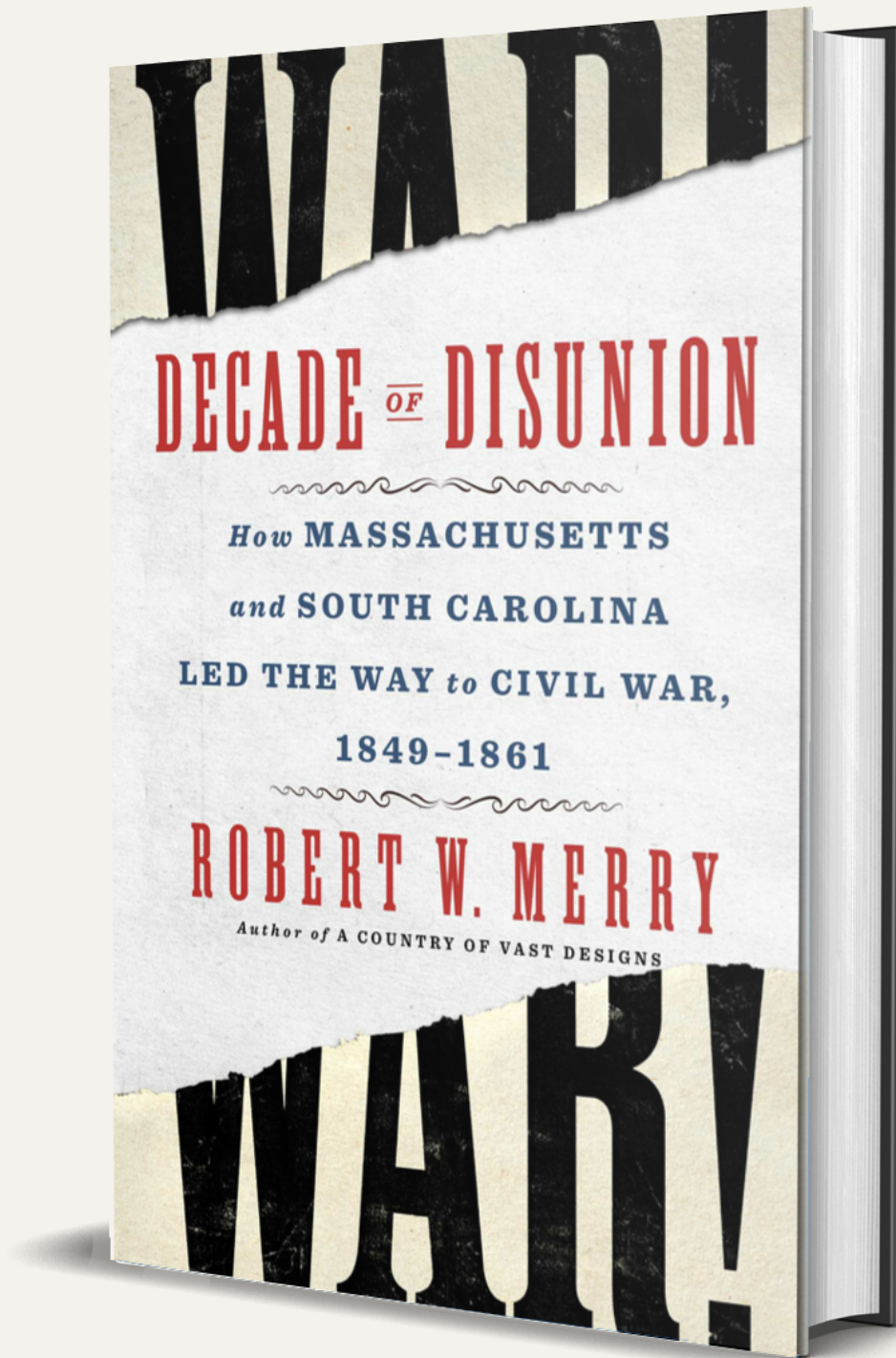


DECADE OF DISUNION



BOOK CLUB KIT

ROBERT W. MERRY is the author of five previous books, including *President McKinley: Architect of the American Century* and *A Country of Vast Designs: James K. Polk, the Mexican War and the Conquest of the American Continent*. He spent a decade covering Washington for The Wall Street Journal and served as an executive at Congressional Quarterly Inc. for twenty-two years, including twelve years as CEO. He also is the former editor of *The National Interest* and *The American Conservative*. He lives with his wife, Susan, in Langley, Washington, and Washington, DC.



ABOUT THE BOOK

Exploring a critical lesson about our nation that is as timely today as ever, *Decade of Disunion* shows how the country came apart during the enveloping slavery crisis of the 1850s.

The Mexican War brought vast new territories to the United States, which precipitated a growing crisis over slavery. The new territories seemed unsuitable for the type of agriculture that depended on slave labor, but they lay south of the line where slavery was permitted by the 1820 Missouri Compromise. The subject of expanding slavery to the new territories became a flash point between North and South.

First came the 1850 compromise legislation, which strengthened the fugitive slave law and outraged the North. Then in 1854, Congress repealed the Missouri Compromise altogether, unleashing a violent conflict in “Bleeding Kansas” over whether that territory would become free or slave. The 1857 Dred Scott decision—abrogating any rights of African Americans, enslaved or free—further outraged the North. And John Brown’s ill-planned 1859 attack at the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry stirred anger and fear throughout the South.

Through a decade, South Carolina, whose economy depended heavily on slave labor, struggled over whether to secede in a stand-alone act of defiance or to do so only in conjunction with other states. Meanwhile, Massachusetts became the country’s antislavery epicenter but debated whether the Constitution was worth saving in the effort to abolish bondage. Both states widened the divide between North and South until disunion became inevitable. Then, in December 1860, in the wake of the Lincoln election, South Carolina finally seceded, leading the South out of the Union.

Decade of Disunion tells the story of this great American struggle through the aims, fears, and maneuvers of the subsequent prominent figures at the center of the drama, with particular attention to the key players from Massachusetts and South Carolina.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did the Mexican War and the acquisition of new territories contribute to the growing crisis over slavery? In what ways did this set the stage for the events of the 1850s?
2. Discuss the components of the Compromise of 1850. How did the strengthened fugitive slave law impact Northern attitudes toward the South and the federal government? Did this compromise succeed in its intended purpose?
3. What were the immediate effects of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the repeal of the Missouri Compromise? How did "Bleeding Kansas" reflect the nation's growing division over slavery?
4. Analyze the implications of the Dred Scott decision. How did it affect the rights of African Americans and the political climate of the time? Why was this decision so significant in the lead-up to the Civil War?
5. What were John Brown's motivations for attacking the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry? How did this event polarize public opinion in both the North and the South?
6. Explore South Carolina's decision to secede from the Union in 1860. What were the key factors that influenced this decision, and how did it serve as a catalyst for the secession of other Southern states?
7. In what ways did Massachusetts play a central role in the antislavery movement? How did the debates within the state reflect broader national tensions over slavery and union?
8. Discuss the role of key figures mentioned in the book, such as John C. Calhoun, Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, and John Brown. How did their actions and ideologies influence the trajectory of events during this decade?
9. What lessons can modern readers draw from the events of the 1850s? Are there parallels between the issues of the past and the present? How can understanding this period help us navigate contemporary challenges?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

10. The book suggests that democracy is not self-sustaining and must be carefully tended. How does this theme resonate throughout the book, and what implications does it have for the preservation of democracy in today's world?

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

Historical Map Analysis

Create or find maps showing the U.S. before and after key events like the Mexican War, the Compromise of 1850, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Discuss how these changes impacted the nation geographically and politically.

Character Role Play

Have group members assume the roles of key historical figures from the book and debate major issues like the Compromise of 1850, the Dred Scott decision, or secession from their character's perspective.

Comparative Analysis

Compare and contrast the events and attitudes of the 1850s with current socio-political issues. Discuss any similarities in public opinion, political polarization, or sectional divides.

If you decide to adopt *Decade of Disunion* for your book club, we would love to hear about it! Please let us know by emailing us at marketing@simonandschuster.com or post on social media using the hashtags **#SimonBooks** and **#DecadeOfDisunion**.

Thank you for your consideration.

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