

Southern Fire-Eaters

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In the years leading up to the Civil War, a group of southern leaders called “Fire-eaters” because of their fiery rhetoric, pushed the region towards secession and, ultimately, civil war. Extreme advocates of states’ rights, the origins of the fire-eaters date back to the late 1700s and the formation of the new constitutional government. In 1798-1799 supporters of the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions saw the states as a bulwark to prevent the Federal government from adopting unconstitutional measures, through the concept of the nullification of offending laws. Initially only theory, in the 1820s-1830s South Carolina attempted to implement the principle during the Nullification Crisis. With the refusal of Andrew Jackson’s administration to accept nullification, some southern leaders began advocating secession from the Union as a means of protecting southern rights. During the debates that led to the Compromise of 1850, fire-eaters maintained an extreme southern position, opposing the admission of California as a free state and the ending of the slave trade in Washington, D.C. They helped organize a southern rights convention that met in Nashville, Tennessee in 1850. In the compromise’s aftermath, fire-eaters lost influence, as the majority in both the north and south favored moderation. In the period preceding and following the election of Abraham Lincoln, however, fire-eaters demonstrated renewed political strength, and helped shape the political dialogue in a manner that promoted disunion.

Three fire-eaters who played prominent roles in the 1850s and in the secession crisis of 1860-1861 were Robert Barnwell Rhett, William Lowndes Yancey, and Edmund Ruffin. A native of South Carolina and referred by some as the “Father of Secession,” Rhett had served in

both the House and Senate in the pre-war years, and had called for secession as early as the 1830s. His son, Robert Barnwell Rhett, Jr., published the *Charleston Mercury*, in which Rhett, Sr. frequently contributed writings in favor of disunion. Following Lincoln's election, Rhett attended the South Carolina Secession Convention, which in late December 1860 made official that which he had worked towards for over three decades. Georgia-born William L. Yancey initially held a Unionist outlook, but a series of personal tragedies and the influence of a relative who strongly supported states' rights pushed him towards a secessionist viewpoint. In the 1840s he served in the Alabama state legislature and then in the U.S. House of Representatives. By then firmly in the secessionist camp, he opposed the Democratic Party's platform in 1848 because in his view it did not sufficiently protect slavery. Yancey opposed the Compromise of 1850, and throughout the remainder of the decade he continued to clamor for the protection of southern rights. At the 1860 Democratic Convention, Yancey led a walk-out of many delegates from the Deep South states, leading to a split in the party and the eventual nomination of both Stephen Douglas and John Breckinridge.

Virginia planter Edmund Ruffin was best known as an agricultural scientist who experimented with fertilizers to improve soil fertility. He also became involved in the political issues of the period, supporting the expansion of slavery, the elimination of tariffs, and a strongly states' rights constitutional perspective. In his sixties, he attended the execution of John Brown, dressed in the uniform of a Virginia Military Institute cadet, and after Lincoln's election, Ruffin attended several secession conventions in order to urge the delegates to vote for disunion. He had ominously stated that the 1860 Election "will serve to show whether these southern states are to remain free, or to be politically enslaved." Together these three Fire-eaters, and others like them, helped convince southerners that Lincoln's election alone provided reason enough for the

south to leave the Union. Ironically, most played only a modest role in the subsequent history of the Confederacy and in the Civil War that they helped initiate.