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Showdown in Virginia: The 1861 Convention and the Fate of the Union

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In the spring of 1861, Virginians confronted destiny?their own and their nation’s. Pivotal decisions awaited about secession, the consequences of which would unfold for a hundred years and more. But few Virginians wanted to decide at all. Instead, they talked, almost interminably. The remarkable record of the Virginia State Convention, edited in a fine modern version in 1965, runs to almost 3,000 pages, some 1.3 million words. Through the diligent efforts of William W. Freehling and Craig M. Simpson, this daunting record has now been made accessible to teachers, students, and general readers. With important contextual contributions?an introduction and commentary, chronology, headnotes, and suggestions for further reading?the essential core of the speeches, and what they signified, is now within reach.

This is a collection of speeches by men for whom everything was at risk. Some saw independence and even war as glory; others predicted ruin and devastation. They all offered commentary of lasting interest to anyone concerned about the fate of democracy in crisis.

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