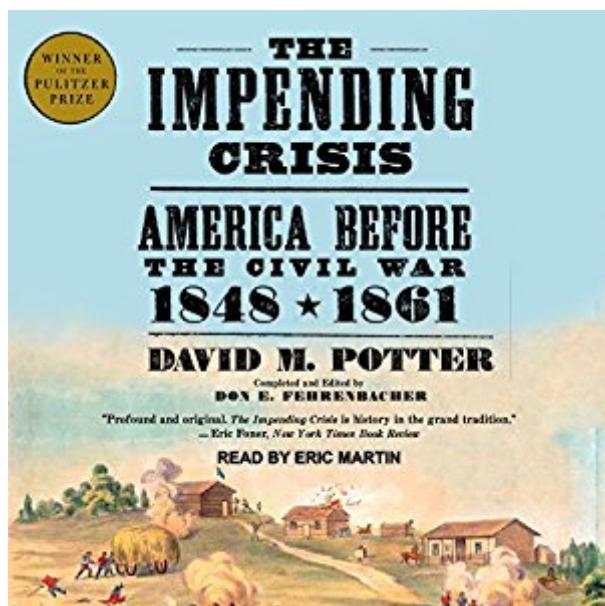


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# The Impending Crisis: America Before The Civil War: 1848-1861



## **Synopsis**

David M. Potter's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Impending Crisis* is the definitive history of antebellum America. Potter's sweeping epic masterfully charts the chaotic forces that climaxed with the outbreak of the Civil War: westward expansion, the divisive issue of slavery, the Dred Scott decision, John Brown's uprising, the ascension of Abraham Lincoln, and the drama of Southern secession. *The Impending Crisis* remains one of the most celebrated works of American historical writing.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Clear, well written. Written during the time when historians had figured out the Jim Crowe version of the causes of the Civil War were clearly partisan. A level-headed history written in the 1970's. What I find interesting is the horror of the partisanship in congress leading up to the war, the descriptive passages of which seem very reminiscent of today's partisan fight over the meaning of the Federal government.

Potter argues in *Impending Crisis* that both prior to, and during, the time period his book covers, the Union had problems with sectionalism and argued that, "the North-South division which ended in the Civil War was nothing unique, but was only the most acute manifestation of a phenomenon which has appeared again and again (29)." Potter also states that, "Since the sectional impulse took a political form and circumstances of politics conditioned the operation of sectionalism," his work would primarily focus on political events (29). With the thesis and the focus of his book expressed,

the author skillfully handles the increasingly complex political world the United States found herself in during the years between Polk and Lincoln's administrations. Potter does a masterful job of drawing in the reader, often making the reader feel he was listening to the author personally. The last two chapters are written, or at least completed by Don Fehrnebacher. Fehrnebacher does a fine job keeping the voice and tone of Potter alive. Sadly, Professor Potter passed away before he could finish this book, or as the editor, Fehrnebacher, says, "his magnum opus" (viii). Potter argues in chapter one that it was President Polk's war with Mexico and the ceded Southwest Territory that led to the sectionalism becoming insurmountable. The rest of his book is given over to the explanation of political events that built to a crescendo under Buchanan's administration, the incoming Lincoln presidency, and the firing upon Fort Sumter in 1861. His book is extensively footnoted throughout, giving the reader immediate recourse to the author's sources. This format is far more useful than the more current form of endnotes. Potter does not simply narrate events. He will digress to a scholarly discussion on various topics. For example, in chapter two, Potter explains the various schools of historical thought regarding why the North and South came to blows. Potter shows that the events swirling about the developing maelstrom were anything but clear and rejects the tendency of Monday-morning-quarterbacking that many historians like to indulge in. The confusion and frustration on all sides are painted in vivid detail. Each of the main historical figures, from Abraham Lincoln to John Brown, are explained, their past and motives, which in turn, makes the actions of the individuals understandable. Nothing is one-dimensional in Potter's book. I find Potter's argument that the North and South have had divisional problems since the beginning to be accurate. The face off over slavery that Polk's Southwest Territory produces, as Potter shows, acts as the catalyst increasing the fissure between the North and South. Polk gives understanding to why the Civil War came about. His book is insightful and well reasoned.

I'm a Civil War buff with a Southern bias but I've always wondered how so many good Americans came to such a horrific solution to mutual disagreements. Apparently there was plenty of blame to go around. Read the book, amazingly clear and other than perhaps Senator Douglas during the 1860 Presidential campaign and Major Anderson at Fort Sumter not many heroes.

Potter's book ranks with Foner's work on Reconstruction. Three books taken together--The Impending Crisis, The Battle Cry of Freedom, and Reconstruction--provide a thorough assessment of the period in U.S. history from 1848-1877. Potter's book, as the first of this trio, examines a great variety of Congressional records, autobiographies and biographies, journal articles and other

sources to evoke a picture of turbulent times leading to the Civil War. His work is meticulously supported by footnotes that give not only supporting opinions, but those that contrast with his own. You can't go wrong by reading this book.

Being an avid reader of 19th century American History I always am looking for books that will help supplement my knowledge of the people and events of that era. This book details the multiple social events, political climates and players that preceded the Civil War. To be sure this is NOT a light or simple read...in fact it reminds me of many political science lectures I listened to as a student. The reader is given a lot of information to sort thru including endless footnotes but it is a fascinating read. Nothing happens in a vacuum and this book does an excellent job of setting the stage as to how this nation hurtled toward the holocaust that was the Civil War.

Classic and indispensible book on the descent to Civil War. Great analysis, supported and clearly argued. Also fun to read.

I found "The Impending Crisis" to be an excellent analysis of the tumultuous political years between the end of the Mexican War and the start of the Civil War. Mr. Potter provides astute historical analysis of the various major crises and issues during this time. It's very well-researched and contains copious footnotes. Such scholarly history can often suffer from a bland, ponderous, and dull style of narrative. But not this book. For me this book was an enjoyable read.

I am an avid student of the American Civil War. The Impending Crisis is a most entertaining and educational read that is helping me to deepen my knowledge of the causes of the War. I am recommending this book as a valuable read for my fellow Civil War students.

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