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The Question of Slavery

BY JEFFREY ROGERS HUMMEL

Slavery can neither fully explain nor ultimately justify the American Civil War. This realization is unfortunately obscured because most scholars and buffs alike have usually sought a single cause for those four years of soul-wrenching conflict. The early nationalist interpretation, put forward by historian James Ford Rhodes, blamed one factor and one factor only: slavery. Slavery induced the southern states to secede, and Rhodes unreflectively assumed that the national government had no option but to suppress them. Later revisionist historians, such as Avery O. Craven and James G. Randall, contended that slavery was dying of its own accord and attributed the war instead to a “blundering generation” of politicians, manipulated by irresponsible extremists and fanatics on both sides. The Progressive perspective of Charles Beard also denied slavery’s role and replaced it with economic considerations. Then, beginning in the 1950s, a neo-abolitionist school, which today dominates Civil War scholarship, reaffirmed the centrality of slavery.

Yet while these competing interpretations have waxed and waned, the underlying quest for the one overriding cause continues unabated. What southerners called their “peculiar institution” was indeed the fundamental cause of secession. That proposition no longer

admits of any doubt. Historians would be hard pressed to find *any* causal claim in all human history for which the empirical support is more overwhelming.

But when historians go on to claim that secession made war inevitable, they embrace a common but logically indefensible leap. Only a few prominent neo-abolitionist historians, such as Eric Foner and Kenneth Stampp, have recognized that Civil War causation breaks down into at least two questions. Why did the southern states want to leave the Union? And why did



Slavery was behind the South’s secession. It wasn’t behind the North’s violent response, however.

the northern states refuse to let them go? Just because slavery is the answer to the first, it does not necessarily follow that it answers the second. These two questions are often conflated because so many Americans approach the Civil War with an implicit and unchallenged prejudice in favor of national unity.

Yet secession and war are distinct issues. For secession to lead to war, northerners had to be determined to hold the Union together with violence. And scholarly research has demonstrated that slavery had very little, if anything, to do with that determination, either on

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the part of President Abraham Lincoln or of the northern public generally.

The sole northern group that had always made opposition to slavery their primary goal was the abolitionists. They burst on the national landscape in the 1830s, demanding the immediate emancipation of all slaves, without any compensation to slaveholders, and full political rights for all blacks. Less well known is that they were also often advocates of disunion. The most prominent and vitriolic of these abolitionists, William Lloyd Garrison, went so far as to denounce the Constitution for its proslavery clauses as “a covenant with death and an agreement with hell.” During one Fourth of July celebration he publicly burned a copy, proclaiming: “So perish all compromises with tyranny!” He believed that, if anything, the North should secede. That way it would get out from under the Constitution’s fugitive-slave clause and become a haven for runaway slaves. The slogan, “No Union with Slave-Holders” appeared on the masthead of Garrison’s weekly paper, *The Liberator*, for years.

Thus passionately opposing slavery and simultaneously favoring secession are quite consistent. And Garrison’s strategic vision was hardly unique to him. Nearly all of slavery’s most radical opponents initially shared it, including Frederick Douglass, the free black leader who in 1838 had escaped from slavery in Maryland, and Wendell Phillips, a wealthy lawyer and Boston Brahmin. Needless to say, this disrespect for the Union did not go over well in the free states. Abolitionist lecturers, presses, and property were frequent targets of hostile mobs throughout the 1830s. Nor did all abolitionists support disunion. Many eventually would turn away from Garrison to take up political activity in a quest for respectability and success. As the antislavery crusade split into doctrinal factions, the resort to the ballot box would bring both a broadened appeal and a dilution of purity.

The Republican Party eventually triumphed by reducing political antislavery to its lowest common denominator. The party’s main position, preventing slavery’s extension into new territories, carried no taint

of disunion. It allowed northerners to take steps against slavery in a distant sphere while honoring their constitutional obligation to leave the local institutions of the southern states alone. Here moreover was an antislavery position that could be made consistent with racism. Keeping slaves out of the territories was an excellent way to keep blacks out altogether. Abolitionists had failed to win over the North because they had put their opposition to slavery ahead of the Union. Republicans succeeded because they put the Union ahead of their opposition to slavery.

Republicans and the Slave Power

That Republicans promised not to interfere with the peculiar institution in the existing states—to the point of supporting in 1861 a proposed *unamendable* thirteenth amendment that would have explicitly guar-

anteed slavery—goes without saying. Even the platform of the abolitionist Liberty Party, which conducted presidential campaigns in 1840 and 1844, had respected this constitutional constraint. But there were other constitutionally permissible steps that the central government could have taken and yet the Republican platform eschewed, such as abolishing slavery

in the District of Columbia and prohibiting the interstate and coastal slave trade. Lincoln even promised in his first inaugural to enforce the fugitive slave law, so hated among many northerners.

The plain fact that Lincoln was not an abolitionist is often cited by those who wish to deny that the seceding states were concerned about slavery’s future. The observation has become commonplace today that special interests inordinately influence government policy. This has actually always been the case; it is just less noticeable or objectionable when government is small and unobtrusive. One of the most powerful special interests during the pre-Civil War period was what abolitionists and Republicans referred to as the “Slave Power.” Despite constituting only one-quarter of southern families in 1860, slaveholders had dominated American politics both in the southern states and at the national level.

It is not as well-known that abolitionists were often advocates of disunion.

Then in 1860 a northerner who had not carried a single slave state, and in ten of them did not get a single recorded vote, was elected president. Nationwide, Lincoln received only 40 percent of the popular vote. Yet he won with the electoral votes of every free state except New Jersey, where he got four out of the state's seven. The contest in the South—mainly between the Southern Democratic and Constitutional Union candidates—had proved utterly irrelevant. Even if the votes of all Lincoln's opponents had been combined, he still would have won. Nothing could make the looming political impotence of the slave states more stark. Almost overnight a special interest that had dictated policy in Congress, to the executive, on the Supreme Court, and usually in both major parties was politically dispossessed.

Southern fire-eaters recognized that a major faction within the Republican Party did favor further steps to divorce the general government from slavery. Lincoln appointed to his cabinet at least two of these radical Republicans: William Henry Seward of New York as secretary of state and Salmon Portland Chase of Ohio as secretary of the treasury. Even if the radicals did not immediately have their way, the Republican Party now controlled federal patronage, the postal service, military posts, and judicial appointments. Lincoln could put Republicans, abolitionists, and even free blacks into public office all over the South. That a national administration—for the first time—morally condemned the peculiar institution might in and of itself trigger slave resistance. And the Republican commitment to a territorial policy that the Supreme Court had already declared unconstitutional in the infamous Dred Scott decision showed that slaveholders could not rely on paper guarantees.

The editors of the *Richmond Enquirer* described how Lincoln's victory must in the long term destroy slavery. "Upon the accession of Lincoln to power, we would apprehend no direct act of violence against negro property," the editors conceded. But "the use of federal office, contracts, power and patronage" would result in

Almost overnight a special interest that had dictated policy throughout the federal government was politically dispossessed.

"the building up in every Southern State of a Black Republican party, the ally and stipendiary of Northern fanaticism, to become in a few short years the open advocate of abolition." Already a Missouri congressman, Frank Blair, Jr., whose family had long been powerful within Democratic circles, had gone over to the Republicans and delivered 10 percent of that border slave state's presidential vote to Lincoln.

The *Enquirer* also understood that the eventual "ruin of every Southern State by the destruction of negro labor" would be accomplished through the increase in fugitive slaves after tampering with the peculiar institution in the upper South. "By gradual and insidious approach, under the fostering hand of federal power, Abolitionism will grow up in every border Southern State, converting them into free States, then into 'cities of refuge' for runaway negroes from the gulf States. . . . There are no consequences that can follow, even forcible disunion, more disastrous to the future prosperity of the people of Virginia."

Nothing to Lose

Secession was risky. But with Republicans in control of the national government, many southern whites felt they had nothing to lose. Slavery seemed eventually doomed otherwise. Slaveholders could better depend on an independent central authority to provide protections against runaways by policing the new borders. As one Georgian explained in a letter to his representative in Congress, Alexander H. Stephens, independence would permit southerners to erect "an impassable wall between the North & the South so that negroes could not pass over to the North or an abolitionist come to the South to annoy us any more."

Other southerners disagreed, however, including Stephens himself. Although he would become the Confederacy's vice president, he opposed his state's secession, judging "slavery more secure in the Union than out of it." By leaving the Union, southerners were abandoning the Constitution's protections for slavery and possibly unleashing the very plague of runaways

they feared. Indeed, Lincoln would warn in his first inaugural that the seceding states could no longer rely on this national subsidy. The withdrawal of the deep South's representatives from Congress would make free-state control over the national government more pronounced than ever. The Republicans would have a free hand in the territories, whereas the economic viability of a small, independent slave republic was in doubt, especially if it could not expand. Even without resorting to war, Republicans could have implemented a set of policies that would have brought the peculiar institution to an end within an independent Confederacy, certainly by the turn of the century, *if* Lincoln had been purely interested in ending slavery *rather than* preserving the Union.

As Lincoln took the oath of office, the Union still contained eight slave states, more than had left. Secession had so far failed in the upper South, where the black population was less dense. Even in a few states of the lower South, disunion had triumphed by only narrow margins. Some northerners were prepared to allow the new Gulf Coast Confederacy to depart in peace. Militant abolitionists such as Garrison were mainly concerned that South Carolina's secession was just a bluff. Even Horace Greeley's staunchly Republican *New York Tribune* had briefly come out for letting the cotton states go, hoping "never to live in a republic whereof one section is pinned to the residue by bayonets."

Lincoln's Determination

Lincoln, on the other hand, was determined to preserve the Union by force if necessary. Slavery's abolition did not figure at all in either his avowed justifications or his private motivations. "I hold that . . . the Union of these States is perpetual," the President asserted in his first inaugural address, cautiously revealing this unyielding posture. "The Union is unbroken, and to the extent of my ability I shall take care, as the Constitution itself expressly enjoins upon me, that the laws of the Union be faithfully executed in all States."

Lincoln's determination received the hearty applause of powerful northern interests. Westerners feared the closing of the lower Mississippi River, even though the Confederate government promised free navigation. Eastern manufacturers worried that they would lose southern markets to European competitors because of the Confederacy's free-trade policy. Yankee merchants and shipbuilders faced an end to a monopoly on the South's coastal trade that the government granted to U.S. vessels. Holders of government securities were edgy about the Union's loss of tariff revenue. But in the final analysis, American nationalism proved to be the most compelling opponent of southern independence.

Republicans had promised northern voters that they could have *both* anti-slavery and Union. Now that the Union was imperiled, the Republican Party had to take decisive action or face political oblivion.

The deep South's refusal to abide by the outcome of a fair and legal election struck northern voters as a selfish betrayal of the nation's unique mission. "Plainly the central idea of secession is the essence of anarchy," argued Lincoln. Indeed, his inaugural equated secession with despotism. "A majority held in restraint by constitutional checks and limitations, and always changing easily with deliberate changes of popular opinions and sentiments,

is the only true sovereign of a free people. Whoever rejects it does, of necessity, fly to anarchy or despotism," because "unanimity is impossible; the rule of a minority, as a permanent arrangement, is wholly inadmissible." Worse still, the successful breakaway of the lower South raised the possibility of other regions separating.

Yet Lincoln also wished to preserve the loyalty of the upper South. Southern unionists made clear their conviction that no state should be forced to remain. He therefore initially settled on a defensive strategy to uphold national authority. Until the Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, the President could not have counted on enthusiastic northern

Even without war, Republicans could have implemented policies that would have ended slavery in the Confederacy, if Lincoln had been interested in ending slavery rather than preserving the Union.

support for an appeal to arms. The attack, however, electrified the free states, as Lincoln issued his proclamation calling up the state militias. The President's call garnered an opposite reaction in the slave states. It wiped out any lingering unionism in those that had already seceded. Still more decisive was its impact on the wavering states of the upper South. Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas all promptly transferred their allegiance to the Confederate States of America. At a single stroke of the pen, Lincoln had more than doubled the Confederacy's white population and material resources.

Once war got underway Lincoln continued to insist he wanted only to preserve the Union, and the newly elected Congress confirmed this war aim shortly after it convened. The Crittenden-Johnson resolutions of July 1861 denied that the government was waging war "in any spirit of oppression, nor for any purpose of conquest or subjugation, nor purpose of overthrowing or interfering with the rights or established institutions of those States," but only "to defend and maintain the supremacy of the Constitution and to preserve the Union." In other words, the resolutions promised to leave slavery untouched in the seceding states.

Political Slavery over Chattel Slavery

It is true that northern blacks, abolitionists, and Radical Republicans, from the first salvo, did seek a crusade against slavery. The prospect of wartime abolition seduced even Garrison and most of his militant followers into abandoning disunion. Only a handful of slavery opponents remained true to their original principles. Among them was Boston freethinker Lysander Spooner, an abolitionist so enthusiastic about John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry that he had earnestly proposed kidnapping the governor of Virginia to hold as hostage in exchange for Brown's life. But although never a pacifist, Spooner saw absolutely no moral analogy between slaves violently rising up to secure their liberty and the central government violently crushing aspirations for self-determination on

the part of white southerners. After the war he would write that the North had fought for the principle that "men may rightfully be compelled to submit to, and support a government they do not want; and that resistance, on their part, makes them criminals and traitors." "Political slavery" had taken the place of "chattel slavery."

Lincoln meanwhile was drifting toward the Radical position. He publicly warned that he would take whatever action he thought necessary to win the war. "My paramount object in this struggle," the President declared in his oft-quoted reply to Horace Greeley, "is to save the Union, and is *not* either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing

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some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do *not* believe it would help save the Union." Lincoln added, however, that "I have here stated my purpose according to my view of *official* duty; and I intend no modification of my oft-expressed *personal* wish that all men every where could be free."

When the preliminary Emancipation Proclamation appeared on September 22, 1862, it was framed as a war measure. It still gave the seceding states until the end of the year to cease their rebellion and retain their slaves. The proclamation did not emancipate any of the slaves in the four border states that had not seceded. Nor did it emancipate any slaves in many of the sections of the Confederacy that the Union armies had already reconquered, including all of Tennessee and large portions of Virginia and Louisiana. This anomaly inspired a cynical retort from Secretary of State Seward. "We show our sympathy with slavery," he stated the day after the final proclamation was issued, "by emancipating slaves where we cannot reach them, and holding them in bondage where we can set them free."

Of course, northerners came around by the war's end to demanding that slavery's elimination be com-

plete and permanent. A little more than two months before General Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox, two-thirds of Congress passed a new, proposed thirteenth amendment abolishing slavery within the United States forever. Emancipation was therefore a consequence of the Civil War. But it was a consequence unintended at the outset, and played no discernible role in the northern refusal to let the lower South go in peace.

Yankee Civil Religion

Although mainstream historians will find no major surprises in the above account, they nonetheless seem oblivious to how instrumental in bringing on the carnage was northern worship of the Union as absolute deity. Why was preserving the nation's existing boundaries such a big deal? Although historians have thoroughly researched southern motives for secession, they have not done as good a job with northern motives. Nationalist bias elevates perpetual union to an automatic and unquestioned standard. Exactly *how* and *why* northerners came to embrace this standard has never been satisfactorily answered. Yet somehow the mystical identification of Union with Liberty had evolved into such a cornerstone of the Yankee civil religion that it was impervious to all reason.

Peaceful secession has become a fixture of the modern world. Even before America's war over secession, Belgium in 1830 had consummated a separation from the Netherlands that was almost entirely without bloodshed. Norway seceded from Denmark in 1905 and Singapore from Malaysia in 1965. Since then, we have witnessed, among others, the peaceful separation of the Czech Republic and Slovakia and the peaceful breakup of the totalitarian Soviet Union into more than a dozen independent nations, including Russia. So we ought to be able to view Lincoln's justifications for the Civil War with a healthy dose of skepticism.

When in the mid-1990s Quebec held a referendum on whether to secede from Canada, the Canadian central government disavowed the use of force to prevent the province's departure. This incident contains some striking parallels to southern secession because the population of Canada at the time was about 30 million, slightly less than the U.S. population in 1860. Quebec had seven million inhabitants, making it smaller than the Confederacy became (about nine million) after Lincoln's call for troops but larger than the Gulf Coast Confederacy (about five million) at the time of Lincoln's inauguration.

The southern states had no right to self-determination because of slavery, runs the retort. But black slavery was practiced in every one of Britain's North American colonies, from New Hampshire to Georgia, at the opening of the War for Independence. Moreover, Virginia's royal governor issued a proclamation on November 7, 1775, similar to Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, freeing any slave who would bear arms against the rebellious colonists. At least 18,000 freed blacks accompanied British forces as they evacuated Savannah, Charleston, New York City, and other places at the end of the earlier war. South Carolina, the only colony with a slave majority when independence was

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declared, lost as much as one-third of its black population to flight or migration. In short, most arguments marshaled to deny the legitimacy of southern independence in 1861 apply with almost equal force against American independence in 1776.

As an excuse for civil war, maintaining the State's territorial integrity is bankrupt and reprehensible. Yet that is the only excuse that Lincoln and the Republican Party put forward. Slavery, to repeat, neither explains nor justifies northern suppression of secession. In the final analysis we must accept the verdict of Moncure Daniel Conway, another abolitionist, self-exiled from his home in Virginia. The Union war effort, he sadly concluded, reduces to "mere manslaughter." **FEE**

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