

Slavery, the Constitution, and the Origins of the Civil War

On December 20, 1860, the delegates to the South Carolina secession convention voted to leave the Union. In the declaration explaining the causes of their momentous decision, they charged that “an increasing hostility on the part of the non-slaveholding States to the institution of slavery has led to a disregard of their obligations, and the laws of the General Government have ceased to effect the objects of the Constitution.” “Thus,” they concluded, “the constituted compact has been deliberately broken and disregarded by the non-slaveholding states, and the consequence follows that South Carolina is released from her obligation.” As almost all historians have increasingly recognized, the institution of slavery was the primary cause of secession and, consequently, of the Civil War. At the same time, as the South Carolina declaration suggests, the debate over slavery and secession was framed in constitutional terms (Figure 1).

The “objects” of the U.S. Constitution referred to the various protections for slavery written into the document in 1787. In the decades leading to the 1860 Charleston convention, Southern extremists claimed that those protections were increasingly weakened by Northern state laws, court decisions, and abolitionist activity. By 1860, alarmed at the scope of these trends, secessionists argued that Northern states had violated the “compact” underlying the Constitution. In contrast, newly elected President Lincoln argued that the Union was “perpetual,” had been created by the people of the nation, and could not be unilaterally dissolved by the act of any group of states. Despite Confederate charges of abolitionism, Lincoln correctly asserted that neither he nor the national government threatened slavery because both lacked the constitutional

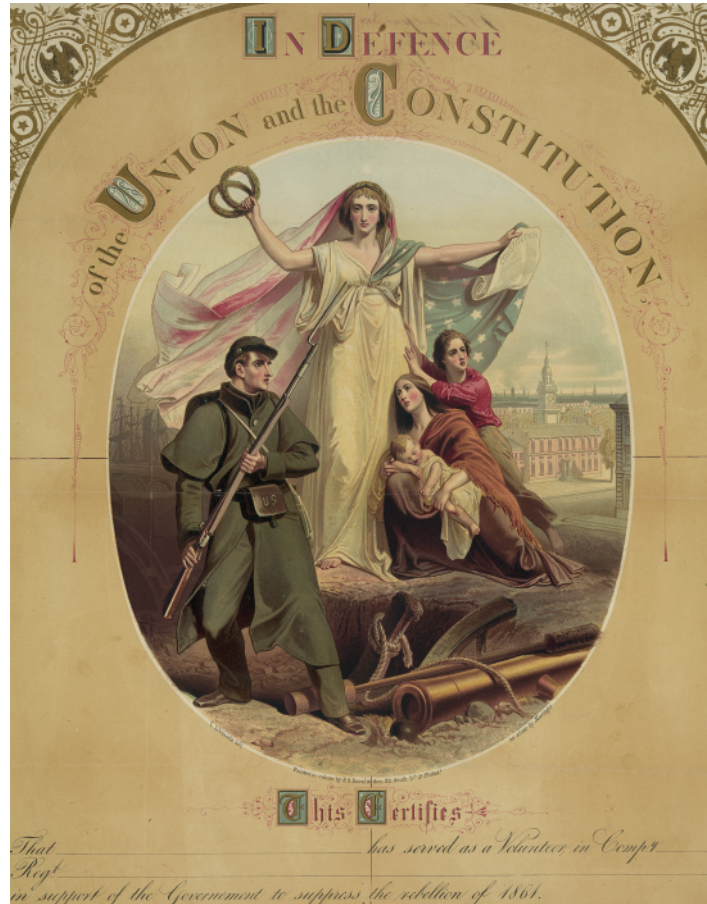


Figure 1. This wartime certificate for Union Army volunteers stresses the role of the Constitution in popular understanding of the sectional conflict. Printed in Philadelphia in 1861, the lithography depicts Columbia bearing two laurel crowns, the flag, and the Constitution, all symbols of national pride. With the Constitution in hand, Columbia protects a family that leans in distress at her side, while a Union volunteer stands attentively. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

power to touch slavery in the states. Only when the war came and the Confederacy proclaimed its independence from the United States did Lincoln claim constitutional authority to end slavery. In all these respects, a consideration of constitutional issues is vital to an understanding of the origins of the Civil War.

The Antebellum Period

Most Americans believe that secession was about “states’ rights,” but the South Carolina delegates’ complaints about the “increasing hostility” to slavery suggests quite the opposite. In the four decades before the outbreak of Civil War, Southern leaders had called for Northern states to support and enforce the federal fugitive slave law, change their own state laws to allow Southerners to travel with slaves in the North, and suppress abolitionist speech. In the constitutional debate over slavery, that is, Southerners wanted states’ rights for *their* states, but not for the Northern states.

Starting in the mid-1820s, most Northern states had passed personal liberty laws, which were designed to prevent the kidnapping or removal of free blacks who were wrongly seized as fugitive slaves. These laws required southerners to provide evidence to a state court before they could take a

fugitive slave out of the state, and the state laws had a much higher standard of proof than the federal Fugitive Slave Act of 1793. Thus, the laws often frustrated southerners who were trying to recover their slaves. In 1842, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down all the state personal liberty laws in *Prigg v. Pennsylvania*. In his opinion Justice Joseph Story, who was from Massachusetts, declared that Southerners had an almost unlimited right to hunt down their fugitive slaves, and while the Northern states could actively help them do so by enforcing the 1793

federal law, they could not pass their own laws adding requirements to the process. This should have satisfied the South, but it did not, and it only infuriated Northern state leaders who began withdrawing all support for the return of fugitive slaves. This undermined the ability of slaveholders to recover runaway slaves.

The Latimer case illustrates their predicament (Figure 2). In 1842, Virginia slaveowner James Grey discovered that his slave, George Latimer, had escaped to Boston. Upon apprehending him, Grey handed Latimer over to the local sheriff, who jailed him while Grey waited for papers to prove he owned Latimer. Public pressure forced the sheriff, who was an elected official, to release Latimer. The sheriff delivered Latimer to Grey, but then Grey was forced to “sell” Latimer to a group of abolitionists for a small amount. The upshot was that Massachusetts had refused to help a slaveowner recover his slave. In 1843, Massachusetts passed the “Latimer law,” which closed all jails to slave catchers, thereby taking the state judicial authorities entirely out of the business of enforcing the federal Fugitive Slave Act. This was completely in line with the Supreme Court’s decision in *Prigg*, which held that the states did not have

to enforce the federal law. But since there were few federal judges in Massachusetts, enforcement of the law was stymied. Other states followed with similar laws. After passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850—which created a corps of federal commissioners stationed in Northern states—local and state governments were even more hostile to slave catchers. Meanwhile, Northern juries almost never convicted people who rescued fugitive slaves from masters or federal officers.

Riots and dramatic rescues in Boston, Syracuse, rural Pennsylvania, Oberlin, Ohio, Milwaukee, and elsewhere angered Southerners, and made them believe that the Constitution was not working to protect their rights. Legally, of course, the system was working fine. The U.S. Supreme Court had held that the states did not have authority to enforce the federal Fugitive Slave Act and the Northern states were acting accordingly. From 1850 to 1861, under the stronger federal law written by slaveholders in Congress, more than 350 fugitive slaves were returned to their Southern masters. More could have been returned if the federal government had been willing to spend more time and money in doing so. Southerners were right that the North was not being cooperative, but the Constitutional provisions for separate state and federal authority allowed this. A new fugitive slave law that provided due process to alleged slaves might have led to a different outcome, but Southerners opposed that as well.

The issue of slave transit was similar. The Southern states all agreed, at least in 1787, that, except for not freeing fugitive slaves, each state was free to regulate slavery as it wished. For decades, most Southern states acknowledged that if a slave was taken to a free state to live, that slave became free. Starting in the 1830s, however, Northern courts began emancipating slaves brought to their jurisdictions by visiting masters. In the 1840s, New York and Pennsylvania passed legislation to require this outcome. In *Lemmon v. The People*, an 1860 landmark case upholding such state legislation, New York’s highest court ruled that eight Virginia slaves became free the moment their master brought them into the state. The New York Court reached this decision even



Figure 2. After escaping from his master in Virginia, George Latimer (1818–c.1880) found his way to Boston where he became the protagonist of a benchmark personal liberty case. Incited by Latimer’s apprehension, a series of popular protests culminated with his freedom and the passing of the “Latimer Law,” which prohibited state officials from enforcing the federal fugitive slave law. (Courtesy of New York Public Library)

though the master came to the state for just one night so he could change ships for direct passage to New Orleans (1). Decisions such as *Lemmon* were consistent with both a century of Anglo-American law and notions of federalism and states’ rights. The states had the right to decide who was a slave and who was not under such circumstances. As could be expected, a number of slave states objected to these decisions; some mentioned *Lemmon* in their secession documents. These states argued that the Constitution had failed them by not protecting their right to travel with their slave property.

Ironically, these same Southern states denied any rights to free blacks who lived in the North. When Northern ships docked in Charleston or New Orleans, any free black sailors on them were arrested and held in the local jail. They were allowed to leave only if the ship captain paid the jailer for their upkeep. In the 1840s, Massachusetts sent commissioners to South Carolina and Louisiana to negotiate an agreement on the status of free black sailors, but officials in both states forced the commissioners to leave without even discussing the issue. At this time, slave jurisdictions also arrested

visiting white Northerners if they were found in possession of antislavery literature. Thus, Southern states had a view of interstate relations that protected the rights of slaveowners, but not free blacks or whites from the North who were not sufficiently supportive of slavery.

Finally, secessionists complained about abolition societies in the North. In effect, they wanted to prevent the North from allowing free speech to opponents of slavery, just as the South did. Almost every Southern state had banned Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 popular anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The South wanted to impose that sort of censorship on the North as well.

On the Eve of War

By the time Lincoln took office in March 1861, seven states had declared themselves no longer a part of the Union. South Carolina had been the first to leave and it had set out the arguments the other seceding slave states would follow. In its secession declaration, the South Carolina delegates singled out Northern states whose actions had allegedly undermined the Constitution:

The States of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin and Iowa, have enacted laws which either nullify the Acts of Congress or render useless any attempt to execute them. In many of these States the fugitive is discharged from service or labor claimed, and in none of them has the State Government complied with the stipulation made in the Constitution. The State of New Jersey, at an early day, passed a law in conformity with her constitutional obligation; but the current of anti-slavery feeling has led her more recently to enact laws which render inoperative the remedies provided by her own law and by the laws of Congress. In the State of New York even the right of transit for a slave has been denied by her tribunals; and the

States of Ohio and Iowa have refused to surrender to justice fugitives charged with murder, and with inciting servile insurrection in the State of Virginia. Thus the constituted compact has been deliberately broken and disregarded by the non-slaveholding States, and the consequence follows that South Carolina is released from her obligation (2).

In the face of this ominous portrait painted by secessionists, Lincoln denied that slavery was threatened by either the free states or his administration (Figure 3). He used his first inaugural address to plead with the Southern states to return to the Union. He began by noting that “Apprehension seems to exist among the people of the Southern States that by the accession of a Republican Administration their property and their peace and personal security are to be endangered.” He insisted there was no “reasonable cause for such apprehension,” reiterating that he had “no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists.” He reaffirmed the constitutional issue that he had “no lawful right to” interfere with slavery, even if he wanted to do so. Because he had no lawful or constitutional right to interfere with slavery, and because he was pledged to preserve the Constitution—and with it the Union—he also reaffirmed that he had “no inclination” to harm slavery. Lincoln’s constitutional thought dovetailed with the politics of the moment. His goal was to bring the seven seceding slave states back into the Union, and to prevent any more from leaving the Union. He could only do this if the people of these states were convinced that a Republican administration did not threaten slavery.

The rest of his statement—that he had “no lawful right” to interfere with slavery—was an assertion of both constitutional principles and well understood constitutional law. From the writing of the Constitution in 1787 until Lincoln’s inauguration, virtually every legal scholar, jurist, politician, and lawyer in America agreed that the national government had no power to regulate slavery in the states where it existed. Lincoln quoted from the 1860 Republican Party platform to underline his own commitment to this constitutional principle:

Resolved, That the maintenance inviolate of the rights of the States, and especially the right of each State to order and control its own domestic institutions according to its own judgment exclusively, is essential to that balance of power on which the perfection and endurance of our political fabric depend; and we denounce the lawless invasion by armed force of the soil of any State or Territory, no matter what pretext, as among the gravest of crimes (3).

This statement of orthodox constitutional law mirrored the analysis offered by General Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, the influential pro-slavery leader of the South Carolina delegation at the 1787 Constitutional Convention. After the Convention, Pinckney bragged to the

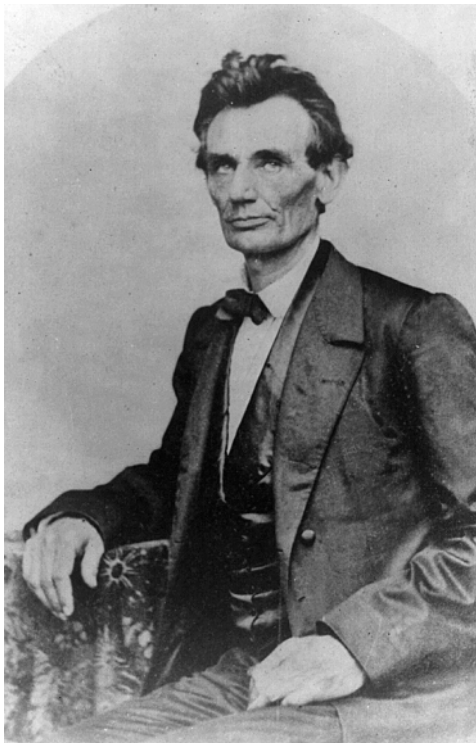


Figure 3. Abraham Lincoln, shown here days after winning the 1860 Republican Party nomination, took a position on slavery that is still a contested topic among historians and laypersons alike. As a presidential candidate, Lincoln faced critics who accused him of being inconsistent in his approach to abolition. However, Lincoln’s commitment to defend his interpretation of the Constitution did not falter. With the advent of war, Lincoln found ways to interfere with the institution of slavery without compromising the integrity of the Constitution. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

South Carolina legislature: “We have a security that the general government can never emancipate them, for no such authority is granted and it is admitted, on all hands, that the general government has no powers but what are expressly granted by the Constitution, and that all rights not expressed were reserved by the several states” (4).

In part Lincoln had “no inclination” to touch slavery in the states because he had no power to do so. An orthodox Whig on constitutional principles, Lincoln had no interest in gratuitously trampling on the Constitution. He believed—as did virtually every member of Congress and the Supreme Court—that the national government had no power to regulate or abolish slavery in the states. At the same time, Lincoln also firmly asserted that no state could leave the Union on its own. Here his constitutional theory was also fairly orthodox and, until his own election, generally accepted on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line: “I hold that in contemplation of universal law and of the Constitution the Union of these States is perpetual. Perpetuity is implied, if not expressed, in the fundamental law of all national governments. It is safe to assert that no government proper ever had a provision in its organic law for its own termination. Continue to execute all the express provisions of our National Constitution, and the Union will endure forever, it being impossible to destroy it except by some action not provided for in the instrument itself” (5). Thus, Lincoln pledged to support the Constitution by preserving the Union, just as he asserted he would support the Constitution by not threaten-

ing slavery in the existing states.

In making this argument, the incoming president reiterated that secession could never be possible under the Constitution: “Plainly the central idea of secession is the essence of anarchy. 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 to despotism. Unanimity is impossible. The rule of a minority, as a permanent arrangement, is wholly inadmissible; so that, rejecting the majority principle, anarchy or despotism in some form is all that is left” (6). In other words, the whole Southern claim of a right to secession was in essence a claim against any continuing form of government. If the South wanted to leave the Union, then the process would have to be followed within the Constitution. Congress might pass legislation allowing states to leave the Union; the states might petition Congress for a constitutional convention, or Congress might pass a constitutional amendment to allow secession and send it on to the states for ratification.

Significantly, almost all of Lincoln’s First Inaugural was about the Constitution. The word itself appears thirty-four times in the speech. And there are additional references to it with phrases such as “frame of government.” Lincoln’s goal in the address was to convince the South to return to the Union, where slavery was protected. Near the end of his speech he made the obvious point that the old Constitution remained in place, unchanged and unlikely to be changed. The so-called Confederate

states claimed the North and the Union threatened slavery in violation of the Constitution, but as Lincoln pointed out, “Such of you as are now dissatisfied still have the old Constitution unimpaired, and, on the sensitive point, the laws of your own framing under it; while the new Administration will have no immediate power, if it would, to change either” (7). In other words, since both the Administration and the states of the Deep South conceded that the Constitution protected slavery, and that Lincoln was obligated to uphold and protect the Constitution and to enforce the Fugitive Slave Law, there was no reason for secession.

Lincoln’s pleas, of course, fell on deaf ears. As he would observe in his second inaugural, “Both parties deprecated war, but one of them would make war rather than let the nation survive, and the other would accept war rather than let it perish, and the war came” (8).

War, Constitution, and Slavery

Once the guns started blazing, the existing constitutional restraints changed. Lincoln argued that under the Constitution slavery was secure, but once the seceding slave states left the Union and made war on their own country, they could no longer claim the protections of the Constitution. Thus, while Lincoln had no power to end slavery when he took office—because the national government could not interfere with slavery in the existing states—he could interfere with slavery in those states that had made war on the national government. Thus, starting in early 1861, a new constitutional reality developed around slavery.

The first change came on May 23, 1861, when three slaves owned by Confederate Colonel Charles K. Mallory escaped to Fortress Monroe, then under the command of Major General Benjamin F. Butler. A day later Confederate Major M. B. Carey, under a flag of truce, arrived at the Fort, demanding the return of the slaves under the Constitution and the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. Butler, a successful Massachusetts lawyer before the war, told Carey that the slaves were contrabands of war, because they had been used to build fortifications for the Confederacy, and thus Butler would not return them to Mallory (9). Ironically, Butler informed Major Carey that “the fugitive slave act did not affect a foreign country, which Virginia claimed to be and she must reckon it one of the infelicities of her position that in so far at least she was taken at her word.” Butler then offered to return the slaves if Colonel Mallory would come to Fortress Monroe and “take the oath of allegiance to the Constitution of the United States” (10). Not surprisingly, Colonel Mallory did not accept General Butler’s offer.

This ended Colonel Mallory’s attempt to recover his slaves, but it was the beginning of a new policy for the United States. Butler, in need of workers, immediately employed the three fugitives, who had previously been used by Mallory to build Confederate defenses. Taking these slaves away from Confederates served the dual purposes of depriving the enemy of labor while providing labor for the United States. The events at Fortress Monroe were the beginning of an entirely new understanding of the powers of the United States on the central constitutional issue of the age: slavery.

Even before General Butler brilliantly devised the contraband policy, the issue of emancipation had been on the table. Many abolitionists and antislavery Republicans wanted Lincoln to move against slavery immediately, but Lincoln could not act for a variety of reasons. He first needed a constitutional theory under which he could act to end slavery in the Confederacy. This theory evolved throughout 1861 and early 1862. By the spring of 1862, Lincoln accepted the notion that as Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy, he could move against the Confederacy’s most important military asset: its slaves. What General Butler could do for three slaves, Lincoln could do for the more than three million slaves in the Confederacy (11). He would issue the Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863.

But before taking this fateful step, Lincoln needed to prepare the way for a constitutionally legitimate change. First, he had to secure the four loyal slave states (Maryland, Delaware, Missouri, and Kentucky) in order to prevent them from seceding. Second, he had to have support from the Congress and the people, including Northern conservatives. Thus, initial Republican forays against slavery were partial and eminently constitutional. In April 1862, for instance, Congress ended slavery in the District of Columbia through compensated emancipation. This did not violate the Fifth Amendment because the taking of property was done with “just compensation.” Nor did it violate the limitations on the power of Congress, because the Constitution gave Congress the power to regulate the District of Columbia. Third, Lincoln had to have some expectation of winning the war, or at least partially defeating the Confederacy. An emancipation proclamation without victory would be nothing, “like the Pope’s bull against the comet” (12). By July 1862, Lincoln believed the war was going his way. Two Confederate state capitals, Nashville and Baton Rouge, were in U.S. hands and, with the exception of Vicksburg, the entire Mississippi River was controlled by Lincoln’s Navy and Army. The Confederates had been forced from their largest city, New Orleans, and United States troops were firmly encamped on the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina. Raiding parties from those islands were bringing the war home to the very citadel of secession. Lincoln only awaited a big victory—which he would get at Antietam in September 1862—to announce his plan for ending slavery in the Confederacy.

Thus, when it came to ending slavery *inside* the United States, Lincoln and Congress narrowly hewed to the constitutional understandings that had existed before the war. The slaves in the Confederacy, however, were another matter. They were property, used by the enemies of the United States to make war on the United States. Furthermore, the Constitution could not be applied in the Confederate states. There was no “law” there anymore, except martial law and the law of war. Under that theory, General Butler declared runaway slaves to be contrabands of war, and thus legitimately seized and freed. Congress did the same in both Confiscation Acts and in other laws and regulations. Lincoln followed suit in the Emancipation Proclamation, narrowly limiting it to those places that were still at war and not under national jurisdiction.

Significantly, Lincoln issued the proclamation “by virtue of the power in me vested as Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States in time of actual armed rebellion” (13). This was, constitutionally, a war measure designed to cripple the ability of those in rebellion to resist the lawful authority of the United States. It applied only to those states and parts of states that were still in rebellion. This was constitutionally essential. The purpose of the proclamation was “restoring the constitutional relations” between the nation and all the states.

The irony of secession was that it allowed Lincoln do what he had always wanted. He had always believed slavery was wrong and immoral. But, as a lawyer, a Congressman, and an incoming president he understood that the national government could only regulate or end slavery in the District of Columbia and the territories. In a famous letter published in the *New York Tribune*, Lincoln repeated his “oft-expressed *personal* wish that all men everywhere could be free” (14). He later told a correspondent, “If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong” (15). Without secession, however, he could never have acted on these personal views, because, as he told the South in his first inaugural address, the Constitution guaranteed their property rights in slaves. But, once the slave states abandoned the Constitution, they could no longer expect it to protect them.

The end of slavery could not, of course, come through a presidential proclamation or a congressional act, because even as the war ended, slavery remained constitutionally protected in those slave states

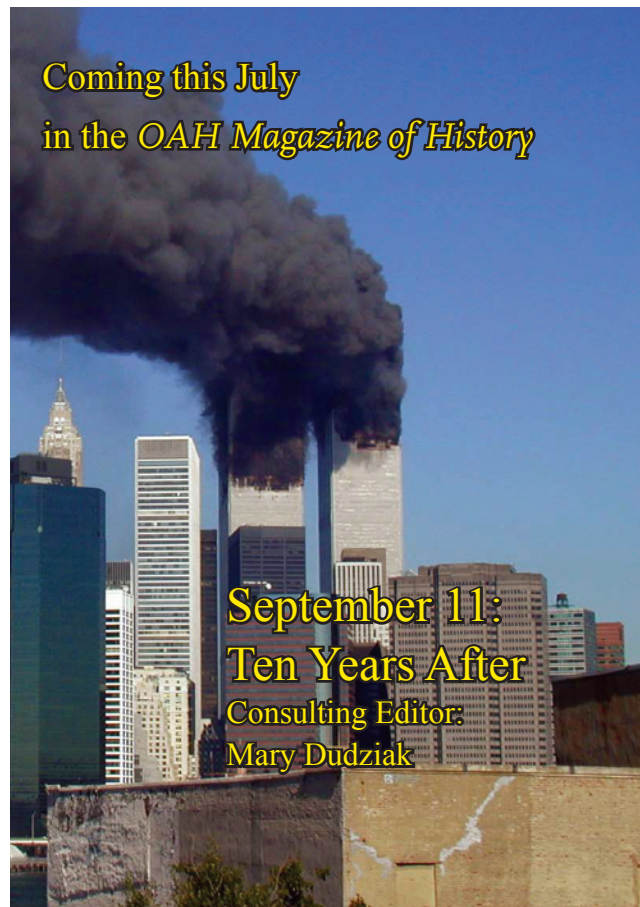
that had never left the Union and those places that had come under U.S. control *before* the Emancipation Proclamation. Thus, a constitutional amendment was needed. Lincoln urged Congress to pass such an amendment, which it did in early 1865. By December it had been ratified, slavery was ended, and the Constitution was permanently altered to forever favor freedom and to never protect or legitimize bondage. Two more amendments, ratified in 1868 and 1870, would make former slaves and their children citizens with the same voting rights as other Americans. These were the final steps in the constitutional revolution that began with South Carolina's unconstitutional act of declaring itself separate from the Union. □

Endnotes

1. For a discussion of this case, see Paul Finkelman, *An Imperfect Union: Slavery, Federalism, and Comity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981).
2. "Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union" found at <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/csa_scarsec.asp>; see also James W. Loewen and Edward H. Sebesta, eds., *The Confederate and Neo-Confederate Reader* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2010), 111.
3. Abraham Lincoln, "First Inaugural Address—Final Text," *Collected Works* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 4:263.
4. Pinckney quoted in Jonathan Elliot, *The Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution*, 5 vols. (New York: Burt Franklin, 1987, reprint of 1888 edition), 4:286.
5. Lincoln, "First Inaugural Address—Final Text," *Collected Works*, 4:264–65.
6. Lincoln, "First Inaugural Address—Final Text," *Collected Works*, 4:268.
7. Lincoln, "First Inaugural Address—Final Text," *Collected Works*, 4:271.
8. Lincoln, "Second Inaugural Address," March 4, 1861, *Collected Works*, 8:332.

9. Benjamin F. Butler, *Butler's Book* (Boston: A.M. Thayer, 1892), 256–57.
10. Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler to Lt. Gen. Winfield Scott, May 24/25 1861, in *The War of the Rebellion: The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 127 vols., index, and atlas (1880–1901), ser. 2, vol. 1:752 [hereafter cited as O.R.]
11. For a more elaborate discussion of how Lincoln moved towards Emancipation, see Paul Finkelman, "Lincoln and the Preconditions for Emancipation: The Moral Grandeur of a Bill of Lading," in William A. Blair and Karen Fisher Younger, eds., *Lincoln's Proclamation: Race, Place, and the Paradoxes of Emancipation* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009) 13–44; Paul Finkelman, "Lincoln, Emancipation and the Limits of constitutional Change," *Supreme Court Review*, 2008: 349–87; and Paul Finkelman, "The Civil War, Emancipation, and the Thirteenth Amendment: Understanding Who Freed the Slaves," in Alexander Tsesis, ed., *The Promises of Liberty: The History and Contemporary Relevance of the Thirteenth Amendment* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010), 36–57.
12. *Ibid.*, 423.
13. Lincoln, "Emancipation Proclamation," January 1, 1863, *Collected Works*, 6:29.
14. Lincoln to Horace Greeley, August 22, 1862, *Collected Works*, 5:388–89
15. Lincoln to Albert G. Hodges, April 4, 1864, *Collected Works*, 7:281.

Paul Finkelman is the President William McKinley Distinguished Professor of Law and Public Policy at Albany Law School. He is the author, co-author, or editor of more than twenty books and over one hundred scholarly articles. His books include *A March of Liberty: A Constitutional History of the United States* (Oxford University Press, 2010), *Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson* (M.E. Sharpe, 2001), *Dred Scott v. Sandford: A Brief History* (Bedford/St. Martin's, 1995), and *An Imperfect Union: Slavery, Federalism, and Comity* (University of North Carolina Press, 1981).



Coming this July
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The Political Origins of the Civil War

Between late January and Election Day of 1860, 23-year-old Charles O'Neill, Jr. of New Haven, Connecticut spent his free time practicing military maneuvers. But he was not preparing to face the Army of Northern Virginia—the Civil War didn't start until April 12, 1861. O'Neill, an elected first lieutenant of the Washington Wide Awakes, a Republican Party-affiliated paramilitary campaign organization (Figure 1), was instead readying for electoral battle against Democrats like the rival Douglas Invincibles. To the young laborer the torch-lit processions, serenades, and occasional brawls were an important part of the most important political campaign of his life: "You may imagine me in a silver and green cape, blue lantern in one hand, a yellow cane in the other, trooping though the mud giving orders, file left, march, shoulder arms, &c.," he wrote his fiancée the week of the momentous election. "Hurrah for old Abe. We are going to win, true as you live" (1).

While O'Neill and his men rarely carried a live firearm or intended to continue drilling after election day, the very public military display of the Wide Awakes further unnerved Southerners already panicked about the election (Figure 1). Formerly moderate newspapers like the *Baltimore Sun* splattered their pages with secessionist arguments. In the halls of Congress, Texas Senator Louis Wigfall accused New Yorker William Seward of encouraging his "John-Brown, Wide-Awake Praetorians" to remain organized following Lincoln's election. "One half million of men uniformed and drilled, and the purpose of their organization . . . to sweep the country in which I live with fire and sword" (2).

O'Neill and Wigfall were hardly alone that fateful year in ascribing particular significance to an election and, to a larger degree, politics in general. After all, it was a *political* act—the election of Abraham Lincoln, the first overtly antislavery candidate, to the presidency—that sparked first secession and then war itself. While few historians would disagree that the Civil War had important economic, social, and cultural causes, the fact remains that the Southern states didn't secede because the



Figure 1. Founded in the spring of 1860 in Hartford, Connecticut, the Wide-Awake Club was a Republican Party-affiliated paramilitary organization whose members paraded in support of the Lincoln-Hamlin ticket. Their mass displays of guns, flags, and torches at political rallies—reflected in the martial symbolism of this membership certificate—intensified the nation's sectional split and help us to understand the political origins of the Civil War. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

North had built a vast, industrial economy and wanted to expand it to the West, or because more people read Northern rather than Southern books and periodicals. Secession was a response to a new political reality: the collapse, after many decades, of Southern slaveholders' iron-fisted control of federal power. The voters of the United States selected a president and a party committed first to containing and, finally, ending slavery. As James M. McPherson put it, "the losers refused to yield and precipitated a war that ended by giving America a new lease on life and a new birth of freedom" (3).

In fact, the overwhelming centrality of politics among the causes of the sectional crisis and, ultimately, the Civil War was clear well before the first shots were fired. In 1858, Senator William H. Seward of New York famously described what he called an "irrepressible conflict between opposing and enduring forces" that could only end once the United States became "entirely a slaveholding nation, or entirely a free labor nation" (4). Despite notable attempts to forge a political compromise over the issue of slavery and its extension in 1787, 1821, 1850 and 1854, successive generations of American leaders simply failed to come up with a workable permanent solution to this particular conundrum. This essay will discuss these various attempts to find a political solution to the slavery issue, and the diminishing returns of success each successive compromise had on soothing the nation's increasingly polarized sections. By the 1850s, when significant new lands were added to the United States as a result of the war with Mexico, compromise-minded politicians in Washington were no match for those in both sections determined to prevail completely in forcing the other to accept its vision of slavery. For the South, it was a federal code guaranteeing slavery in the territories and paving the way for new slave states, coupled with a Fugitive Slave Law that fully swung the weight of the federal government behind the interests of slaveholders. For an increasingly antislavery North, it was, at the very least, the containment of slavery where it already existed. But with the rise of a Republican Party committed not just to containing slavery, but bringing it to an end, political compromises like those attempted before and after Lincoln's election

in 1860 were doomed to failure. Politics—and political failure—stands firmly atop the long list of causes of the Civil War.

The “Compromise of 1787”

The first attempt at a grand political compromise over slavery took place at the moment of the republic’s birth, during debates over the federal constitution. Delegates to the Philadelphia Convention of 1787 clashed over how to count slaves for enumeration purposes regarding the distribution of taxes and apportionment of the new House of Representatives. During the previous decade most northern states had either ended slavery outright (as in Massachusetts) or gradually abolished it by statute (as in New York) in what historians call the “first emancipation.” Delegates opposed to slavery, mostly from the northern states, proposed to count only the free inhabitants of each state for apportionment purposes. On the other hand, those more supportive of the institution preferred to count each state’s actual population, including slaves, and since slaves could not vote, their owners would reap the benefit of increased representation in both Congress and the Electoral College.

The solution arrived upon by the delegates, called the “three-fifths compromise,” counted every five slaves as three people, thereby reducing the power of the slave states relative to their initial proposal. But, as pointed out in recent work by Garry Wills and Leonard Richards, the compromise vastly increased the South’s power in the federal government by granting the region “bonus” seats in Congress and more electoral votes based on a completely disfranchised slave population. This imbalance, according to Wills, helped Southern presidential candidates like Thomas Jefferson win landslide victories in the Electoral College while also padding Southern representation on the Supreme Court and in Congressional leadership positions. Slaveholders also gained a clause in the U.S. Constitution guaranteeing the return of fugitive slaves. The results were enough to commence a long-running conspiracy theory in the North about a “Slave Power” which, like many conspiracy theories, contained an element of truth. A slaveholder occupied the White House for fifty of the sixty-two years between 1788 and 1850; eighteen of thirty-one U.S. Supreme Court justices owned slaves, and each of the three longest-serving Speakers of the House did, too. The smaller of the two sections seemed firmly in control (5).

The Missouri Compromise

After Jefferson’s 1803 purchase of French Louisiana doubled American territory, it became clear that the earlier political compromises over slavery would have to be renegotiated. For the two decades after the ratification of the U.S. Constitution, the addition of new states to the Union occurred in an almost perfect one-for-one North/South ratio: Vermont/Kentucky, Tennessee/Ohio, Louisiana/Indiana, and Mississippi/Illinois. When Alabama was admitted in December of 1819, the number of slave and free states was, once again, in perfect symmetry, with eleven of each.

Settlers of the territory of Missouri, most of whom had come from the South, had also reached the specified number to warrant statehood, and applied for admission as a slave state. A bitter series of debates erupted in Congress on the subject of Missouri’s admission, brazenly emphasizing what so many politicians of the era wished to avoid: deep sectional divisions within the United States.

For the second time in the nation’s history, a grand political compromise was attempted over the issue of slavery and its expansion, and Kentucky’s Henry Clay, the Whig Speaker of the House, brokered it (Figure 2). Clay’s Compromise granted each section a new state—Maine for the North, and Missouri for the South—and slavery was forbidden in the vast lands of the Louisiana Purchase north of 36° 30’

(the southern border of the new state of Missouri). The immediate problem of Missouri was solved, but the larger question of whether slavery should be allowed to expand further was postponed for another day (6). The debates and threats of disunion went to the core issue of the struggle for power in Congress between representatives of the northern and southern states and, related to that, the ability of Congress itself to decide the fate of the territories added to the United States. These were difficult issues to solve, and incidentally ones put off into the future by the founders. This is why the aging Thomas Jefferson confided to a correspondent his fears that the line created by the Compromise would endanger the future of the nation: “this momentous question, like a fire bell in the night, awakened me and filled me with terror. I considered it at once as the knell of the Union . . . a geographical line, coinciding with a marked principle, moral and political, once conceived and held up to the angry passions of men, will never be obliterated” (7).

Missouri slaveholders rejoiced, but Congress had, for the first time since 1787, excluded slavery from a public territory. The Missouri Compromise held sway (and kept the sections at nominal peace over the issue of slavery’s extension) for three decades. But the failure of the members of the Fifteenth Congress to resolve these issues once and for



Figure 2. “The Great Compromiser,” Henry Clay (1777–1852) played a pivotal role in numerous congressional debates on the slavery question, helping draft the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and the Compromise of 1850. Even outside Capitol Hill, Clay could not escape controversies involving slavery. Citing an agreement with a previous owner, his slave, Charlotte Dupuy, claimed that she was legally entitled to freedom. Though the case was settled in favor of Clay, in 1840 he freed Charlotte and her daughter. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

all ensured the issue would again creep into public discourse once there was more territory to organize and settle.

The Mexican Cession and the Compromise of 1850

The annexation of the Republic of Texas in 1845 and the addition to the United States of 525,000 square miles of new territory as a result of the 1846–48 war with Mexico again brought the politics of slavery's future into sharp focus. The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo forced Mexico to cede territory including the entire current states of California, Nevada, Utah and portions of Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Wyoming to the United States, in exchange for \$15 million. As had happened with the petition to admit Missouri a quarter century before, antislavery Northern Congressmen tried to block the addition of new slave states. This time, Northern House Democrats like David Wilmot of Pennsylvania broke with their Southern brethren in 1846 and passed a proviso which attempted to ban slavery from any territory gained as a result of the war with Mexico. While the measure failed to pass the Senate (where the South had more representation and allies), some Southern leaders decided that the Wilmot Proviso represented a new, dangerous attack on slavery, by attempting to limit its expansion south and west. During the 1848 Presidential election, antislavery feeling coalesced in the North around the new Free Soil Party, which failed to win any electoral votes but deprived the Democratic candidate of enough electoral votes to deliver the White House to the Whig candidate Zachary Taylor (a slaveholding hero of the Mexican War) (8). Throughout 1849, increasingly disunionist rhetoric dominated political discourse in both the North and South, especially after President Taylor called for the admission of California as a free state, without even an intervening period as a territory.

Stung by Taylor's California announcement, Southerners led by Mississippi Senator Jefferson Davis demanded that their region be granted guarantees protecting slavery in the territories as well as a strong federal fugitive slave law to ensure the return of runaways to their masters. Once again Henry Clay, by 1850 an aging *éminence grise* of the Senate, tried to forge a last-ditch political compromise. This time, he proposed that a long series of measures representing each side's demands be passed as a single, colossal "omnibus" bill, which ideally would quell the sectional discord and, like the Missouri Compromise, preserve the union for another thirty years. Clay's compromise provisions included:

- Admission of California as a free state
- Organization of New Mexico and Utah Territories without mention of slavery (and the status of that institution to be later determined by the territories themselves in a process called "popular sovereignty")
- Prohibition of the slave trade (but not slavery itself) in the District of Columbia
- Settlement of various Texas boundary claims, and
- A strict new Fugitive Slave Law

Although the omnibus bill failed, Stephen Douglas, a young Democratic Senator from Illinois, used his considerable political skills to pass the Compromise of 1850 as a series of separate bills (with each section's representatives voting for the measures that were the most self-serving) in September 1850 (Figure 3). As with most backroom political deals, each party had to accept terms it found unpalatable. Observers on both sides hailed the Compromise as a "final solution" to the vexing question of slavery in the territories. But in reality the legislation pleased no one, certainly not the growing chorus of radicals in both the North and South.

Making Kansas Bleed

Stephen Douglas's encore to the Compromise of 1850 was the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which provided for the settlement and organiza-

tion of the parts of the old Louisiana Purchase north of Indian Territory (present day Oklahoma). Douglas, a nationalist and Democrat looking ahead to his party's nomination for the presidency in 1856, hoped both to populate the upper Midwest with settlers and win political favor in the South. His legislation nullified the twenty-three-year-old Missouri Compromise barring slavery from parts of the original Louisiana Purchase north of 36° 30' and replaced it with "popular sovereignty." Douglas famously claimed to "care not" whether Kansas would remain free or become a refuge for slavery. But thousands of Americans on both sides of the slavery issue *did* care, and pro- and anti-slavery supporters flooded the fertile river valleys in the eastern part of the territory in 1854 and 1855. Violent clashes soon occurred, especially once proslavery Missourians (called "Border Ruffians" by their foes) crossed the man-made border to steal a territorial election for their side (9).

During the spring of 1856, Border Ruffians led in person by one of Missouri's U.S. Senators sacked the antislavery town of Lawrence; one day later violence stalked the U.S. Capitol building itself when Congressman Preston Brooks of South Carolina attacked Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts with a heavy cane in response to Sumner's speech blaming Southerners for crimes in Kansas. The Senate floor, the site of so many formal compromises over slavery, had by 1856 become the scene of bloody physical aggression. In response to the



Figure 3. Memorialized with a statue in Freeport, Illinois, the "Little Giant," U.S. Senator Stephen Douglas (1813–1861) was for years the most prominent northern face of the Democratic Party. During a debate with Abraham Lincoln at this site, Douglas pronounced the Freeport Doctrine, a commitment to "popular sovereignty" to decide the slavery question in the new territories of the Union. Douglas became a source of division within his party as many Southern Democrats attacked his attempt at compromise. This split led to Douglas's defeat in the 1860 presidential election. (Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

sack of Lawrence (and, perhaps, also for the caning of Sumner) the radical abolitionist and recent Kansas arrival John Brown dragged five proslavery settlers from their beds and split open their heads with broadswords. Later that summer, Brown and his men engaged with proslavery settlers and Missourians on the battlefield at both Black Jack and Osawatimie. In the words of the New York editor Horace Greeley, the territory had become “bleeding Kansas,” and politicians seemed powerless to stem the tide of violence on the prairie.

One of the main legacies of the border wars in Kansas was the formation of a new political party that only added to the sectional tension separating North and South. Organized in 1854, the new Republican Party grew out of a loose coalition of antislavery Whigs and Free Soil Democrats who had mobilized in opposition to Stephen Douglas’s Kansas-Nebraska Act. In addition to opposing slavery and its expansion into new territories, the party put forward a vision for remaking the United States on Northern values, emphasizing free homesteads for settlers, assistance to railroads and industry, and bank reform. They vigorously argued that the free labor system of the Northern states was superior in every way to slavery and, in fact, the very foundation of civic virtue in a republic such as the United States. The new party immediately took root in New England and the Old Northwest, and nominated John C. Frémont for President in 1856 with the slogan “free soil, free labor, free speech, free men, Frémont.” Although he received virtually no support in the South (where he and the Republicans were excoriated as divisive forces who would likely bring on civil war) and lost to Democrat James Buchanan, the political neophyte won big in New England, New York, and the northern Midwest.

The Election of 1860 and the Coming of the Civil War

The election of 1860 showed just how frayed the nation’s political system had become after a decade of uninterrupted sectional turmoil, and how unlikely a Henry Clay-style grand compromise would be at the start of the new decade. The campaign had barely gotten underway when John Brown resurfaced by invading the slave state of Virginia and occupying the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry in October, 1859. The raid was over just thirty-six hours after it had begun, and Brown and six of his surviving followers were hastily convicted and sentenced to hang after a sensational trial in Charles Town, Virginia. Harpers Ferry polarized the United States as no previous event ever had, and set in motion a dizzying spiral of actions and reactions. At the start of 1860, the raid and some Northerners’ responses to it threatened to cost the Republican Party at the polls. “The quicker they hang him and get him out of the way, the better,” said Republican Charles H. Ray. “We are damnably exercised here about the effect of Old Brown’s retched *fiasco* . . . upon the moral health of the Republican Party!” (10)

In the South, newspapers declared that Brown’s actions were simply the logical (and inevitable) outcome of Republican agitation over slavery restriction. The *Baltimore Sun*, heretofore the voice of border state moderation, announced that the South could not afford to “live under a government, the majority of whose subjects or citizens regard John Brown as a martyr and a Christian hero, rather than a murderer and a robber” (11).

Time and again, Southern criticism fell on those considered more “radical” opponents of slavery, men like William H. Seward and Horace Greeley. “Brown may be insane,” wrote the editor of the *Richmond Enquirer*, “but there are other criminals, guilty wretches, who instigated the crime perpetrated at Harpers Ferry . . . bring Seward, Greeley, Hale, and Smith to the jurisdiction of Virginia and Brown and his deluded victims in the Charlestown [sic] jail may hope for a pardon.” Suddenly the political futures of Republicans *not* heretofore known as “radicals,” men like Abraham Lincoln, were looking up.

If the Republicans were worried, the Democratic Party was itself full of disunionists. The Democrats had survived the 1850s with their party intact—making it one of the last bi-sectional institutions to break into Northern and Southern factions. But the long-delayed split finally occurred in early 1860 at the party’s nominating convention, with Southern Democrats unwilling to support Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, its leading candidate and the only Democrat with potentially national appeal. Southern delegates to the convention walked out and nominated the sitting vice president John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky on a proslavery platform. That left a bitter husk of the party of Jefferson and Jackson to nominate Douglas to run on the same platform the party used in 1856. What remained of the old Whig Party of Henry Clay formed the Constitutional Union Party and nominated John Bell of Tennessee on a platform of preserving the Union at all costs.

Faced with this scenario, Republicans, who had studied the map of the last Presidential election, concluded they could win the White House by reversing Democratic victories in just two or three Northern states like Pennsylvania, Illinois, and Indiana. Its leading candidate, William Seward of New York, had been a U.S. Senator for many years, and had made enemies across the political spectrum with antislavery addresses like the famous “Higher Law” (1850) and “Irrepressible Conflict” (1858) speeches, each of which was made out to be more radical than they actually were. When Seward failed to muster the votes necessary to capture the Presidential nomination on the first ballot in Chicago, many delegates turned instead to their favorite “second choice,” the railroad lawyer and former one-term Congressman Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln won the nomination on the third ballot (Figure 4).

The centerpiece of the Republican Party’s electoral appeal, cemented at the center of its platform, was unequivocal opposition to the expansion of slavery. “No new slave states” was a constant cry on the campaign trail. Slavery, for Republicans, was an immoral institution and a relic of “barbarism.” Most party members believed that by confining the institution within its present boundaries, it would be placed on the road to eventual extinction. The party was, therefore, a genuine anti-slavery party. This is not to say that most (or even many) Republicans were abolitionists. Indeed, party candidates and opinion-makers labored incessantly to separate themselves from abolitionists who agitated for an immediate, uncompensated end to slavery. But a key reason many Southerners believed a Republican victory would mean a certain end to their “peculiar institution” was because so many Republicans made this very point, repeatedly and unceasingly. First and foremost was Lincoln himself. In the Cooper Union address in February 1860 he claimed that “[a]n inspection of the Constitution will show that the right of property in a slave is not ‘distinctly and expressly affirmed’ in it” (12). After Lincoln won the nomination and, citing custom, withdrew from the campaign trail, his surrogates made the point even more explicitly. Future Vice President Henry Wilson of Massachusetts, for example, explained in detail how, when in office, the Republicans would accomplish their chief aim: “We shall arrest the extension of slavery and rescue the Government from the grasp of the slave power,” he said. “We shall blot out slavery from the national capital. We shall surround the slave states with a cordon of free states. We shall then appeal to the hearts and consciences of men and in a few years we shall give liberty to the millions in bondage” (13). Southerners should be excused if they feared for slavery’s future within a Republican-led Union. Republicans themselves told them what to expect.

The campaign of 1860 was actually two separate elections, one in the North and one in the South. In the North, Lincoln and Douglas faced off against each other; in the South the contest was largely one



Figure 4. This presidential campaign button featuring Abraham Lincoln on one side and vice-presidential nominee Hannibal Hamlin (not shown) on the other, signals the use of photography, a recent technological development, in the practice of political advertising. Though Lincoln withdrew from the campaign trail, artifacts carrying his image were widely circulated throughout the nation with the purpose of increasing Lincoln's national appeal. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

between Bell and Breckinridge. These sectionally segregated elections were almost completely insulated from each other. In fact, Lincoln did not even appear on ballots across most of the South, and Breckinridge garnered little support north of the Mason-Dixon line. Lincoln won the election with just thirty-nine percent of the popular vote, by carrying seventeen free states and their 180 electoral votes. Breckinridge won eleven slave states and their seventy-two electoral votes; neither leading candidate captured a single state in the opposite section. Bell and Douglas—the only two candidates who possessed national appeal—trailed far behind, with thirty and twelve electoral votes, respectively. Vast majorities of Americans voted for candidates who promised less, not more, compromising spirit over the future of slavery.

Secession Winter and a Final Attempt at Compromise

Just six weeks after Lincoln's triumph in the election of 1860, South Carolina seceded from the Union. As James Loewen explains in this issue, the South Carolina *Declaration of Immediate Causes* explained explicitly that it was the election of Lincoln and other Republicans that triggered their action: "[Northerners] have united in the election of a man to the high office of President of the United States, whose opinions and purposes are hostile to slavery," read the *Declaration*. "On the 4th of March next this [Republican] party will take possession of the government. It has announced that the South shall be excluded from the common territory; that the judicial tribunals shall be made sectional, and that a war must be waged against slavery until it shall

cease throughout the United States." The document goes on to mention slavery, slaves, or slaveholding eighteen times (14). Before Lincoln even took the oath of office, six additional states declared their secession from the Union. They established a Southern government, the Confederate States of America, on February 4, 1861. Six weeks later, Alexander Stephens, once a Whig U.S. Senator from Georgia who voted for the Compromise of 1850 but now vice president of the breakaway nation, delivered what came to be known as the "Cornerstone Speech." He explained that "the cause of the late rupture" was a political disagreement over the "proper status of the Negro in our form of civilization." Stephens's new boss, Confederate President Jefferson Davis, another veteran of the U.S. Senate, justified the dissolution of the Union as an act of self-defense against the victorious Republicans.

Yet during that bleak "secession winter" the nation's remaining unionist politicians tried one more time to avert the breakup of the United States by forging a compromise. Known by the name of one of its attempted architects, Senator John J. Crittenden of Kentucky, this last attempt at compromise consisted of six proposed constitutional amendments and four proposed Congressional resolutions. These included the permanent existence of slavery in the Southern states; Southern demands for a mighty fugitive slave code and slavery in the District of Columbia; and, perhaps most importantly (and certainly ironically), the un-amendable and un-repealable reestablishment of the old Missouri Compromise line: slavery would be prohibited north of the 36° 30' parallel and guaranteed south of it. The idea of Southerners and conservative Unionists turning once again to Henry Clay's Missouri Compromise to turn back the past seven years of sectional agitation, violence, and electioneering showed how dissipated and dilapidated the nation's political institutions had become. But even the reintroduction of the Missouri line would be anathema to the central tenet of Republicanism, and Lincoln urged his allies to reject the compromise if it meant abandoning the principle of nonextension. "Let there be no compromise on the question of *extending* slavery," he wrote during the secession crisis. "If there be, all our labor is lost. . . Stand firm. The tug has to come, & better now, than any time hereafter" (15). Both the House and the Senate soundly rejected Crittenden's compromise. The new president and congressional Republicans, after all, had been elected on a platform explicitly dedicated to halting the expansion of slavery. This political act, accomplished by voters across the North, triggered the dire crisis of the Union during the winter of 1860–61. And, as the president himself would memorably say four years later, the war came. □

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Jonathan Earle is associate professor of history at the University of Kansas. He is the author of numerous books and articles including *Jacksonian Antislavery and the Politics of Free Soil* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004), winner of the Society of Historians of the Early American Republic's 2005 Broussard prize, *John Brown's Raid: A Brief History With Documents* (Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2008), and *The Routledge Atlas of African American History* (Routledge, 2000). He is currently working on a book on the election of 1860 for the Pivotal Moments in American History series published by Oxford University Press.

Letters TO THE Editor

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The Economic Origins of the Civil War

Early in March 1865, with the Civil War nearing its end, Abraham Lincoln reflected on the reasons for the sectional clash. In his second inaugural address he observed, “[The] slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union, even by war; while the government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it” (1). While most historians would agree with that statement, it is significant how much those remarks leave questions on the Civil War unresolved. Lincoln’s comments do not explain *why* the North wanted to restrict the expansion of slavery, or *why* some Southerners were willing to “rend the Union” in their defense of slavery. In engaging those “why” questions, historians have filled up many bookshelves.

This essay suggests an answer to those challenges. It argues that more than any other concern, the evolution of the Northern and Southern economies explains why the Civil War came about. These pages will explore the reorientation of the North around an east-west axis and the increasing need of the South for new soils. But as important as any answers might be, equally important is the process of inquiry. Before investigating the role of the economy, it is useful to look at the prevailing interpretation, which argues that strongly held moral concerns about slavery were the principal cause of the conflict (2).

A Conflict Driven by Moral Concerns?

Historians who assert that principled reasons lay at the heart of the conflict do not ignore economics. It would be hard to do so. As most high school and university textbooks make clear there were fundamental differences between the two sections. But these scholars assert that such divergences simply comprise “preconditions” and serve as a background for other developments, while moral concerns remain the key to explaining the clash. No Civil War historian is more influential today, nor has any writer been more consistent in emphasizing the importance of high ideals than James McPherson. In a recent interview he summarized his outlook, including the role played by the distinct econ-

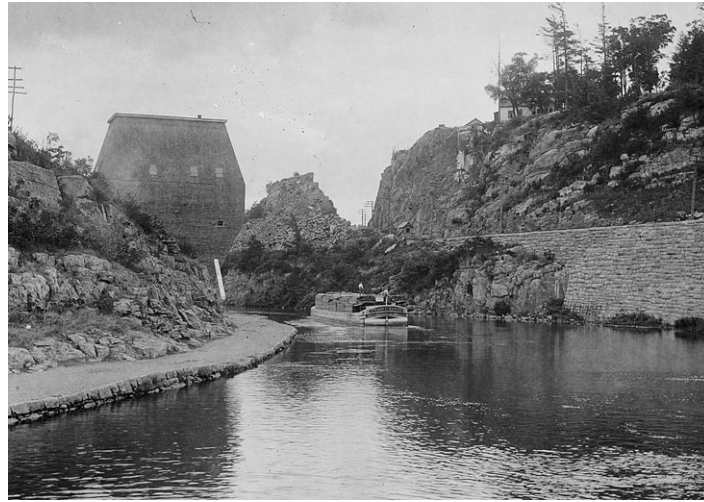


Figure 1. Completed in 1825, the Erie Canal stretched across New York state from the Hudson River to Lake Erie. It helped to reorient national trade patterns from a north/south axis along the Mississippi River to an east/west one along the Great Lakes. This economic shift provided the basis for a new sectional politics that would lead to civil war in 1861. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

omies of the two sections. “The paths of development [in the North and South] increasingly diverged over the first half of the nineteenth century,” McPherson notes, “and, in the process, generated increasingly polarized ideologies about what kind of society and what kind of nation the United States ought to be. And that focused on the institution of slavery, which by the 1830s was being increasingly attacked by Northern abolitionists as contrary to ideals of liberty that the country had been founded on . . . while the South grew increasingly defensive and turned aggressive in its defensiveness . . .”

McPherson continues, emphasizing the moral concerns that led to secession. “Southern leaders,” he remarks, saw their “way of life . . . was in jeopardy under a United States government completely in

the hands of people who opposed the expansion of slavery and whose leaders branded slavery a moral wrong that must eventually disappear from American society. So they seceded.” McPherson appropriately called his magnum opus, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (3).

Similarly, Charles Dew in his study of secession considers but subordinates the role of economics. He observes: “States’ rights, historic political abuses, territorial questions, economic differences, constitutional arguments—all these and more paled into insignificance when placed alongside this vision of the South’s future under Republican domination. . . . Slavery and race were [the] absolutely critical elements in the coming of the war” (4).

But as attractive (and widespread) as this interpretation might be, it is weakened by grave problems. For example, when the events of these years are closely scrutinized, it is hard to see an attack on slavery or its defense as the central issue. Lincoln and the North did not take up arms with any intention of freeing the slaves. On the contrary, Republicans swore when the war broke out that they would not disturb the “peculiar institution.” Moreover, the moral interpretation overlooks the Republicans’ far-reaching economic goals and accomplishments—measures such as a national banking system, higher tariffs, river and harbor improvements, a transcontinental railroad, and a homestead act. These initiatives were not one-off items. They were part of a coherent program to build a stronger national economy.

Furthermore, the focus on principled causes does not explain why for so many decades the North and South were able to compromise their differences. Despite problems that were every bit as challenging as those the country faced after 1850, the two sections were able to work out a series of compromises between 1820 and mid-century (Figure 2). Finally, McPherson's approach sheds little light on the deep divisions *within* the sections. Of the fifteen slave states, only seven, located in the Deep South, left the Union before the fighting broke out. And in most of those seven states at least forty percent of voters, and sometimes half, opposed immediate secession. The North was divided as well. In 1856, most Northerners backed the Republicans' opponents. Even in 1860 fifty-five percent of Northern voters favored a candidate other than Lincoln.

All these problems with the prevailing interpretation argue for rethinking the causes of the Civil War. As noted above, this essay contends that the evolution of the Northern and Southern economies was the single most important factor in explaining the war (5).

Era of Compromises, 1820–50

Any full understanding of the origins of the Civil War, and the role of the economy, must begin with the era of compromises, which stretched from 1820 to 1850. Despite challenging problems, harsh attacks by Northerners on slavery, and equally fervid defenses by Southerners, the two sections hammered out a series of deals during these decades. While individuals, not impersonal forces, engineered these compromises, the patterns of the national economy fostered a spirit of cooperation. The positive influence of business activity during these years is evident in five ways.

To begin with, trade along the Mississippi and its tributaries gave the Northwest and Southwest a shared outlook and a common set of interests. Second, the Border States, which comprised the northern reaches of the slave regime, had strong and growing ties with the North. In these four states—Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri—slavery declined while links with the North expanded. Third, lucrative economic ties linked the manufacturers and merchants of the North with the cotton planters of the South. That cooperation drew the ire of antislavery activists. Charles Sumner of Massachusetts condemned the alliance between the “lords of the lash and the lords of the loom” (6). Fourth, boom times in the Southwest reinforced the case for the Union as well. The region boasted fresh soils and high returns, in addition to a deep appreciation for the role that the federal govern-

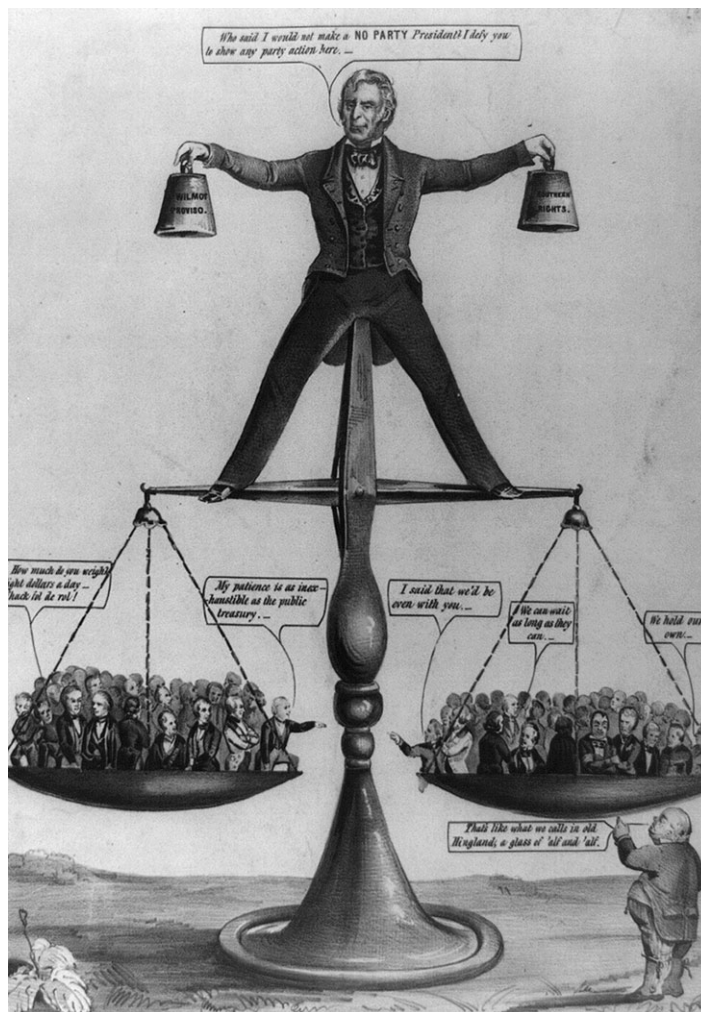


Figure 2. Published in 1850, this political cartoon depicts President Zachary Taylor (1784–1850) attempting to balance Northern and Southern claims on the slavery issue, the ‘Wilmot Proviso’ against ‘Southern Rights.’ A slave-holder himself, but a politician first, Taylor took a moderate stance on the expansion of slavery. Below, Congressmen occupy the scales, while on the ground, John Bull, a personification of Great Britain, studiously observes the American political impasse. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

ment played in pushing back natives, Spaniards, and Mexicans.

Finally, the burgeoning economy fostered similar divisions in every state, creating the foundation for two national parties. Throughout the United States, prosperous farmers, planters, and businessmen came together to support the Whigs. At the same time urban workers and impoverished farmers, individuals who felt excluded by the new exchanges, backed the Democrats. While the two parties battled each other vigorously over economic issues, both had adherents throughout the country, and remained committed to a unified nation (7).

Shared interests allowed leaders in the North and South to work through a series of divisive sectional problems between 1820 and 1850. These challenges included the Missouri Controversy, 1819–21; the Nullification Crisis, 1832–33; the Gag Rule fight, 1835–44, over receiving abolitionist petitions; and the aftermath of the Mexican War (which would lead to the Compromise of 1850). Each of these issues potentially was as threatening to the Union as those that tore the country apart in the 1850s. But thanks to common interests, North and South, the national fabric remained whole.

The Reorientation of the North

By the late 1840s the economies of the two sections were evolving. Those changes accelerated the end

of the era of compromise and prompted a decade of conflict that culminated in civil war. In the North the most important development was the reorientation of trade from its north-south channel along the Mississippi to an east-west axis that included the Great Lakes and the Erie Canal (Figure 1). Shipping along the Mississippi continued to grow. But the commerce that went east-west by lake steamers and canal boats, and after 1855 by railroads, became far greater.

Pressing concerns shaped the outlook of those living near the lakes. All the lake ports, including Chicago, Cleveland, Milwaukee, and Buffalo, required extensive federal funds to build piers and dredge their harbors. The Great Lakes have no natural harbors, and the job of keeping ports open—as opponents wryly noted—was endless. Those who relied on the lakes also needed assistance to open several chokepoints tying up commerce, particularly the passages at Sault Ste. Marie and the Saint Clair Flats near Detroit. Recurrent demands for federal outlays made these individuals advocates of higher tariffs because that impost was the chief source of government revenues.

Lake congressmen and their allies in New England defended these requests for funds by waving the banner of nationalism. But it was a

nationalism based on “What is good for the Lakes is good for the country.” Chicago representative “Long John” Wentworth (the tallest man in Congress) announced his credo: “I am a national man in every sense of the word . . . and am growing stronger in the faith every day I live. The commerce of my constituents is that of the whole nation” (8). New Englanders, who could now sell more shoes and cloth to the West, echoed this sentiment. After Lewis Cass finished a speech on the need for a canal at the eastern end of Lake Superior, Massachusetts Senator John Davis announced his wholehearted support for the project. “I am rejoiced to hear the remarks of the Senator from Michigan,” Davis stated. “He uses exactly the right word when he applies the term ‘national’ to the work for which the appropriation of land was made yesterday” (9). This self-serving nationalism, fully enunciated by mid-century, would become the ideological basis for Republican policies during the Civil War and the ensuing decades.

A second development also transformed the North: the rise of anti-slavery. Although this essay argues for the primacy of economic change in understanding sectional conflict, no study of these years can ignore the growth of abolition and the antislavery movement. But the larger point is that abolitionists, like William Lloyd Garrison, remained a small minority, speaking for no more than five percent of the Northern population. Radicals, including Charles Sumner and Salmon Chase, had a broader following. These individuals agreed not to disturb slavery where it existed, but advocated aggressive steps to speed its demise. But even taken together, these two groups, abolitionists and Radicals, comprised no more than fifteen percent of the Northern population. Anyone looking back into history for heroes should certainly celebrate those determined men and women. This relatively small group, however, did not determine the policies of either the North or the Republican Party (10).

In the mid-1850s the Republican Party emerged based on these two overlapping constituencies: the individuals determined to develop the Northern economy and the supporters of militant antislavery. Both sets of goals—economic development and antislavery—shaped the Republican platform. Yet there is little question which was preeminent. The antislavery goals were limited. The Republicans rejected abolition. Indeed, they went out of their way to reassure the South that they would not disturb its institutions. The Republicans also rejected Radical demands for ending slavery in the District of Columbia and in federal shipyards, as well as calls for checking the interstate slave trade and repealing the Fugitive Slave Law.

Apart from a strong denunciation of slavery and an affirmation of the Declaration of Independence, a position that most Northerners could agree with, the sole Republican antislavery plank was opposition to the extension of slavery into the West. This was an important demand, but it was one that combined economic ends and antislavery goals. Free soil meant preserving the West for white settlers. In 1858 Lincoln pointedly remarked, “Now irrespective of the moral aspect of this question as to whether there is a right or wrong in enslaving a negro, I am still in favor of our new Territories being in such a condition that white men may find a home . . . where they can settle upon new soil and better their condition in life” (11). This policy was often accompanied by the demand that all blacks, slave and free, be barred from the territories. At the same time, Republicans in their 1856 and 1860 platforms spelled out a coherent economic program that included river and harbor improvements, a homestead act, a transcontinental railroad, and higher tariffs.

More broadly, the ascent of the Republicans signaled that the era of compromise had ended. A purely Northern party, which shared little common ground with the South, and particularly with the Deep South, had risen to prominence.

Transformation of the South

The South too was changing; but the pattern of change and the response to sectional issues was strikingly different in the Deep South, the Border States, and the Upper South. The Deep South, the states from South Carolina to Texas, led the opposition to the North. The stiffening Northern resistance to the expansion of slave territory and the increasingly urgent need of planters for new soils changed the outlook of this cotton-growing region. Up to the Mexican War (1846–48) Northern representatives, if grudgingly, had gone along with plans to secure new soils for slaveholders. That was evident in the Louisiana Purchase, the Missouri Compromise, the admission of Arkansas, and the war with Mexico. But in 1846 with the introduction of the Wilmot Proviso, a house bill that would have prohibited slavery within the lands annexed after the Mexican War, Northern representatives made clear their opposition to yielding any additional territory. The emergence of the Republican Party in the mid-1850s, only confirmed that determination.

At the same time this resistance emerged, the demand, particularly from the Deep South, for additional soils intensified. Southerners needed new land for several reasons. New territories would make possible additional slave states, and allow the South to preserve the balance of power in the Senate. Southerners also wanted to expand because they feared the danger of a growing slave population in a society that was hemmed in. Finally, by the 1840s Southerners had begun to worry about the possibility of soil exhaustion if they did not have new areas to cultivate.

Even within the Deep South, however, not all individuals and regions were equally concerned about the restrictions on growth. Virtually all white Southerners condemned free soilers. But those who lived in the northern reaches of the Deep South, including the northern counties of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, were more moderate and more reluctant to countenance extreme measures. This was a part of the Deep South more closely connected with the states to the north by an expanding overland trade. It was also the part of the Deep South that raised the most grain, and fostered a culture of small milling centers and artisan production. Migrants who had come south through the Appalachian highlands, and who often could trace their family origins back to Scotland or Northern Ireland, settled this region. These individuals felt that even if no new slave states entered the Union, they could flourish in a more diversified economy—one that included manufacturing and a variety of crops, not just cotton (12).

The hard-liners, the fire-eaters, came from the southern districts in the Cotton States. These were the areas where little grain was grown, where there were few overland links with the North, and where settlement came from the Atlantic coast and often originally from the south of England. These individuals, both large planters and small farmers, were convinced that without expansion, slavery and the whole Southern social system were endangered. At midcentury, and again during the secession crisis of 1860–61, the loudest cries for firm measures came from these districts (13).

Why then did the Deep South secede? Because leaders in each of the Deep South states feared that with the victory of Lincoln and the Republicans their way of life, rooted in slavery, was doomed. Is this simply a restatement of McPherson’s approach, which emphasizes moral support for slavery as the cause of secession? Only superficially. Rather, this economic interpretation locates the Southern decision to secede both *temporally* and *geographically*. It emphasizes the importance of the changes taking place after the late 1840s in the creation of this mindset, and it argues that only one portion of the Deep South led the struggle, while citizens in the other counties resisted those demands (14).

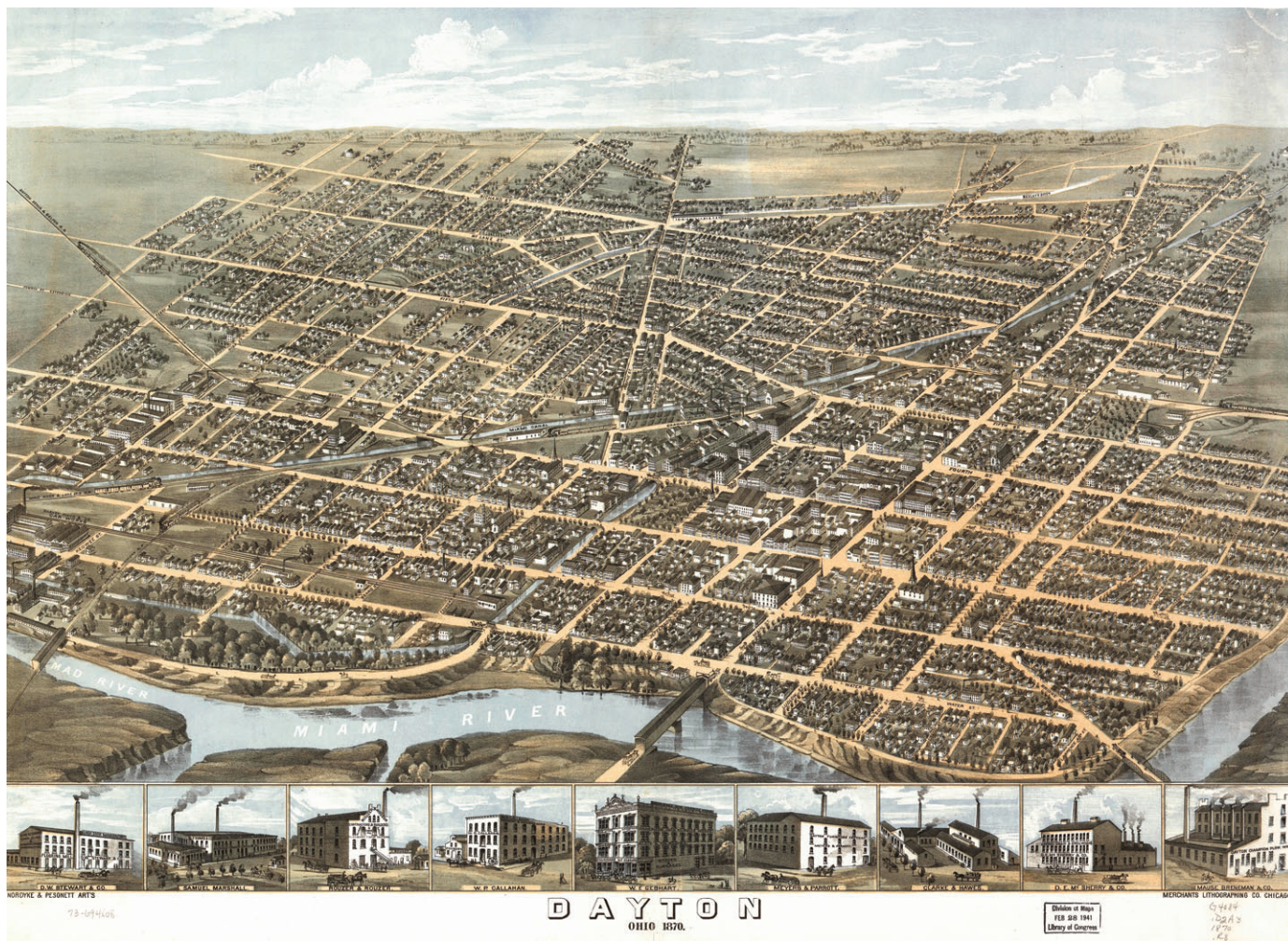


Figure 3. This bird's-eye view of 1870 Dayton, Ohio illustrates the rapid economic and population growth experienced throughout the Midwest after mid-century. Between 1850 and 1870, Dayton's population more than doubled, going from 11,000 to 30,000 due, in large part, to the development of a manufacturing economy vitalized by the extension of the Erie Canal. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

Secessionist fervor was much less apparent in the other two sections of the South: the Border States and Upper South. Since at least the 1830s the Border States of Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland, and Delaware had drawn closer to the Northern economy. Furthermore, in each of these states the percentage of slaves had steadily declined since about 1830. Both during the mid-century crisis and the secession winter the Border States remained loyal to the Union. Politicians in this area defended the institution of slavery, but most felt future development was linked to a rapidly growing North (15).

The Upper South states of Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas stood between those polarities. They had more slaves and larger plantations than the Border States, but were also more involved in overland trade with the North than was the Deep South. Unlike the Deep South, these states did not consider Lincoln's election just cause for war. They seceded only after fighting began in April 1861 and states were forced to choose sides. Like the Deep South, the Upper South was divided. As a rule, the areas dominated by small farmers opposed secession, while those where planters held sway favored the Confederacy (16).

If the entire South had been like the Border States, or even the Upper South, there would have been neither secession nor Civil War. What's clear is that secession was precipitated not by the slaveholding

states as a group, but rather by one set of self-interested individuals within the Deep South.

The War and Reconstruction

Any study of the causes of the Civil War cannot end with the outbreak of fighting in April 1861. The events of the ensuing months and years underscore the economic motives that drove the Republicans as well as their reluctance to assist African Americans. When the war began, Republicans reassured the South that they would not disturb its institutions. Only after a year of fighting did the outlook of mainstream Republicans change, when it became clear the conflict would be a prolonged one and that the freed people could prove a valuable asset for the North. Even more important in precipitating a new approach were the tens of thousands of African Americans who fled to Union lines as the Northern armies advanced. On January 1, 1863, reflecting these new realities, Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation (17).

The initial reluctance of the Republicans to assist African Americans contrasts with their enthusiasm for a program of economic nationalism. Even before the war, Republicans secured a higher tariff. And once fighting began, Congress followed through on other Republican promises. Lawmakers approved a homestead act, a transcontinental

railroad, river and harbor improvements, and land grants to create state universities. Furthermore, the need to finance the war led to an income tax, the sale of bonds directly to the public, a uniform national currency, and the National Banking Act (18).

During the Reconstruction Era the Republican commitment to the newly freed people remained at best half-hearted while aid for Northern business expanded. Thus the outcome of the Civil War and Reconstruction, with the blacks free but subjugated, and big business flourishing and protected, was not an aberration. Rather it was the logical outcome of the triumph of a party that had long been more devoted to the development of the North than to improving the condition of the less fortunate (19).

Conclusion

To conclude, this essay argues that more than any other factor, the evolution of the Northern and Southern economies produced the Civil War. Americans, like the people of most nations, cherish their myths. A recent book by historian Edward Ayres speaks to that issue. Ayers explains that scholars like James McPherson, popular filmmakers, such as Ken Burns, and novelists like Michael Shaara present the same optimistic reading of the sectional clash. These individuals, Ayres notes, “dramatize the ways that antislavery, progress, war, and national identity intertwined at the time of the Civil War . . . They defend [the war’s] integrity from the evasions of those who insist that the South fought for something other than slavery; they protect it from those who emphasize the North’s narrow self-interest” (20). Such myths may be comforting. But ultimately, they are luxuries that no nation can afford. Economics more than high moral concerns produced the Civil War. □

Endnotes

1. Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler, 8 vols. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953–55), 8:332.
2. The “moral” and “economic” interpretations differ in what each sees as the primary cause of the clash. One emphasizes strongly held beliefs about slavery; the other, business activities. But both explanations, in their own ways, touch on ideas and the economy. The economic interpretation accepts the importance of ideology, but argues that those beliefs emerged, for the most part, from material interests. When dealing with the economy as “background,” the moral approach looks only at the largest units, the “North” and “South.” By contrast, the economic interpretation provides a fine-grained analysis of groups *within* each section, and argues that such distinctions are crucial to understanding the role of the participants in the clash.
3. These quotes are drawn from James McPherson’s interview with William R. Ferris, *Humanities Magazine*, March–April 2002, available online, <<http://www.neh.gov/whowere/mcpherson/interview.html>>. See also McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
4. Charles B. Dew, *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001), 80–81.
5. This essay is largely based on Marc Egnal, *Clash of Extremes: The Economic Origins of the Civil War* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009).
6. Charles Sumner, Speech, June 28, 1848, in *Charles Sumner: His Complete Works*, intro. George F. Hoar, 20 vols. (1900; reprint New York: Lee & Shepard, 1969), 2: 233.
7. Evidence on the social basis of the two parties comes from many studies of particular locales. See for example, Frank Otto Gattell, “Money and Party in Jacksonian America: A Quantitative Look at New York City’s Men of Qual-

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9. Davis, Aug. 18, 1852, *Congressional Globe*, 32nd Congress, 1st sess., Appendix, 985.
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11. Abraham Lincoln, Seventh Debate with Stephen A. Douglas, October 15, 1858, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, 3:12.
12. Larry K. Menna, “Embattled Conservatism: The Ideology of the Southern Whigs” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1991); Lillian A. Pereyra, *James Lusk Alcorn: Persistent Whig* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966), 3–44.
13. On the premodern mindset of these planters, see Eugene Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965); Fred Bateman and Thomas Weiss, *A Deplorable Scarcity: the Failure of Industrialization in the Slave Economy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981); Marc Egnal, *Divergent Paths: How Culture and Institutions Have Shaped North American Growth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 14–18. For a contrasting view, see John Majewski, *Modernizing a Slave Economy: The Economic Vision of the Confederate Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).
14. On the conflicts over secession, see J. Mills Thornton III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978); Michael P. Johnson, *Toward a Patriarchal Republic: The Secession of Georgia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977); and Ralph A. Wooster, *The Secession Conventions of the South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962). Valuable source material is presented in Dwight L. Dumond, ed., *Southern Editorials on Secession* (1931; reprint, Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1964), and William W. Freehling and Craig M. Simpson, eds., *Secession Debated: Georgia’s Showdown in 1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
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Marc Egnal is a professor of history at York University, Toronto. He is the author of *Clash of Extremes: The Economic Origins of the Civil War* (Hill and Wang, 2009) and *A Mighty Empire: The Origins of the American Revolution* (1988; reprinted with a new preface, Cornell University Press, 2010). For reviews and discussion of Egnal’s most recent book, visit <<http://www.clashofextremes.com/>>.



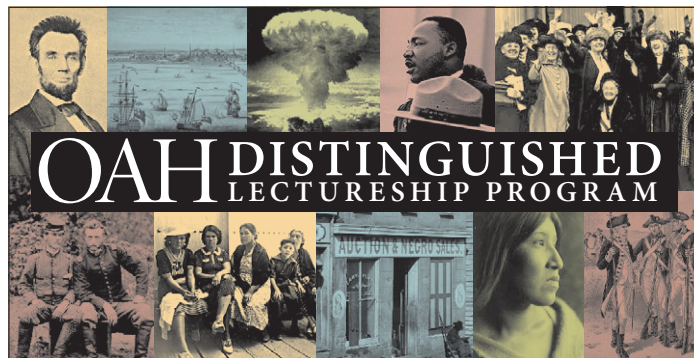
The OAH Seeks New Treasurer

Applications and nominations are now welcome for the office of Treasurer of the OAH. The late Robert Griffith, who served admirably in the post, was forced by illness to resign effective January 1, 2011. Jay Goodgold is serving as Interim Treasurer until a new Treasurer can be found. President David A. Hollinger has appointed a subcommittee of the OAH Executive Board to review all candidates and offer a recommendation to the board. Ideally, candidates would have a strong record of administrative service and demonstrated ability to handle complex budgets.

The OAH Constitution and Bylaws specify a five-year term and declare that "The Treasurer shall supervise the disbursements of all funds, and shall report to the membership annually on the financial status of the organization." With the help of the OAH staff, the Treasurer also prepares a proposed budget each spring for submission to the OAH Finance Committee, serves as a member of the Finance Committee, and is a financial adviser and consultant to the organization. The Treasurer is an unpaid officer of the organization and is a voting member of the Executive Board.

OAH members are invited to apply or to nominate other OAH members. Send letters of interest or nomination, along with a c.v. or résumé to Executive Director Katherine Finley at OAH, 112 North Bryan Ave., Bloomington, IN 47408 or kmfinley@oah.org. The search will continue until the position is filled, but the OAH Executive Board hopes that suitable candidates can be identified before April 1, 2011.

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Gender History and the Origins of the Civil War

Are they better men, wiser, purer, or greater? Have they accomplished more, fought more, or paid more proportionally for the Union than we of the South?" James Seddon of Virginia posed this question to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1847 as part of a diatribe against what he called the "arrogant assumption of superiority" by Northerners opposed to slavery extension—their "pharisaical pretension that they are not as other men." Seddon was a cranky, cadaverous man who fancied himself a "Cavalier" aristocrat and true blue-blood. His words elucidate why Southern Whigs and Democrats, in the midst of the Mexican War, closed ranks against the emerging "free soil" coalition in Congress. Southerners saw the doctrine of nonextension—which would ban slavery from territories acquired in the war—not only as an assault on their constitutional principles but also as an insult to their manhood. Seddon's speech is merely one of the countless instances, laced throughout the vast legislative record, in which antebellum politicians linked their political positions to their status in the gender order (1).

With so many sources and interpretations easily accessible to us, teachers of American history can now offer to students, at both the collegiate and high-school level, a "holistic" account of how gender battles were at the heart of sectional strife. Gone are the days when all we might do was "add women and stir," leavening the political history narrative with a few female actors and a comment here and there about gender conventions (2). The ingredients are now at hand for providing students of the causes of the Civil War with far more satisfying fare.

Recent scholarship has elaborated interlocking storylines that "gender" the familiar narrative of sectional alienation. One storyline traces the divergence of gender conventions in the North and South, as economic modernization gave rise to new understandings of masculinity and femininity in the North, even as the white South defended traditional patriarchy. Another traces the politicization of women in the antebellum era as they were drawn into the slavery debates—implicated both in resistance to and defense of the peculiar institution.

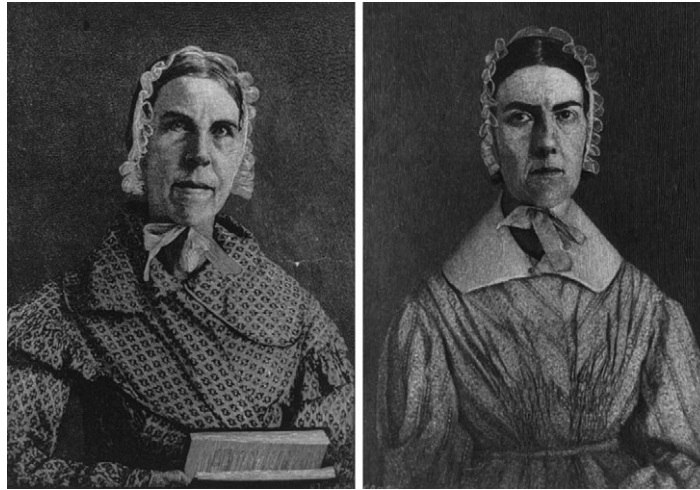


Figure 1. The Grimké sisters, Sarah (1792–1873) and Angelina (1805–1879), hailed from a wealthy and prominent South Carolina slaveholding family. Influenced by antislavery Quakers they met in Philadelphia, they became outspoken abolitionists. On speaking tours, they were attacked for stepping outside the proper female sphere, a backlash that sparked their activism for women's rights. Since they refused to assume the traditional female role of peacemaker, they were also accused of fostering national disunion, placing them at the center of American politics. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

themselves from the South—have long served as representative of Garrisonian immediatism and of the nascent women's rights movement (Figure 1). Sarah (1792–1873) and Angelina (1805–1879) were raised on a South Carolina plantation in a wealthy and prominent slaveholding family. After visiting Philadelphia and coming under the influence of antislavery Quakers, the women could no longer abide life in the South. Each chose to convert to Quakerism and to resettle in the "city of brotherly love" (Sarah in 1821, and Angelina in 1829). They affiliated with Lucretia Mott and the leading abolitionists of Philadelphia, and soon adopted a leadership role in the movement. Angelina's *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South* (1836), which aimed to refute the Biblical justifications for slavery, signaled that the sisters could be forceful publicists for abolition. They soon brought their moral fervor and powers of persuasion to the lecture circuit, where they provided the movement with an invaluable asset—firsthand testimony about the racist regime of slavery.

But that testimony proved volatile. Their 1837 antislavery speaking tour of the North encountered bitter criticism and resistance from men who charged that they had overstepped the boundaries of their appointed sphere. This backlash radicalized the sisters, prompting them to attack the idea of separate spheres, to insist that men and women had the

A third storyline concerns how the first two developments were perceived: the idea that the Northern and the Southern social orders had grown incompatible fed the conviction that the two sections were politically irreconcilable (3). These storylines permit us to offer students new readings of some familiar characters and events on the road to civil war. I will illustrate this by connecting two iconic women and one turning-point event: the Grimké sisters of South Carolina and the Wilmot Proviso debates. Through this essay, I mean to suggest one possible method, among many others available in recent scholarly works, for blending social and political history.

Revisiting the Grimké sisters

The Grimké sisters—who repudiated their elite slaveholders' milieu and chose defiantly to exile



Figure 2. William Lloyd Garrison (1805–1879), who disparaged the hypocritical manhood of slaveholders and argued that true men protected the weak and oppressed, was the central founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833 and the editor of the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*. This statue of Garrison in Boston’s Commonwealth Avenue Mall was sculpted by Olin Warner in 1885. Lionized by Bostonians after the Civil War, Garrison was attacked in antebellum Boston by mobs and hated by many in the North and the South for his radical antislavery and women’s rights views. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

same moral and political duties, and to develop an analogy likening the systematic brutality of racism to the systematic unfairness of sexism. (Sarah’s *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes, and the Condition of Women* [1838] was the first American treatise on women’s rights.) The Grimké sisters thus set the stage for the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 even as they withdrew gradually from public prominence (4). Such an historical account can punctuate a lecture on abolitionism, and work to illustrate how Garrisonians, ever more extreme in the face of Northern hostility, were marginalized in the 1840s by their own social radicalism.

Yet another account is possible, one in which the Grimkés, and their critique of traditional gender norms, are very much at the center of American politics. While the Grimkés’ critics argued that their public speaking was unfeminine, that the women had “perverted” the law of female subjection, those same critics also charged them with the ultimate political crime: treason. From the start, the principal accusation abolitionists had to answer, from critics in both the North and the South, was the charge that they were disunionists—that their plan was to break the bond between the North and South and thereby destroy the Union (5). Foes of abolition saw women’s antislavery work as particularly dangerous to the survival of the Union.

These claims rested on the idea that women’s appointed role in the cult of separate spheres was to foster social harmony—they would keep the national family together just as they fostered harmony in their own domestic spheres. The most influential attack on the Grimkés came from Catherine Beecher, the popular spokeswoman of Northern domesticity, who had become a national celebrity by celebrating the moral virtue and influence of women. Beecher’s *Essay on Slavery and*

Abolitionism, with reference to the duty of American females (1837), accused abolitionist women of spawning hatred and resentment among Southerners and thus of both undermining gradualist efforts to dismantle slavery and of bringing the country to the “very verge of the precipice” of disunion. She begged that the North and South stop provoking each other, and urged women to play their divinely ordained role of peacemakers (6).

Even more strident critiques of the Grimkés and their cadre of female activists came from Southern politicians, who issued a series of jarring chastisements to antislavery women. For example, Jesse A. Bynum of North Carolina declared in 1837 that it was a “portentous foreboding, an awful omen, when women were stepping into the political theatre, calling on men to act.” To follow their exhortations, he continued, was “supreme folly” and would result in “civil war, and one, too, that would drench the fairest fields of this great republic with brothers’ blood.” In the same spirit, Senator Henry Clay intoned that the “ink which [women] shed in subscribing with their fair hands abolition petitions may prove but the prelude to the shedding of the blood of their brethren” (7). The Grimkés’ story can thus disclose a fundamental dynamic in the sectional struggle. In this era, there was no more tried and true way to discredit an opponent than to call him—or her—a disunionist. Disunion was not only invoked by secessionists as a threat. It was also wielded as an accusation against radical reformers in the North in an effort to silence and intimidate them.

These accusations, however, had mixed success as abolitionists elaborated a variety of strategies for answering the charge. The Grimkés tried to motivate female antislavery converts to withstand the critique by counseling that their role was, simply, to act virtuously.

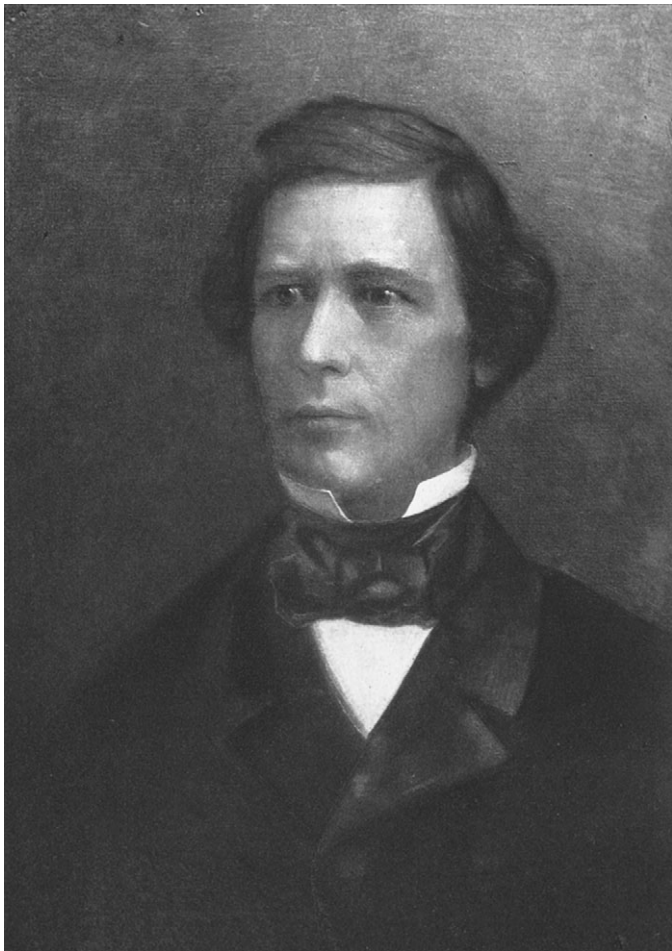


Figure 3. David Wilmot (1814–1868) a Democratic U.S. Representative from Pennsylvania, sponsored an amendment to an 1846 Mexican War appropriations bill that would have barred slavery from any territory wrested from Mexico. Though it failed to become law, the measure reflected a growing sentiment among Northern Democrats against the proslavery wing of the party, and contributed to the coming sectional split. Proviso advocates and opponents used gendered language to bolster their position, Wilmot himself denying any “morbid sympathy” for blacks or “squeamish sensitiveness” on the subject of slavery. (Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

Acknowledging that slaveholders “seek to frighten us” with “fear of the consequences” of disunion, the Grimké’s Female Anti-Slavery Society of Philadelphia asked, in the proceedings of its October 14, 1836 meeting, “Can any consequences be worse than the consequences of Slavery itself” (8)?

Anti-abolition forces in the North rejected this logic, and as female abolitionists escalated their campaign, anti-abolitionists increasingly resorted to violence. Among the most shocking of such instances took place in May 1838, as female abolitionists convened their second annual national convention at Pennsylvania Hall in Philadelphia, only to be surrounded by an enraged mob of ten thousand opponents, hurling both verbal obscenities and actual stones and brickbats at the participants. The women, in a solemn procession through the seething gauntlet, “simply faced down the angry onlookers, relying on the moral force of their own courage and sense of right to protect them from attack.” But the mob, intent on issuing an unmistakable warning, burnt Pennsylvania Hall to the ground after the women had exited it (9).

This violent backlash further radicalized some of the immediatists, and in the 1840s, Garrison himself would develop the theme the

Grimké’s had articulated—the notion that slavery and not disunion was the ultimate horror (Figure 2). He would make the slogan “no Union with slaveholders” his mantra, and call for radical abolitionists to embrace rather than deny disunionism. He shouted back at his critics that as long as slavery existed, there could be no truly moral Union. The old false Union had to be destroyed before a new moral Union could be forged (10).

Far from marginalizing Garrison, this extreme stance all but guaranteed that his brand of immediatism would shape American politics in the two decades to come. The principal tactic of anti-abolitionists in the 1840s and 1850s, and indeed into the war years themselves, was to argue that anyone who opposed the extension of slavery was a Garrisonian in disguise, an extremist who advocated a radical agenda of black rights, women’s rights, and disunion. In short, anti-abolitionists associated any challenge to slavery with gender disorder, and they associated gender disorder with dystopian images of civil war.

Gender and the Wilmot Proviso

This dynamic is evident in the Wilmot Proviso debates of 1846–47. Against the backdrop of the Mexican War, Democrat David Wilmot of Pennsylvania proposed to Congress, in August of 1846, a proviso that would bar slavery from any territories wrested from Mexico (Figure 3). Wilmot’s bold move reflected the growing resentment of Northern Democrats against the long-dominant proslavery wing of the party; politicians like Wilmot were increasingly anxious that the Democrats’ fealty to slavery might alienate Northern voters. Wilmot’s measure passed the House, only to falter in the Southern-dominated Senate. Although it never became federal policy, the proviso subsequently garnered wide support in the North, including the endorsement of state legislatures (11).

While historians have long had a good fix on *why* David Wilmot proposed his territorial restriction on slavery in 1846, gender analysis can further elucidate *how* he and his allies chose to make their case. In a time-tested tactic, proslavery men moved quickly to lump Wilmot in with radical abolitionists such as Garrison, and particularly with abolitionist women. Opponents of the proviso, Northern and Southern, again and again derided the “mawkish sensibilities” and “sickly, morbid philanthropy” of free soilers. Such language was, of course, deeply gendered. According to the dominant conventions of the day, sentimentality was itself associated with femininity. In other words, women were creatures of the heart, while men were governed by reason. When politicians used the words “sickly” and “morbid” to tarnish abolitionists, they plainly meant to cast them as excessively emotional and seduced by maudlin, lurid exaggerations. Ironically, popular antislavery texts such as Angelina Grimké and Theodore Dwight Weld’s *American Slavery As it Is* (1839), designed by their authors to enumerate the cold, hard facts, played into the stereotype. It was both weak and unhealthy, anti-abolitionists charged, to dwell obsessively on evidence of the slaves’ suffering (12).

A central preoccupation of proviso advocates was to establish the manliness of the position of nonextension, thereby to dissociate themselves from the radical abolitionism of the Grimké’s and to neutralize a powerful weapon in the hands of Southern politicians. Wilmot himself repeatedly decried “squeamish sensitiveness upon the subject of slavery,” or “morbid sympathy” or “morbid sensitiveness” for blacks. He and his allies justified nonextension as a policy designed to benefit white men, by bringing the free labor system into the West. Moreover, Wilmot and his allies turned the tables on their critics by casting further compromise with the South as an act of unmanly subservience and submission. Congressman Wood of New York, for instance, likened compromise to sexual servitude. Any man who would “encircle himself in the arms of the South, let me say that an infamy awaits him

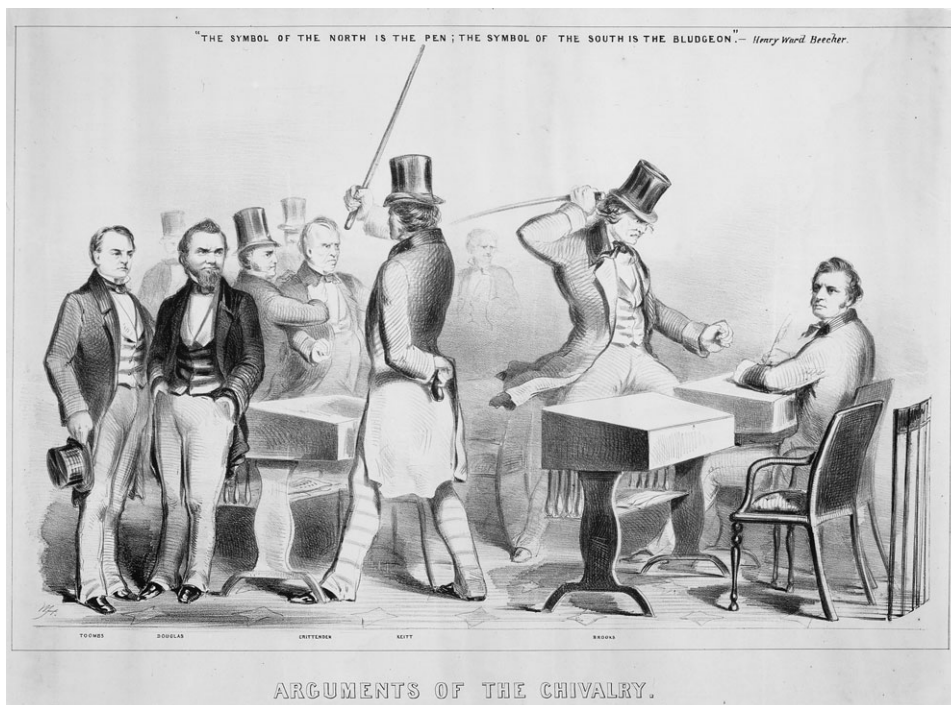


Figure 4. Representative Preston Brooks of South Carolina caned Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts on May 22, 1856, after Sumner delivered a blistering antislavery speech, “The Crime Against Kansas.” Sumner had rhetorically attacked Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois (shown second from left) and Andrew P. Butler of South Carolina, Brooks’ cousin. This 1856 lithograph by a young Winslow Homer (probably unpublished) implicitly joins Henry Ward Beecher in condemning the Southern “bludgeon,” representing a violent, hyper-masculine chivalry, and shows his preference for the more cerebral Northern model of manhood. (Courtesy of Library of Congress)

deeper and blacker than the pit of perdition. . . . There is no high-minded southern man but will look upon him with contempt. He may use him, but he will despise him” (13).

Wilmot and his supporters in the emerging free soil coalition understood well that the key to defending their position was to strengthen themselves against what had been the most effective of all proslavery weapons: the rhetoric of disunion itself. Wilmot repeatedly announced that he refused to be baited by such rhetoric and refused to be intimidated into making more compromises. “This cry of disunion is as idle as the nursery tale with which children are frightened into obedience,” he asserted. Turning the charges of sentimentality against proslavery forces, and associating them, deftly, with their mortal enemies the abolitionists, Wilmot argued that purveyors of disunion rhetoric appealed to people’s emotions. Reason, he countered, must prevail over fear (14).

This impulse to question the manliness of one’s opponents, so prominent in the discourse on the proviso, had, of course, taken many shapes during the slavery debates of the 1830s and 1840s. As historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown and others have shown, “inflammatory masculine rhetoric” was a key part of the arsenal of anti-abolitionists and immediatists alike. Southern slaveholders and Northern Democrats had routinely assailed the manhood of abolitionists, charging them with waging their campaign “from behind the whalebone and cotton padding of their female allies.” Garrisonians had shot back by disparaging the false manhood of slaveholders, exposing their vaunted cult of honor as a cover for their violent and lascivious behavior toward the slaves. True men, abolitionists argued, followed the dictates of their consciences and served as protectors of the weak and oppressed (15).

Gendered Sectional Rhetoric

The proviso debates signaled an important shift in the use of gendered rhetoric. Before this moment, party allegiances had somewhat reined in the use of such attacks. Northern Democrats and Whigs knew that blanket caricatures, charges, and condemnations of Southern men would alienate their partisan brethren. But in the proviso debates, the kid gloves came off, and the North and South pummeled each other, across party lines, with insults and accusations in the elemental language of gender aspersions. Southerners believed that the proviso was a repudiation of the spirit of compromise that had guided the founding generation, and the renewal of the very struggle against tyranny that had produced the Revolution. In response, Southerners invoked their manly duty to protect their dependents from the specter of an abolitionist-induced race war. In one of many examples, Representative Robert W. Roberts of Mississippi, who himself had accused abolitionists of “morbid” concern for the slaves, warned Southern men, in morbid tones of his own, that the “canting Abolitionist” planned to “murder [their] wives and children” (16).

As for Garrison, he saw in the proviso debates a kind of vindication. “Within the last six months a most surprising change in public sentiment has undeniably taken place,” Garrison wrote in March 1847, of Northern support for Wilmot’s measure. Garrison relished the fact that his disunionism “terrifi[e]d many,” and that it put him and his followers “in constant collision with all the religious sects and political parties.” To occupy disunion grounds “requires a good deal of nerve,” he boasted to his friends. Indeed, in the pages of *The Liberator*, Garrison increasingly defended disunion not merely as a moral stance, but also as a pragmatic one. Garrisonians made no secret of their hopes that the Southern

rejection of the proviso would teach Northerners a lesson—namely the “futility” of restricting slavery within the context of the Union (17).

The 1850s

In the tumultuous 1850s, proslavery forces would keep up the familiar drumbeat by repeatedly associating the emerging free soil coalition with gender disorder and with disunion. Free Soilers would work hard to cast off the taint of radicalism and to distance themselves ideologically and tactically from the immediatists. The controversy over the 1852 publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is perhaps the best but, by no means the only, illustration of this. Even as Stowe positioned herself in the mainstream of Northern public opinion, eschewing any affiliation with the nascent woman’s rights movement, she was assailed by proslavery Southerners as the perfect epitome of Northern female radicalism (18).

Indeed, the pivotal events of the 1850s gain drama and resonance when read as evidence of how proslavery and antislavery forces came to see gender differences as constitutive of the irrepressible conflict. The caning of Charles Sumner, for example, stoked Northern criticisms of the hypermasculine Southern cult of honor and deepened the conviction among Republicans that the gender roles and relations of the South were patterned on the brute logic of the plantation system (Figure 4). Southerners who celebrated the caning, by contrast, derided the effeminity and lack of honor among Northern men (19).

Pedagogical Benefits

To do such a gendered reading of some of the political turning points on the road to secession has a very distinct pedagogical payoff. In my experience, it is still the case that female students come to a Civil War class expecting that the story of the war’s origins is the story of male politicians. To learn that women and gender are central to sectionalism motivates and emboldens these students. Moreover, in “gendering” sectional strife, we are better able to convey to all students the high emotional, psychological, and cultural stakes of the era’s political debates. As a result, students understand how Southerners and Northerners alike perceived attacks on their political principles as attacks on their homes, their pride, and their elemental sense of self. Finally, gender history elucidates how slavery was both the fundamental difference between the sections and yet, at each stage of the struggle, a contingent difference. Slavery as a political issue did not displace other sources of disunion in American politics, it encompassed them. For Southern slaveholders, the abolition of slavery represented a congeries of dangers: race war and civil war, moral decline, foreign intervention, class strife, economic decay, and gender anxieties. For antislavery Northerners, it was the “Slave Power Conspiracy” that embodied all of these various dangers to the nation and the social order. □

Endnotes

1. *Congressional Globe*, 29th Cong., 2nd sess., Appendix, 76–79, 136; Varon, *Disunion!: The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789–1859* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 191–92.
2. Here I am adapting Bruce Dorsey’s formulation from his essay, “Add Men and Stir?: Männlichkeiten in geschlechterhistorischer Lehre und Forschung” (“Add Men and Stir?: Teaching and Writing Masculinity as Gender History”), in *Vaeter, Soldaten, Liebhaber: Maenner und Maennlichkeiten in der Geschichte Nordamerikas – ein Reader (Fathers, Soldiers, Lovers: Men and*

- Masculinities in North American History, A Reader*), eds. Juergen Martschukat and Olaf Stieglitz, (Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript, 2007), 27–42.
3. For some noteworthy works of the last decade, see Stephen W. Berry, *All that Makes a Man: Love and Ambition in the Civil War South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Stephanie M.H. Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Amy Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Michael D. Pierson *Free Hearts and Homes: Gender and American Antislavery Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Kristen Tegtmeier Oertel, *Bleeding Borders: Race, Gender and Violence in Pre-Civil War Kansas* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009). For a concise interpretive synthesis, see Nina Silber, *Gender and the Sectional Conflict* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).
4. On the Grimké’s place in American abolitionism, see, for example, Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne, eds., *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women’s Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994).
5. This argument is developed in my book *Disunion! The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789–1859*.
6. Catherine E. Beecher, *An Essay on Slavery and Abolitionism, with Reference to the Duty of American Females* (Philadelphia: Henry Perkins, 1837).
7. *Register of Debates*, 24th Cong., 2nd sess., 1330–37; *Congressional Globe*, 25th Cong., 3rd sess., Appendix, 359.
8. *National Enquirer* (Philadelphia), October 15, 1836.
9. On the burning of Pennsylvania Hall, see Margaret Hope Bacon, “By Moral Force Alone: The Antislavery Women and Nonresistance,” in Yellin and Van Horne, *The Abolitionist Sisterhood*, 285–87.
10. On Garrison’s thinking in this era, see Waltham M. Merrill, ed., *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison, vol. 3: No Union With Slaveholders, 1841–1849* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1973).
11. On the proviso, see, for example, Thomas R. Hietala, *Manifest Design: American Exceptionalism and Empire* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985).
12. On the gendered nature of abolitionism, see Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men & Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002).
13. *Congressional Globe*, 29th Cong., 2nd sess., Appendix, esp. pp. 150–53, 172–77, 315–17, 323, 334, 364–66.
14. *Congressional Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st sess., Appendix, 1076–80.
15. Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Yankee Saints and Southern Sinners* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985); Kristin Hoganson, “Garrisonian Abolitionists and the Rhetoric of Gender, 1850–1860,” *American Quarterly* 45 (December 1993): 582–87.
16. On Southern reactions to the proviso, see, for example, *Congressional Globe*, 29th Cong., 2nd sess., Appendix, 76–79, 116–18, 134, 136, 170, 361.
17. William Lloyd Garrison to Richard D. Webb, March 1, 1847, in Merrill, ed., *Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, 470–73; *The Liberator*, October 8, 1846, January 1, 8, February 26, 1847.
18. Joan D. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).
19. Lloyd T. Benson, *The Caning of Senator Sumner* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2004).

Elizabeth R. Varon is professor of history at the University of Virginia. A specialist in the Civil War era and nineteenth-century South, Varon is the author of *We Mean to be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (University of North Carolina Press, 1998), which won the Lerner-Scott Prize of the American Historical Association, and *Southern Lady, Yankee Spy: The True Story of Elizabeth Van Lew, A Union Agent in the Heart of the Confederacy* (Oxford University Press, 2003). Her newest book is *Disunion!: The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789–1859*, (Littlefield Fund for Southern History and University of North Carolina Press, 2008).