

Why The War Was Not About Slavery

By Donald W. Livingston

American historians up to the 1960s tended to treat the War Between the States as a tragic or as a bungling affair. The moral challenge posed by slavery was seen as an aspect of why war broke out, but one overshadowed by deep and long standing constitutional, economic, and political conflicts. Today, however, historians, inspired by Marxist-style analysis, preach the one-dimensional doctrine that the conflict at its core was a *moral struggle* over slavery. The South was willing to destroy the Union in order to protect slavery and expand it. The North fought to eliminate slavery by preserving the Union. A recent historian, for instance, writes "It is an astonishing anomaly that ... for one hundred years historians and commentators attempted to exorcise slavery as relevant or to downplay it as incidental to the conflict. Recent scholarship has at last acknowledged that the participants, after all, knew what they were contending about. Slavery, its expansion or limitation, its abolition or perpetuation was what the war was all about."¹

Another historian writes "that Southerners seceded over one thing and fought over one thing, slavery." A recent biographer of Robert E. Lee says of Lee "He was a leader in the South-

ern rebellion, in which so many fought so nobly for such a bad cause."²

Robert Penn Warren, a Pulitzer Prize poet and novelist, witnessed the birth of this new style of writing history in the early 1960s, and wrote a devastating critique of it in *The Legacy of the Civil War*. Through the myth of a holy crusade to abolish slavery, Americans had illegitimately acquired what he called a great "treasury of virtue." Even historians who know the myth is a distortion have generally not written history in a way to criticize it. The National Park Service has ordered every Civil War battlefield park in the nation exhibit the theme that the war was "about slavery." This was the theme of Ken Burns' TV series on the Civil War in which Lee was presented as "a traitor." The series was very popular and prompted the conservative columnist George Will to gush that it was a demonstration of what television is *for*. The myth has been taught for generations in public schools and colleges. References to it are frequently heard in political speeches, commemoration speeches of all kinds, the media, in film, and in sermons from mainline churches. People in Argentina, Toyko, Paris, Moscow and Australia who know next to nothing about American history know that

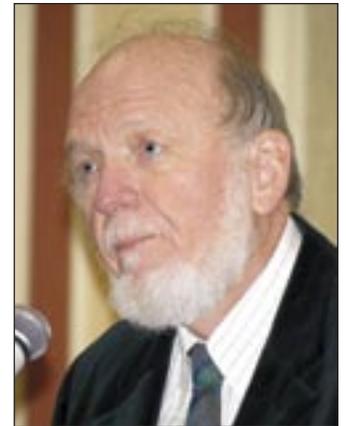
the Civil War was "a b o u t slavery."

The upcoming sesquicentennial year c o m m e m o -

rating the beginning of the War to Prevent Southern Independence promises to be a long, extended speech explaining how the war was "about slavery."

The myth, however, is not true. What is essentially wrong with it is not that it obsessively focuses on slavery while omitting facts contrary to the myth (though it does that), but that it reads a moral meaning into the conflict over slavery that did not exist. It leads us to believe that the North's "anti-slavery" was a correct response to the *moral challenge*, whereas the South was "pro-slavery" and reprehensibly turned its back on the moral challenge. In what follows we shall see that what Warren called America's great "treasury of virtue" is filled with fool's gold that morally corrupts all who exploit it.

The first thing to appreciate is slavery was, from the very first, a *national*



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enormity, an *American* sin for which every section of the Union bore some responsibility. This, however, is not how we have been trained to think. We think of slavery as an alien and “un-American” practice confined to the South in the 19th century. But an honest look at American history reveals a quite different picture. Slavery was woven into the economic, political, and cultural fabric of the Northern states from the beginning. The first African slaves were brought to New England in 1638 in exchange for enslaved Indians. Boston began importing slaves from Africa in 1644. For 164 years New Englanders sold slaves throughout the Western Hemisphere.

The Puritans who settled in New England were part of a larger group, the rest of whom settled in the West Indies and began sugar planting which required an especially brutal form of labor with a high mortality rate. New England slave traders supplied the demand for labor and formed marriages and other alliances with their Puritan kinsmen in the West Indies. By the end of the Revolution, slavery had been a respected institution in New England for around 140 years. One out of four families in Connecticut owned slaves. And there were slave plantations in the region. One out of fourteen people in Rhode Island was a slave, and around 50 percent of ministers owned slaves.³

The dark story of New England’s involvement in the practice of slavery has been hidden from general public perception until recently, when three New England journalists published *Complicity, How the North Promoted, Prolonged and Profited from Slavery* (New York: Random House, 2005). They express their utter shock in discovering New Englanders approved the slave trade and the practice of slavery in their States. They ask “How could we not know this?” And the answer is “Northerners have pushed much of their early history into the deepest shadows of repression ... Slavery has long been identified in the national consciousness as a Southern institution.” The time to bury that myth is overdue. Slavery is the story of America, all of America. The

nation’s wealth, from the very beginning, depended upon the exploitation of black people on three continents. Slavery, they continue, was a “national phenomenon. The North shared in the wealth it created, and in the oppression it required.” What is truly astonishing, however, is it took so long for these New England journalists to discover facts in their own backyard that were not difficult to uncover.⁴

Nor are they entirely emancipated from Warren’s “treasury of virtue,” for their book is titled *Complicity*. It is misleading, however, to say the North was *complicit* in American slavery. It was *foundational*. The slave trade began and was carried out mainly by New England States for more than a century and a half. The wealth piled up by New England and New York was generated by servicing slave economies throughout the Western Hemisphere. The purchase of slaves and land in the South and elsewhere was financed by Northern banks; slave-produced staples were transported in Northern ships and insured by Northern companies. The global industrial revolution was based on textile manufacturing which generated an insatiable demand for cotton throughout the world. It is no exaggeration to say the New York City of 1860 was built on slave produced cotton. So was the New England textile industry. Some 75 to 90 percent of federal revenue came from the Southern export trade. The federal government was funded from the first up to 1860 by slave labor.

Slavery, then, was a national enormity integral to the entire economic and political structure of the United States from the beginning. Its elimination, therefore, *morally demanded* a *national solution* where all would share, to some degree, in the sacrifices and costs necessary to remove it. From our perspective, the morally right thing would have been a nationally funded program to *emancipate* slaves, *compensate* slave owners for their loss, and *integrate* the African population into American society as social and political equals. Yet, throughout the entire antebellum period, *no national political party of any importance* ever proposed

emancipation, much less compensation and integration. The South could not have seceded and fought to reject a morally responsible solution urged by the North because no such program was ever proposed or even contemplated.

Why not? There were two reasons. First, there was no national program because there was no *nation* in the modern sense of the term. America was an inchoate federation of States, not a centralized nation-state on the model of Britain or France. Everyone understood that slavery was a domestic institution governed entirely by the laws of each State. Congress simply had no constitutional authority to interfere with slavery in the States. Nor did Congress want that power. On March 3, 1861, Congress passed an amendment to the Constitution making it *impossible ever to amend the Constitution* to give Congress power over slavery in the States. Lincoln approved the amendment in his first Inaugural Address.

Since Congress had no power over slavery, and did not want such power, the only way to abolish slavery would be through individual state action or by an amendment to the Constitution. No such amendment was ever proposed during the antebellum period, or even seriously contemplated. One reason is that Northerners were not at all willing to help pay for emancipation. They viewed slavery as entirely the South’s responsibility, willfully ignoring their own foundational and continuing participation in an economy and political order to which slavery was integral. But there was more to the North’s lack of interest in emancipation than a refusal to compensate slave owners. If slaves were freed nationally, they would be part of a national American society, but as we shall see, Northerners absolutely refused to integrate free Africans into their States.

If no national political party put forth an emancipation plank during the entire antebellum period, how did the myth ever arise that the war was a great moral struggle between those wanting to protect slavery and those wanting to abolish it? The myth is



possible because of the confused and confusing way many Americans think about morality. We can best appreciate this by exploring the logic of the myth.

Most all antebellum Americans believed two propositions. The first proposition is that slavery *abstractly considered* (that is independent of positive law, circumstance, and custom) is a violation of natural law. This was as true of Southerners as Northerners. Lincoln makes this clear in one of his debates with Douglas: Before proceeding, let me say I think I have no prejudice against the Southern people. If slavery did not now exist amongst them, they would not introduce it.⁵ Why not? Because Southerners, like most Americans, thought that slavery *abstractly considered* is a violation of natural law.

The second proposition held by most Americans and especially by Northerners is the African population was never to be part of the American polity. These two propositions are not contradictory, but they exist together in tension. If slavery, abstractly considered, is a violation of natural law, then slaves in America should be freed. But if America is a white European polity to which Africans are never to belong, then, even if freed, they would be in a permanently servile position without the protections of the master who had, if nothing else, an economic interest in the welfare of the slave.

The moral tension between the two propositions is that between the *God-given* natural right of freedom and the *manmade* political right to be a citizen of a certain country. Even if it is true that all men have a God given natural right to freedom, it does not follow that all men have a *political right* to be citizens of the United States, or citizens of Israel which is a Jewish state, or of Pakistan which is an Islamic state. Whether an alien African population brought over by force and bound by force should be citizens of the United States is a question to be decided by those with the authority to grant political rights, and this will require nice judgments about their traditions and cultural identity (what makes them a people), and what barriers those erect, if any, to assimilating the alien population into their polity. Americans were white European Protestants with an ethic of individualism, a Protestant work ethic, and an ideology of progress. The African population was only two generations from tribal existence, uneducated, with no European past, and with only an abstract racial identity based on common bondage. It is doubtful one could find a parallel in history of two peoples less likely for social and political integration than these two.

So the American response to the moral challenge of slavery had to be filtered through these two beliefs: that

slavery in the abstract is wrong *and* the African population is never to be integrated into the social and political fabric of America. Given the tension generated by these two propositions, a conditional justification for slavery could be given. Although natural law teaches that slavery is wrong, it also teaches when confronted with a choice of policy, one should always choose what does the most good and the least harm. Thus Thomas Aquinas taught although prostitution is a sin and harms society, making it illegal could produce more harm than good. He judged the natural law teaching on prostitution is it should be legally tolerated but contained.

Likewise, if freed blacks were not to enjoy social and political rights and were to live as pariahs, which would push them into vagabondage and crime, then arguably emancipation in some cases would do more harm than good. If so, then slavery as a way of managing what was perceived to be an alien African population until some better arrangement could be found would be justified as a matter of prudence by the same natural law that declares all men have an inalienable right to freedom. This was an awkward position to be in, but it was how most antebellum Americans, North and South, thought of their condition. And, unhappily, they never moved beyond it in confronting the moral challenge of slavery.

Consider Lincoln's remarks in a debate with Stephen Douglas, September 18, 1858:

"I will say then that I am not, nor have ever been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black races ... there is a physical difference between the white and black races which I believe will forever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other men am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race."⁶

In the manner of St. Thomas, Lincoln did not object to slavery as long as it was confined to the South. He laid out the possibilities confronting Americans: "What then? Free them all, and keep them among us as underlings? Is it quite certain this betters their condition? What next? Free them, and make them politically and socially, our equals? My own feelings will not admit of this; and if mine would, we well know that those of the great mass of white people will not ... We cannot then, make them equals." Lincoln confessed he could not think of an acceptable solution to the moral problem of slavery: "If all earthly power were given to me, I should not know what to do, as to the existing institution."⁷

Why was this supposedly greatest of all American statesmen stumped? Why did he not propose a nationally funded emancipation? He himself was caught in the grip of the tension between the two propositions just mentioned above, between natural rights and political rights. Consider another passage where Lincoln fully embraces the conflict between natural rights and political rights at the expense of natural rights: "Negroes have natural rights ... as other men have, although *they cannot enjoy them here*, and Taney once said the Declaration of Independence was broad enough for all men. But though it does not declare that all men are equal in their attainments or social position, yet no sane man will attempt to deny *the African upon his own soil* has all the natural rights that instrument vouchsafes to all mankind."⁸ The only solution Lincoln ever offered to the moral challenge of slavery was deportation of free blacks back to Africa — to their "own soil."

The only place where the African population was accepted as part of society was in the South. There blacks were integrated into society through the family, i.e.; the plantation household. Southerners had come to think that the native soil of blacks was Virginia and Georgia, not Africa. There was subordination in the Old South but not segregation. Slaves attended the same church as their masters. Only ten percent of Southerners even owned slaves,

and half of those owned fewer than five. A third owned one or two. Half the owners worked in the fields with their slaves; ate with them; lived on the same property with them, and sometimes in the same house. Slave owners traveled in public transport with their servants. This social intimacy, as we will see, was extremely distasteful to Northerners who worked to remove themselves as far as possible from the African population with a determination that has been erased from general historical memory.

This was especially true of New England. Early in the 19th century New England Federalists worked out the *first nativist racial ideology*. New Englanders thought themselves to be a superior race because descended from pure Anglo-Saxon Puritan stock. There was some truth in this. There had been hardly any immigration into New England from 1620 to the 1820s. For two centuries the original Puritan stock had intermarried to form a strong regional identity. They thought the blood of the rest of the Union was diluted by foreign peoples who did not have a title to be the "true Americans." Particularly disgusting was the South with its mixture of French, Spanish, Aboriginal and even African blood. The defeat of John Adams and the election of Thomas Jefferson as president was a *racial trauma* for New Englanders. They referred to him contemptuously as the first "Negro president." Jefferson had lived with Africans for so long that to New Englanders he had *become African*. His election meant that inferior and racially compromised Southerners would come to dominate the Union, and his purchase of the Louisiana territory, which more than doubled the size of the Union, confirmed their worst fears. They saw it as a plot by Virginia to dominate the Union which would turn it into a mongrel nation instead of one controlled by a morally superior, white Anglo-Saxon New England.

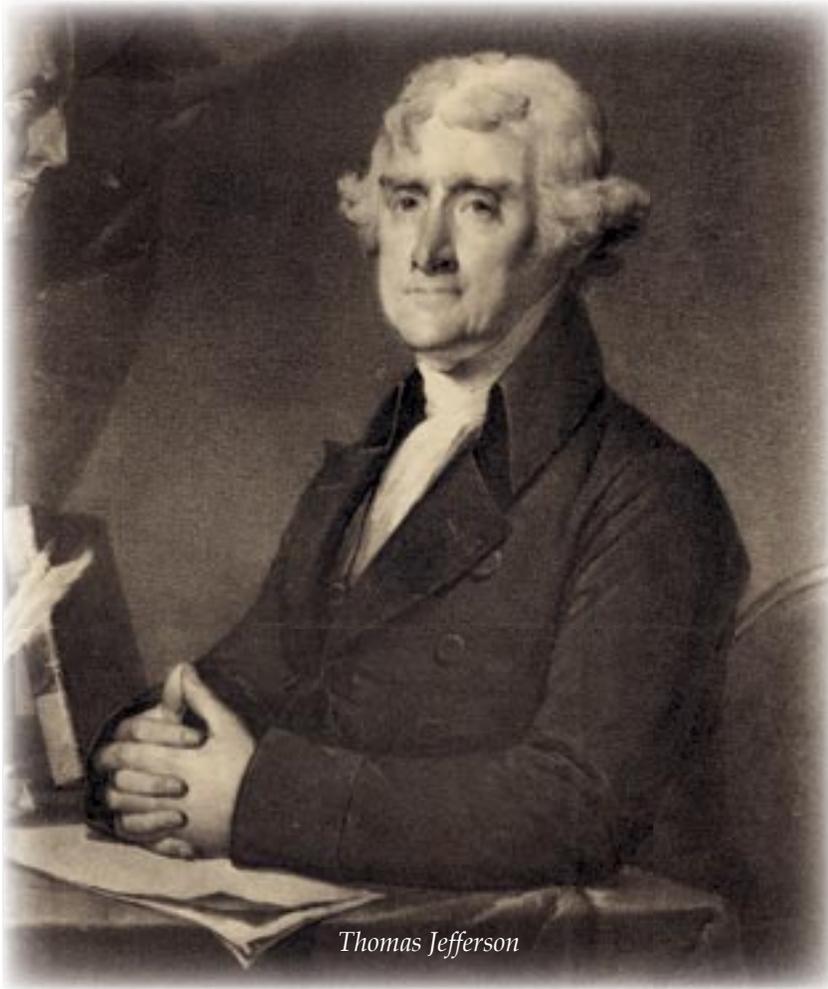
The story of New England racism is another narrative that has been suppressed by our popular national history. But a window has been opened in this self-imposed ignorance by Joanne Pope Melish in her book *Disowning*

Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and Race in New England, 1780-1860. She asks how did New Englanders view the emancipation of their native blacks and the prospect of integrating them into New England society? She points out state laws did not emancipate slaves outright, but rather freed those born after a certain date and upon achieving a certain age, usually eighteen for females and twenty-one for males. This was a form of compensated emancipation which allowed the slaveholder — not only to use the labor of the slave — but to sell him or her before the day of emancipation.

What about those who remained? During the transition period from slavery to emancipation, slaves were not educated with the end in view of integration into New England society. Instead they were treated as slaves and continued to exist in a servile condition after emancipation. They were tightly segregated into shantytowns at the edge of townships. These were often raided and burned. In some cases corpses were dug up and removed from the township. Melish estimates that from one-fifth to one-third of all violence done to blacks and abolitionists in the North was done by New Englanders.⁹

When after emancipation, the social pathologies of the black community did not improve, rather than shoulder part of the responsibility (failure to educate and integrate), New Englanders developed a theory of racial inferiority to explain the lag. Indeed, the first scientific theories arguing blacks were not members of the same species as whites were developed in the North. Josiah Nott was from one of Connecticut's oldest families and a brilliant scientist. He saw that insects spread yellow fever and anticipated Darwin's theory of evolution. He collaborated with the distinguished Harvard zoologist Louis Agassiz on a massive treatise *The Types of Mankind*, which argued blacks and whites are not of the same species in the same way that whites are distinct from monkeys.

Since Agassiz and Nott were among the most respected scientists of their day, it is worth observing the



Thomas Jefferson

moral implications of their theory. In a letter describing an encounter with blacks, Agassiz wrote "Seeing their black faces with their fat lips and their grimacing teeth, the wool on their heads, their bent knees, their elongated hands, their large, curved fingernails, and above all the livid color of their palms, I could not turn my eyes from their face in order to tell them to keep their distance."¹⁰ Josiah Nott jokingly described his theory that blacks were of a different species as niggerology.¹¹

It was widely believed in the North that, if freed, blacks, could not compete with the white man and would eventually die out. Jefferson Davis expressed shock in hearing Northern senators speak of the extermination of blacks as a matter of course. Even New England's great moralist Ralph Waldo Emerson shared this view: "the dark man, the black man declines ... It will happen by & by, that the black man will only be destined for museums like the Dodo."

The system of racial segregation leading to the gradual elimination of New England's indigenous African population was mirrored everywhere in the North and West. The 1820 constitution of Missouri prohibited free blacks from entering the State. The Constitution of Oregon ratified in 1857 excluded free blacks and mulattos: "*No free Negro, or mulatto, not residing in this state at the time of adoption of this constitution, shall ever come, reside, or be within this state, or hold any real estate, or make any contract, or maintain any suit therein; and the legislative assembly shall provide by penal laws for the removal by public officers of all such free Negroes and mulattos ... and for the punishment of persons who shall bring them into the state, or employ or harbour them therein.*" The Oregon constitution passed by a margin of 8 to 1. Its language prohibiting free blacks from entering the state was almost identical to that of the earlier constitutions of Illinois and Indiana. Every Midwestern state — Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Michi-

gan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota — as well as those in the Far West, California, Oregon, Colorado, New Mexico — at one time or another passed measures to exclude free blacks from the state. Eugene Berwanger, who has carefully studied racial attitudes in the Western states, said "79.5 percent of the people of Illinois, Indiana, Oregon and Kansas voted to exclude the free Negro simply because of their prejudice."¹²

Those blacks already in the state before exclusion laws were passed were subject to severe restrictions. In Lincoln's state of Illinois, blacks were not citizens of the state, could not vote, could not sit on juries, could not use the courts to testify against white people, and the state refused to educate their children. And if this were not enough, their very movement was tightly restricted. The revised 1833 statutes of Illinois declared: "If any person or persons shall permit or suffer any ... servant or persons of colour, to the number of three or more, to assemble in his, her, or their out-house, yard, or shed, for the purpose of dancing or reveling, either by night or by day, the person or persons so offending shall forfeit and pay a fine of twenty dollars." And free blacks guilty of such assemblies were "to be whipped, not exceeding thirty nine stripes on his or her back." Cases abound of slaves escaping to free Northern states and being treated so badly that they would surrender themselves to authorities and request return to their master. Lincoln fully supported these shameful black codes and never once raised his voice against them during his political career in the state legislature.

These exclusion laws were successful and restricted the free black population of the Midwestern states to an average of around one percent. But even this minute number was considered too much. Serious efforts were made to colonize blacks abroad. Societies appeared with such names as "Ohio in Africa" and "Indiana in Africa." The Ohio plan was to remove 600 free blacks a year out of the state until free of the entire black population. A delegate to the Illinois constitutional convention in 1847 said "I am

in favor of removing [Negroes] not only from this state, but from all the States. Lincoln introduced a bill in the Illinois legislature to remove blacks from the state. J. C. Hall, leader of the colonization society in Iowa, said in a 1857 meeting Africans had never been part of the civilized world and could not compete with whites: "As long as they remain, they must be outcasts and inferiors. They can have no aspirations except as the objects of an unwelcome, hesitating and noisy charity."

Colonization of blacks out of the country was the favored solution in the North to the problem of slavery. The various colonization societies read like a who's who of American leaders: Madison, Marshall, Hamilton, Webster, Lincoln. But no one pushed the project harder than Lincoln. In debates with Douglas he had urged state and federal governments to fund programs of colonization. The same appeal was made in two state of the Union addresses and in the preliminary emancipation proclamation. In 1862 he introduced a constitutional amendment to buy and deport slaves. He sent the State Department out to arrange treaties with European colonial powers to secure land for Negro colonization. He explored possibilities in Haiti, Liberia, New Granada, Ecuador, St. Croix, Surinam, British Guiana, Honduras and the Amazon. In 1862 he urged Congress to pass a constitutional amendment to buy and deport slaves. In this plan slavery was to continue until 1900. At the end of his speech, Lincoln uttered the famous words: "We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best, hope of earth."¹³ As with so many of Lincoln's memorable phrases, these words have been taken to mean whatever those who quote them wish for them to mean. What Lincoln himself meant was America would continue to be torn — not by slavery as such — but by the presence of a large number of Negroes, whether free or not. The "last best hope of earth" referred to a purely white European polity free of racial strife, and not to a land of freedom for all as it is absurdly interpreted today.

Given the disposition of the vast majority in New England, the other

Northeastern states, the Midwest, and the West to rid themselves of the free African population in their states, it is preposterous to claim such people invaded the South to emancipate slaves. And they did not. Yet there was a long-standing agitation about slavery in the antebellum period, and that was a factor (though by no means the only one) in the decision of the Southern States to withdraw from the Union. This agitation, however, did not spring from a *moral motive* of concern for the liberty and well-being of the slave, but from other motives — and ones that were not always morally attractive. To appreciate this it is necessary to take a look at the main anti-slavery episodes in the antebellum period.

The first anti-slavery episode occurred at the Philadelphia Convention in 1787 over whether slaves should be taxed as persons and have representation in Congress or whether they should be taxed as property. New Englanders argued they should be treated as chattel and not represented in Congress. We must keep in mind that during this debate New Englanders were heavily engaged in the international slave trade and that many were well-accustomed to treating Africans as livestock. When criticized about his travels to Africa to buy slaves, John Brown (who with family support founded Brown University), said "there was no more crime in bringing off a cargo of slaves than in bringing off a cargo of jackasses."¹⁴

Southerners pointed out their laws gave the master ownership only in the *labor* of the slave, not his *person*. A compromise was reached in which slaves were counted three-fifths for the purpose of representation in Congress. This did not mean, as it is tirelessly said to mean, that slaves were three-fifths of a human being, but only that slaves, so it was thought, could perform only three-fifths of the work of a free white man. Racially conscious New Englanders resented this rule. They demanded that only whites have representation in Congress. One cannot exaggerate the resentment New Englanders felt over the three-fifths' rule for slaves. They

complained about it continuously up to 1860. But this first national quarrel over slavery had nothing to do with a *moral concern* for the well-being of the slave. If anything, the New England position that slaves were like livestock was morally inferior to the Southern position that, though subordinate (like women and children), slaves were nevertheless persons needing protection and hence representation.

The second anti-slavery episode occurred over Jefferson's close race with Aaron Burr for the presidency, which was decided in the House of Representatives. To New England Federalists this election was seen as illegitimate because without the slave representation Jefferson would not have won. Accordingly, as we have seen, racially conscious New Englanders referred to Jefferson as the first "Negro president." It was in this connection that stories about a sexual liaison between Jefferson and one of his slaves, Sally Hemings, appeared. This supposed relation not only offended against New England's white nativist ideology, it showed the extent to which Southerners had been dragged down by their long association with Africans.

The Puritans saw themselves on a mission into a dark wilderness. Nature was something alien to be conquered and controlled by a strong will guided by abstract reason. Southerners, in contrast, developed very early the myth of the South as a garden of Eden. Nature was to be respected, but it was also something to be embraced, cultivated and enjoyed. New Englanders found this relaxed, comfortable relation to nature in the South unsettling. For them, Africans were a symbol of undisciplined and uncivilized nature. By living in close association with Africans, Southerners had reverted back to a more primitive state of nature, making them unworthy of leadership in an American Union that should be modeled on New England. From Jefferson's election up to 1860, New England cultural elites launched an insistent campaign to demonize the character of Southerners. Two excellent studies of this are *North Over South*, by Susan

Mary Grant, a British scholar; and Ann Norton's *Alternative Americas*.

Thomas Goodwin, a Northern abolitionist, could write in 1864 that Southerners had "African playmates ... African attendants ... African recreations ... African voices ... African minds." The inadequate notion of liberty and the relaxed morals of Southerners was "the direct influence of so large a population of half-barbarous Africans interspersed among them."¹⁵ Southerners had become *Negroized*, and so were not true Americans as defined by New England elites.

The repressed sexuality of New Englanders found ample room for fantasy about the South's descent into nature. Repression of sex meant rising above nature to conquer it and so to advance civilization. Such was the meaning of the celibate marriage of the abolitionists Theodore Weld and Angela Grimke. Abolitionists supposed not only masters had a free hand with slave girls but that Africans (being creatures of nature), were oversexed and proved a source of temptation to masters and mistresses. One abolitionist wrote that "The Southern States are ONE GREAT SODOM." A female New Englander placed the blame for interracial liaisons on the uncontrolled lust of slave women. These she said "lured young slave holders into illicit attachments." And John Rankin said "I could refer you to several instances of slaves actually seducing the daughters of their masters."¹⁶ It is hard not to see here more than a small bit of suppressed envy.

The agitation over the three-fifths rule and Jefferson's election was certainly about slavery, but it was not in the least about the emancipation and welfare of the African. Indeed, it was anti-African. Slavery was an evil because it brought to America a large number of half-barbarous Africans. Southerners were corrupted by close association with Africans and were unfit to govern the Union, yet somehow they had acquired a commanding grip on it. As of 1860, 11 presidents had come from the South, only five from the North. Attorneys general: 14 from the South and five from the North. Supreme Court Justices: 17 from the South, 11 from the North. Speakers of

the House, 21 from the South, 12 from the North. Southern character was not only barbarous (and secretly envied), it was also feared. Emerson bitterly explained Southern political dominance by saying that Northerners knew how to control steam and machines, while Southerners knew how to control men.

The third anti-slavery episode was sparked by Jefferson's purchase of the Louisiana Territory from Napoleon, his embargo, and Madison's war with Britain. New Englanders were opposed to expansion westward which they thought was contrary to their interest and was part of a Southern plot to take over the Union. The Louisiana Purchase and Jefferson's embargo on British shipping confirmed their worst fears, as did Madison's embargo and declaration of war with Britain. New England government agencies, from juries to legislatures, nullified the embargo and refused to send troops in the War of 1812. None of this would have happened, they thought, if Virginia did not dominate the Union, and that would not have happened without the hated three-fifths' rule that gave Africans representation. Representative Josiah Quincy from Massachusetts said "the slave representation is the cause of all the difficulties we labor under."

A Convention of New England States met at Hartford in 1814 and seriously considered secession. The Convention sent commissioners to Washington with a number of demands that had to be met as a condition for New England's remaining in the Union. Among these were repeal of the three-fifths' rule.

Talk of slavery was certainly a factor in the nullification and secession movements that raged in New England from 1804 to 1814, but this talk revealed no concern for the emancipation and welfare of the African population. New England, until 1808, was still engaged in the African slave trade. The agitation was about how the South had come to dominate the Union and was pursuing policies not in New England's commercial and political interests.

The fourth anti-slavery episode was in 1820 over admission of Missouri as a slave state. A com-

promise was reached by drawing a line across the continent, allowing slavery south of the line but prohibiting it north of the line. In our popular history, this is presented as a moral drama between those who were anti-slavery and those who were pro-slavery. But it was nothing of the sort. On the anti-slavery side was Senator James DeWolff of Rhode Island, who strongly opposed Missouri's entrance as a slave state. We recall that DeWolff, one of the richest men in the country, had gained his wealth through the New England slave trade. His company had run some eighty voyages to Africa until the trade became illegal for Americans in 1808, only 12 years before the Missouri Compromise. And DeWolff would continue trading in slaves in a foreign market.

What was the meaning of DeWolff's anti-slavery position? He was simply continuing the New England Federalist policies which had led to the secession movements in 1804-1814 — namely to weaken the expansion of the Southern agrarian interest which favored Westward expansion, free trade, and was opposed to a national bank and to government subsidies for business, all of which were in conflict with New England's subsidized shipping, fishing and manufacturing interests. DeWolff's — and New England's — anti-slavery position on admitting Missouri as a slave state was not in the least motivated by a moral concern for the welfare of the slave.

However, it is difficult for us today to read the expression *anti-slavery* without importing our own 21st century moral sensibilities into it. Unless historians go out of their way to correct us, we cannot help but think the Missouri controversy was a great moral drama between those who sought to keep Africans in slavery and those who sought to liberate them, or at least to limit expansion of the evil. But that is most certainly not how the participants in the controversy thought. The freedom and welfare of the African population never crossed the mind of DeWolff and most other opponents of Missouri entering as a slave state.

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Not About Slavery

Yet there is an important complication that needs to be addressed. As we have seen, nearly all Americans, including Southerners, as Lincoln acknowledged, believed that slavery *abstractly considered* is a violation of natural law. Consequently, slavery could be justified only by positive law, or by natural law, if and only if circumstances were such that eliminating it would do more harm than good.

This distinction between abstract principle and moral practice is difficult for Americans to grasp today because we have been trained to think about morals ideologically — to believe morality is mostly a matter of adhering to abstract principles. To be sure, believing in certain moral principles is a part of morality, but it is not the most important part. Moral merit attaches not to what one believes but to what one does or seriously intends to do. To believe in the abstract moral principle that slavery is wrong or that abortions of convenience are wrong conveys intellectual merit because one believes something which is true, but it conveys no moral merit unless it is part of an action intended to end the evil.

Let us call a critique of slavery based merely on assertion of an abstract moral principle *sentimental anti-slavery*. Such a critique enables one to feel good about oneself without having to do anything about ending slavery. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* enabled millions of Northerners to ignore slavery was a national evil and to feel good about themselves without having to acknowledge their own collective foundational and continuing participation in an economy dependent on slave-produced staples. Most criticism of slavery in the North throughout the antebellum period was rooted in sentimental anti-slavery.

The use of sentimental anti-slavery to mask (often morally unworthy) economic and political motives is morally corrupt because it singles out the

slave owner for condemnation (while willfully ignoring the institution is a national evil) and because the critic has no intention of actually doing anything (for which there would be a cost) to eliminate it. Jefferson unmasked the sentimental anti-slavery agitation over Missouri by sardonically observing that all the moralistic noise about preventing Virginia slaves from going to Missouri did not free a single slave in Virginia. The Missouri Constitution prohibited the entrance of any free Negroes, a provision which called forth no moralistic agitation, as it conformed entirely to Northern anti-Negro attitudes and practice.

That a genuine moral concern for the welfare of the slave played no part in the anti-slavery episodes we have examined so far should not be surprising. James Banner, a historian of New England Federalism, observed throughout the entire North after the Revolution and for the next half-century there was no interest in a genuine moral critique of slavery: "Save for a few isolated leaders, no one spoke out vigorously and continuously in defense of manumission, nor did the successful campaign against the slave trade engage the public interest or enter to any substantial degree into partisan debate."¹⁷

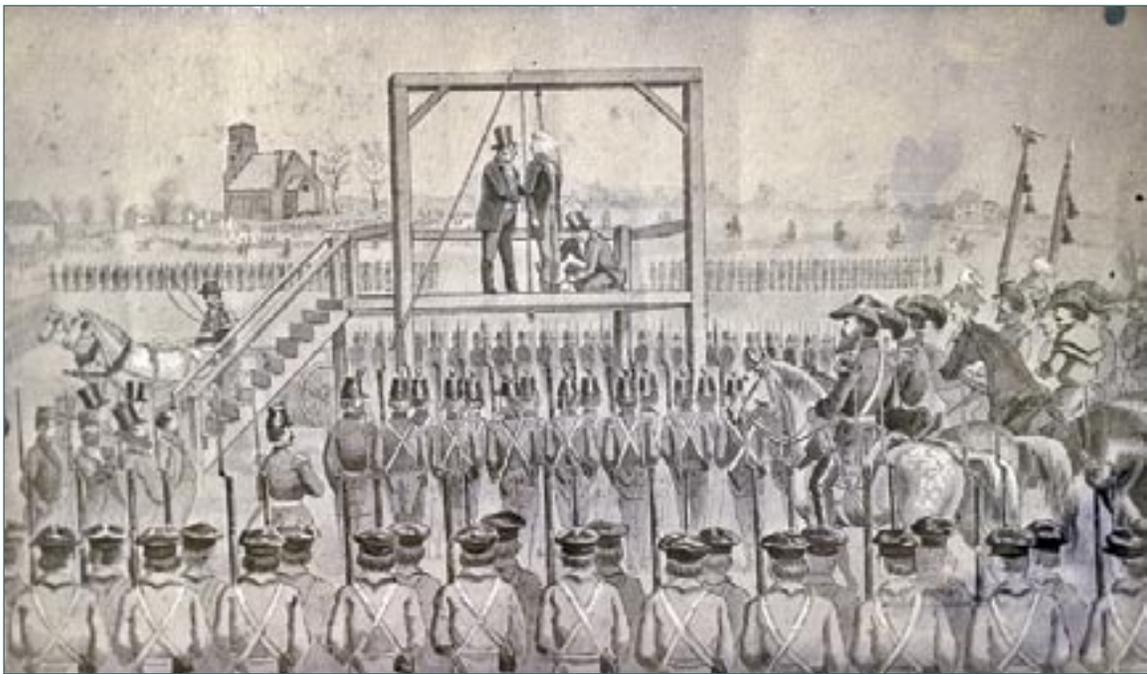
The fifth anti-slavery episode was that brought on by a small number of New England abolitionists, usually marked by the appearance in 1831 of William Garrison's journal *The Liberator*. One cannot accuse the New England abolitionists of sentimental anti-slavery. They certainly felt good about themselves for professing the abstract proposition that slavery is wrong, but they also called for action and were prepared to suffer for the cause. They held that slavery is a sin committed by the South against humanity, and they demanded immediate and uncompensated emancipation. The abolitionists at first proposed what their New England fathers had proposed in 1804-1814,

namely secession of the North from the South. This would free them from complicity in the slave economy and fatally weaken the institution in the South. Jeffrey Hummel, in *Emancipating Slaves and Enslaving Freeman*, has recently defended this abolitionist argument that secession of the North was the best way to end slavery.

As the Abolitionist movement developed, however, more violent methods were urged. Lysander Spooner of Massachusetts, a libertarian thinker of some merit, proposed infiltrating the South with armed units that would join black escapees and poor whites to form insurgent groups in wilderness areas. Spooner wrote to Bostonian abolitionist leader Wendell Phillips in 1840: "I think in five years, 500,000 men in the North would join and that nearly all the non-slave holders of the South would be with us. Cultural elites such as minister Theodore Parker, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, and Stephen Foster encouraged the plan." Wendell Phillips paid for printing 500 copies of a handbill explaining the plan, and hoping, as he said, to "spread panic" among Southerners. The South was flooded with flyers and pamphlets of this kind proposing insurrection and advocating terrorist tactics such as poisoning well water and the like.

In time the hatred of abolitionists would be directed to all Southerners — whether they owned slaves or not. John Brown killed Southern farmers in Kansas who did not own slaves and was praised by New England elites for doing so. His mission to seize weapons at the Federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry for a slave insurrection was funded by New England elites.¹⁸ After it failed, he was executed, and immediately became an abolitionist hero and martyr. Today he is still admired by a certain kind of American.

The only part of the Abolitionist movement that had moral merit was the early effort to effect the North's se-



The hanging of John Brown on December 2, 1859.

cession from the Union as the best way of putting slavery on the road to extinction. That proposal had real promise of effecting a beneficial change. But it was the terrorist part of the movement that came to dominate. That part, however, must be repudiated as morally reprehensible. The project of ending slavery is a morally worthy one, but not if one uses immoral means. Some 50 million babies have been killed in America through abortions, usually for the purpose of birth control. That is morally reprehensible, but it does not justify killing abortionists or bombing abortion clinics, which is the counterpart of what abolitionists recommended for Southerners. This Puritan vision of slaying in the name of the Lord is celebrated in *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* which sadly has become an icon of American national identity.

Mainline historians either praise the abolitionists or are muted or mild in their criticism. It is said that, though violent and uncompromising in their rhetoric, they at least awoke the North to the moral problem of slavery. But they did no such thing. All they did was loudly assert an abstract moral principle to which they professed allegiance, demonize Southern character, demand immediate and uncompensated emancipation, and advocate terrorist tactics. No one had to tell Ameri-

cans slavery abstractly considered is a violation of natural law. That was not the moral problem. The *moral problem* was to put forth a practical proposal to end slavery that would do more good than harm to all sides concerned. This would have to include some form of *emancipation*, *compensation* to slaveholders, and *integration* into American society.

Abolitionists, however, had nothing to offer but immediate and uncompensated emancipation, and failing that, terrorism. These demands were as unjust as they were practically impossible. No emancipation could be just that did not include compensation, and that was not proposed. The abolitionists made no contribution whatsoever to the real *moral challenge* posed by slavery. What they did was heat passions up to the boiling point, making rational discourse about the problem impossible. Their legacy lives on in the effacement from collective memory that slavery was a national evil (demanding a national solution, which Americans failed to provide) and in the self-congratulatory demonization of Southern character. It is this legacy that informs the official story that the war about slavery.

And perhaps here something should be said about Calhoun's famous remark that slavery is a positive

good. This has been twisted by historians to mean that Calhoun repudiated the American principle that slavery is a violation of natural law in favor of the unAmerican principle that slavery is a positive good. But he did no such thing. He made clear that he was not talking about slavery as an *abstract moral principle* at all, but about the merits and demerits of an actual practice which the Union had inherited.¹⁹

By the 1830s Southerners were confronting an unreal situation. Their character was constantly vilified by abolitionists who let their imaginations run wild in decrying the evils of slavery, real and imaginary. Yet no morally responsible proposal was put forth to eliminate it. Since Northerners were not prepared to do anything about eliminating the institution, Calhoun shifted attention away from abstract principle to an evaluation of the actual practice — something would have to be done in any serious attempt to reform or eliminate it. He argued the practice in fact did not corrupt the virtue and patriotism of Southerners as was claimed. And as to slaves, he observed they had arrived, a people torn from their tribal roots, in a barbarous condition, but over time had gradually become civilized, Christian and a part (though a subordinate part) of Southern society. It was simply a fact, he said, that Africans had progressed

under slavery, and Calhoun placed no limit on the future progress they could make. He urged the vicious attacks on Southern character cease (which advanced no practical agenda in eliminating the institution) and the institution be reexamined in another ten years.

Calhoun taught that liberty is a reward for virtue. This logically implies blacks who achieved the required level of virtue should be given more responsibility, and eventually freedom. Calhoun did not go out of his way to stress this point nor to propose a plan of gradual emancipation, but neither did anyone else at the time. The crude, ideological way historians have treated Calhoun's claim the institution of slavery had achieved some positive good is symptomatic of how ideological Americans have become and how deeply entrenched is the error that to claim allegiance to an abstract moral principle confers moral merit. Such historians can see in Calhoun's remark only the assertion of the abstract moral principle that slavery is not a necessary evil but a positive good. From this they conclude Calhoun was an odious man. They simply cannot see he was not talking about principles at all, but was offering a concrete evaluation of the practice in the particular context of an American Union that had never intended for Africans to be part of the polity. Far from being odious, Calhoun appears as a judicious man of practical wisdom among strident moral adolescents who confuse allegiance to abstract principle with moral merit and who cannot perceive any moral merit which is not accompanied by a confession of allegiance to an abstract moral principle.

And it should be added though abolitionists made much of the abstract principle that slavery is wrong, most of them shared the racist attitudes of most Northerners who recoiled from association with blacks. Senator Benjamin Wade of Ohio was a towering figure in the Abolitionist movement, but he abhorred contact with blacks. He arrived in Washington in 1851, describing it as "a God forsaken N..... ridden place." He complained, "the food was all cooked by n..... until I can smell and taste the n....." Looking for a

housekeeper in 1874, he complained "for mere n..... power it will cost over \$500 a year." He was determined to find a "white woman" because, "I am sick and tired of n....." Wade said he did not like blacks, but he hated Southerners more.

The sixth anti-slavery episode was prompted by the Kansas-Nebraska Act which abolished the Missouri Compromise line. Slavery would now be allowed in Western states if they chose to have it. The Act was passed in 1854. Prior to that time Lincoln had been silent on slavery. As a lawyer he had taken on the case of a slave owner seeking return of his slaves who had fled to Lincoln's state of Illinois for freedom. He supported the cruel black codes in his state, and urged colonization of Africans abroad. But his political career was at its lowest point, and so after 1854, he began playing the anti-slavery card.

Prior to the war, Lincoln offered no practical solution to the moral challenge of slavery other than deportation. And though he rejected the abolitionists because of their demand for immediate and uncompensated emancipation, he followed them in treating adherence to abstract moral principle as identical to morality. He said that the great struggle confronting Americans was that "One section of our country believes slavery is *right*, and ought to be extended, while the other believes it is *wrong* and ought not to be extended" [Lincoln's italics].²⁰ Here the conflict is structured in purely ideological terms as a philosophical conflict between contrary beliefs in abstract moral principles, and not as a conflict over practical proposals of how to eliminate the evil of slavery. We are led to think Southerners simply think slavery is right and so are evil, while Northerners think it is wrong and are good.

But the truth was just the opposite. Americans were not divided between those who think slavery, abstractly considered, is right and those who think it is wrong. Most agreed that it violates natural law, but Northerners, did not want to live with free Africans in their midst. They were opposed to slavery in principle, but could not see

eliminating it without having to integrate free blacks into their states, and that was not on the table for discussion. But to take that view is, in effect, to say slavery is acceptable as a practical matter. All of the practical difficulties and complications which emerge from a thoughtful understanding of the *real moral challenge* posed by slavery are flattened out by Lincoln and reduced to a conflict of belief about abstract principles. Rather than see this as a failure in moral understanding, it is celebrated today as a *moral achievement*.

This explains why our popular history presents Lincoln as a moral giant in his opposition to the westward expansion of slavery. The great man, it is thought, drew a line in the sand beyond which the slave power could not go. But the no-slavery-in-the-West agitation which brought Lincoln to power (like the quarrel over allowing slavery in Missouri), had nothing to do with a moral concern for the liberation and welfare of the African population. It was about white Northern and Western interests which, among other things, included keeping free Negroes out of the West.

Moreover, there was no realistic possibility the plantation system could move west. As Charles Ramsdell has shown, the geography of the West did not lead itself to large-scale plantation agriculture.²¹ In the Western territories, under the Missouri Compromise line, where slavery could have expanded, there were only 17 slaves in 1860. But more importantly, there were moral limits. As we have seen, Western states were determined to keep free blacks out of their territory. Slave owners in Western states could never be secure. Those who ventured out soon left. There were 55 reported slaves in Kansas in 1856. By 1860 there were only two. The prospect of slavery moving west in the mid-fifties when Lincoln began exploiting the issue that made him president was nonexistent. The real reason was stated by Charles Eliot Norton of Massachusetts, a militant liberal activist, a professor of art and literature at Harvard, and said to be one of the most cultivated men in America. He supported the free soil movement in the West in order to "con-

fine the Negro within the South.”

Instead of proposing a national solution to the moral problem of slavery as he should have done, Lincoln played on racist fears and demonized the South as a great slave power likely to extend slavery not only over the West, but over the entire United States! This claim was preposterous, but Northerners were whipped up into a mass hysteria and believed it. Its legacy survives today in the myth that the war was about the South’s desire to protect and expand slavery.

It is true Southerners insisted on the right to use the common territory as a matter of constitutional right, even though many knew it would not be used in practice to expand slavery. To renounce that right would mean the loss of other constitutional rights in a sectional Cold War over economic, political, and constitutional differences stretching back some fifty years. Besides, much good could come from allowing slaves to go West. As Jefferson suggested, one practical good would be that slaves could be taken West for emancipation. Diffusion of the African population over the continent would ease the racial tensions which would inevitably arise from emancipation. A small minority of blacks could be more easily integrated into white society than a large block of thirty to forty percent of a state’s population.

Here was a real morally responsible proposal for gradual emancipation. Instead of deporting blacks to Africa, as Lincoln proposed, why not use the vast unoccupied territory of the West to allow slaves to work out their freedom? Southern philanthropists opposed to slavery secured land for just this purpose. John Randolph was one of these. He strongly supported the entrance of Missouri as a slave state, though he hated slavery. He provided in his will that property be bought in Ohio for the comfortable accommodation of 300 of his freed slaves. But the white citizens of Ohio refused them entrance. The freedmen returned to Virginia and asked to be wards of the state.

Why did not Lincoln urge a nationally funded program of gradual

emancipation in the Western territories? The answer is that he lacked the moral courage and even the inclination to challenge the racial prejudices of his time. This is understandable, but it sits uneasily with the myth of the *Great Emancipator* and friend of black equality.

The no-slavery-in-the-West platform that Lincoln ran on was merely a code word for no-Africans-in-the-West, slave or free. As a historian of Kansas put it, “The western settlers did not talk about the sinfulness of slavery; they despised the Negro.” The editor of the influential *Chicago Tribune* said the North’s greatest fear was “if the slaves were liberated, they would become roaming vagrants; that they would overrun the North and subsist by mendicancy and vagrancy; and that from the day they were made free, they would cease to work.” That might well be true if they had to live under the black codes of Lincoln’s Illinois, but not if they were gradually emancipated, endowed with basic civil rights, and given their own farms in the vast unsettled West.

The editor of the *Chicago Times* said “There is in the great masses of the people a natural and proper loathing of the Negro, which forbids contact with him as with a leper.” Senator Sherman of Ohio, brother of the Union general, said although most Northerners opposed slavery in the abstract, they were also “opposed to having many Negroes among them.” These were spurned and hated all over the country. The influential *Illinois State Journal* declared “The truth is the n..... is an unpopular institution in the free States ... we confess that we have, in common with nineteenth-twentieths of our people a prejudice against the n.....” Governor John M. Palmer, who became governor of Illinois, said that race, not slavery, was the real problem confronting Northerners: “It is the presence of the Negro race: a race which the sentiments of our people doom to a condition of racial and political inferiority beyond the reach of all efforts for their elevation.”

The editor of *The Milwaukee Sentinel* said the two races could never live to-

gether in peace: “Whether it is instinct, reason or prejudice, is scarcely profitable to discuss ... It exists throughout the whole North and time seems to do little or nothing toward molifying it.” An abolitionist said this about his fellow Midwesterners who supported Lincoln’s no slavery-in-the-West agitation: “They are more properly Negro haters, who vote Free-State to keep Negroes out, free or slave; one half of them would go for Slavery if Negroes were to be allowed here at all.” The inherent sinfulness of slavery is not once thought of by them.

The Republican Party platform of 1856 declared “all unoccupied territories of the United States, and such as they may hereafter acquire, shall be reserved for the white Caucasian race — a thing that cannot be except by the exclusion of slavery.” And Lincoln said keeping slavery out of the territories would free them from “the troublesome presence of free Negroes.” *The New York Tribune* said barring slavery from the territories would “give them an opportunity to become what New England is now,” namely a uniquely white, morally superior, and enthusiastically commercial society unpolluted by Africans and racially compromised Southerners.

To conclude. There was certainly a lot of anti-slavery talk in the antebellum period, but it did not have the moral content the official story implies. We have examined the major anti-slavery episodes from the Philadelphia Convention in 1787 to the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. Not a single one was motivated by a moral intention to do something about freeing the African population or attending to its welfare. In every case the motive was the economic and political interests of white people in the North and West against those of the South. The African population was viewed from New England, throughout the North, and across the West as a pariah people to be removed from one’s presence as far as possible.

The South did not secede to protect slavery from a national plan of emancipation because no national political party proposed emancipation. Indeed, there was greater legal protection for

slavery in 1860 than ever. And the South did not secede to expand slavery into the Western territories because given its geography and, more importantly, the racial attitudes of Westerners, there was no realistic possibility of the plantation system moving West. Besides by leaving the Union, the Southern States lost all claim to the use of those territories. We should also note that the Confederate Constitution abolished the slave trade and allowed the entrance of non-slave-holding states. Confederates were not intent on spreading slavery to every state in the Confederacy, and the same people who wrote the Confederate Constitution were not disposed in the 1850s (contrary to Lincoln and the official story) to spread slavery throughout the United States.

It is true that some states gave attacks on slavery as their reason for seceding, but not all of them did. Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee and Arkansas at first refused to join the Confederacy. They reversed themselves after Lincoln ordered — what they considered an unconstitutional — invasion of the seceding states. As Lee said, he did not want to live in a Union held together by bayonets. Those states that did give attacks on slavery as their reason for seceding did not have in mind resistance to a morally responsible nationally funded program of emancipation, but the virulent, irresponsible attacks of abolitionists. Their long advocacy of a slave insurrection and terrorism was put in practice by John Brown and supported by national cultural elites and even government officials. When the governor of Virginia requested the return for trial of fugitives of Brown's raid which had fled North, the governors of Ohio and Iowa refused to comply, even though the Constitution requires governors to return fugitives from justice to the state where the alleged crime occurred when requested by the governor of that state. South Carolina, Texas and Mississippi mentioned this break-down in the rule of law as one of their reasons for seceding.

And to this we should add Northern leaders, moving through the unchartered territory of the industrial

revolution, were beginning to deny that America is a federation of States. They began talking of it as a unitary nationalist regime with the central government having plenary powers controlled, of course, by the North. This was contrary to the Jeffersonian vision of the Constitution as a federation of sovereign States, which dominated in the South and which was the view of many in the North as well. Lincoln got no electoral votes from the South. He was the first sectional president.

Southern fears the Republican Party was a revolutionary party seeking to destroy the federation of States in favor of a unitary state governed by the North was openly affirmed by Wendell Phillips, a nationally recognized leader in the abolitionist movement. Prior to Lincoln's election, he gave a speech explaining the meaning of the Republican Party: "It is just what we have attempted to bring about. It is the first sectional party ever organized in this country. It ... calls itself national; but it is not national, it is sectional. The Republican Party is a party of the North pledged against the South."²²

If there were indeed two sections, with such strong identities that one could be pledged against the other, why not separate them and have two distinct federations of States? The Union was morally dissolved prior to the South's secession.

The North did not acquire a "treasury of virtue" from prosecuting one of the bloodiest wars of the 19th century. Instead, it acquired a habit of self-righteousness and moral self-deception which unfortunately has become a national characteristic. Just as Northerners suppressed the obvious fact slavery was a national evil for which they bore some responsibility, so our popular history today cannot acknowledge the invasion and plundering of the South from 1861 to 1877 was an awful crime, as the great 19th-century liberal Lord Acton put it. Their very identity requires they view the conflict instead as a great moral struggle to abolish slavery, even though the antebellum North put forth no morally responsible proposal for eliminating it.

The official story that the war was a great moral struggle for the "soul

of the nation" only strengthens the disposition to self-deception and self-righteousness. The war could not have been a battle for the soul of the nation because America in 1860 was not a centralized nation-state that could be said to have a soul. It was an inchoate federation of sovereign states only 70 years old; it had grown in only 50 years to more than four times its original size, which was expanding to the Pacific; and in which secession had been publically acknowledged as an option in every section of the Union.

Our nationalist historians have made it virtually impossible to perceive the moral truth that the best solution to all the problems confronting the federation of States in 1860 would have been a peaceful division into two federations, which is what the early abolitionists recommended. That, among other things, would have ended the fear that Southerners would use the Western territories as a dumping ground for emancipated Africans because by seceding, they would have no constitutional claim to those territories. Secession would also have hastened the extinction of slavery, which drew its strength from being integrated with the Union. Jefferson Davis himself said that secession would mean the end of slavery.

The official story that the war was about the South's desire to protect and expand slavery and the North's determination to abolish it is not merely an error in academic history. The evidence against it has not been ignored so much as it has been suppressed. It had to be suppressed because it contradicts the legitimating myth of the centralized nationalist regime that emerged after the war. Having been repeated so often, it has come to be believed because of repetition.

There is a lack of moral maturity in a regime that cannot confront its own moral failures, but constructs its national identity by projecting those failures onto a scapegoat. And this disordered view of moral reality accepted by both the people and their rulers cannot but have a deleterious effect on domestic and foreign policy. A great stride would be made in ending

the ideological style of politics — so characteristic of Lincoln's rhetoric — which distorts the moral lens through which public conflicts are perceived, if the whole truth were told about the North's role in slavery, in constructing racial attitudes, and in its failure to even remotely confront the great moral challenge posed by slavery.

But that would require writing a quite different kind of history from the one taught to the public over the past 50 years. Indeed, it would require seriously rethinking the standard narrative of post-bellum American nationalism. Such a history is long overdue. As I hope to have suggested in this essay, there is no lack of evidence to support writing such a history.

ENDNOTES

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