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Slavery, Economics and Constitutional Ideals

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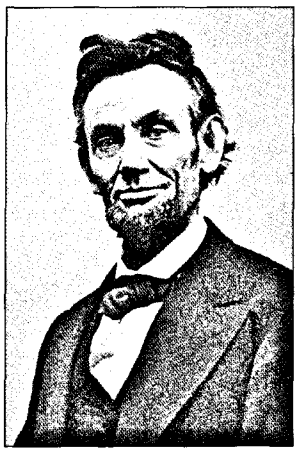


Abraham Lincoln, seen here a month before his second inaugural, shared many of the racial prejudices of his day. He was willing to compromise with the South on many issues involving slavery to preserve the Union and the Constitution, but he refused to compromise his opposition to the extension of slavery into the territories.

Preceding pages: *A "Slave Auction at the South" from the July 13, 1861, issue of* Harper's Weekly. *The engraving was developed from a sketch by artist Theodore Davis, who witnessed several such scenes while traveling with William Howard Russell, a reporter for the* London Times, *on a tour through the Confederacy early in the war.*

Everyone knows Appomattox Court House as the place where the Civil War ended, where Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant and Gen. Robert E. Lee signed the document that ended the fighting between the largest of the Civil War armies. This is where the 30,000 remaining soldiers of the Army of Northern Virginia laid down their arms, where Union soldiers treated their recent opponents with respect, where soldiers tried to show Americans how they could have peace with dignity after four years of brutal war.

As we think about endings, however, it is also useful to think about beginnings. That is what President Abraham Lincoln did in his Second Inaugural Address, delivered just five weeks before the surrender at Appomattox and his own assassination soon thereafter. All knew, he said, reflecting sadly and thoughtfully on how the Civil War came about, that slavery was, "somehow," the cause. In that "somehow," however, lay puzzles, contradictions, and questions. The connections between slavery and the Civil War have concerned Americans ever since the events at Appomattox.

Time after time, between the 1780s and the 1860s, slavery provided both the fuel and the spark for a series of confrontations in Congress, in the Supreme Court, and in the Presidency; angry debate broke out in newspapers, books, and churches; it broke out in Virginia, Boston, and Kansas. Slavery unleashed the harshest words, the hardest feelings, and the most desperate acts in American history.

Nevertheless, anomalies and complexities marked the role of slavery in dividing the North and South. By 1861, after all, slavery had existed for two centuries in what became the United States. The slave economy grew stronger in the 1850s, flourishing as never before. Only a quarter of southern whites owned slaves and that proportion declined as the years passed. Only a small fraction of northern whites ever joined the abolitionists. Some of the largest

slaveholders in the South voted against secession and many northern men voted against the Republicans in 1860 and in every election during the war. (Women were not allowed to vote until the adoption of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution in 1920.)

Dwelling on these complexities, some people have insisted that the Civil War could not have turned on slavery. It must have been about competing constitutional ideals or economic self interest, about politics or the personality of leaders. Others assert that war and emancipation were inevitable, or that slavery simply could not survive American progress and ideals. Many have questioned why such a large portion of the population, North and South, would be willing to fight for an institution in which they had no personal stake.

The simple arguments ignore too much. The challenge is to understand how a fundamental yet long-contained conflict suddenly exploded into a war that surprised everyone with its scale and consequences. The challenge is to understand the deaths of more than 620,000 people in a catastrophic war that few sought but many fought, a war that brought a great good in the destruction of slavery.

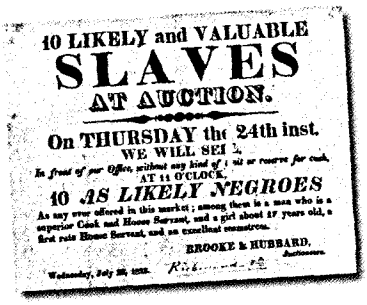
By the time of the American Revolution, slavery had become deeply entrenched in North America. Slaveholders helped found the new nation and demanded accommodation to slavery in the Constitution. With the white population booming and American participation in the international slave trade abolished after 1808, there was hope that slavery would meet the same fate in the South as in the North: a gradual fading, without deep social dislocation or serious financial loss to slaveholders.

Reassuring expectations of the painless demise of slavery died soon after the nation's founding. Slaveholders pushed into new lands to raise cotton, and the burgeoning demand for slaves gave the institution a new profitability even in states that could not

Population of Appomattox County 1850 & 1860

Census Year	1850	1860
Whites	4209	4118
Slaves	4799	4600
Free Blacks	185	171
Total	9193	8889

The overall population of Appomattox County declined during the 1850s, as this chart shows, but the county fared well economically. In 1860 the county's 4,600 slaves and 171 freedmen accounted for more than 53 percent of the total population. Most blacks stayed in the county after the war, as evidenced by the 1870 census, which showed the black population at 4,536. Many freedmen worked as servants or sharecroppers in the postwar years. Others were farmers owning land, or tradesmen with their own businesses (such as blacksmiths, shoemakers, wheelwrights, and coopers).


10 LIKELY and VALUABLE
SLAVES
AT AUCTION.
On THURSDAY the 24th inst.
WE WILL SELL
In front of our Office, without any kind of reserve for cash,
AT 12 O'CLOCK,
10 AS LIKELY NEGROES
As any ever offered in this market; among them is a man who is a superior Cook and House Servant, and a girl about 17 years old, a first rate House Servant, and an excellent seamstress.
BROOKE & HUBBARD,
Auctioneers.
Wednesday, July 26, 1820.

Slave sale broadside from Richmond, Virginia.

William Lloyd Garrison considered slavery "utterly evil" and fought against it uncompromisingly through the pages of The Liberator, *the militant antislavery newspaper he founded in 1831 and continued to publish for the next 34 years, until the ratification of the 13th Amendment ended slavery.*

grow the valuable fiber. As the United States government purchased or seized land from the American Indians, the French, the Spanish, and Mexico, the boundaries of the United States seemed to dissolve, promising a nation that would cover all of North America and the Caribbean. The number of slave states and free states grew at an equally torrid pace.

The United States Constitution could not contain the conflicts that resulted over the expansion of slavery. The document's three-fifths and fugitive slave clauses came to antagonize the North without reassuring the South. The Founding Fathers avoided, finessed, or left murky issues that would emerge with increasing frequency over the next 50 years: the status of slavery in territories before they became states, the power of Congress to regulate the slave trade among states or to rid the District of Columbia of slavery, the authority to return slaves who escaped into free states, whether a state could peaceably leave the Union. These problems repeatedly came before Congress, dominating and disrupting entire sessions.

Debates over the admission of Missouri as a slave state in 1819 established the pattern for the debates and compromises to follow. "The North" and "the South" emerged as self-conscious places from those debates, uniting the new states of the Northwest with the states of New England, New York, and Pennsylvania against the new states of the Southwest with Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia. Missouri came into the Union with slavery at the same time as Maine came in without slavery, ensuring the balance between slave and free states, but Congress also prohibited slavery in all the lands north of the southern border of Missouri. When northern opponents of slavery flooded Congress with petitions, southern legislators forced the "Gag Rule" to prevent the acceptance of such documents, leading to charges of suppression of free speech.

Several remarkable years around 1830 amplified the conflict over slavery. In the Nullification Crisis, South Carolina fought with the Federal Government over the boundaries between state and national power, with tariff the subject of immediate dispute. At nearly the same time, slaves in Virginia, under the leadership of Nat Turner, launched a bloody raid on neighboring whites, striking terror throughout the

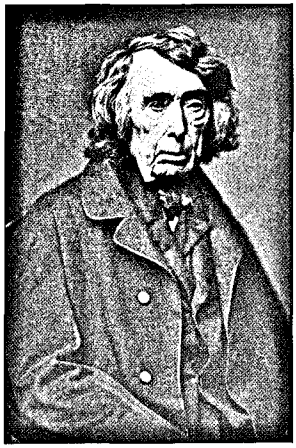
South and raising the stakes of the national debate. William Lloyd Garrison founded *The Liberator*, the first abolitionist newspaper to attract widespread attention, denouncing slavery as a sin and calling for its immediate end. In the next decade, both the Methodist and Baptist churches would separate over slavery, the first major American institutions to split. Slavery would no longer be merely a political issue but now stood as a moral division.

While only two percent of white northerners joined the abolitionist movement, many in the North came to view slavery as, at best, a crude social system, out of step with the times, economically inefficient, harmful to poorer whites, and corrupting of slaveholders who developed an inflated sense of themselves and their power. White southerners saw the North, in turn, as arrogant, greedy, and hypocritical, living far from the South, possessing no way to deal with the costs and consequences of their anti-slavery agitation. Black people in the North faced harsh discrimination and biting poverty, white southerners argued, and yet northerners dared criticize the South for a slavery it had inherited. Both regions came to view the other with distrust, expecting the worst and often finding it.

When the United States won a war with Mexico in 1848 many northerners worried that slavery, and the political power of the slave states, would vastly increase. The Wilmot Proviso, declaring that slavery could not be established in any territory the United States might win from Mexico as a result of the war, split Congress along sectional lines. Soon thereafter, the conflict over the admission of California as a free state tore at the nation.

After months of bitter struggle, Congress forged an elaborate truce in the Compromise of 1850. The Compromise left slavery in the District of Columbia alone but abolished the slave trade there. It provided a stronger law to capture fugitive slaves in the North and return them to their owners in the South but announced that Congress had no power to regulate the slave trade among the states. It admitted California as a free state but left undetermined the place of slavery in the other territories won from Mexico. The Compromise managed to infuriate both sides, making both feel they had lost. Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, inspired by the

Harriet Beecher Stowe first became aware of the evils of slavery from a domestic servant, a runaway slave, while living in Cincinnati, across the river from slave-holding Kentucky. She wrote Uncle Tom's Cabin *to protest the passage by Congress of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. The book, published in 1852, has been called the "greatest piece of artistic propaganda ever written by an American" and helped to intensify anti-slavery sentiment in the North in the years just before the outbreak of the Civil War.*



Chief Justice Roger B. Taney hoped to settle the slavery issue once and for all with his ruling in the Dred Scott case that only white persons could be citizens of the United States and that any measure, congressional or otherwise, barring slavery from U.S. territories was unconstitutional. The decision only served to intensify the divisions between North and South and became one of the principal causes of the Civil War.

battle over the fugitive slave law, sold 300,000 copies in 1852 and became the subject of the most popular play in American history, exposing many northerners to powerful antislavery emotions.

In 1854 Sen. Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois called for building a railroad across the continent to bind together the expanded United States. He proposed that the people of the new territories decide for themselves whether or not their states would permit slaves and slaveholders. Calling this policy "popular sovereignty," Douglas put it forward in the Kansas-Nebraska Bill and expected the slave issue to die down. Just the opposite happened: Kansas became the crucible of conflict between North and South. Antislavery forces in New England and New York sent abolitionist organizers and rifles to Kansas. Southerners, in turn, organized an expedition to reinforce their comrades. John Brown, a free-soil emigrant to Kansas retaliating for earlier violence, killed five proslavery men with razor-sharp broadswords. For good reason, the territory became known as "Bleeding Kansas." With insults flying in Congress, Rep. Preston Brooks of South Carolina searched out Sen. Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, who had delivered bitter speeches against slavery and personally insulted his family, and beat him senseless with a heavy rubber cane.

The Dred Scott case of 1857 brought the conflict over slavery into the Supreme Court. Chief Justice Roger B. Taney decreed that Congress had never held a constitutional right to restrict slavery in the territories and that therefore the Missouri Compromise of 1820 was invalid. White southerners exulted that they had been vindicated by the Dred Scott decision, that the Supreme Court was on their side, and that the North's demand for territories free of slavery was simply unconstitutional. Many northerners, however, sneered at the decision, which they saw as one more corrupt act by the forces of slavery. All of these events became chapters in a continuing story of conflict and distrust, driving the North and South farther apart.

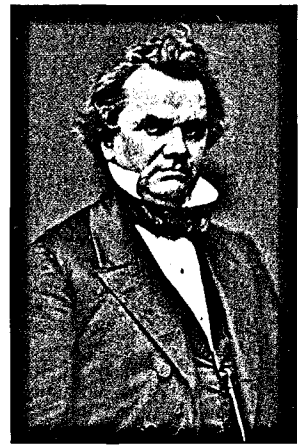
Meanwhile the American political system shattered. Ever since the 1820s, through all the episodes of conflict, two national parties had held the nation together. Democrats and Whigs from the North and South cooperated with one another in order to win

the Presidency and control the Congress; party leaders struck bargains and worked for compromise. But voters throughout the country grew disgusted with the two established parties, which seemed to grow more alike and less effectual with each passing year. While slavery played a role in that dissolution, the parties suffered from other problems, problems of leadership, economic policy, loss of direction, the challenges of immigration, and hard times. Massive numbers of Whigs abandoned the party, first for the "Know-Nothings," who blamed the nation's troubles on the immigrants pouring into the United States, and then for the Republican Party.

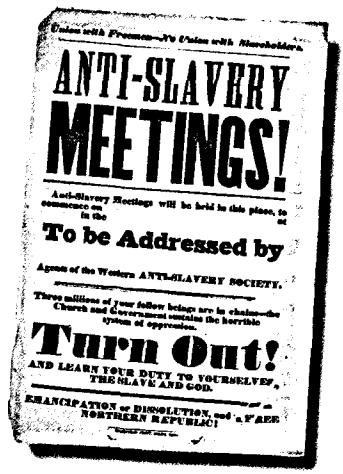
The Republicans were something new: a sectional party, explicitly devoted to the interests of white northerners. The Republicans blamed the country's turmoil on the Slave Power, a conspiracy of slaveholders in the highest reaches of national power. The Republicans called for the North to unite against the South, seizing the balance of power in Congress. The new northern party, a white man's party, called above all for the settlement of the western territories without slavery and without black people. In the debates between Republican Abraham Lincoln and Democrat Stephen A. Douglas in Illinois in 1858, the Republicans saw the most attractive presentation of their ideas and the emergence of a potential national leader. Lincoln combined a principled opposition to the spread of slavery with reassurances that he would not touch the institution where it had been established.

The Republicans distanced themselves from abolitionists, whom they portrayed as fanatics, but opposed slavery's expansion and its dominion in the highest reaches of power. The Democratic party remained the major party running against the Republicans, but it splintered into regional factions. Politicians of all sorts, suddenly finding themselves without a national constituency to worry about, played to the prejudices and vanity of their local audiences, indulging in the most extreme charges, inflaming North and South against one another.

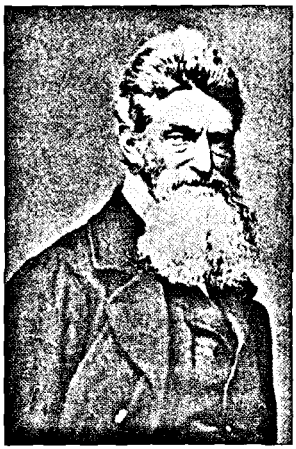
In the fall of 1859 John Brown and a small force of antislavery men attacked the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia), hoping to unleash a slave rebellion that would bring bondage to an end. Even hitherto moderate northerners and



Stephen A. Douglas believed "popular sovereignty" to be the answer to the slavery question and the way to keep sectional antagonisms from destroying the Union. He was wrong on both counts.



Broadside announcing a public lecture on the evils of slavery about 1855. Many such events were sponsored by abolitionist societies in the 1830s and 1840s.



John Brown was one of the most militant of abolitionists. His grandiose plans to free slaves won the moral and financial support of prominent New Englanders and led to vicious acts of violence and murder. The failure of his attack on the Harpers Ferry arsenal in 1859 resulted in his capture and subsequent hanging. On the day of his execution, he issued a final, prophetic statement: "I, John Brown, am now quite certain that the crimes of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood."

southerners grew to distrust one another as they watched how the other side responded to Brown's raid. Many in the North could not hide their admiration for this man who acted rather than talked; many in the South found in John Brown confirmation of their worst suspicions of the North's bloodthirsty hatred of their countrymen.

The political conventions that met soon after Brown's execution to nominate candidates for President in 1860 arrayed themselves around the slavery issue. The Democrats split into northern and southern parties, the North behind Stephen Douglas and the South behind John C. Breckinridge. A new Constitutional Union party tried to mediate between North and South, running John Bell for President. The Republicans, after tumultuous struggle among various factions, turned to a moderate from a crucial and divided state: Abraham Lincoln of Illinois. Their platform announced that they would not disturb slavery where it already existed, but would not allow its spread. This stance resulted in the long-standing balance of power in Congress being shifted to the North.

By 1860, 400,000 slaveowners and 3,500,000 slaves worth $3 billion peopled a vast territory stretching from Delaware to Texas. Cotton accounted for an ever-increasing proportion of the exports of the United States, growing to more than half by 1860. Apologists devised ever more elaborate and aggressive defenses of slavery, no longer depicting bondage merely as a necessary evil or an unfortunate inheritance but rather as an instrument of God's will, a progressive force in the world, a means of civilizing and Christianizing Africans otherwise lost to heathenism.

The candidates of 1860 did not meet face to face, either in cooperation or in debate. Partisan newspapers portrayed opponents in the harshest light without fear of rebuttal. The South believed Lincoln to be a fervent abolitionist, though he was not. The North believed southerners were bluffing in their talk of secession, but they were not. The split in the Democratic Party gave Lincoln only 39 percent of the popular vote, and that came from northern states, but he triumphed easily in the electoral college.

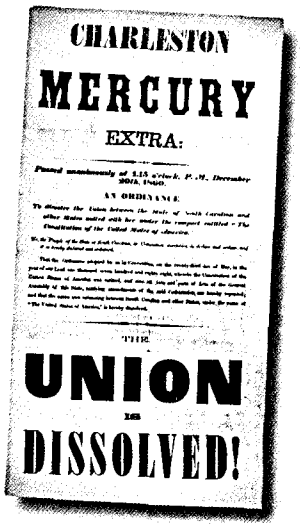
The Republicans claimed to work within the political system, but southerners charged that Lincoln's supporters had violated an honored tradition of

compromise necessary for the country's survival. The Republicans had built their campaign around anti-southern policies and rhetoric and did not seek the votes of southern men. The same states that had created the Union, southerners argued, could leave that Union when it turned against them and the South had every right, every incentive, to abandon a North that had expressed its rejection of the South in Lincoln's election. Indeed, Lincoln's election demonstrated that national elections could now be won without southern electoral votes. Deep South states quickly lined up behind South Carolina as secession rallies erupted across the region. Seven states left the Union by February 1861, when a new Confederacy named Jefferson Davis its President.

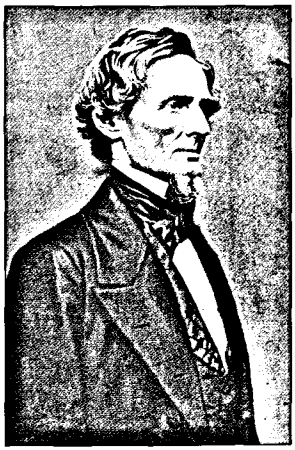
Many thousands of white southerners, some of them quite powerful and influential, resisted secession. Some argued that secession was treason. Others warned that the South was committing suicide. Others argued that slavery would be far safer within the Union than in a fragile new country bordered by an antagonistic United States. The opposition to secession proved especially strong in the upper South—in Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Maryland—all of which showed every sign of staying with the Union.

Northerners, too, were divided at the beginning of 1861. Many recent immigrants from Ireland and Germany viewed the conflict between the North and the South as none of their business. Northern Democrats, hating Lincoln and his policies, called for conciliation with the South. Men like former President John Tyler, as well as others from the large borderland that overlapped the North and the South across the middle of the nation, an area in which love of the Union and support for slavery easily coexisted, worked frantically, but fruitlessly, to find a compromise. In February 1861 the United States Senate came within just a few votes of passing a constitutional amendment protecting slavery forever and wherever the nation might ever expand. All the desperate compromises failed as the delegates of one Deep South state after another left the Senate and as Republicans steadfastly refused to give in.

President Lincoln told the South in his inaugural speech in March 1861 that he had no intention of touching slavery where it was already established,


CHARLESTON
MERCURY
EXTRA:
THE
UNION
IS
DISSOLVED!

The first notice of the adoption of South Carolina's Ordinance of Secession appeared in the Charleston Mercury.



Jefferson Davis did not want to be president of the Confederacy but fulfilled his duties with unswerving devotion to the cause. "We have entered upon the career of independence," he said, "and it must be inflexibly pursued."

"There are two things that a democratic people will always find very difficult—to begin a war, and to end it."

Alexis de Tocqueville, French statesman and writer, 1831

that he would not invade the region, that there would be no shedding of blood, and that he would not attempt to fill offices with men repugnant to local sensibilities. But he also warned that secession was illegal, "the essence of anarchy." It was his duty to maintain the integrity of the Federal Government, and to do so he had to "hold, occupy, and possess" Federal property in the states of the Confederacy. Lincoln, after delaying as long as he could for political and strategic ends, finally decided to send a relief expedition to Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina, where food was running out for the besieged Federal garrison there.

Jefferson Davis and his government proclaimed that any attempt to supply the fort would be in and of itself an act of war, a violation of the territorial integrity of the new Confederacy. On April 12, at 4:30 in the morning, Gen. Pierre G. T. Beauregard opened fire on the fort to drive out the Federal soldiers. Southerners, even those who resented South Carolina for precipitating the war, agreed that they had no choice but to come to that state's aid if the North raised a hand against their fellow southerners. President Lincoln felt he had no choice but to call out militia to put down secession. When he did, Virginia, Tennessee, Arkansas, and North Carolina quickly joined their fellow slaveholding states. Kentucky and Maryland, despite the presence of strong advocates of secession, considered the matter and then, under Federal military threat, remained in the Union.

All the events that brought on the Civil War, then, turned around slavery. By 1861 slavery had become a fundamental feature of the American political, economic, and religious landscape. Slavery was growing ever stronger, intertwining itself ever more tenaciously into a prosperous South of railroads, telegraphs, newspapers, and towns. Southern secessionists announced that slavery stood as the "cornerstone" of their new slaveholding republic, one of the richest nations in the world from the moment of its birth. Slavery defined the only difference that mattered enough to destroy the Union. Yet the complexities and contradictions remained deep.

No intractable differences between an industrial and agrarian society drove the North and South apart; no debate over a tariff played an important

role after the 1830s. Slavery and the regional division of labor benefited white people in both the North and the South. Even in New England, the home of the most fervent abolitionists, thousands of mill-workers depended on southern cotton for their livelihood. The great majority of white people in the United States thought about slavery only when forced to. Politicians spent most of their time on issues that had nothing to do with slavery. At the moment of crisis, Confederate leaders rallied Southerners not around slavery but around family, home, and Constitution. Union leaders rallied northerners not against slavery but around economy, democracy, and nation.

That "somehow" in Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address expressed the sense in which slavery caused the Civil War, not as a moral crusade or a principled protection of abstract constitutional rights for the South, but as the factor that had led to broken political compromises, cultural and social differences, and mutual distrust between the North and the South. The North and the South acted from anger built up over generations. Emotion and thought had become merged, with memories of events from the last four decades driving every decision. The Civil War began in expectation of easy victory over a detested enemy, a quick and satisfying ending to a long and frustrating argument. No one realized how long the war would last or the heartbreak, destruction, and lasting bitterness that would result from it.