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Slavery Through Distinct Perspectives

by Kevin Gomez

Stephen F. Hale a Confederate soldier, and commissioner of Alabama was one of the leading pro slavery voices in the South during the time of the Civil War. Frederick Douglass was a famous abolitionist who had a burning passion to end the institution of slavery. Confederate General Patrick Cleburne proposed emancipating slaves, and using them as soldiers. President Andrew Johnson was a former slave owner who openly refused blacks the right to vote. Each of these men either participated in or had something to do with the Civil War. The impacts of these men are still felt in our society today and will continue to be felt for years to come.

In late 1860, Hale wrote a letter to Governor Beriah Magoffin of Kentucky stating various reasons why Southern states should secede from the Union. Among them were states rights, Northern inequality towards Southerners, and most important Lincolns' election without any Southern support. In most Southern states Lincoln was not even on the ballot. Lincoln's election proved to Southerners that they did not have a voice in government. Hale believed Lincoln wanted to see the down fall of the South. According to Hale "the election of Mr. Lincoln cannot be regarded otherwise than a solemn declaration, on the part of a great majority of the Northern people, of hostility to the South, her property, and her institutions" (Hale 97). The ending of slavery was seen as aggressive attack on the way of life for most Southerners. According to Hale the South was completely powerless in what seemed to be the destruction of its way of life. "There are many constitutional conservative men at the North who sympathize with and battle for us. That is true, but they are utterly powerless" (Hale 99). Hale urged the Southern states to secede in response to Lincoln's election so that they could protect their way of life, property, and safety.

Hale's letter states that "slaves were recognized both as property and as a basis of political power by the federal compact" (Hale 91). To Hale the fact that the Union was trying to take away the right for Southerners to own "property" called for an immediate secession. Considering the majority of Southern wealth was built on the backs of slaves, eliminating slavery would cripple the economy. Hale wrote "every law of congress passed for the protection of northern property, and submitted ever since the foundation of the government, with scarcely a murmur to the protection of their shipping, manufacturing, and commercial interest" (Hale 93). The North continuously passed laws that favored its economy, and according to Hale it purposely ignored laws that favored the Southern economy. For example, the North never enforced, or even passed laws against, the fugitive slave act causing Southerners to lose valuable property. Hale also stated that the US had navy ships off the coast of Africa to stop the slave trade, instead of using those resources to protect America. To Hale and most Southerners, the end of slavery seemed very unfair, and thus to them secession seemed like the only choice.

Hale writes in his letter that the North saw John Brown as a hero instead of the treasonous criminal Southerners saw Brown as. The North made him into a martyr, and a hero while the South condemned him a felon. After the election, the South essentially saw President Lincoln as another John Brown, meaning the North loved him while the South could not stand him. Lincoln's election was an insult to the South, and its way of life. After Lincoln's election

Hale wrote “for the triumph of this new theory of government destroys the property of the South, lay waste her fields[...] consigning her citizens to assassinations and her wives and daughters to pollution and violation to gratify the lust of half-civilized Africans” (Hale 98). Hale saw Lincoln’s election as the nail in the coffin for the Southern way of life. Southerners believed Lincoln despised them, so to draw up more support Hale proclaimed that it was “the imperative duty of the Southern states to resume the power they have delegated to the federal government and interpose their sovereignty for the protection of their citizens” (Hale 96). In other words, Hale believed the South had no choice but to secede from the union.

Fours years after Hale’s letter to the governor of Kentucky, Confederate General Patrick Cleburne proposed a plan which could lead to a Southern victory. In his proposal, General Cleburne stressed three of the biggest Southern weaknesses; supplies running low, soldiers deserting their post, and slaves becoming spies for the northern army. From Cleburne’s point of view, if the South did not do something drastic the war was basically lost. Cleburne’s proposal was to emancipate the slaves and have them join the Confederate army, promising them freedom if they stayed loyal to the South. Although the North had also suffered large numbers of casualties, their supplies, and soldier count was not as depleted as the Confederates. The north received aid from foreign nations, and after winning a battle, the North would often recruit the slaves they had just freed.

Even with the odds stacked against them, failure was not an option for the South. General Cleburne wrote, “Loss meant loss of all we now hold most sacred- slaves and all other personal property, lands, homesteads, liberty, justice, pride, and manhood” (Cleburne 55). General Cleburne believed that emancipating the strongest and ablest bodied slaves was the South’s only chance of victory. According to Cleburne slavery went from one of the South’s strongest sources of strength to one of the weakest resources. At the beginning of the war slavery powered the Southern economy, but by the end of the war it was costing thousands of Southern lives daily to protect their property. It was a struggle for the South to protect themselves because most battles occurred in the South. The battlefield stretched everywhere in the Confederacy there was a slave to set free. Cleburne wrote “to prevent raids we are forced to scatter our forces, and are not free to move and strike like the enemy” (Cleburne 56). The South clearly needed more troops, and the only way Cleburne saw of expanding the Southern army was to emancipate, and enlist slaves.

General Cleburne believed, as much of the South did, that the North was trying to enslave the South. Cleburne believed “slavery is not all our enemies are fighting for. It is merely the pretense to establish sectional superiority and to deprive us of our rights and liberties” (Cleburne 58). Although giving up their property was going to be a big economic hit for the South it was better than Northerners enslaving white Southerners. Emancipating the slaves would also destroy the North’s biggest war platform. According to Cleburne without the abolition platform the only thing the North would be fighting for was ambition, and greed for more land. Cleburne was also convinced that Emancipation would mean foreign aid; as Cleburne believed that there were many countries willing to help the South, but could not support slavery.

Cleburne was convinced that Southern emancipation would stun the North and make them reevaluate the war. Emancipation would also prevent the North from using slaves as spies, and would actually motivate slaves to fight harder than the bravest soldier because they fought

for their freedom. Cleburne stated, “the galley slaves of portions of the fleet were promised freedom... they fought well, and civilization owes much to those brave galley slaves” (Cleburne 61). In addition, Cleburne believed the emancipated soldiers would stay loyal to the South because the South had the power to give them their wives and homes back. In Cleburne’s opinion with a revitalized army of slaves, the South could now properly protect its borders and win the Civil War.

Stephen Hale’s letter may lead one to believe Hales would not have been in favor of Cleburne’s proposal. Although both are in favor of slavery Hale sees’ slavery as vital to the Southern way of life. Hale sees’ slavery as “both property and as a basis of political power by the federal compact” (Hale 91) so it is unlikely Hale would want to give up some of that power and “property”. Hale saw Lincoln’s election as an insult to the South because of Lincoln’s desire to emancipate the Southern slaves. It was very likely that Hale would feel the same way towards Cleburne’s proposal. If Hale would have responded to Cleburne, Hale would have been outraged. In Hales opinion whites and blacks could never be on the same social platform. Hale states “the white man stripped by the heaven-daring hand of fanaticism of that title to superiority over the black race which God himself has bestowed” (Hale 98). Hale would have probably preferred to die defending slavery than to emancipate some slaves in order to help the South win the war.

The great abolitionist Frederick Douglass would have been completely opposed to General Cleburne’s proposal. Douglass, a former slave, knew the hardships of slavery, therefore would have never supported the emancipation of only some slaves. To Douglas nothing was worse than returning to slavery, that is why he devoted the majority of his free life to the abolitionist movement. Douglass would not have trusted General Cleburne’s proposal. Cleburne is clearly not bothered by slavery; to Douglass this is the worst trait a person could have. In studying Douglass, it is very clear Douglass supported the abolition of slavery. Having said that one can draw the conclusion that Douglass would have advised slaves not to trust the racist General Cleburne.

Contrary to the racial views of Frederick Douglass, President Johnson believed that whites were superior to African Americans. Johnson believed “everyone must admit that the white race was superior to the black” (Johnson 6). Johnson was a slave owner who believed that blacks being elected to office was more dangerous than the Civil War itself. Johnson gave the impression that he was not a racist but seems to have believed whites were superior to blacks. In his interview with Fred Douglass, Johnson claimed to want to be “the Moses to lead the colored man from bondage to freedom,” (Johnson 2) but in reality, Johnson was the one holding the colored man back. Johnson claimed that he did not pass any legislation that allowed blacks to vote because it would upset the poor whites who were now forced to be on the same social platform as blacks. By refusing to pass any legislation that gave blacks the right to vote, Johnson was putting all political power in the hands of “the enemy.” Johnson was empowering whites while putting down blacks. Johnson sympathized with the poor whites because in his eyes they had nothing to do with causing the war, but yet they suffered the most. Johnson believed that slaves received freedom, and the poor whites received destroyed property and loss of life. Johnson believed this gave poor whites an excuse to be upset at blacks, but he did not realize those poor whites were the former slave breakers, slave catchers, and overseers of blacks.

President Johnson's racial views were very similar to the views of Stephen Hale. Both men seemed to believe in the superiority of the white race. Although Johnson did not seem as extreme as Hale in his racial views one can definitely see the similarities between their ideas. Johnson believed if we "give the colored race the unlimited right of suffrage, and a fire brand it cast among the people that cannot be extinguished" (Johnson 6). This sounds a lot like the ideas of Hale as he saw slaves as "property and a source of political power" (Hale 91). Although Johnson would have probably agreed with Hale, Johnson would have also agreed with some of General Cleburne's ideas. For example, Cleburne would have been in favor of blacks fighting for the North instead of whites, as Cleburne believed whites were superior to blacks. This would have probably saved many white lives, and caused the deaths of many African American soldiers.

Frederik Douglass, General Cleburne, President Johnson, and Stephen Hale all had a strong impact on America. Douglass spread the abolitionist message, and wanted black suffrage because he believed it would lead to racial equality. Cleburne preached Southern emancipation of slaves because nothing was more important than victory to him. Hale urged the South to secede because Hale believed slavery was essential to the Southern way of life. Johnson withheld voting from African Americans because Johnson was racist. Some of their ideas were good, some were not, but they each contributed in molding America into what it is today.