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Secession over Dishonor: An Examination of the Role of Southern Honor in Events
Precipitating Secession

Stephen Rogers

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Abstract

This thesis explores the role of southern honor in events leading to the 1860-1861 secession of the southern states. For decades, conventional thought has distilled events precipitating the American Civil War into one of two categories: slavery or states' rights. While there is no doubt that these were major factors that contributed to disunion, to consider them apart from the context of the antebellum honor culture is to endeavor to analyze them in a vacuum. With this in mind, it is the attempt of this thesis to evince that the prevailing honor culture compelled Southerners to respond with the aggressive action of secession.

In examining this topic, research was conducted on the origins of the Southern honor culture, the characteristics of the defense of honor, and the role that honor played in antebellum politics prior to session. With these elements laid as a foundation to condition the understanding of the southern honor culture, an analysis of similar elements within the secession crisis is undertaken. The language of contemporary letters, speeches, and newspapers are examined for the underpinnings of the Southern honor culture as contextualized in the politics of secession.

The final analysis shows a strong connection between the language of secession and the ethos of the Southern honor culture. The adherence to this culture of honor would constrain the south to draw a hard line on the issues of slavery in the 1860 election; and in light of the unfavorable result, the structures of honor would demand an aggressive defense for its preservation, thus yielding secession.

Key Terms: Honor, Secession, Antebellum Culture

Introduction

When one examines the causes of the War Between the States and events surrounding the secession of the Southern states, two concepts rise to the forefront as the most widely acclaimed impetuses of upheaval. The principle of states' rights and the institution of slavery stand as the most eminent and well-acknowledged causes that led to the rending of the fabric of union in 1861. These two entities have been acknowledge for over a century and a half as the underlying factors that manipulated events in Antebellum America as precariously as a line of dominoes.

As devoted as scholarship has been to these two seemingly inseparable institutions, one element of the equation is often neglected: the push that toppled those dominoes; the spark that lit the proverbial powder keg and pushed the Southern states pass the point of no return in their struggle for independence. It is the intent of this thesis to examine this overlooked facet of the secession movement with the belief that it was the defense of honor that compelled the Southern states to secede.

Of all the words in the lexicon of Southern history, non-are arguably as encompassing of the culture and ethos of the Antebellum South as the term honor. For centuries this curt but potent expression has meant many things to many people, and even within the narrowing scope of its usage in Antebellum society, the practical definitions are as varied as the individuals who extolled its virtues and adhered to its principles. In his book, *Southern Honor: Ethics And Behavior In The Old South*, Bertram Wyatt-Brown defines Southern honor as being composed of three elements: one's own conviction of self-worth, the public declaration of the self-assessment, and the community's evaluation of the claim.¹ The sense

¹ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).14

of honor that pervaded the Antebellum South was not honor as virtue, but rather bore a closer resemblance to what is contemporarily referred to as the human ego; one's sense of self-esteem or self-importance. Though over a century and a half removed, the connection between these two psychological elements reveals innate commonalities in human nature.

Historiography

Many books have been written arguing that states' rights and slavery were the primary causes of secession and war. However, not much scholarship directly addresses the nature of Southern honor and its impact on Antebellum culture. An exception is the work of Bertram Wyatt-Brown. He stands as the authority on honor in the Old South. The research of his major work, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*, is the nucleus of any published work on the subject.

The work of another scholar of great eminence has contributed heavily to the research. John Hope Franklin in his 1956 work, *The Militant South, 1800 – 1860*, explores the role of violence in Antebellum Southern life and explains how the Old South's rash propensity for aggression led them to take the steps that would ultimately cause disunion.

David Hackett Fischer is one more historian of note who has contributed to the understanding of honor, not merely in the context of Southern culture, but in the broad setting of English settlement of North America. In his book, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*, Fischer provides an exhaustive study on the British roots of American colonization, the subsequently emergent cultures, and the principles of hierarchy and honor that prevailed within them.

As this paper is a survey of the topic, there are inherent limitations to the scope of its

research. It is not capable of deeply examining the nature of honor in each of the eleven states that would comprise the Southern Confederacy, comparing and contrasting the different elements that made each one unique as well as the overarching, hegemonic themes. Another obstacle to the research this topic was the lack of statistical data on dueling. As the practice was deemed illegal in most states, its activity required secrecy from its participants. This secrecy meant that there would be no records of duels that occurred within the various states. Rather, the only records that would endure the passage of time were the recollections of individual duels, and few mentions in period newspaper articles; hardly enough for a quantifiable analysis. The greatest obstacle to research was the nature of honor itself. As an abstract concept, it is virtually impossible to quantify. Therefore, it is the intent of this thesis to use the evidence of the primary sources to construct a quantifiable model to measure the impact of honor upon the Southern culture.

Origins

To understand the role of honor in the Antebellum South one must first understand its origins. While the definitive answer is nebulous at best, there are many currents of thought that attempt to explain this phenomenon, and most can be distilled into one of two lines of reason. The first hypothesis seeks to explain the honor culture as a byproduct of those who initially settled the Tidewater regions of the South. As Virginia stands as the oldest English colony in North America, with the founding of Jamestown in 1607, it is only appropriate that the assessment of the origins of the honor culture start here at the nucleus of Southern settlement.

This initial theory proposes that the men who initially settled the Virginia colony were originally Englishmen of noble birth from the higher social strata. State tradition holds that under

the tenure of Governor William Berkeley in the 17th century, exiled "cavaliers," supporters of the deposed English King Charles I, settled the region in large numbers². Historian David Hackett Fischer notes that Governor Berkeley encouraged the Cavaliers to come in droves.³ Popular history advocates that the later gentry of the 18th century were the descendants of these noblemen and embodied a code of honor reflecting the courtly and chivalric notions of their ancestors⁴.

By 1700, European migration to Virginia alone sore close to 80,000, putting the colony's white population at approximately 100,000 individuals.⁵ The majority of immigrants, especially those to the Tidewater region, came from South and eastern in England and transported with them class ideas birthed in their native land.⁶ In addition to these settlers who most of society would readily identify as gentlemen, there was another less refined group of note that came to call the South home: the Celts. Though the sophisticated members of colonial society settled the tidewater as the new aristocracy, immigrants from Ireland, Scotland, and Wales populated the backwoods of the hinterlands. These rough-hewn, semiliterate plain folk were often the herdsman of sheep, cattle, or swine; enterprises that reflected the simplistic nature of their existence.⁷

The bond of "kinship" would become a cord interwoven within the greater tapestry of Southern culture; so too would violence, but that will be discussed in detail further along.⁸

² Mark C. Nitcholas, "The Evolution of Gentility in Eighteenth-Century England and Colonial Virginia" University of North Texas), .125

³ David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989)227.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, 120.

⁶ Ibid, 121.

⁷ Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

⁸ Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) 37.

According to Bertram Wyatt-Brown, historians have been reluctant to acknowledge the influence of Old World groups, such as the Scotch Irish, simply because they melded so fluidly into the American citizenry.⁹ Ellen and Forrest McDonald noted the magnitude of the Celtic infiltration in a study. Using the 1790s census, they derived that over half of South Carolina's registered property owners were of Celtic descent, and over a third of Maryland's. Even though the 19th century would see the descendants of the uncouth Celts as fully naturalized Americans, "nevertheless," remarks Wyatt-Brown, "the same violent spirit, inattentiveness to regularity of farming, and clannishness persisted."¹⁰ Regardless of which group of people were the progenitors of the honor culture of the Old South, the fact remains that the emergent new social order would be shaped by their understanding of the concept of social classes and the new environment in the budding colonies; a hybrid amalgamation of Old and new world ideas.¹¹

Defense of Honor

The acquisition of honor was the work of a lifetime; from an early age, white Southern males were instructed in its importance. The commitment they made to the acquisition of honor, and the accompanying social esteem made it a great investment, and just like any other precious item of great value, it had to be protected from those of mal-intent. Slander was to honor what water is to fire. The slightest remonstrance against one's character could result in complete defamation in the eyes of the community, a fate worse than death. Any implication that a man lacked honor either as an individual or in the eyes of the community was tantamount to an

⁹ Ibid, 38.

¹⁰ Ibid, 38.

¹¹ Nitcholas, *The Evolution of Gentility in Eighteenth-Century England and Colonial Virginia* (University of North Texas, 2000).

attempt on his life, and would be addressed as such.¹²

Antebellum Southerners were a fiercely independent, practical-minded group, so very seldom did they come to depend upon the weak arm of local government to settle personal affairs.¹³ Moreover, because of the nature of something as personal and valuable as honor, it was not believed that the justice system could render appropriate satisfaction for the injury done. This belief is best embodied in the admonition of an 18th-century South Carolina mother to her young son:

... None will respect you more than you respect yourself. Avoid quarrels as long as you can without yielding to imposition. But sustain your manhood always. Never bring a suit in law for assault and battery or for defamation. The law affords no remedy for such outrages that can satisfy the feelings of a true man. Never wound the feelings of others. Never brook wanton outrage upon your own feelings. If you ever have to vindicate your feelings or defend your honor, do it calmly. If angry at first, wait until your wrath cools before you proceed.¹⁴

The son she instructed? An adolescent Andrew Jackson, future president of the United States, would become noted for how keenly he followed his mother's instruction.

The duel was the preferred method of settling disputes of honor in the Old South. Though fully embraced by Southern culture, the concept of dueling was not a new institution, nor was it limited to the American South. The concept of dueling dates back to the ancient world, and one of its most famous depictions, the story of David and Goliath, is in scripture.¹⁵ Dueling had been used for centuries in Europe to determine a man's bravery and honor; the jousting of the Middle

¹² William J. Cooper, *The South and the Politics of Slavery, 1828-1856* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1978).71

¹³ John Hope Franklin, *The Militant South, 1800-1861* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1956, 2002 reprint).33

¹⁴ Andrew Jackson, as quoted by H. W. Brands, *Andrew Jackson: His Life and Times* (New York: Doubleday, 2005).31

¹⁵ Nicholas, *The Evolution of Gentility in Eighteenth-Century England and Colonial Virginia* University of North Texas, 2000).100

Ages was simply a more glamorized version of the ancient practice.¹⁶

Dueling in the most refined sense was limited to the upper class, to those who merited the title of "gentleman."¹⁷ Historian Dickson Bruce observes that the "institutionalization" of the duel with governing rules acted to offset the passions and fury that often escalated, and sought to re-create the classical entity under the guise of honor.¹⁸ Violence was an integral part of the Southern culture, and when matters of honor were concerned, things could become savage. Historian John Hope Franklin writes, "Whenever a Southerner fought another, he was, in a very real sense, engaged in war. The honor and dignity at stake were no less important to the individual than they would be to an embattled nation."¹⁹ Dueling provided structure to the seemingly senseless violence of the Southern culture. Dueling "set the boundaries of the upper circle of honor. They excluded the allegedly unworthy and therefore made ordinary brawling appear ungentlemanly, vulgar, and immoral."²⁰

Although the ritual of classical dueling was reserved for sophisticated gentleman, the upper class did not hold a monopoly on honor, or its defense. These values matriculated even to the less refined elements of Southern society, and unto reaches where the lack of law and order dictated that every man should be his own constable and magistrate.²¹ For the lower class, poor whites, there existed an uncouth version of the gentlemen's duel: "rough-and-tumble" or "gouging." In this brutal form of sparring, Anglican minister, George Woodmason, stated that men behaved as "Tigers and Bears...Biting one another's lips and noses off, and gouging one another – that is, thrusting out one another's eyes, and kicking one another on the Cods [groin],

¹⁶ Ibid, 101.

¹⁷ Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

¹⁸ Ibid, 351.

¹⁹ Franklin, *The Militant South, 1800-1861* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1956, 2002 reprint).36

²⁰ Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).352-353

²¹ Franklin, *The Militant South, 1800-1861* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1956, 2002 reprint).

to the great damage of many a Poor Woman.”²² The ferocity of this form of brawling was great; nevertheless, lower-classed whites embraced rough-and-tumble as their means of defending honor and manhood.

As much as Southerners would love to imply that their Northern counterparts were without honor, evidence would reveal honor, as ego, to be ubiquitous. Possibly the most notable and relatable instances – at least to Antebellum Southerners - of Northern defense of honor is the Burr – Hamilton Duel. In this instance, two prominent New York statesmen, Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr, were led to the fatal dueling field by the exacting demands of honor. Hamilton, though morally opposed to dueling, penned before the tragic encounter:

All the considerations which constitute what men of the world denominate honor, impressed on me... not to decline the call. The ability to be in future useful... would probably be inseparable from a conformity with public prejudice in this particular.²³

Even to the end, Hamilton understood the obligations of a gentleman of honor, and knew that the only way to maintain his honor (or ego) and the confidence of the public as a leader, was to meet Burr.²⁴ Surprisingly, however, this was not Hamilton’s first affair of honor; over the course of his life, he would be a principal Party in at least ten affairs of honor, none of which, save the last, would actually result in a duel.²⁵ The Burr – Hamilton duel is just one of numerous instances of gentlemen of the North espousing, embracing, and defending honor.

Honor in Politics

²² George Woodmason, as quoted by Elliott J. Gorn, "'Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch': The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry," *The American Historical Review* 90, no. 1 (1985)18.

²³ Joanne B. Freeman, "Dueling as Politics: Reinterpreting the Burr-Hamilton Duel," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (1996)292.

²⁴ Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004)694.

²⁵ Freeman, *Dueling as Politics: Reinterpreting the Burr-Hamilton Duel*, Vol. 53 Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1996)294. Here is a list of the various affairs of honor in which Hamilton was involved as taken directly from Freeman’s journal article: the Rev. William Gordon (1779), Aedanus Burke (1790), John Francis Mercer (1792-1793), James Nicholson (1795), Maturin Livingston (1795-1796), James Monroe (1797), John Adams (1800), Ebenezer Purdy/George Clinton (1804), and Burr (1804)

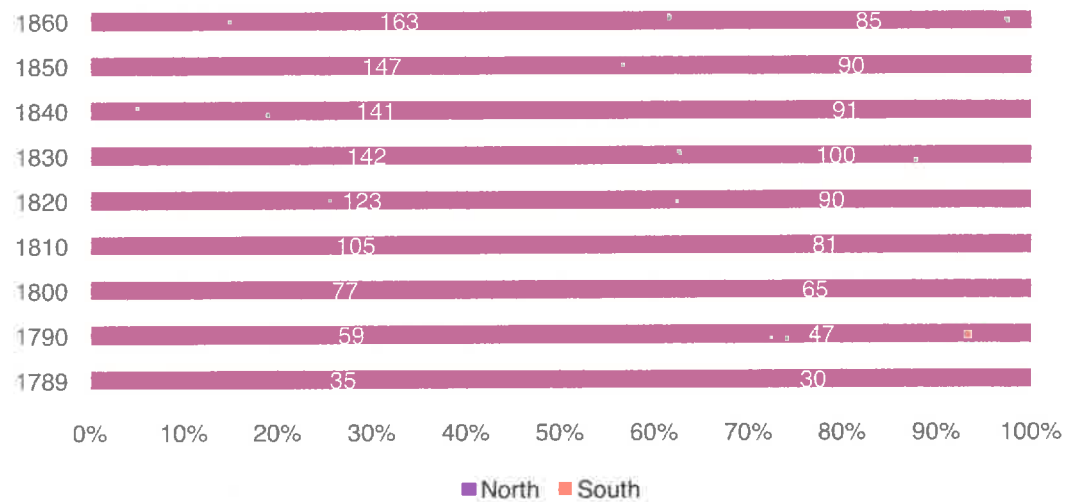
The early years of the republic saw an amiable state of existence between the Northern and Southern states. This era of relative benevolence stemmed greatly from the influence of slaveholders in government. In an 1858 speech, South Carolina Senator James Henry Hammond claimed that Southern surrogacy, “took our country in her infancy,... ruling her for sixty of the seventy years of her existence...”²⁶ This statement draws support from the fact that seven of the nation’s first ten presidents were Southerners, and six of them had been slave owners. In addition to securing the executive branch of government, the South had managed to garner a significant percentage – though not a majority – of members in the House of Representatives as well as parity in the Senate.²⁷ The progression of the 19th century, however, would see this state of domestic peace quickly deteriorate into one of discontent.

The growth of the Northern population during the first half of the century spawned a corresponding increase in the Northern representation in Congress, illustrated in Table 1. Acute to their declining power, Southerners became increasingly leery of the aims and motives of their Northern colleagues. The adversity that Southerners felt from the increasing disparity in congressional representation also raised the sensitivities of the honor-conscious group to slights to their honor and attacks on their societal structure, specifically their “peculiar institution” of slavery. The early 19th century would contain many an instance in which Southerners would indignantly declare themselves the victims of injustices at the hands of the Northern-slanted federal government; an egregious affront of honor.

²⁶ James H. Hammond, *Selections from the Letters and Speeches of the Hon. James H. Hammond, of South Carolina* (New York: John F. Trow & Co., 1866)322.

²⁷ Jesse Thomas Carpenter, *The South as a Conscious Minority, 1789-1861 : A Study in Political Thought* (New York: New York University Press, 1930)22.

Table 1: Distribution of Membership in the House of Representatives by Decade



Compiled from table of representatives in *Biographical Directory of the American Congress, 1774-1921*. As Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri were slave states, they are figured in with the South.

Perhaps the first major instance of such occurred in 1819–1820 with the question of Missouri statehood. Carved from territory acquired in the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, both North and South were anxious to grant Missouri statehood; the matter of slavery, however proved to be a point of contention. Desirous of stemming the tide of slavery, Northern representatives sponsored a measure to forbid the institution of slavery within the new state. Strict constitutionalist, Southerners saw this not only as an attack upon their institution, but also as an attempt to deprive them of rights to property protected by the cherished Constitution. Although

resolution stiffened and hard lines were drawn, a compromise was eventually reached: Missouri would enter the union as a slave state, but slavery would be outlawed in the remaining territories North of Missouri's Southern border.

The implications of this decision were not underestimated. Although slavery was permitted within the state, Southerners understood that Congress had also used its authority to prohibit slavery, a fact that left many Southerners, at the very least wary of federal power. It also marked the beginning of the formation of a detrimental sectional divide. In a letter to Massachusetts Congressman John Holmes, Thomas Jefferson declared:

But this momentous question [of slavery in Missouri], like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once as the knell of the Union. It is hushed indeed for the moment. But this is a reprieve only, not a final sentence. A geographical line, coinciding with a marked principle, moral and political, once conceived and held up to the angry passions of men, will never be obliterated; and every new irritation will mark it deeper and deeper.²⁸

The 1830s saw the debate of constitutionality and federal powers taken to a new level; the point of contention: the "Tariff of Abominations." The slight perceived by many in the Southern states, particularly in South Carolina, was that the Northern states with their might of industry were infringing upon the rights of Southern citizens. The dictates of honor would not allow them to permit this to pass unaddressed. South Carolina, led by Southern sectionalists, such as then vice-president, John C. Calhoun, resolved to take a stance through the doctrine of nullification. To justify this willful disregard of federal authority, the radicals cited the 1798 Kentucky Resolutions: "...where powers are assumed [by the federal government] which have not been delegated, a nullification of the act is the rightful remedy..." The nature of such a clause would provide a means for a state (and its people) to preserve its honor; thus, the doctrine of nullification was deemed a legitimate provision for the defense of honor.

²⁸ *Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes, April 22, 1820 (Library of Congress: , 1820).*

Ardent fire-eaters such as Robert Rhett gave language to the intense emotion of the nullifiers: “If you love life better than honor, – prefer ease to perilous glory, awake not! Stir Not! ... Live in smiling piece with your insatiable oppressors, and die with the noble consolation that your submissive patience will survive triumphant your beggary and despair.”²⁹ In 1832, the South Carolina state legislature officially passed an ordinance of nullification in which they render the tariff null and void and declared their refusal to submit to Federal coercion. In an attempt at Southern coalescence, South Carolina appealed to the other states of Dixie to join her in resistance; none, however, would answer her plea.³⁰ Quick congressional intervention stayed at the rash hand of the Fire-eaters; with the passage of a reduce tariff, South Carolina was able to rescind its nullification ordinance and save face.³¹ Though more Southern states did not join South Carolina in taking a stand against the tariff, it was a victory nonetheless, for “it demonstrated,” according to historian Robert Fogel, “that Southern militancy could win victories in Congress.”³²

The affronts continued in 1846 with the Wilmot Proviso. During the war with Mexico, Pennsylvania representative, David Wilmot proposed an amendment barring slavery from the territories that would be acquired from Mexico. Southerners were outraged at what they saw as an attempt to subordinate them; especially since the majority of soldiers who fought the war hailed from the South.³³ The question posed by one Alabamian accurately summed up the sentiments of indignant Southerners: “when the war-weary soldier returns home, is he to be told

²⁹ Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982),40

³⁰ Clement Eaton, *A History of the Old South* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949),330, 331

³¹ Robert William Fogel, *Without Consent Or Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1990)297.

³² Ibid.

³³ James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988)57.

that he cannot carry his property to the country won by his blood?"³⁴ Though the Wilmot Proviso ultimately failed, its proposal drove a wedge of separation, further polarizing the nation.³⁵

One more issue to come to a head during the same period was Southern frustration at the disregard of the Constitution's fugitive slave provision by several Northern states. Southerners would come to charge their Northern counterparts as having, "generally repealed all laws intended to aid the execution of that act, and imposed penalties upon those citizens whose loyalty to the Constitution and their oaths might induce them to discharge their duty."³⁶ This was an egregious insult to Southerners, for in their estimation the issue went beyond the simple economic impact; Virginia senator James Mason spoke for the entire region when he concluded, "Although the loss of property is felt, the loss of honor is felt still more."³⁷

The tensions of 1850 had deeply permeated the Congress; there was open talk of violence. James Hammond of South Carolina told John C Calhoun, "We should kick them [Northerners] out of the capital and set it on fire."³⁸ Actual physical violence manifested itself in numerous fistfights in Congress, and on one occasion, a Mississippi senator drew a pistol against a colleague on the floor of the Senate.³⁹ Congress attempted to resolve the crises that were rapidly dividing the nation through a provision appropriately deemed the Compromise of 1850. Though the compromise had noble intentions of restoring the amicable rapport amongst the states, its provisions were seen as wanting by both sides; nevertheless, it was reluctantly accepted

³⁴ Chaplain W. Morrison, *Democratic Politics and Sectionalism: The Wilmont Proviso Controversy* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1967)65.

³⁵ James M. McPherson and James K. Hogue, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* (Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2010) 66.

³⁶ *Georgia Declaration of Secession Avalon Project, Yale Law School, 1861*.

³⁷ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988)79.

³⁸ McPherson and Hogue, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* (Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2010) 71.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

for the sake of peace.⁴⁰

One of the greatest affronts to Southern honor occurred in 1859. In October of that year the abolitionist fanatic, John Brown lead an ill-fated raid against a federal armory in Harpers Ferry, Virginia. This attack was to be the initial step in what Brown conceived would evolve into a slave insurrection to engulf the South.⁴¹ Unfortunately for Brown, however, the scores of anticipated slave recruits never flocked to his standard. Brown's forlorn hope against the federal government, and the slave powers it protected, ended in dismal failure and his eventual execution. Understandably, the attack gripped all classes of Southern whites in fear, for there was no horror among them greater than slave revolt. As this attempt at insurrection was fostered at the hands of a Northern abolitionist, many Southerners began to conclude that this was the true aim of an abolitionist government. Even Northern Democratic newspapers that expressed Southern sympathies. "BROWN and his followers," surmised the Cincinnati *Enquirer*, "are but the advance column of the partisan disciples of SEWARD and CHASE [leading Republicans], who are burning to make a practical application of the irrepressible con-flict doctrine. They stand ready to deluge the land in blood to carry out their fanatical views...The danger of having a Republican-Abolition President can now be readily appreciated."⁴²

As Southern forbearance thinned, so too did their ties to the Union. The final insult would be the election of a Republican president. According to Southerners, Republicans had expressed their true designs through the action of John Brown. Many Republicans tried to distance themselves and the Party from the bloodletting Radical; even Lincoln said that there was no

⁴⁰ Bruce Levine, *The Fall of the House of Dixie: The Civil War and the Social Revolution that Transformed the South* (New York: Random House, Inc., 2013)34.

⁴¹ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988)240, 205, 208.

⁴² ""The Cloud in the Distance no Bigger than a Man's Hand" - the First Battle of the "Irrepressible Conflict"." *Enquirer*October 19, 1859, a.

excuse for his “violence, bloodshed, and treason.”⁴³ Nevertheless, the slave power was resolute that, as long as the Republican Party sought to restrict slavery, the collective honor of the South demanded that Lincoln’s election be resisted at all hazards, even the destruction of the Union itself. Following the result of the infamous election of 1860, the Jackson *Mississippian* unabashedly published what amounted to the sentiments of the Deep South.

The outrages which abolition fanaticism has continued... to heap upon the South, have at length culminated in the election of Abraham Lincoln... In view of the formal declaration... by the Northern states to wield the vast machinery of the federal Government... for destroying the liberties of the slaveholding states, it becomes their duty to dissolve their connection with it and establish a separate and independent government of their own.⁴⁴

Thus they did.

Secession over Dishonor

The secession of the Deep South took place with relative rapidity, and the departure of each state was extolled by the cheers of boisterous throngs. While the swift leave of these states would give the impression of relative ease in the process, the secession effort was not without impediments. One vulnerable flank in the bulwark of secession was the role of non-slaveholding whites. For decades, Southern state legislatures were dominated by the slaveholders whose districts often received deference when it came to internal improvements, much to the chagrin of the non-slaveholders, who often complained of over-taxation and underrepresentation.⁴⁵ Secessionists feared that the decades of alienation would lead non-slave owners to cast their lot with the Republicans.⁴⁶ In order to avert such a course, it was imperative to convince the masses that all whites, both planters and non-slaveholders had much to gain from secession.

⁴³ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988)212.

⁴⁴ "The Deed's done -- Disunion the Remedy." *The Semi-Weekly Mississippian* November 9, 1860, 1860e.

⁴⁵ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988)298.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 242. This would become the reality for the territory that became the state of West Virginia; East Tennessee held Union sentiments, but never formed a separate state.

The argument that secessionist politicians put before the masses was the notion of honor through white supremacy. “Not all Southern whites owned slaves,” said historian James M. McPherson, “but they all owned white skins.”⁴⁷ While not every Southern white might have been part of the wealthy planter class, the fact that they were white inherently set them apart; they were members of the master race. This ideology later identified as “Herrenvolk democracy,” provided justification for white supremacy and slavery through “the equal superiority of all who belong to the Herrenvolk (master race) over all who do not.”⁴⁸

Invoking the fears of the masses was a preferred tactic of the secessionists. Michael P. Johnson, in his analysis of the secession movement in Georgia makes an interesting observation. He states that secessionists used fear not so much as a motivation to forge a bond between all classes and white society, but rather as means of preventing a “linkage between non-slaveholders and slaves that might be based on a mutual antagonism toward slaveholders.”⁴⁹

The propagation of this fear was a theme in much of secession rhetoric. The *Richmond Enquirer* proclaimed that Lincoln “openly avows eternal hatred of the institution of slavery in the South,” as well as wishes to subjugate the Southern people by “placing the Negro on an equality with the free white voters at the polls.”⁵⁰ *The Montgomery Mail* espoused that the true aim of the Republican Party “is to free the Negroes and force amalgamation between them and the children of the poor men of the South.”⁵¹ Even clergymen were preaching the doom of Southern virtue. Baptist pastor, James Furman raved to the citizens of South Carolina: “If you are tame enough to submit [to Northern subjugation], Abolitionist preachers will be at hand to consummate the

⁴⁷ McPherson and Hogue, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* (Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2010)37.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*; Sociologist Pierre van den Berghe, originator of the phrase, discusses it more in his book *Race and Racism: A Comparative Perspective* (New York, 1971).

⁴⁹ Michael P. Johnson, *Toward a Patriarchal Republic: The Secession of Georgia* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1999)46.

⁵⁰ *Richmond Enquirer* August 17, 1860, 1860a.

⁵¹ *Montgomery Weekly Mail* October 26, 1860, 1860b.

marriage of your daughters to black husbands!”⁵²

This type of fear mongering certainly raised the stakes on the issue of secession. To the average Southerner, this was not an argument of states’ rights, or even of preserving a way of life, but it was a question of honor. The threat that free, enfranchised blacks posed to the social order, the political structure, and the honor of the individual was unacceptable; no Southern white would stand to be considered equal with a black person, an inferior creature. Not to mention the unthinkable, ultimate degradation: the intermarriage of Negroes with their daughters. For a man to have his daughter defiled in such a manner would be the greatest evil that he could imagine, not to mention it would blanket his family in shame and ridicule. The evocation of such incensing rhetoric often had the desired effect, transforming the debate of secession to a crusade of honor.

The language used by the Southern states to officially express their grounds for secession was weighted with the underpinnings of honor. Four of the eleven states that would comprise the Confederacy issue declarations of causes of secession enumerating the grievances/rationale that compel them to succeed.⁵³ Throughout each of these documents runs one concurrent theme: feelings of subjugation to Northern oppression. Georgia sites the federal government as having “endeavor to weaken our security... and persistently refuse to comply with express constitutional obligations to us that reference property [slaves].” They also claimed that the government unjustly abused power to “deprive us of an equal enjoyment of the common territories of the republic.”⁵⁴ South Carolina, bemoaning the future effects of a Republican presidency, lamented that “the guarantees of the Constitution will then no longer exist; the equal rights of the states will be lost. The slaveholding states will no longer have the power of self-government, or self-

⁵² James C. Furman, "Letter to the Citizens of the Greenville District," *Southern Enterprise* November 22, 1860, .

⁵³ These are separate documents from the secession ordinances, which all eleven issued.

⁵⁴ *Georgia Declaration of Secession Avalon Project, Yale Law School, 1861*).

protection, and the federal government will have become their enemy.”⁵⁵ Mississippi was the most direct and addressing its plight within the Union: “there was no choice left us but submission to the mandates of abolition, or a dissolution of the union, whose principles had been subverted to work out our ruin.” Concluding their acquittal, it is re-iterated that, “utter subjugation awaits us in the union... We must either submit to degradation, and the loss of property... Or we must to secede from the union formed by our fathers.”⁵⁶

Southerners particularly those in the upper echelons of the social strata, were adherents of the philosophy of hegemonic liberty. David Hackett Fischer defines this concept as “the power to rule, but not to be overruled by others.”⁵⁷ This principle was seen almost as a biblical mandate, as freedom-conscious men could draw parallels between God's giving man dominion over to creations of the earth and their own ideals of liberty. The ideal of hegemonic liberty also perpetuated the hierarchical tendencies of the Southern honor culture. A gentleman's status was often affirmed by the liberties to which he was entitled.⁵⁸ Men of noble birth with substantial properties were thought to have more freedoms and liberties than their social inferiors.⁵⁹ There was nothing to be gained through Equality, so the struggle for liberty was also the quest for power and honor. In recognition of this Socio-political truism, John Randolph of Virginia was led to declare, "I am an aristocrat, I love liberty; I hate equality."⁶⁰

The antithesis of this prized liberty was slavery, a form of existence where a man was void of power, liberty, and honor. Southerners, themselves owning slaves, understood fully the

⁵⁵ *Declaration of the Immediate Causes which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union* Avalon Project, Yale Law School, 1860c).

⁵⁶ *A Declaration of the Immediate Causes which Induce and Justify the Secession of the State of Mississippi from the Federal Union* Avalon Project, Yale Law School, 1860d).

⁵⁷ Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).411

⁵⁸ David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).412

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

degradation that accompanied servitude. The dishonor that such a plight ascribed to its unfortunate victim was more than any self-respecting white man could bear. With this fear of degradation and its effects a painful reality to gentlemen of the Old South, they were resolved to resist any measures that gave them any sense of inferiority.⁶¹ In that culture, to make a man feel as though he was inferior was perceived as not only as an affront to his honor, but an attempt to deprive him of his cherished liberties as well.⁶²

To deprive a gentleman of his property would also be viewed as depriving him of his honor, for it lessened his net worth and social status, as well as attempted to subordinate him to a governing power to which he did not consent. Many Antebellum Southerners viewed the growing Northern clamor against slavery as the precursor to complete Northern domination of their way of life. Mississippi senator, Albert Gallatin Brown, exclaimed that Southerners did not fear a slave revolt as much as they did the shame of submission to Northern tyranny.⁶³ In 1850, Brown declared in the Senate chamber, "if you attempt to force upon us sectional desolation – and what to us is infinitely worse – sectional degradation, we will resist you; and if in the conflict of resistance the union is dissolved," he emphatically asserted, "we are not responsible."⁶⁴

It is also important to note that there were two phases of secession. The first, occurring in the winter of 1860-1861, in which the Deep South (South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas) left the Union, and the second in the spring of 1861 with the departure of the Upper South (Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee). The

⁶¹ Richard E. Beringer et al., *Why the South Lost the Civil War* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1986) 399-401.

⁶² Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989)114.

⁶³ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *The Shaping of Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s-1890s* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001)177.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

secession of these states was not sparked by the same impetus. While the whites in the upper South benefit from the byproducts and resultant social order of the slave society, there was not as great a concentration of slaves in the Upper South as in the Deep South, illustrated as per Figure 2. The whites of these states still derived honor their Herrenvolk democracy and they adhered to the belief that slavery was a benefit, but because slaveholders did not completely dominate these state legislatures, the states of the Upper South were not driven immediately towards his session. Unionist sentiments were deep in some areas of these states and many were loath to sever those ties. Subsequent actions by the Lincoln administration, however, would lead even many unionist to conclude that, “the non-slaveholding states [held] such a preponderance in the federal government over the remaining slaveholding states as to make it incompatible with the safety of the latter.”⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Roy Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, Vol. 4 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953)61-62.

Following the attack on Fort Sumter, President Lincoln issued a call for 75,000 volunteers to quell the Southern insurrection. Whites in the upper South were aghast at the thought of being called upon to shed Southern blood as pawns in a “war of Northern aggression.” The reaction of many can be typified in the legendary response of Robert E. Lee: “I cannot raise my hand against my birthplace, my home, my children.”⁶⁶ The theme present here, the bond of kinship, was one of the rudimentary elements of the Southern honor culture. Southerners were not narrow in applying this concept nearly to family, but similarly expressed sentiments imply that Southerners viewed kinship and broader terms that encompass their communities, their states, and conceivably, the entire South. Following Lincoln’s call, James C. Taylor of Virginia wrote to Governor John Letcher, “Virginians can never fight our southern brethren...Please do not ask us to join a northern army to fight our southern friends, neighbors, fathers & brothers.”⁶⁷ The Nashville *Daily Patriot* exhorted that, “the community of interest existing and all the slaveholding states must and will unite them for the purpose of war...”⁶⁸ While the entire South shared language, heritage, culture, and religion, the tie that completed their bond of kinship was slavery, the basis of the economic and social orders. The defense of the collective honor of the South and the preservation of the essential institution demanded that the upper South too dissolve ties with the oppressive Union and Stand united with the sons of Dixie. Determined to maintain their sacred honor, the eleven Southern states abandoned the Union force by the efforts of their fathers and birth for themselves a new nation.

⁶⁶ Douglas Southall Freeman, *R. E. Lee: A Biography*, Vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936)431.

⁶⁷ *James C. Taylor to Governor John Letcher, April 15, 1861* *Library of Virginia, b*.

⁶⁸ "The Progress of Revolution--the Duty of Tennessee." *Nashville Daily Patriot* April 24, 1861, c.

Conclusion

The thought-provoking nature of an abstract topic such as Southern honor raises other questions that cannot be adequately addressed in this thesis. Questions that may warrant further study include: What role did female honor play in the aforementioned events? Did the honor culture differ in the various Southern states? Did an honor culture exist among Southern slaves, and if so, what were its dynamics? How did Southern Unionists justify their stance within the strictures of the honor culture? What was the role of honor in the South in the postbellum decades? What role did Northern honor play in events precipitating secession?

The very existence of the Confederate states of America was in itself an antagonistic challenge to the North. Resolute that the Union should not perish, Lincoln accepted the defiant challenge to the affair of honor. The four-year duel with engulf the nation, North and South. When the smoke cleared in 1865, the Confederacy, slavery, and the Southern owner culture were all defeated and dismantled. The impact of honor in the endeavor however is not to be neglected. Honor, it was oft repeated, motivated the Southern soldier, honor was the bedrock of Antebellum Southern culture, and it was the defense of honor that shape the Southern response of secession.

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