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Essay

THE REVOLUTIONARY ORIGINS OF THE CIVIL WAR

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When Abraham Lincoln was elected president in 1860 on a platform of preventing the extension of slavery into the West, the Southern states felt their way of life was threatened and seceded from the Union. Since many states, including those of New England, had talked of seceding from the Union at various times in the antebellum period following the Revolution, explaining the secession of the Southern states is not a major historical problem. We can fairly easily account for why the Southern states seceded.

What is more difficult to explain is why the Northern states cared. Why was the North willing to go to war to preserve the Union? It was not because the North was bent on the abolition of slavery, at least not at first. Many Northern whites, of course, were opposed to slavery, but what they were especially opposed to was the extension of slavery into the West. Northerners were opposed to the extension of slavery into the West because they knew that slavery would create a society incompatible with the one they wanted for their children and grandchildren who they presumed would settle in the West. But this was not the only reason why the North cared enough for the Union to engage in a long and bloody war that cost Northerners several hundred thousand lives. To fully understand why the North cared enough to resist the secession of the Southern states we have to go back to the Revolution and the ideas and ideals that came out of it.

Lincoln's words, which Douglas Wilson has aptly called his sword, were crucial in sustaining the struggle to maintain the Union.¹ With his words he reached back to the Revolution to draw inspiration and understanding of what the Civil War meant for the nation and the world. He knew what the Revolution was about and what it implied not just for Americans but for all humanity. The United States was a new republican nation in a world of monarchies, a grand experiment in self-government, "conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."² The American people of 1858, said Lincoln, deeply felt the moral principle of equality expressed in the Declaration of Independence, and this moral principle made them one with the Founders, in Lincoln's words, "as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration."³ This emphasis on liberty and equality, he said, was "the electric cord . . . that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men

¹ DOUGLAS L. WILSON, *LINCOLN'S SWORD: THE PRESIDENCY AND THE POWER OF WORDS* 8 (2006).

² Abraham Lincoln, Address Delivered at the Dedication of the Cemetery at Gettysburg (Nov. 19, 1863), in 7 *THE COLLECTED WORKS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN* 17, 23 (Roy P. Basler et al. eds., 1953).

³ Abraham Lincoln, Speech at Chicago, Illinois (July 10, 1858), in 1 *ABRAHAM LINCOLN: SPEECHES AND WRITINGS 1832-1858*, at 439, 456 (Don. E. Fehrenbacher ed., The Library of Am. 2012) (1989).

together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world.”⁴

With words like these, drawing on the meaning of the American Revolution, Lincoln expressed what many Americans felt about themselves and the future of all mankind. Liberty and equality, he said, were promised not just “to the people of this country, but . . . to the world for all future time.”⁵ The Revolution, he said, “gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that all should have an equal chance” in the race of life.⁶ But if the American experiment in self-government failed, then this hope for the future would be lost.⁷

Spreading freedom and democracy around the world had been an explicit goal of the Revolution; it was what turned the Americans’ little colonial rebellion into a world-historical event, important for everyone throughout the world. Americans believed that the French Revolution of 1789 was a direct consequence of their Revolution, and Lafayette thought so too. Which is why he sent the key to the Bastille to George Washington. It hangs today in Mount Vernon.

But all the nineteenth-century efforts in creating democracy in Europe had ended in failure. Americans had seen the French Revolution spiral into tyranny. All attempts by Europeans to create democracies in the revolutions of 1848 had been crushed. By the 1860s, as Lincoln pointed out, the United States was a lone beacon of democratic freedom in a world of monarchies. On American shoulders alone rested the survival of the possibility of self-government; it was indeed the last best hope for the future of democracy.

That responsibility was what sustained Lincoln throughout the war, a war, as he said in his Gettysburg Address, that was testing whether this nation dedicated to liberty, equality, and self-government could long endure. Whenever we commemorate the Civil War, we commemorate the Revolution. Indeed, in an important sense Northern success in the Civil War was the culmination of the Revolution.

How did this nation that had once been united enough to defeat the greatest power in the world fall apart and engage in a long and bloody civil war? The seeds of the Civil War were no doubt sown when the first slaves were brought to Virginia in the seventeenth century. But no one sensed that

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Abraham Lincoln, Speech at Independence Hall, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Feb. 22, 1861), in 2 ABRAHAM LINCOLN: SPEECHES AND WRITINGS 1859–1865, at 213, 213 (Don E. Fehrenbacher ed., The Library of Am. 2012) (1989) [hereinafter 2 LINCOLN SPEECHES].

⁶ *Id.* (emphasis removed).

⁷ *See id.*

at the time. Even in 1776 when Americans declared their independence from Great Britain, no one foresaw a civil war in the newly created United States.

To be sure, the thirteen separate North American colonies were not very united; that they were able to come together at all in 1776 was something of a miracle. Before the Revolution the British colonies had little sense of connectedness with one another. Most of them had closer ties with London and Britain than they had with one another. Until the Continental Congress met in Philadelphia in 1774 more of its members had been to London than had been to Philadelphia. It was Great Britain and its policies that created the colonists' sense of being Americans. In fact, the British officials were the ones who defined the colonists as Americans. Until the last moment before independence the colonists thought of themselves as Englishmen. It was British tyranny expressed in the Coercive Acts of 1774 that made colonists like Patrick Henry declare that they were not Virginians or New Yorkers, but Americans. The long and bloody war with Great Britain, in which all parts of the country suffered at one time or another, was a searing experience. More Americans died in that war in proportion to population than in any other war in our history, with the exception of the Civil War in which both sides were Americans.⁸ No wonder that the Revolution bred an overwhelming sense of unity. The glorious cause of the Revolution united all Americans. The Revolution and the beliefs and ideals that came out of it—liberty, equality, self-government—created national bonds that were not easily broken; indeed, they are the bonds that still hold us together and make us think of ourselves as a single people, as a single nation.

Of course, Americans at the time of the Revolution were aware of sectional differences, differences that were essentially based on slavery. Although slavery in 1776 legally existed in all the new republican states, ninety percent of the nearly 500,000 African Americans—constituting about a fifth of the total population of the country—lived in the South, working in the tobacco fields of the Chesapeake and in the rice swamps of South Carolina and Georgia.⁹

These Southern states were obviously different from those in the North. In 1776 John Adams worried that the South was too aristocratic for the kind of popular republican government he advocated in his *Thoughts on Government*;¹⁰ but he was surprised to learn that the Southern states more or

⁸ THE TOLL OF INDEPENDENCE: ENGAGEMENTS AND BATTLE CASUALTIES OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION 133 (Howard H. Peckham ed., 1974).

⁹ EVARTS B. GREENE & VIRGINIA D. HARRINGTON, AMERICAN POPULATION BEFORE THE CENSUS OF 1790, at 8 (Columbia Univ. Press, 1966) (1932).

¹⁰ Letter from John Adams to Joseph Hawley (Nov. 25, 1775), in 3 PAPERS OF JOHN ADAMS 316, 316 (Robert J. Taylor ed., 1979).

less did adopt the kind of mixed government he suggested, and he expressed relief in seeing “the [p]ride of the haughty” brought down “a little” by the Revolution.¹¹

Of course, what Adams was referring to was a slaveholding society dominated by planter-aristocrats that contrasted with the more egalitarian small-farm societies of the North, especially in the states of New England. But slavery was not inconsequential in the North. Black slaves made up nearly seven percent of the population of New Jersey and fourteen percent of the population of New York City. Nearly eight percent of Rhode Island’s population was composed of slaves.¹² It was not just the Southern Revolutionary leaders—Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and so on—who owned slaves; so did many of the Northern leaders—Boston’s John Hancock, New York’s Robert Livingston, and Philadelphia’s John Dickinson were slaveholders. On the eve of the Revolution the mayor of Philadelphia possessed thirty-one slaves.¹³

Nonetheless, the sectional differences were obvious. In the mid-1780s the Boston merchant Stephen Higginson was convinced that “in their habits, manners and commercial Interests, the southern and northern States are not only very dissimilar, but in many instances directly opposed.”¹⁴

Jefferson tended to agree, and in 1785 he outlined to a French friend his sense of the differences between the people of the two sections, which he attributed mostly to differences of climate. The Northerners were “cool, sober, laborious, persevering, independent, jealous of their own liberties, and just to those of others, interested, chicaning, superstitious and hypocritical in their religion.”¹⁵ By contrast, said Jefferson, the Southerners were “fiery, voluptuary, indolent, unsteady, independent, zealous for their own liberties, but trampling on those of others[,] generous, candid, without attachment or pretensions to any religion but that of the heart.”¹⁶ Despite his sensitivity to

¹¹ Letter from John Adams to James Warren (June 16, 1776), in 4 PAPERS OF JOHN ADAMS 316, 316 (Robert J. Taylor ed., 1979).

¹² GORDON S. WOOD, *EMPIRE OF LIBERTY: A HISTORY OF THE EARLY REPUBLIC, 1789–1815*, at 515–16 (2009).

¹³ GARY B. NASH, *THE UNKNOWN AMERICAN REVOLUTION: THE UNRULY BIRTH OF DEMOCRACY AND THE STRUGGLE TO CREATE AMERICA* 32 (2005).

¹⁴ Letter from Stephen Higginson to John Adams (Dec. 30, 1785), in *Letters of Stephen Higginson, 1783–1804*, at 725, 728 (J. Franklin Jameson ed.), in 1 ANNUAL REPORT OF THE AMERICAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE YEAR 1896, at 706 (1897).

¹⁵ Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Marquis de Chastellux (Sept. 2, 1785), in *THOMAS JEFFERSON: WRITINGS* 826, 827 (Merrill D. Peterson ed., 1984).

¹⁶ *Id.*

the differences, however, Jefferson and most other Southern planters did not as yet see these sectional differences as endangering national unity.

Since we know how the story turned out, it is easy to read back signs of what we know will happen. But it is a mistake to see too many anticipations of the Civil War in the Revolutionary decades. In the 1780s leaders from both the South and the North came to realize that the Confederation—the league of states—created in 1777 and ratified in 1781 was not working out and would have to be reformed or scrapped altogether. The slaveholding state of Virginia took the lead in this reform and was supported by national-minded leaders from the Northern states. The differences that arose in the Constitutional Convention and later in the 1790s were differences of ideology, not sectional differences between North and South. The delegates differed essentially over the strength of the national government vis-à-vis the states. The split in the Constitutional Convention was essentially between the large states that wanted proportional representation in both houses of Congress and the small states that feared being overwhelmed by the more populous states. James Madison of Virginia and James Wilson of Pennsylvania eventually had to surrender to the wishes of the small states and accept the so-called Connecticut Compromise that gave equal representation of two senators from each state. The issue, in other words, did not divide along sectional lines. Although at one point Madison tried to suggest that the real division in the Convention was between the slaveholding and nonslaveholding states, everyone knew that this was a tactical feint, designed by Madison to get the Convention off of the large–small state division that was undermining his desperate desire for proportional representation in both houses. So fearful was he of the power of the state legislatures to vitiate national authority by electing two senators from each state that he regarded the Connecticut Compromise as a major defeat.

The party division that arose in the 1790s was not between North and South. The difference between the Federalists and the Republicans was over the nature of the national government and support for the French Revolution. Although the leadership and base of the Republican party were located in the South, it was not and could not be exclusively a sectional party. The Northern Republicans were a very important and increasingly dynamic part of the party. Jefferson rightly never saw himself as the leader of a sectional party. He was, as he said, the leader of “the world’s best hope,” a popular democratic-republican government that was something “new under the sun” and that promised eventually to “ameliorate the condition of man over a great

portion of the globe.”¹⁷ No wonder Lincoln paid “[a]ll honor to Jefferson.”¹⁸ His vision was Jefferson’s vision.¹⁹

Still, there was the serpent of slavery lurking in this Arcadian garden of yeoman farmers that threatened to destroy the democratic-republican dream. At the outset the Revolutionary leaders were well aware of this serpent. They knew from the beginning that slavery was incompatible with the ideals of the Revolution.

Indeed, it was the Revolution that made slavery a problem for Americans. Before the mid-eighteenth century most Americans largely took slavery for granted as the lowest and most degraded status in a hierarchical world of degrees of unfreedom and dependency, and few colonists had bothered to criticize it. But the Revolution changed everything. All the Revolutionary leaders realized that there was something painfully inconsistent between their talk of freedom for themselves and the owning of black slaves. If all men were created equal, as all enlightened persons were now saying, then what justification could there be for holding Africans in slavery? Since the American colonists “are by the law of nature free born, as indeed all men are, white or black . . . [,] [d]oes it follow,” asked James Otis of Massachusetts in 1764, “that tis right to enslave a man because he is black?”²⁰

The Revolutionary rhetoric made the contradiction excruciating for many Americans, both in the North and South. Prominent slaveholding Southerners, like Jefferson, declared that “the abolition of domestic slavery is the great object of desire in those colonies where it was unhappily introduced in their infant state.”²¹ Given the mounting sense of inconsistency between the Revolutionary ideals and the holding of people in bondage, it is not surprising that the first antislave convention in the world was held in Philadelphia in 1775.

If the Revolutionary leaders, these founders who were otherwise so enlightened and farsighted, knew that slavery contradicted everything the Revolution was about, why didn’t they do more to end the

¹⁷ Thomas Jefferson, First Inaugural Address (March 4, 1801), in 33 THE PAPERS OF THOMAS JEFFERSON 148, 149 (Barbara B. Oberg et al. eds., 2006); Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Joseph Priestly (March 21, 1801), in THE PAPERS OF THOMAS JEFFERSON, *supra*, at 393, 394; Letter from Thomas Jefferson to John Dickinson (March 6, 1801), in THE PAPERS OF THOMAS JEFFERSON, *supra*, at 196, 197.

¹⁸ Letter from Abraham Lincoln to Henry L. Pierce and Others (Apr. 6, 1859), in 2 LINCOLN SPEECHES, *supra* note 5, at 18, 19.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ James Otis, *The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved* (1764), reprinted in 1 THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION: WRITINGS FROM THE PAMPHLET DEBATE, 1764–1772, at 69, 69–70 (Gordon S. Wood ed., 2015).

²¹ WOOD, *supra* note 12, at 518.

institution that they claimed to abhor? This is the question many historians are asking today.

The reason they didn't act more forcefully was that many of them, perhaps most, thought that time was on the side of abolition. As incredible as it may seem to us who know what they could not know, that is, their future, the leaders tended to believe that slavery was on its last legs and was headed for eventual destruction. Dr. Benjamin Rush was convinced that the desire to abolish the institution "prevails in our counsels and among all ranks in every province."²² With hostility toward slavery mounting everywhere among the enlightened in the Atlantic world, Rush in 1774 predicted that "there will be not a Negro slave in North America in 40 years."²³

Enlightened Virginians also assumed that slavery could not long endure. Jefferson told a French correspondent in 1786 that there were in the Virginia legislature "men of virtue enough to propose, and talents" to move toward "the gradual emancipation of slaves."²⁴ To be sure, "they saw that the moment of [emancipation has] not yet arrived," but, said Jefferson, with the spread of "light and liberality" among the slaveholders that moment was coming.²⁵ Slavery simply could not stand against the relentless march of liberty and progress. That the Philadelphia Convention of 1787 was scrupulous in not mentioning "slaves," "slavery," or "Negroes" in the final draft of the Constitution seemed to point to a future without the shameful institution. If the Revolutionary dream that slavery would naturally die away had been realized, there would never have been a civil war. This illusion that slavery would die a natural death led the Revolutionary leaders to table efforts to abolish the institution. They thought that in time it would simply disappear.

But slavery in the United States was not on its last legs at all. Predictions of its demise could not have been more wrong. Far from being doomed, American slavery in fact was on the verge of its greatest expansion.

How could the Revolutionary leaders have been so mistaken? How could they have deceived themselves so completely? For a full generation the nation's leaders lived with the illusion that the institution of slavery was

²² GARY B. NASH, *RACE AND REVOLUTION* 9 (1990).

²³ Letter from Benjamin Rush to Granville Sharp (Nov. 1, 1774), in *The Correspondence of Benjamin Rush and Granville Sharp 1773-1809*, at 13, 13 (John A. Woods ed.), in 1 J. AM. STUD. 1 (1967).

²⁴ Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Jean Nicolas D meunier (June 26, 1786), in 10 THE PAPERS OF THOMAS JEFFERSON 61, 63 (Julian P. Boyd et al. eds., 1954).

²⁵ *Id.*

declining and on its way to being eliminated. Of all the illusions they had about the future, this was the greatest.

But the Founders' self-deception and mistaken optimism were understandable, for they wanted to believe the best, and initially there was evidence that slavery was in fact being eliminated and dying out. The Northern states, where slavery was not deeply rooted in the economy, began immediately to attack the institution, and by 1804 every Northern state had provided for the eventual end of slavery.

The South, where slavery was much more deeply entrenched in the economy and society, was slower to act. But even in the South there were encouraging signs of movement against the institution, especially in Virginia.

Virginia was no ordinary state. It was by far the most populous state; indeed, by itself it made up a fifth of the population of the nation. It was as well the largest state in territory and the richest. It is not surprising that four of the first five presidents were Virginians. And the working model for the Constitutional Convention in 1787 was the Virginia Plan. During the first few decades of the new Republic, it dominated the nation as no state ever has since. As Virginia went, so went the nation.

There were signs in the 1770s and 1780s that Virginia was trying to do something about slavery. If Virginia could abolish slavery, it was assumed, then the rest of the South would surely follow. In Virginia the harsh black codes of the early eighteenth century, which resembled later Jim Crow laws, had fallen into neglect, and by the time of the Revolution fraternization between whites and black slaves had become more common, both in sporting events and in religion. The growing of wheat instead of tobacco was changing the nature of slavery in the Upper South, and many of the planters, now calling themselves farmers, began hiring out their slaves, suggesting to some that slavery might eventually be replaced by wage labor. Some Virginians, including George Washington, did not even think of their state as Southern. In the late 1780s Washington regarded Virginia as one of "the middle states," referring to South Carolina and Georgia as "the Southern states."²⁶

Other evidence from the Upper South seemed to reinforce the idea that slavery was on its way to extinction. What could be a more conspicuous endorsement of the antislavery cause than having the College of William and Mary in 1791 confer an honorary degree on the celebrated British abolitionist Granville Sharp? That there were more antislavery societies created in the

²⁶ JOHN RICHARD ALDEN, *THE FIRST SOUTH* 9 (1961).

South than in the North was bound to make people feel that the South was moving in the same direction of gradual emancipation as the North.

In Virginia and Maryland some of these antislave societies brought “freedom suits” in the state courts that led to some piecemeal emancipation. These suits do not seem very meaningful by our standards, but by the standards of the eighteenth century they were significant. If the slaves could demonstrate that they had maternal Indian or white ancestors, they could be freed, and hearsay evidence was often enough to convince the courts. “Whole families,” recalled one sympathetic observer, “were often liberated by a single verdict, the fate of one relative deciding the fate of many.”²⁷ By 1796 nearly thirty freedom suits were pending in Virginia courts. By 1790 the free black population in the Upper South had increased to over thirty thousand; by 1810 the free blacks in the area numbered over ninety-four thousand.²⁸ When even Southerners like Jefferson, Patrick Henry, Henry Laurens, and St. George Tucker publicly deplored the injustice of slavery, from that “moment,” declared the New York physician and abolitionist E. H. Smith in 1798, “the slow, but certain, death-wound was inflicted upon it.”²⁹

Everywhere, even in South Carolina, slaveholders began to feel defensive about slavery and began to sense a public pressure against the institution that they had never felt before. In the aftermath of the Revolution, whites in Charleston expressed squeamishness about the evils of slavery, especially the public trading and punishment of slaves. In the 1780s some of the Carolinian masters expressed a growing reluctance to break up families and even began manumitting their slaves, freeing more slaves in that decade than had been freed in the previous three decades.

What helped to convince many people in the North that slavery’s days were numbered was the promised ending of the despicable slave trade in 1808. Almost everywhere in the New World slavery was dependent on the continued importations of slaves from Africa. Although this need for slaves from Africa was no longer true of the Upper South, South Carolina and Georgia were still importing slaves. The fact that the Deep South and the rest of the New World needed slave importations to maintain the institution deluded many Americans into believing that slavery in America was also dependent on the slave trade and that ending the slave trade in the United States would eventually end slavery itself.

Those who held out that hope were utterly wrong. They simply did not appreciate how demographically different North American slavery was from

²⁷ IRA BERLIN, *MANY THOUSANDS GONE: THE FIRST TWO CENTURIES OF SLAVERY IN NORTH AMERICA* 281 (1998).

²⁸ WOOD, *supra* note 12, at 522.

²⁹ DUNCAN J. MACLEOD, *SLAVERY, RACE AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION* 29 (1974).

that in South America and the Caribbean. They were blind to the fact that in most areas the slaves were approximating the growth of the whites, nearly doubling in number every twenty to twenty-five years.³⁰ Northerners had little or no appreciation that slavery in the South was a healthy, vigorous, and expansive institution. As far as they were concerned, the Virginia and Maryland planters, who had more slaves than they knew what to do with, were enthusiastically supporting an end to the international slave trade as the first major step in eliminating the institution of slavery itself. This assault on the overseas slave trade appeared to align the Chesapeake planters with the antislavery forces in the North and confused many Northerners about the real intentions of the Upper South, which in fact was in the business of exporting its surplus of slaves.

All these developments misled many Americans and allowed them to postpone dealing with the issue. Like John Adams and Oliver Ellsworth, the third chief justice of the Supreme Court, they thought when the importation of slaves was cut off, white laborers would become so numerous that the need for slaves would disappear.³¹ “Slavery,” said Ellsworth, “in time will not be a speck in our country.”³²

In the meantime, the initial differences between the two sections were rapidly and dramatically increasing, becoming more severe. During the three or four decades following the Revolution the North and South grew much further apart. Both sections were American and republican, both professed a similar rhetoric of liberty and popular government, but beneath the surface they were fast becoming very different places with different cultures and values—one coming to honor common labor as the supreme human activity, the other continuing to think of labor, manual labor, in traditional terms as mean and despicable and fit only for slaves.

When on the eve of the Civil War the South complained that it had remained true to the eighteenth-century Republic and that it was the North that had changed, it was correct. In the years immediately following the Revolution the North was radically transformed—politically, economically, socially, and culturally. It was not that the population growth in the two sections was different, though by 1810 New York had outstripped Virginia as the most populous state. It was the varied nature of the growth in the North. The Northern states were building turnpikes and canals, creating banks and corporations, and greasing the growing internal trade with paper

³⁰ GREENE & HARRINGTON, *supra* note 9, at 3–18.

³¹ RICHARD S. NEWMAN, *THE TRANSFORMATION OF AMERICAN ABOLITIONISM: FIGHTING SLAVERY IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC* 33 (2002).

³² J. J. Spengler, *Malthusianism in Late Eighteenth America*, 25 *AM. ECON. REV.* 691, 705 (1935) (quoting WILLIAM G. BROWN, *THE LIFE OF OLIVER ELLSWORTH* 154–55 (1905)).

money to an extent not duplicated in the Southern states. Everywhere in the Northern states farm families were busy buying and selling with each other. The society was still predominantly rural and agricultural, with no large manufacturing cities as in England, but in many Northern towns people seemed to be doing everything but farming.

By 1815 even the tiny town of Mount Pleasant, Ohio, with a population of only five hundred persons had several dozen artisans and manufacturing shops, including three saddlers, three hatters, four blacksmiths, four weavers, six shoemakers, three cabinet makers, one baker, one apothecary, two wagon makers, two tanneries, one wool-carding machine maker, two wool-carding machinists, one wool-spinning machinist, one flax spinner, and one nail factory. Within a six-mile radius of this little Ohio town were nine merchant mills, two grist mills, twelve saw mills, one paper mill, one woolen factory, and two fulling mills.³³ There was nothing like this little Ohio town in the South. The North was becoming the most highly commercialized society in the world.

The North was becoming increasingly dominated by hosts of middling people—commercial farmers, mechanics, clerks, teachers, businessmen, and industrious, self-trained would-be professionals—who celebrated work and the making of money to a degree unprecedented in the Western world.

This celebration of labor, especially manual labor, was important. Ever since Aristotle, leisured aristocrats and the professional classes had held labor, especially manual labor, and the making of money in contempt. Even someone who ran a business, say, a printing business with twenty employees, was nonetheless considered to be involved with manual labor and thus contemptible. Such men who worked for a living, Aristotle had said, could never possess virtue and could never exercise political leadership.

Perhaps nothing separated the North and South more than their contrasting views of labor. The South, dominated as it was by leisured slaveholding planters, could scarcely conceive of labor as anything but despicable and shameful. Slavery, as it had for centuries going all the way back to the ancient Greeks, required a culture that held labor in contempt. Scorn for work and slavery were two sides of the same coin.

The North developed very differently. In the several decades following the Revolution the middling men of the North launched a wholesale campaign against aristocrats who had scorned them for ages. They urged each other to shed their earlier political apathy and accused all those

³³ GEORGE ROGERS TAYLOR, *THE TRANSPORTATION REVOLUTION, 1815–1860*, at 207–08 (Henry David et al. eds., 1957).

gentlemen who were “not . . . under the necessity of getting their bread by industry” of being parasites and of living off “the labour of the honest farmers and mechanics.”³⁴ Those leisured aristocrats who “do not labor, but who enjoy in luxury the fruits of labor” had no right to decide the laws as they had in the past.³⁵

Of course, the American aristocrats these middling people attacked were not European aristocrats. In the eyes of these middling sorts these leisured aristocrats were what we today might label elites, mostly members of the professions—lawyers, judges, physicians, clergymen, government officials—anyone who was not involved with manual labor in one form or another. In the eyes of the middling sorts—artisans, clerks, businessmen—these elites seemed to do no real work.

This celebration of labor inevitably made the South with its leisured aristocracy supported by slavery seem increasingly anomalous. In reaction the Southern aristocrats began emphasizing their cavalier status in contrast to the money-grubbing Northern Yankees. They began claiming that they were the only true gentlemen left in America.

It was not just the brutal fact of slavery that mattered; it was what slavery did to the society. Slavery in the South tended to create a different economy, society, politics, and culture from the North. While the North was coming to value labor as fit for all social ranks, much of the white population of the South was becoming more and more contemptuous of work and desirous of acquiring the leisure that slavery seemed to afford. Indeed, so great was the white cult of indolence that some Southerners began to worry about the discrepancy between an industrious North and a lethargic South. “[W]here there is Negro slavery,” one concerned Virginian told Madison, “there will be laziness, carelessness, and wastefulness,” not as much among the slaves as among the white masters.³⁶

The South grew in population and prospered, but its culture and society remained traditional in many ways. During the decades that the North was commercially exploding, the South remained essentially what it had been in the eighteenth century—a staple-producing, slaveholding society. Cotton replaced tobacco and rice as the principal staple, but the society, the economy and much of the politics remained roughly what they had been in the colonial period. Slavery determined the organization of the society.

³⁴ GORDON S. WOOD, *THE RADICALISM OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION* 282 (1992).

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ DREW R. MCCOY, *THE LAST OF THE FATHERS: JAMES MADISON AND THE REPUBLICAN LEGACY* 222–23 (1989).

The wealthy slaveholding planters dominated their society to a degree no group in the North could match. They managed the overseas marketing of the staple crop of cotton for the small planters, which reinforced an unequal relationship between patrons and clients. More important, their patriarchal system of slavery sustained a hierarchical society, a society that was very different from that of the Northern states. The commercial institutions that were springing up in the North had few counterparts in the Southern states. The South did not have the numbers of turnpikes, canals, banks, corporations, and issues of paper money that the North had. Fearing any interference with their peculiar institution, the planter-dominated legislatures kept government to a minimum; they taxed their citizens much less heavily and spent much less on education and social services than did the legislatures of the North.

Although most Southern farmers were not slaveholders and many of the plain folk of the South may have worked as hard as any ambitious Northern artisan, these ordinary Southern folk could never give the same kind of enterprising middling tone to Southern society that existed in the North. There were fewer middling institutions in the South—fewer towns, fewer schools, fewer newspapers, fewer businesses, fewer manufacturing firms, and fewer shops. And there were fewer middling people in the South—fewer teachers, fewer clerks, fewer publishers, fewer editors, and fewer engineers. The antebellum South never became a middling commercial-minded society like that of the North. Its patrician order of large slaveholders continued to dominate both the culture and the politics of the section. As James Madison privately admitted in the 1790s, “In proportion as slavery prevails in a State, the Government, however democratic in name, must be aristocratic in fact.”³⁷

As the North and South gradually grew apart, each section began expressing increasing frustration with the other, aggravating differences that had been present from the beginning of the Revolution. Northerners, especially New England Federalists, began to complain about what they saw as unjustified Southern dominance of the federal government. They focused on the Three-Fifths Clause of the Constitution that counted slaves as three-fifths of a person for assessing representation in the House of Representatives and the Electoral College. The Federalists charged that the Three-Fifths Clause gave an unfair advantage to the Republicans and was responsible for Jefferson’s election in 1800. Thus was born the idea of the “slave power” that was unfairly usurping control of the national government from the free states.

³⁷ James Madison, Notes for the *National Gazette* Essays (circa Dec. 19, 1791–Mar. 3, 1792), in 14 THE PAPERS OF JAMES MADISON 163 (Robert A. Rutland et al. eds., 1983).

Even more unsettling to some Northerners was the gradual realization that slavery was not dying in the South after all. The earlier enthusiasm of the Upper South to liberalize its slave system began to dissipate, especially following the news of the slave rebellion in the French colony of Saint Domingue in 1791. Gabriel's conspiracy in Virginia in 1800 further destroyed the hopes of many that Virginia was gradually eliminating slavery. The earlier leniency in judging "freedom suits" in Virginia ended, and manumissions in the state rapidly declined. Southerners now began reversing their earlier examples of racial mingling. The evangelical Protestant churches ended their practice of mixed congregations. The Southern states began enacting new sets of black codes that resembled later Jim Crow laws, tightening up the institution of slavery and restricting the behavior of free blacks. Indeed, because free blacks seemed to threaten the slave system, they were compelled by law to leave the Southern states.

The final blow to all the illusions the founders had lived with came with the Missouri crisis in 1819. The attempt by New York Congressman James Talmadge, Jr., and the House of Representatives to attach a prohibition of slavery to the bill admitting Missouri to the Union precipitated a sectional crisis more severe than anything felt before. Jefferson told John Adams that "From the battle of Bunker's hill to the treaty of Paris we never had so ominous a question. . . . I thank god that I shall not live to witness it's issue."³⁸

The Missouri Crisis caused the scales to fall from the eyes of both Northerners and Southerners. The North came to realize clearly that the South was not going to abolish slavery, that it was aiming to carry the institution into the West. The South for its part came to realize more clearly than ever before that the North really cared about abolishing slavery and would never stop trying to end it, and certainly did not want the institution to spread to the West. From that moment Americans clearly saw signs of a storm on the horizon, at first no bigger than a man's hand, but signs of a storm that would grow larger and more ominous every year. From that moment the Civil War became inevitable.

³⁸ Letter from Thomas Jefferson to John Adams (Dec. 10, 1819), in *2 THE ADAMS-JEFFERSON LETTERS: THE COMPLETE CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN THOMAS JEFFERSON AND ABIGAIL AND JOHN ADAMS* 548, 549 (Lester J. Cappon ed., 1959).

