

Chapter 2: Disunion

Slavery lay behind the greatest crisis in American history. Of that there is no serious debate. It was clear to Americans at the time that the future of slavery in the federal territories of the West – and by extension the future of slavery itself – was “somehow the cause of the war,” as Lincoln memorably put it.¹ It was also clear that the slavery question was more than a conventional political controversy or wedge issue: it was a malignant cancer that ate away at the structures that held the Union together until they violently imploded.

What made the slavery question so politically destructive and why couldn't anyone resolve or even contain it? Part of the answer was the sheer growth and expansion of American slavery, whose development was entwined with its integration into the British-dominated international economic system. Cotton – “white gold” as it was called at the time – was to the international economy what oil is today: a valuable global commodity, whose production was geographically concentrated and hence fantastically profitable to those who control it. As slavery became ever more entrenched into Southern life and integrated into the international economic order, it triggered a corresponding increase in the number of people who passionately devoted themselves to either advancing or destroying it. Furthermore – and never to be forgotten – slaves became increasingly adept political actors whose daily struggle to ameliorate the terms of their bondage, if not free themselves from it altogether, ensured that the slavery question could never be swept under the rug of national politics.

But the coming of the Civil War cannot be explained exclusively by the deepening chasm between those on either side of the slavery question. Just as important as the *rise* of the slavery question was the *demise* of the structures and institutions that held the Union together – churches, political parties, civic institutions, economic practices, ideas of nationalism, patterns of communication,

¹ Lincoln, “Second Inaugural Address,” 4 March 1865.

systems of infrastructure. If the slavery question was an aggressive cancer, these were the Union's immunities that had the potential to fight it off. But they failed to withstand the onslaught. National structures snapped under the pressure of new contexts, thus exposing the Union to the full force of the contagious slavery question. Once the dominos started falling in the 1840s and 50s, the lethal nature of the slavery question became apparent. Like a cancer, it was invasive and self-replicating: as it spread throughout the body politic it redirected the power of national institutions toward disunion by fracturing them along sectional lines.

To understand the violent death of the nineteenth century Union, it is necessary to consider not only the disease that killed it, but also the deficiencies of its immunities. It wasn't so much that the Union's immune system failed; rather, it was that it had been designed to fight off different threats. The profound shifts in the international context that became apparent by the mid-century are key to understanding the Union's increased vulnerability. Because the Civil War was an internal struggle, it might seem counter-intuitive to look beyond its borders for its origins. But when we cast our gaze beyond the internal American landscape, what emerges is a horizon that was in the midst of profound change. The sun was setting on the postcolonial era of U.S. history. The position of the United States within the international system had changed in significant ways by the mid-century, not least in that the North and South had become connected to the wider world in distinctive and, at times, antagonistic ways. At the very moment it needed all of its strength to fight off the slavery conflict, the Union's immune system proved incapable of adapting to a new environment.

The *internal* crisis of the Union, in other words, was inextricably linked to *external* changes and stimuli. These included shifts in the structures of the international economy, the fate of slavery outside of the Union, the increased geopolitical power and security of the United States that became evident after the annexation of Texas and conquest of northern Mexico, and – perhaps most unexpected of all – the most compressed immigration surge in U.S. history, which was largely driven by a wild-card

contingency that had nothing to do with slavery: a potato blight on the other side of an ocean. These structural developments deepened the divide between the sections, accelerated the demise of national institutions, and removed the security threats that had long tied the Union together.

I

There once was a time when the Old South was viewed as a social and economic anachronism, a throwback destined to be overwhelmed by Yankee capitalism. According to this view, slavery was a quasi-feudalistic institution that stunted the region's economic development. In the nineteenth century's frenetic race of material development, the backward-looking, slaveholding South ran the wrong direction around the track.²

Few interpretations of the American past have been as thoroughly revised as this one. Far from a feudalistic hold out, the slaveholding South is now seen as a driver of capitalist development.³ The growth of American slavery was inextricably entwined with the emergence of new global systems of political power, capital, financial services, transportation, and – above all – commodity markets. At the micro-level within each plantation and farm, slavery was sustained by the masterclass's preponderance of power over its bonded laborers. Sustaining that asymmetric distribution of power required more than just maintaining discipline on the plantation, it required an imperial power structure, a dynamic international economic order, and a powerful pro-slavery culture and ideology. The South's masterclass was forward-looking and innovative because American slavery was a rapidly expanding and changing institution. There was no modern precedent or parallel for explosive and self-perpetuating growth of a slave system such as that of the South. The slave population dramatically increased, almost entirely through natural reproduction after the closing of the international slave trade in 1807. In contrast to the

² For the classic articulation, see Eugene Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964).

³ The South "stood at the center of the most dynamic and far-reaching production complex in human history." Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A New History of Global Capitalism* (New York: Knopf, 2014), p. 244.

slave systems of the Caribbean that required continuous importations of new slaves from Africa, the slave population of the United States surged in the nineteenth century. The first U.S. census of 1790 found there to be roughly 700,000 slaves. Twenty years later there were nearly 1.2 million. By the eve of the Civil War, there were some 4 million slaves in the United States.

Slave labor agricultural production grew at a similar pace, particularly cotton which flourished in the “black belt” region of the states of the Deep South. Before Eli Whitney’s 1793 “cotton gin” expedited the labor intensive process of separating cotton seeds from fiber, the United States produced 3,000 bales of cotton per year. Seventy years later on the eve of the Civil War, the slaves in the South produced 4 *million* bales of cotton – an increase of more than 1,333%.⁴ The cotton boom altered the demography of slavery. As the old colonial tobacco complex of the Virginia tidewater gave way to the new cotton kingdom, the geographic concentration of slavery shifted to the states of the Deep South and Mississippi River Valley. An estimated 1 million slaves endured a “forced migration” to a different plantation in the South at some point in their life.⁵ American slavery, in sum, was not a static institution clinging to the past; it was a dynamic social and labor system that expanded at breakneck speed.

American slavery rested upon racist assumptions of the inferiority of people of African descent. But another of its cornerstones was an emerging global economic system that had an insatiable appetite for its staple crops of tobacco, sugar, and – above all – cotton. At its mid-nineteenth century height, the slaveholding South produced the lion’s share of the cotton consumed by the hungry textile mills of Britain (77%), the United States (nearly all), and Europe (90% in France; 60% in Germany; 92% in Russia).⁶ The most important market for Southern cotton was Britain. The great mills of Lancashire devoured the fibers picked by slaves an ocean away, transforming the raw material into finished textile

⁴ Figures from Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery: 1619-1877* (New York: Hill and Wang, revised edition, 2003), pp. 93-5.

⁵ Edward Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), p. xxiii.

⁶ Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Knopf, 2014), p. 243.

goods, which were then transported to markets around the world, particularly within the British Empire. The cotton South became an essential component of Britain's global imperial system. To return to the our oil analogy, the South was far more dominant in the nineteenth century's cotton markets than Saudi Arabia is in today's crude oil markets.

Southern slavers shrewdly leveraged their "white gold" as a means of attracting foreign investment. Without credit there would have been no slave empire. American slaveholders were blessed with ample land – once the Native peoples of the Deep South had been dispossessed of their lands in the era of the War of 1812 – and, thanks to those high birth-rates among the slave population, labor. But, like the new American republic as a whole, the South needed capital. It needed funds to underwrite all of the activities necessary to create millions of bales of cotton and then deliver them to distant markets: slave purchases, land sales, the clearing of woodlands in cotton producing regions, annual acquisitions of seed and machinery, transportation of commodities from plantations to port cities. The list could go on. The problem was not simply a dearth of capital; it was that the volatility of cotton prices and the threat of slave rebellion introduced high risks for the lenders of money, many of whom were lodged in distant banks in the North or across the Atlantic and shied away from risky investments in a distant, slaveholding society.

Southern planters engineered new commercial associations and financial instruments to facilitate their integration into the growing capital markets of the North, Britain, and continental Europe. Planters pooled their resources together into state-chartered associations that raised money in distant capital markets by selling securitized bonds backed by the collateral of land or even slaves themselves.⁷ Financial innovations such as these opened capital markets to Southern planters, underwriting investment not only in more slaves and land, but also in new technologies and infrastructures,

⁷ Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, p. 248.

particularly railroads.⁸ Louisiana was a particularly popular destination for foreign investors: the London firm of Baring Brothers loaned more capital to it than to any other state in the Union; indeed, fifty-two percent of the capital invested in the states' sixteen new banks was foreign, primarily British.⁹

The case of the cotton economy illustrates how slaveholders leveraged their position to maximize profitable relationships with distant creditors and markets. This was a story of market integration, financial innovation, and economic expansion; the process by which American slavery became a key cog in the developing machinery of the global economy – albeit one prone to a devastating boom-bust cycle, as would become clear in the great Panic of 1837. In other realms, however, the slaveholding class of the South pursued its interests not through integration but rather through appropriation and domination. Nowhere was this more the case than in politics. The slaveholding South “mastered America” in the nineteenth century.¹⁰ Southern slavers and theorists appropriated the symbols and history of the young nation in order to buttress the “peculiar institution.” Nationalism flourished in the antebellum South, but it was a peculiarly Southern variant that interpreted the nation’s founding documents and ideals as endorsements of racial slavery.

This sectional appropriation of nationalism became politically institutionalized in what Northern critics came to call the “slave power.” Southern slavers exerted power disproportionate to their number in American politics. Thanks to how the three-fifths compromise inflated their political representation, they punched well above their weight in national politics. Slaveholders assumed leadership roles in key congressional committees, the military, the foreign service, and judiciary. Today we tend to equate the Old South with state’s rights. To be sure, the idea of state’s rights existed in the antebellum South,

⁸ William G. Thomas, *The Iron Way: Railroads, the Civil War, and the Making of Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 36.

⁹ Jay Sexton, *Debtor Diplomacy: Finance and American Foreign Relations in the Civil War Era, 1837-1873* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 70.

¹⁰ Robert Bonner, *Mastering America: Southern Slaveholders and the Crisis of American Nationhood* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

particularly in regard to the “compact theory” of the Constitution that left the door open to the secession of individual states. But state’s rights was not the South’s only political tradition. Southern slavers were not uniformly opposed to central power. One of the secrets to their success was how they commandeered the power of the federal government to advance the interests of the “peculiar institution”: they developed a pro-slavery foreign policy; they used the federal judiciary to their advantage; they sought to build-up national military and naval power; in time they demanded a draconian federal fugitive slave bill that trampled upon the state’s rights of the North; they even went so far as to make their allegiance to the Union conditional of a series of radical pro-slavery federal measures, not least governmental protection for them to carry their slaves into *all* federal territories of the West.¹¹

Southern slavers’ embrace of central power appears paradoxical when juxtaposed to the constitutional tradition of state’s rights, but it makes perfect sense when placed in the context of their heightened perception of *international* threat. Any Southern slaver who consulted a map of the Western Hemisphere by the 1830s had cause for alarm. The gradual end of slavery in the Northern states was not the only ominous development. Slavery was on the retreat outside of the Union. It had been violently demolished in Haiti, of course. But there was more to the story. The new states of Spanish America were in the process of gradually phasing slavery out, most ominously in neighboring Mexico, which abolished the institution in 1829.

Most significant of all was Britain’s epochal turn toward antislavery in 1833. Once the engine behind the slave trade and the entrenchment of slavery in North America, the world’s greatest power now committed itself to abolishing slavery. It is hard to overstate the significance to the United States of the Britain’s Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, which began the process of emancipation in British

¹¹ Matthew Karp, *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

possessions in the Caribbean. This was one of the most significant external drivers of internal political change and conflict in U.S. history. Like the Haitian Revolution before it, British abolition further radicalized both sides of the slavery debate in the United States. It was a boon to opponents of the peculiar institution, encouraging radical abolitionists and African Americans to demand an immediate end to slavery.¹²

Just as ominous as its empowerment of abolitionism within the United States was the abrupt transformation of the geopolitical chess-board. Britain now threw her mighty naval power against the international slave trade. Southerners feared that their former colonial master might go further by containing the expansion of slavery, if not promoting abolitionism within the remaining pro-slavery holdouts of the hemisphere. Of most concern in the 1830s and 40s were the precarious slaveholding polities of Texas (an independent republic led by American immigrants) and Cuba (part of the declining Spanish Empire). The cases were different in their particulars, but connected in how Southern political elites feared that both territories were in the cross-hairs of British abolitionism.

The situation in Texas was most urgent. Slaveholders deemed a free-labor Texas an unacceptable risk on the grounds that it would block the western expansion of the “peculiar institution,” as well as destabilize slavery in neighboring states by becoming a magnet for runaway slaves. Acting through the national institution of the Democratic Party, pro-slavery Southerners, led by Secretary of State John C. Calhoun and President (and future Confederate) John Tyler, engineered the annexation of Texas in 1844-5 to pre-empt the doomsday scenario of an anti-slavery, British satellite on the doorstep of the cotton kingdom. When Southerners advocated annexation on pro-slavery grounds, the issue predictably inflamed sectional tensions – indeed, Texas was annexed by congressional joint resolution, which required only a simple majority, after the attempt to ratify a treaty, which required a two-thirds

¹² Edward B. Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009).

majority, failed.¹³ The South's strategy for Cuba differed in that annexation was not necessary to preserve slavery on the island. But Southern statesmen made it clear that they would take pre-emptive action if Cuban slavery came under threat. Just as the South's slavers formulated new economic institutions and arrangements, they also began to develop new diplomatic strategies to secure slavery in an increasingly anti-slavery world.

II

The rising power of the slaveholding South did not make the collapse of the Union inevitable. Southern separatists gradually grew in number as time marched on, to be sure, but for most of the nineteenth century moderates held the secessionists at bay.¹⁴ After all, the increased prosperity of the South had occurred within the geopolitical framework of the Union. Why give away the security that it offered in exchange for an unknown, but presumably perilous, future? Nor was the fact that the South developed its own peculiar derivative of American nationalism necessarily an omen of disunion. The South's brand of American nationalism was but one of many variations of what was a pluralistic and protean nationalism.¹⁵

The nineteenth century world witnessed a burst of competing nationalisms. The American version sparred with and drew from European forms, particularly those of Britain and Ireland. It also spawned internal variations of its own nationalism that vied with one another for supremacy. The common spine of this spectrum of competing American nationalisms was self-perpetuating and reinforcing: it was the idea that to be American meant to be free from the rigid structures, institutions, and ideas of the Old World. Conformity and uniformity was the opposite of what it meant to be

¹³ Joel Silbey, *Storm over Texas: The Annexation Controversy and the Road to Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁴ William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Volume I: Secessionist at Bay, 1776-1854* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

¹⁵ Paul Quigley, *Shifting Grounds: Nationalism and the American South, 1848-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), esp. pp. 16-49.

American in this age of democratization and populism. To be American – that is, if you were a white male – meant to be empowered by liberation from the old structures and institutions of the past.

Where one travelled once freed from the shackles of monarchy, religious establishment, and state monopoly was an open and contentious question. Indeed, the emerging democratic politics of the era revolved around questions of national definition – and the constellation of policies and institutions that went along with it.¹⁶ American politics in the Age of Jackson (1815-1848) were characterized by a series of duals between competing visions of the nation’s meaning and future: Jacksonians sought to liberate the economy and culture from the old “money power” and faux-aristocracy, while their opponents, who coalesced into the Whig party, fought for the order and stability provided by institutions such as the 2nd Bank of the United States; social reformers challenged existing practices and institutions in a bewildering array of movements that campaigned for emancipation, temperance, women’s rights, prison reform, Indian rights, and on and on. In the highly competitive and combative political marketplace of Jacksonian America, the emerging conflict between North and South was but part of a broader post-colonial pattern of political conflict that inescapably accompanied the project of creating “a more perfect union.” The politics of this era were less *antebellum*, in the sense that they were leading up to the Civil War, than they were the *postbellum* aftershocks of a revolution whose social and political realization remained incomplete.

Yet, not all political competitions were created equal. The sectional conflict over slavery was more than just a political division; it was a wrecking ball that in time demolished the Union itself. What made it different? Why was it impossible to contain? The starting point to answer these questions is the sheer intensity, passion, and moral conviction that came to characterize either side of the slavery

¹⁶ This line of argument is advanced in Daniel Feller, *The Jacksonian Promise: America, 1815-1840* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

debate. There had been factions for and against slavery since the founding era; what changed as the nineteenth century progressed was each side's intensity, institutional sophistication, and political reach.

Central to this story, of course, was the emergence of a network of abolitionist and anti-slavery societies that spanned the Atlantic. Today we most often remember the abolitionists for the passion and perseverance with which they advanced their moral arguments against the evils of slavery – and with good reason, it should be added. But just as important as content was form: those opposed to slavery constructed dynamic institutions that engaged both with wider publics and elites within the corridors of power. The antislavery movement had its internal factions and divisions, not least of which were the tensions between black abolitionists, who tended to demand immediate abolition, and more conservative antislavery whites, who argued for incrementalism. But these divisions should not obscure from view the remarkable achievements of abolitionist agitation that remains the gold standard for all social reform movements to this day. Those opposed to slavery established a social movement capable of raising funds on both sides of the Atlantic, coordinating political action across vast distances, delivering emotive and intellectually cogent arguments against the institution of slavery, and – never to be forgotten – assisting those slaves fortunate enough to escape the grip of their master.¹⁷

Meanwhile, in the South, a parallel process consolidated support for the “peculiar institution.” Southern politicians and theorists developed the political and moral defense of slavery. Gone was the talk common in the age of the Revolution in which slavery was regarded as a “necessary evil”; it was replaced in the 1830s by an affirmative – indeed, an aggressive – pro-slavery ideology that presented it as a “positive good.” But support for slavery required more than an ideology: it required the almost universal backing of the Southern whites. Of particular importance were non-slaveholding whites, who totaled roughly three-quarters of the South's white population in 1860. There were signs that this group

¹⁷ For a comprehensive new history of abolition, see Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016)

was beginning to develop a political consciousness that was potentially receptive to anti-slavery actions. But for every Hinton Rowan Helper who tried to persuade his fellow non-slaveholding whites that they had a bum deal in the cotton kingdom, there remained scores, probably hundreds, who condoned slavery – actively so in cases such as the poor whites who joined slave patrols to round-up run-aways.¹⁸ The South’s proslavery move had an international dimension as well. Just as anti-slavery groups drew power from their British counterparts, the defenders of the “peculiar institution” plotted its expansion into the Caribbean, defended slavery where it remained in the Western Hemisphere (particularly Cuba), and presented their social system as a replicable innovation in the science of labor management which they believed portended a global resurgence of unfree labor.¹⁹

What further separated the slavery divide from the other political controversies of postcolonial America was its reach. The slavery question was exceptionally dangerous because of the fact that it played out across the varied civic institutions and political formations of the Union. If the sectional conflict can be likened to a “cold war,” it was one with multiple fronts. Indeed, understanding the origins of the Civil War requires a broad conception of politics. Some of the most significant battlegrounds and turning points on the road to disunion occurred in realms apart from that of formal politics.

None were more important than evangelical Christianity. As national politicians grappled with the portentous constitutional questions concerning the expansion of slavery, a comparable struggle concerning the morality and theology of slavery took place within the powerful evangelical churches, particularly the Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians. These churches were among the most powerful agents of nationalism in the early republic, both as propagators of a shared belief system and in the more hard-headed terms of institutional reach and coordination. “If the Churches divide on the subject of slavery,” nationalist Henry Clay feared, “there will be nothing left to bind our people together but

¹⁸ David Brown, *Southern Outcast: Hinton Rowan Helper and the Impending Crisis of the South* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2006).

¹⁹ Karp, *This Vast Southern Empire*.

trade and commerce.”²⁰ It thus was an ominous portent of the storm to come when two of the mightiest evangelical churches – the Baptists and Methodists – fractured along sectional lines in the 1840s. “How little is to be expected from any other Union, if the union of Christians fail,” wrote a reporter from the Southern Baptist Convention of 1845.²¹ The sectional split within the major institutions of evangelical Christianity accelerated a divergence in religious culture which radicalized those on either side of the slavery debate. The very beliefs and institutions that had been one of the primary engines of nationalism did an abrupt about-face, re-directing their power on behalf of sectionalism.²²

The fissure within the evangelical churches was part of a broader pattern. Comparable processes of sectionalization played out in other realms: in intellectual thought; in interpretations of the law and the Constitution; in civic organizations. Sometimes, slavery even broke apart the fundamental building-block of nineteenth century nationalism, the family. The key question confronting the United States in the mid-nineteenth century was if any of its national structures and institutions could withstand the onslaught of the sectional divide over slavery, somehow turning the ship of state around before it crashed into the shoals of disunion.

III

One of the prime candidates to weather the storm were the material bonds of commerce, investment, and infrastructure. After all, it was these economic structures that Clay identified as the Union’s last hope after the fissure of the churches. Of the many achievements of the “founding fathers,” none were more visible by the mid-nineteenth century than the awesome material growth of the Union. A number of forces fueled America’s frenetic development: the integration of the national market; new systems of

²⁰ Quoted in Richard Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993), p. 323.

²¹ Quote in C.C. Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation: Denominational Schisms and the Coming of the American Civil War* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), preface page.

²² Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics*, p. xix. There were exceptions, of course, namely the Episcopalian and Catholic churches.

transport and communication; technological innovations; the Marshall court's broad construction of the commerce clause; the continuation of profitable economic relations with Great Britain. All of these and more greased the wheels of a rising economic juggernaut – prone to overheating, though it was – that raced across the bountiful lands of North America, reaching all the way to the gold mines of California by the mid-century.

We have seen the economic boom within the slaveholding South. But the South was not alone in developing a dynamic and internationally integrated economy. The diverse economy of the North also galloped forward at a breakneck pace. In the new states of the West, agricultural output increased at a rate not unlike that of cotton in the Deep South. In the single decade of the 1850s in Illinois, for example, the production of corn doubled and that of wheat ballooned nearly threefold.²³ This boom was made possible by new technologies that mechanized agricultural production. Just as the “cotton gin” revolutionized cotton production, the McCormick reaper expanded harvesting capacity in the emerging “wheat belt” of the new states of the West. New infrastructures that cut transportation costs and opened distant markets to American farmers further accelerated the growth of agriculture. To return to the example of Illinois, a catalyst of that state's agricultural development in the 1850s was the opening of what was then the world's longest railroad, the Illinois Central Railroad (ICR).

The funding of the ICR demonstrated that it wasn't just Southerners who found new ways to raise capital. The ICR received federal support in the form of land-grants – indeed, it was the first of what would become many land-grant lines in the United States. But just as important to the success of the ICR was its ability to attract foreign capital: two-thirds of the company's shareholders were Britons who saw the railroad as a means of more efficiently transporting grains from the American wheat belt to England, where they were needed to feed the working classes (many of whose appetites came from

²³ Don Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness: Lincoln in the 1850s* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1962), pp. 7-8.

working in mills fueled by Southern cotton). When renowned British liberal Richard Cobden visited Illinois in 1859, he did so not to observe American democracy first-hand, but rather to inspect the railroad on behalf of its foreign shareholders.²⁴

This was part of a broader pattern. Far more British capital poured into the Northern states than into the slaveholding South. Ten railroads before the Civil War had \$1 million or more of their stock held abroad – but only one was located in the South, despite slaveholding states possessing 35 percent of the nation’s railroad mileage in 1860. This pattern of capital migration was, in part, a result of a downgrade in the South’s credit rating that followed the Panic of 1837. Nine U.S. states and territories defaulted on their debts in that credit crisis; but the three that took the further step of repudiating their obligations were all slaveholding (Mississippi, Florida, and Arkansas). Foreign capitalists took notice when slaveholding advocates of repudiation vowed that they would rather “slap John Bull in the face than to quail before his power.”²⁵ The upshot was that Northern states were able to attract foreign capital at lower rates than those of the South. An early form of British “ethical investment” began to emerge: “The existence of even a minute fraction of the population in bondage places the government of that state at a serious disadvantage in the money market,” the *Westminster Review* reported in 1850.²⁶

The free and slave states might have competed on the London money market, but the story of the first half of the nineteenth century was also one in which the regional economies of the Union became entwined by symbiotic material connections. Yankee industrialization and the emergence of what would become the nation’s “capitol of capital” on Wall Street began to provide the manufactured goods and financial services that were in demand in the South – and, for that matter, in the West. The

²⁴ William G. Thomas, *The Iron Way: Railroads, the Civil War and the Making of Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 52-3; Thomas P. Martin, “Cotton and Wheat in Anglo-American Trade and Politics, 1846-1852,” *Journal of Southern History*, 1 (August 1935), 293-219.

²⁵ Quoted in Reginald C. McGrane, *Foreign Bondholders and American State Debts* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), p. 34.

²⁶ Sexton, *Debtor Diplomacy*, 69-78.

integration of the national economy was further advanced by the “transportation revolution” of new roads, canals, railroads, and steamship lines.²⁷ Communications pulsed through these circuits, stimulating the integration of markets across the Union and spurring economic growth and innovation. “In the early days of the country, before we had railroads, telegraphs and steamboats – in a word, rapid transit of any sort – the States were each almost a separate nationality,” Ulysses S. Grant later reflected.²⁸ The federal government played an important role in this process national integration. Federal subsidies were given to upstart steamship lines; federal agents surveyed and organized new territories. The Post Office, the largest bureaucracy of the new central state, fostered national organization by advancing communications, particularly the newspapers that constituted the largest item by bulk delivered by the postal system. The Post Office also contributed to the building of national party structures by functioning as a patronage spoils ground for the era’s political parties.²⁹

The bonds of commerce and infrastructure integrated the diverse markets and regions of the Union. Material forces further advanced the national project by becoming a central component of American nationalism itself. “The nation that draws most materials and provisions from the earth,” William H. Seward declared in the 1850s, “and fabricates the most, and sells the most of productions and fabrics to foreign nations, must be, and will be, the great power of the earth.”³⁰ Not surprisingly, some of the most powerful institutions of the national economy resisted the march toward disunion. The lion’s share of the business community in New York City, for example, fought to the bitter end for sectional compromise as a means of diffusing the combustible slavery debate. Business elites led the way in the frantic and ultimately doomed attempts to avoid disunion and war during the secession

²⁷ George Rogers Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution, 1815-1860* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1951).

²⁸ Mary D. McFeely and William S. McFeely (eds.), *Memoirs and Selected Letters: Personal memoirs of U.S. Grant, Selected Letters 1839-1865* (New York: Library of America, 1990), 774.

²⁹ Richard John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

³⁰ Quoted in Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1963), p. 27

winter of 1860-61.³¹ The mobilization of business interests on behalf of the Union reflected the success of national economic integration and the profitable relationships that were imperiled by secession.

“Physically speaking, we can not separate,” Lincoln declared in his inaugural address, “we can not remove our respective sections from each other nor build an impassable wall between them.”³²

Yet, for all of their strength, the material structures and interests of the Union could not repel the advance of Southern separatism. Indeed, in some regards economic structures and policies contributed to rising sectionalism even as they fostered the emergence of a national market. The key issue here was the tariff. Few issues were more important in nineteenth century politics – and few are more misunderstood today. When the tariff is mentioned today in relation to the origins of the Civil War, it is normally trotted out by apologists of the Confederacy or dogmatic libertarians who make the case that the real cause of disunion was not slavery, but rather the emergence of a centralized state that trampled upon state’s rights and economic liberties. This argument is rubbish, or worse – the following footnote provides an accessible rejoinder that strikes the match into the dumpster.³³

The tariff did not cause the Civil War, but that does not mean that we should ignore it when examining the origins of the conflict. The tariff debate – which was the most prominent manifestation of the broader question concerning the Union’s position within the international economic system – contributed to disunion in that it followed the pattern of morphing from a structure that tied the nation together to one that pulled its sections apart.

Tariffs were not always politically contentious. In the tumultuous age and aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, American political elites – even the young South Carolinian John C. Calhoun – embraced economic nationalism on the grounds that it would foster national strength and

³¹ Philp S. Foner, *Business and Slavery: The New York Merchants and the Irrepressible Conflict* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941).

³² Lincoln’s Inaugural Address, 4 March 1861, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/lincoln1.asp

³³ For a dismantling of this myth with helpful references, see Marc-William Palen’s blog: <https://imperialglobalexeter.com/2015/03/02/debunking-the-civil-war-tariff-myth/>

independence in a volatile geopolitical order. But as the international position of the United States stabilized in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, this short-lived consensus unraveled. The tariff became a political lightning-rod. The most famous of all the great tariff showdowns was South Carolina's attempt to nullify the federal tariff in the 1830s. The nullification crisis was a dress rehearsal for disunion: South Carolina radicals made the case for state sovereignty and the right to nullify federal legislation, shrewdly choosing the tariff issue as a first line of defense for slavery.³⁴ The crisis extended momentum to many of the arguments for Southern unity and separatism that would later gain great traction – not least the “forty bale theory” of South Carolinian George McDuffie which posited that for every one hundred bales of cotton produced by the South, national tariffs redirected forty percent of the profits to a parasitic class of Yankee merchants and protected laborers. But for all of the portentous features of the crisis, the bonds of Union weathered the storm. Indeed, the Union came out of the crisis stronger than when it went in: Jackson's triumph over South Carolina strengthened the national spirit and tethered it to the constitutional precedent that the federal government was supreme.

Jackson's triumph did not end controversy over the tariff, which evolved into one of the great wedge issues that divided Democrats (advocates of tariff reduction) and Whigs (proponents of tariffs). But for all the sound and fury that the issue invoked, on balance the tariff debates of the era buttressed the Union by sustaining a line of political division that crossed sectional lines – despite the best efforts of South Carolina hotheads to make the tariff a sectional issue. Though free trade was strongest in the staple exporting South, it had many Northern advocates, not least Western farmers, port city merchants, and cosmopolitan reformers who viewed free trade in the moral terms advanced by the great Victorian free trade advocates, Richard Cobden, John Bright, and the pages of the British free-trade journal *The Economist*. On the flip side, there were proponents of the tariff in the slave South,

³⁴ William Freehling, *Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1816-1836* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).

particularly sugar planters, hemp producers, and a nascent commercial and industrial lobby based primarily in New Orleans and the economically dynamic state of Virginia. Jacksonians fought over the tariff – with the gloves off and sucker punches not off limits – but doing so brought them into political alliances that crossed the sectional divide. Furthermore, the debate was never one of pure free trade vs unalloyed protectionism. Even the apostles of “free trade” from the mid-nineteenth century would be protectionists today – ad valorem rates of 20% were considered low in 1850, whereas today rates higher than 3% would be considered protectionist.³⁵ For all of its bluster and bark that presented the issue in binary terms, the tariff question boiled down to fine grain disputes over how high specific rates should be. The tariff debate, in sum, had a big wind-up but a slow fastball.

Rather than viewing U.S. tariff policy as a grand, moral struggle, it should be seen as a political manifestation of the contentious processes of Atlantic market development and economic integration. Like the era’s financial and commodity markets, the politics of the tariff were volatile, with rates often changing after each election cycle that recalibrated the relative power of the nation’s varied economic interests. There was an overall downward trend in U.S. tariffs in the decades preceding the Civil War, however. The most important tariff reduction occurred in 1846. In an underappreciated moment of transatlantic integration, Britain repealed its hoary Corn Laws in the same year that the Southern dominated Democratic Party passed the reductionist Walker Tariff.³⁶ The liberation of commerce from the shackles of protection helped to spark the long awaited economic upturn after the depression years of the “hungry forties,” as it was known in Britain, which followed the catastrophic Panic of 1837. The United States further reduced tariffs in the following decade. The ascendance of tariff reductionism was a big part of why the postcolonial Atlantic economic order reached its heyday at the very moment the

³⁵ See the comments of Alfred Eckes in H-Diplo Roundtable XVII, 16 on *The “Conspiracy” of Free Trade: The Anglo-American Struggle over Empire and Economic Globalisation, 1846-1896* at <https://networks.h-net.org/system/files/contributed-files/roundtable-xviii-16.pdf>

³⁶ Marc-William Palen, *The “Conspiracy” of Free Trade: The Anglo-American Struggle over Empire and Economic Globalisation, 1846-1896* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), chapter 1.

Union was unravelling. The increase in trade triggered a corresponding boom in British investment in the United States, particularly its rapidly forming railroad network. Already by 1860, the United States possessed more railroad track mileage than the rest of the world combined.³⁷

As the transatlantic economic complex entered a boom phase – which was further fueled by the discovery of gold in California and Australia – the march of protectionism stalled. The language, ideas, and alliances of protectionism remained, but the push for tariff increases lost momentum.³⁸ Hereafter the most important realm in which the tariff issue played out was within the sections, not across them. The tariff (specifically) and economic nationalism (more generally) became an adjunct of the sectional conflict in the dozen or so years leading up to secession. As slavery conditioned Americans to think in starkly sectional terms, those on either side of the divide developed sectional conceptions of the policies and structures that should govern their integration into what was starting to become, thanks to steam power and imperial expansion, a global economy.

Low tariffs remained the cornerstone of Southern political economy. The rise of Southern separatism was inseparable from the cotton kingdom's integration into the broader Atlantic economy. "England and the United States are bound together by a single thread of cotton," Friedrich Engels observed, "that which, weak and fragile as it may appear, is, nevertheless, stronger than an iron cable."³⁹ The point cannot be emphasized enough: American slaveholders were economic internationalists whose connections to distant markets, particularly that of Britain, pulled them away from the Union. But the economic internationalism of the Southern masterclass was not without its limits: it did not fully embrace the liberalism of the great British free traders – many of whom, not least Cobden and Bright, were fervently anti-slavery. Rather, when Southern politicians made the political

³⁷ Kevin Hillstrom and Laurie Collier Hillstrom, *Industrial Revolution in America: Iron and Steel* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2005), p. 13.

³⁸ Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 111.

³⁹ Quoted in Schoen, *The Fragile Fabric of Union*, p.225.

case for tariff reduction they emphasized not liberal ideology, but Yankee exploitation of the slaveholding states. The South's gospel of free trade was not Cobdenite liberalism, but rather the conspiracy theory that Yankee protectionists and merchants were nothing more than parasitic middlemen who sucked away the profits of the cotton trade even as they hypocritically sought to block the expansion of slavery.

The premise that the tariff question was an adjunct of sectional rivalry was the thin end of a wedge that cracked open the door to a Southern variant of economic nationalism which made independence a materially plausible – even desirable – move. Here, once again, the innovative and dynamic nature of the slaveholding South is visible. The South's attitudes toward the tariff subtly evolved in the 1850s. As Southerners calculated the value of their position in the Union, powerful cases were made for advancing the region's economic independence by promoting the development of the region's infrastructure, commercial services, and nascent manufacturers. "Political independence is not worth a fig without commercial independence," Southern thinker George Fitzhugh wrote in 1854.⁴⁰ A nascent entrepreneurial class coalesced in the South that worked out its ideas for promoting economic modernization in new commercial publications such as *Debow's Review*. The message propagated by *Debow's* was a powerful one: maximizing the profitability of slavery meant diversifying the South's economy to decrease dependence upon Yankee parasites. This Southern version of economic nationalism was rooted in its export economy that sought integration into a liberal international order, but it nonetheless acknowledged the need for some revenue generating duties, as well as coordinated and state-supported programs of economic diversification and development. It was ardently pro-slavery. Indeed, slaves could provide a labor pool for future development projects and resource extraction. The economic vision that emerged in the South in the 1850s was a far more robust model for an

⁴⁰ Quoted in Nicholas Greenwood Onuf and Peter S. Onuf, *Nations, Markets, and War: Modern History and the American Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006), p. 328.

independent South than was the old one-dimensional railing against Yankee tariffs. Ultimately, this modernizing vision would help to broaden the appeal of the Confederate project to those outside the “cotton belt,” not least Virginia. Its legacy can be seen not only in the success of secession, but also the centralizing tendencies of the wartime Confederate state.⁴¹

The story in the North was more politically complex and varied, but one with a similar arc in which the old nationalist dimensions of the tariff gave way to a sectional conception of political economy. The key to this story was the rising appeal of antislavery among Northern whites on the grounds of economic self-interest. Old divisions within the North over the tariff and other economic issues subsided as U.S. politics came to be dominated by the question of if the territories would be open to slavery. This issue led many Northern whites to link antislavery to their own material self-interest. The moral arguments of the abolitionists resonated with a relatively small constituency; in contrast, the critique of slavery that was grounded in free labor and white self-interest had a potentially dominant share of the political market. It might even have spread to the non-slaveholding whites in the South had the war not come when it did. If the territories were opened to slavery, as Southern slavers demanded, the North’s free-labor economy would be imperiled. The fear went something like this: the “slave power” would come to dominate the territories, thus cutting off new land for Northern migrants and farmers, which would lead to increased urbanization and industrialization in the existing free states, which in turn would destabilize Northern social relations, transforming the republic into a class-ridden version of an Old World country.

The ideology of free labor was the headline performer of Northern political economy in the 1850s; everything else, including the tariff, was a warm-up act that got drowned out by the main show.⁴²

⁴¹ John Majewski, *Modernizing a Slave Economy: The Economic Vision of the Confederate Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

⁴² Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

The new political alliances and coalitions constructed upon the foundation of opposition to the expansion of slavery in the territories transcended the old battle-lines on the tariff, inverting the formula from the Jacksonian era. Of the many tightrope balancing acts managed by the new Republican Party in the 1850s, few were of greater significance than how it brought into the fold both protectionists and tariff reductionists. This was a matter of electoral necessity: to win the presidency, the new party needed to win states with powerful protectionist lobbies, such as Pennsylvania, as well as those Midwestern agrarian states whose export economies led them to advocate tariff reductions. The party achieved this by fudging the tariff issue whenever possible, euphemistically speaking of protectionism in the terms of necessary revenue generation. Some Republicans even voted for the tariff reduction of 1857.

The strategy of cartwheeling around this internal party division was successful in the short term, but not over the long-haul, particularly once the war triggered a ferocious resurgence of protectionism beginning with the Morrill Tariff of 1861. In the years after the war, questions about tariffs, banks, and currency once again would rip through the United States, wreaking havoc within the Republican Party. The result was to undermine the party's power during the pivotal post-war era of Reconstruction. Ironically, the Southern white elites who railed against the Yankee tariff before the Civil War benefited from the divisions it fostered among their old rivals after 1865.

IV

The vicissitudes of America's tariff politics closely tracked broader geopolitical developments. Protectionism flourished in moments of crisis – most of all in the era and aftermaths of the War of 1812 and Civil War – while it receded in periods marked by a decrease of security threats. The tariff was not alone in being connected to the broader international system. The antislavery movement, feminism, literature, business practice – all of these and more were shaped by the institutions and processes of Atlantic integration. Indeed, the political fate of the Union itself hinged upon shifts in the tectonic plates

of the international system. Behind the Union's collapse was not only the particulars of the domestic politics of the 1850s, but also a profound shift in the geopolitics of the greater Atlantic system.

The key geopolitical development of the mid-nineteenth century was the rising power of the United States. By 1860, the United States had become a nascent world power that dominated the continent of North America. The young republic not only asserted control along the Pacific coast, most notably in California, but it also flexed its muscles in the Caribbean and Central America, where Wall Street financiers controlled the world's first transcontinental railroad (across Panama). Blueprints were drafted for unprecedented infrastructure projects, not least a transcontinental railroad across North America. Coal production soared as new markets for this powerful energy source took root – even in distant outposts such as San Francisco. The United States searched for opportunities across the Pacific, signing a commercial treaty with China (1844) and “opening” Japan to foreign commerce (1854). The fact that the homeland was fracturing did not stop enterprising Americans from going about laying the foundations for what in time would become a global American empire.

The changed geopolitical environment of the mid-nineteenth century was an important development on the road to disunion – another of those forces of nationalism that retreated as the two sections started their fateful march to war. National security had been one of – if not the – greatest drivers of national integration in the young republic's history. We have seen how the creation of the Union in 1787 was inextricably linked to a volatile geopolitical context and the founding fathers' heightened perception of threat, as well as how early American politics was dominated by the question of how to solidify independence and fend off rival powers. The War of 1812 was not a “forgotten war” for Americans who lived in its aftermath: it unleashed a powerful nationalist spirit that came to be embodied in the Monroe Doctrine, the annual social rituals of the Fourth of July, and, perhaps most of all, the political celebrity of Andrew Jackson, the hero of the Battle of New Orleans.

This nationalist spirit persisted in the aggressive ideology of “manifest destiny,” which helped to fuel the imperial expansion of the 1840s. The Democratic Party, now led by slaveholder James K. Polk (who bought slaves while in the White House “like a speculator in a bullish stock market”!⁴³), had an answer for the sectional and partisan rancor triggered by the annexation of Texas in 1845: more expansion. When Mexico, the previous sovereign in Texas, refused to accept the new border, war predictably ensued. The outcome of the “War against Mexico” marked a turning point in the history of the geopolitical position of the United States.⁴⁴ No longer was the United States an insecure power. Sure, its politicians continued to raise fears of recrudescing Old World imperialism and deploy the old symbols of national security such as the Monroe Doctrine. But the developments of the 1840s signaled the end of America’s “postcolonial” era, at least in the realm of geopolitics: the powers of the Old World had acquiesced to a U.S. continental dominion that neighboring states like Mexico were unable to stop. The old bogeyman of the British Empire became more of an enabler than a threat by mid-century: British investors advanced some of the funds the United States used to pay the indemnity to Mexico as agreed in the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo; the Royal Navy helped open East Asian markets to Yankee traders; and the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty (1850) pledged Anglo-American cooperation in the Central American isthmus. Southern slavers still feared British abolitionism, but now could take comfort in the fact that it had been exposed as a paper tiger. When push came to shove, anti-slavery Britain rolled over when the pro-slavery United States gobbled up Texas. Southerners concluded that British acquiescence to their expansion derived from the old country’s dependence upon their cotton.⁴⁵

Just as the geopolitical storm clouds drifted off the horizon, the anvil thundercloud of disunion materialized directly above. This was no coincidence. The newfound security and power of the United

⁴³ William Dusinger, *Slavemaster President: The Double Career of James Polk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), esp. p. 19.

⁴⁴ As the “Mexican-American War” should be called: Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), chapter 19 title.

⁴⁵ For exploration of this point, see Schoen, *The Fragile Fabric of Union*, passim and esp. p. 9.

States after the conquest of northern Mexico intensified internal divisions over slavery in two ways. First, and most obviously, the diminution of foreign threats altered the security calculations that motivated the formation and continuation of the Union. With the security motive for Union receding in importance, the seeds of internal division took root and shot up like a Leylandii tree in a damp climate. Foreign threats still lingered in American politics, but their greatest significance was now how they mapped onto and deepened sectional divisions. Most ominous was how both sides of the sectional debate over slavery came to see each other in the light of the old British threat. Proslavery Southerners viewed the antislavery forces within and outside the union as interlinked (not without reason, it should be said); meanwhile, Northerners began to speak of the “slave power” as an aristocratic clique that mimicked the opponents of democracy that were found among the states of the Old World (again, with some justice).

Second, the altered geopolitical context inflamed the sectional crisis because the establishment of U.S. dominion in North America required political attention and action. Americans were soon to discover one of the great lessons of empire in North America: establishing dominion is easier than consolidating and maintaining it. The experience of Britain after its triumph in the Seven Years’ War provides an obvious parallel. The result of the Mexican War in 1848 chained kryptonite around the neck of America’s democratic political system. It took the form of a simple question: would the federal territories of the West be open to slavery? The federal lands in question included those taken from Mexico, as well as some of the old but still unorganized territories of the Louisiana Purchase. If the origins of the Civil War can be boiled down to one question, it is that one. It became the single greatest driver of U.S. politics from the end of the War against Mexico to the election of Lincoln in 1860. The possibility of prohibiting slavery in the West dramatically appeared in the form of the Wilmot Proviso of 1846, which attempted to rally Northern congressional support on behalf of the cause of making the funding of the War against Mexico contingent upon all territorial acquisitions remaining off limits to the

“slave power.” This phase of the crisis was momentarily put to bed with the Compromise of 1850, which mitigated immediate tensions without fundamentally resolving the issue in all of the territories (California, however, was admitted as a free state).

The Compromise of 1850 was the last gasp of a dying generation of politicians who had come of age in the nationalist era of the War of 1812. John C. Calhoun was on his death bed when he last spoke before Congress – he was soon to be followed by Henry Clay and Daniel Webster. The legislation of 1850 was not achieved in a grand compromise as originally proposed by Clay, but – ominously – via separate votes with shifting majorities, as orchestrated by the rising political star within the Democratic Party, Illinoisan Stephen Douglas. As a new generation took hold of the reins of power in a transformed geopolitical context, cultural and political reference points changed. The old nationalist spirit of those who came of age during the War of 1812 gave way to rising sectionalism and the revolutionary spirit embodied in the European revolutions of 1848. Events across the Atlantic set precedents for secessionist movements, as well as forcible attempts to quash them.⁴⁶

The question of slavery in the territories did not go away after 1850 because the colonization of North America could not be stopped. There was no American attempt to impose a version of the old British proclamation line of 1763 as a means of thwarting the danger. If anything, the possibilities offered by the colonization of the West accelerated competition between the sections to gain their upper hand. The territories of the West required organization, leading to divergent sectional answers to the question of if slavery would be allowed. Stephen Douglas once again took center stage, proposing what he deemed to be a compromise option in the infamous Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which sought to find resolution to the territorial question so that a transcontinental railroad could be constructed with its terminus in his home state of Illinois.

⁴⁶ Timothy Mason Roberts, *Distant Revolutions: 1848 and the Challenge to American Exceptionalism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), pp. 134-39; Andre Fleche, *Revolution of 1861: The American Civil War in the Age of Nationalist Conflict* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

Douglas proposed following the old tradition of passing the buck to the peoples of the territories, who would be empowered to decide the slavery question for themselves. This proposed solution of “popular sovereignty” reflected America’s tradition of imperial de-centralization. But the Kansas-Nebraska Act differed from its predecessors in the founding era, such as the Northwest and Southwest Ordinances, in that the territories now in need of organization (Kansas and Nebraska) did not have pre-existing labor regimes that had taken root under the auspices of European rule. Furthermore, there were not the same geopolitical pressures that had necessitated deference to local views on slavery in the early republic. The increased security and power of the United States had ended the old fear that settlers would detach from the Union and ally with the British or Spanish. The administration of a vast continent was now a national, rather than geopolitical, question.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act marked the point of no return in the sectional crisis. The bill deserves the condemnation that posterity has given it, but it bears pointing out that it was the best compromise on offer. There simply weren’t better options on the table for bridging the widening gulf between the Democratic Party’s Northern wing, which housed a growing faction that opposed slavery in the territories or recognized the political imperative of so doing, and its traditional Southern core, which demanded slaveholder access to the West. What made the Kansas-Nebraska act most politically attractive – that it kicked the can down the road by letting the inhabitants of the territories decide the slavery question for themselves – was also what led to its failure. Douglas’s bill kicked-off a scramble for influence in Kansas among the most ardent defenders and opponents of slavery. The intra-national “cold war” now had a hot proxy in “bleeding Kansas.” Compromise became increasingly difficult once blood had been spilled; the constitutional issue of slavery in the territories became tethered to violence in Kansas, which soon had rival territorial governments and support structures. Intended to diffuse the slavery question, the Kansas-Nebraska Act set in motion a chain reaction that inexorably led to disunion and civil war.

V

Once mixed with the slavery question, the fuel of national integration curdled, clogging up and ultimately breaking down the engines of Union. What happened with churches, tariffs, and geopolitics also played out in the realm of party politics. Of all the national structures that buckled under the strain of sectional conflict, none did more to determine the course of disunion than political parties. The collapse of the system of nationally structured Whig and Democratic parties ushered in a new political system closely tethered to sectional interests and the slavery question: the new anti-slavery party of the North, the Republicans, vied for power with a Democratic Party that ultimately fractured into Northern and Southern wings.

Slavery was the principal driver of this political realignment. But it was not the only one. One of the great x-factors in U.S. history helped to topple the party system in the 1850s, thus setting the stage for disunion: the surge in immigration in the 1840s and 50s. The decade after 1845 witnessed the most compressed increase in the percentage of the population that was foreign born in U.S. history. Some three million immigrants arrived in U.S. ports in this period. Three million might not sound like much in today's terms, but remember that the census of 1850 estimated that the nation's entire population was just over 23 million. The proportionate equivalent would be if around 41 million immigrants arrived in a decade's span today (as a point of comparison, an estimated 14 million immigrants arrived in the United States in the first decade of the twenty-first century). The principal cause was the great humanitarian crisis of the mid-Victorian era, the potato famine in Ireland. Deprived of a core source of sustenance, and with the British state failing to provide adequate relief, desperate Irish boarded vessels bound for the other side of the Atlantic. Joining them were unprecedented numbers of Germans, who sought higher wages and better prospects than were on offer Europe, as well as refugees from the failed European revolutions of 1848. What made this burst of immigration politically significant in the United States was not only its suddenness, but also its ethnic and religious composition. Some two-thirds of the

migrants in this period – including both Germans and Irish – were Catholic. They arrived into the world’s most dynamic and market-driven evangelical Protestant culture.

The result was a social and political confirmation of Newton’s third law of motion – every action generates an equal and opposite reaction. Ethnic and religious tensions already were running high in the mid-1840s, most notably in the Philadelphia riots of 1844 that pitted Protestants against Catholics. Each vessel that arrived from the Old World with more migrants increased the ire of “native” white Protestants. Fueling their discontent was not only religious sectarianism, but also the increase in labor competition. It is no coincidence that many of those who joined the nativist Know-Nothing party were young men of modest means. Adding further fuel to the fire were the attempts of Catholic leaders, particularly in New York, to claim public funds for their parochial schools. New wedge issues appeared on the political landscape, including lengthening the wait period for the naturalization of immigrants, as well as the prohibition of alcohol – indeed, Maine passed a temperance bill in 1851 that was strongly supported by nativists.

The rising nativism of this period intensified as the perception spread among “native” Protestants that the political establishment was unresponsive to their concerns. The Democratic Party, which cultivated votes from the rising Irish population, certainly was not about to kowtow to the growing nativist lobby. The Whigs were generally more sympathetic to nativist critiques of Catholicism, but they were of two minds on the issue in terms of political strategy: to fully commit to nativism risked undermining economic growth and future electoral prospects in states with large immigrant populations, not least New York, the great swing state of nineteenth century politics. The emerging politics of nativism thus destabilized the Whigs, eroding their party’s foundation and legitimacy just as Douglas pulled the pin from the grenade of the Kansas-Nebraska bill. The Whigs likely would have imploded under the pressure of one existential crisis; there was no way they would survive the weight of both immigration and slavery. The sheer political energy unleashed by these two emotive and divisive

issues overwhelmed the Whig Party, ripping it apart on two separate axes: a sectional North versus South one, as well as an ethnocultural one regarding nativism.

The Whig Party did not die – it was killed. It was killed by innovative political start-ups that seized the opportunity provided by the dislocation of the mid-1850s. The Know-Nothing Party was no laughing matter, despite its name that today so often invokes chuckles. The new party creatively harnessed the power of evangelical anti-Catholicism, while at the same time tapping into the passions of the social protest movement of nativism that emerged from below. The nativist party brought new voters and, indeed, candidates into the political process. It raced onto the scene on the local, as well as national, level. Know-Nothingism was a political, as well as a social and religious, insurgency.⁴⁷ Its nativist bigotry, anti-establishment agenda, and mobilization of evangelical energy now looks less like a distant curiosity than a portent of the nationalist populism of more recent times.

But for all their potential strength, the Know-Nothings were nothing compared to another new party that emerged from the political rubble: the Republicans, whose primary objective was to restrict the expansion of slavery into the Western territories. We have seen the appeal of the Republicans' free labor ideology. The rapid ascent of this new party in the compressed period of 1854-6 was a result not only of its ideological coherence on the issue of slavery in the territories, but also its inclusive methodology. Republicans encouraged negotiation and compromise among different and often competing interests; they creatively found synergies between local, state, and national structures; they fostered elastic frameworks that allowed, indeed encouraged, local and regional variation.⁴⁸ Underlying the Republicans' political methodology was an implicit agreement: the party's priority was to prevent the expansion of slavery into the territories. Its position on other issues – the tariff, nativism, foreign policy – would be ironed-out after the territorial issue had been resolved. In the meantime, the new

⁴⁷ Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know-Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁴⁸ William Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

party muddled through its internal divisions. In Massachusetts the Republican Party fused with the Know-Nothings; but in New York, it stood against them. In the long-term, internal divisions over immigration would rip through the Republican Party, just as would happen with the tariff. But in the immediate term the new party's de-centralized and pluralistic nature gave it the flexibility it needed to emerge victorious in the wide-open politics of the mid-1850s.

By 1856 it was apparent that America's political landscape had been transformed. The once great Whig Party followed the footsteps of the dodo bird toward extinction as the Republicans rapidly ascended, gobbling up a diverse coalition that included former Whigs, Know-Nothings, and Democrats who were fed up with the South's unending demands on slavery in the territories. The new party was constructed upon the infrastructure of the evangelical churches of the North – it was for this reason that its members labelled themselves “the Christian party in politics.”⁴⁹ The Republicans came surprisingly close to capturing the White House in 1856. Four years later, the Republicans found a leader who personified its powerful combination of political pluralism and moral clarity on the key issue of the slavery.

The collapse of the Whig Party reverberated through the South, as well. Sleeper cells of Whigs remained, particularly in the Upper South and sugar planting and port city dominated Louisiana. But the general picture in the Deep South became one of de facto single party rule. The dominance of Democrats radicalized the politics of the Deep South in the 1850s, creating a self-perpetuating dynamic of pro-slavery extremism. Candidates for office raced to establish themselves as the most ardent defender of Southern institutions and honor. There was little political incentive for Southern statesmen to pursue compromise with the North when it would imperil their electoral prospects in the next election. This dynamic helps to explain why the South's position on slavery in the territories morphed into a hardline policy that left no room for compromise with Northern Democrats: slaveholders,

⁴⁹ Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America*.

Southern Democrats held after the notorious pro-slavery *Dred Scott* decision, should receive the support of the federal government in taking the slaves into any federal territory that they so desired. This cycle of party radicalization was not unlike today's "gerrymandering," which creates de facto one-party districts that are similarly prone to radicalism. The only thing worse than two political parties is to have only one.

The mid-nineteenth century surge in immigration destabilized the political structures that tied the sections of the Union together. It was a sharp illness that weakened the Union's immune system, leaving it vulnerable to the malignant cancer of the slavery question. Would the United States have avoided Civil War had there been no Irish potato famine? It is an old exam question worth consideration. The case would go something like this: without the additional strain caused by the social conflicts surrounding the influx of Catholic immigrants (from Germany, as well as Ireland), the Whigs could have weathered the storm during the Kansas-Nebraska Act – which, after all, was a Democratic bill. If the Whigs survived, there would have been no Republican party that opposed the expansion of slavery in the territories of the West, no election of Lincoln – hence, no rational case for secessionists to use in their bid to convince their fellow Southerners that disunion was an urgent priority.

It is a seductive line of thought, but one with a weak first link in the counterfactual chain: the Whigs would not have survived the strain of the slavery question. They would have divided at some point into Northern and Southern wings, just as the other parties did (the Know-Nothings split over the slavery in the territories question in 1855, as did the Democrats in their fiery party convention in Charleston in 1860). But if the burst of immigration in the 1845-55 period no more caused the Civil War than did the tariff, it nonetheless demands our attention because it conditioned *how* and *when* the Union collapsed by accelerating the process of political realignment along sectional lines. The rapid ascent of nativist politics was the quick jab that left the old Whig vs Democratic party system stunned just before the knock-out blow was delivered in the form of the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

VI

The secession of the Southern states in the months following the election of Lincoln was a rational and calculated act aimed at creating a new geopolitical configuration in which an independent, slaveholding South could leverage its export economy to its advantage, while at the same time safeguarding its peculiar institution from anti-slavery pressures. The 1861 Confederate Constitution was an act of diplomacy, as well as internal politics. Its premise, not surprisingly, was to establish a constitutional order in which slavery would be protected and nourished. In contrast to the U.S. Constitution, that of the Confederacy explicitly mentioned slavery, no less than ten times. But Confederates did not emphasize their peculiar institution when making the case for entry into the family of nations to the antislavery foreign powers. Instead, Southerners presented their new polity as an exemplar of the right to elite-led self-determination and an exponent of the liberal practice of free trade. A month before the war started, the Confederate leadership dispatched emissaries to Britain and Europe to hand-deliver their new constitution – “the best proof which you can afford of the wisdom, moderation, and justice” of the new slaveholding nation.⁵⁰ Further rebel agents crossed the Atlantic in search of foreign loans. Thus began the slaveholding South’s diplomatic gambit that would do as much as any army or domestic policy to determine the Confederacy’s fate.

But for as much as secession and early Confederate state formation were the products of carefully calibrated geopolitical designs, also underlying these political moves were emotions: above all, fears and anxieties about the stability of the Old South’s racial hierarchy. Southerners remained terrified not only of the external forces of antislavery, but also the very slaves whom they publicly depicted as content and subservient. As secessionist conventions formed in the critical winter of 1860-61, rumors spread throughout the South of imminent plots hatched by slaves and their “black Republican” allies in

⁵⁰ Toombs to Yancey, Rost, and Mann, 16 March 1861, in James Richardson (ed.), *Messages and Papers of the Confederacy*, 2 vols. (Nashville, 1906), II, pp. 3-8. For secession as statecraft, see Schoen, *The Fragile Fabric of Union*.

the North. Such fears had long been a feature of the Old South. What gave them newfound force during the mid-nineteenth century was the erosion of Southern confidence in the Union, a development which was the product not only of domestic politics, but also alterations in the geopolitical and international economic order. It was this broader context that slaves became masters at exploiting.

The significance of such fears might seem counter-intuitive given that one of the most striking features of American slavery in the high antebellum period was its relative stability. In the opening three decades of the nineteenth century, there had been at least four major slave revolts or conspiracies: Gabriel's conspiracy (Virginia, 1800); the Deslondes revolt (Louisiana, 1811); the Denmark Vessey plot (South Carolina, 1822); and Nat Turner's insurrection (Virginia, 1831).⁵¹ The years between Nat Turner's insurrection and John Brown's raid in 1859, in contrast, lacked a rebellion or plot on this scale. There were acts of organized slave resistance, to be sure, but the masterclass's fear of an American version of the Haitian rebellion never came to pass.

The best answer to the old question of "why were there so few slave rebellions in the South" is that slaves found better ways to resist. Slaves honed their skills of resistance every day in the unending power struggles that took place on the plantations. This daily friction and conflict led them to understand that the deck was stacked against them when it came to a Caribbean-style full-on rebellion: they were a minority population in the South (whereas they had been an overwhelming majority population in Haiti); they understood that their masters could call in overwhelming power if the occasion arose; they took note of the list of failed attempts at revolt. So, instead of engaging in an act that would be tantamount to suicide, they resisted in a more effective way: they ran-away.

There were two forms of running away, which were largely – though not entirely – determined by geographic location. The first took place in the cotton states of the Deep South, where the densest

⁵¹ David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 205-30.

concentration of slaves was to be found. Slaves here knew that there was almost no chance of making it to freedom. Imagine trying to survive a journey on foot from the Gulf South all the way to Ohio – with no provisions and while being chased by hounds. Slaves might attempt to melt into the free black communities of cities such as New Orleans, or those with light skins might try to “pass” for being white and try to escape by travelling in the open amongst the racial class that kept them bonded. Such forms of running away required untold nerve, social versatility, and self-confidence. But they were rare.

Most run-aways in the Deep South did not seek a freedom that was nearly impossible to attain; rather they sought to protest specific terms of their enslavement. The two most common triggers of running away are revealing: whipping (or the threat of it) and family separation (or the threat of it). When confronted with these horrific acts of exploitation, many slaves took to the woods. This was a rational and calculated act that deprived the master of labor, the very purpose of the institution. It cost the master in further ways: he might have to take out an escaped slave ad in the local paper, or hire a patrol of poor whites to do the dirty work of tracking down. The costs went beyond the master’s pocketbook. In a society that fancied itself as the pinnacle of civilized gentility, a master whose slaves ran away became stigmatized as one who had abnegated his paternalist responsibilities. For all of these reasons, running away was an effective mode of resistance that, though mostly undertaken by individuals, sought the collective aim of protesting the most unbearable aspects of slavery. The goal was not only to make the master pay in some form for the abuse of power, but also to make him think twice before resorting to the lash or breaking up a family in future. Running away in the Deep South in this regard echoed the working class’s use of the strike to improve labor conditions in other capitalist societies of the Victorian era.⁵²

⁵² This view of run-aways – and my view of slavery generally – owes much to Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1972), pp. 648-57 (for run-aways) and John Hope Franklin and Loren Schwening, *Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

The other form of running away is the one more commonly remembered today: the “underground railroad.” These run-aways might better be called “run-towards,” for they raced toward free soil just as much as they ran-away from their enslavers. They were most often based in the borderlands of slavery – Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland, Virginia – and fled to free territory, often with the assistance of the “conductors” who managed abolitionist “stations” on the underground railroad, a loose network established by those prepared to risk their own skins to help those who sought freedom. About one thousand or so slaves reached freedom in this way each year in the decade preceding the Civil War.⁵³

The numbers were proportionately small; but the impact was great – even beyond that of individual freedom. If there was one social group that did more than any other to make the slavery question so dominant in public life in mid-nineteenth century America, it was those slaves who ran for their freedom. They destabilized slavery not only by disrupting the operations of individual planters, but more so by making it clear to any master who would see that slaves were not content with their bondage – only content to wait for the opportunity to escape. Run-aways further challenged slavery by giving abolitionist societies a popular issue in which to attract public support. The narratives written by escaped slaves, most famously that of Frederick Douglass, revealed the horrors of slavery, while at the same time empowering readers with the knowledge that the odds could be overcome through heroic action.

Perhaps most important of all was how run-aways escalated the sectional conflict by ensuring that it remained front and center upon the national political stage. Because the race to freedom entailed crossing state lines, run-aways poured into the glass of national politics that toxic cocktail of slavery and the powers of the federal government. The advocates of slavery pointed to the Constitution’s fugitive

⁵³ Eric Foner, *Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2015); R.J. M. Blackett, “Dispossessing Massa: Fugitive Slaves and the Politics of Slavery after 1850,” *American Nineteenth Century History* 10 (June 2009), pp. 119–36.

slave provision, as well as legislation from the early republic; meanwhile, Northern states advocated “state’s rights” when it came to which layer of government should determine the legal rights of those suspected of being fugitives.⁵⁴ The resulting Fugitive Slave Act, part of the broader Compromise of 1850, came down on the side of those advocating a pro-slavery federal government. Its egregious provisions diminished the legal rights of fugitives, who were denied habeas corpus and the right to testify in their own defense, while it empowered federal officials to enforce the compliance of Northern whites. What made the Fugitive Slave Act so explosive in the North was that it implicated those in the free states with the odious institution of slavery, which they now were required to support through assisting the federal state in its attempts to re-enslave those who had escaped to free soil. The fugitive slave issue became as central to antislavery culture as the federal territory issue was to antislavery politics. In the tug-of-war that was the sectional crisis, the harder the South pulled the more resistance it met; the more anti-slavery sympathies manifested themselves in the North, the harder the South pulled.

It takes much historical imagination for us today to recapture the insecurity and fear that dominated the mindset of the South’s ruling class, even when it was at the peak of its powers in the 1850s. For all their political and economic triumphs, for all the relative stability of their peculiar institution, Southern white elites were haunted by the specter of run-away slaves and the free blacks and abolitionists who aided and abetted them. The fear was that the combined forces of discontented slaves and Yankee abolitionists portended more than just the run-aways that chipped away at the foundation of slavery; the ultimate fear was that the nexus of slaves and outside agitators plotted to destroy slavery through fomenting rebellion. John Brown’s attempt to incite a slave rebellion by commandeering the federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, in 1859 was more than just another episode on the road to disunion. It was a harbinger of a future of terror. It didn’t matter that Brown’s

⁵⁴ For this inversion of the traditionally assumed positions on state’s rights, see Michael E. Woods, “‘Tell Us Something About State Rights’: Northern Republicans, States’ Rights, and the Coming of the Civil War,” *Journal of the Civil War Era*, 7:2 (June 2017), pp. 242-268.

attempt to foment a rebellion was an unmitigated failure. Southern elites might have interpreted it as a demonstration of the power of their pro-slavery firewall. But they didn't. They saw it as the beginning of a new era in which the region would be gripped by the terror of slave rebellion and Yankee infiltration. We should listen to slaveholders' terrified reaction and frantic attempts to snuff out other such plots, for it tells us something: for all their boasts of slavery's benign paternalism, for all their talk about the cheery disposition and gratitude of the slaves themselves, the masterclass's persistent fear of slave rebellion might well have been an accurate assessment of threat.

It certainly appears as such when viewed through the prism of what unfolded as soon as the Civil War began. Slaves did what they long had done, but now in previously unimaginable numbers and with previously unimaginable results: they ran toward freedom, thus setting in motion a chain of political events that would lead to the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 that forever ended slavery in the United States. The Civil War did not start as a war of liberation, but the actions of the slaves quickly made it into one. The Union Army was the magnet: wherever it went, it attracted slaves who seized the opportunity to liberate themselves. By late 1862 Union policy caught up with what was happening on the ground. Congressional acts and, most of all, Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation laid the political and constitutional groundwork for the Union's turn toward emancipation, while accelerating the ultimate end of slavery by incentivizing slaves to run-toward Union lines. Events on the ground and in Washington began to move in sync. The climax came in early 1863, when the Union formally took the previously unimaginable step of harnessing the power of the African Americans to the military effort. This policy shift occurred just as the Grant marched his powerful western army through the Mississippi Valley, the core of the cotton kingdom that soon turned into a deep well of military manpower for the North. "The colored population is the great *available* and yet *unavailed* of, force for

restoring the Union,” Lincoln wrote in March 1863, “The bare sight of fifty thousand armed, and drilled black soldiers on the banks of the Mississippi, would end the rebellion.”⁵⁵

Armed ex-slaves in blue coats marching through the heart of the plantation complex of the Old South – this was surely the most revolutionary moment in U.S. history. The chasm over slavery had intersected with a shifting international context, producing in the process a political crisis that evolved into what deserves to be called a social revolution, incomplete though it would be. What was so remarkable about its early phase was the compressed period of time in which it happened. Just before the war erupted in March 1861, Lincoln signaled that he was prepared to accept an amendment to the Constitution that would forever forbid the federal government from abolishing slavery from within the states in which it existed. Less than two years later his administration enlisted escaped slaves into the Union Army. The acceleration and compression of transformative change was not limited to emancipation and black military service. The implosion of the early Union and the North’s vigorous campaign to destroy Southern separatism set off a series of shock-waves that rippled throughout not only North America, but the wider world itself.

⁵⁵ Abraham Lincoln to Andrew Johnson, 26 March 1863, Basler (ed.), *Collected Works*, vol. 6, pp. 149-50.