CHAPTER VI

# The American Tragedy

WHEN Louis Kossuth, the Hungarian revolutionary, came to America in 1851, he was only one of many visiting Europeans who believed that America was "unequaled in general intelligence and in general prosperity," and "a glorious evidence of mankind's capacity to self-government. . . ." Some Europeans, however, could not fail to notice the fact of human slavery, which, as one English newspaper phrased it in 1845, "is a canker in the root of the seemingly fair and flourishing plant . . . and threatens to make the great republic of modern times a warning instead of an example to the world at large." The United States, John Stuart Mill tartly remarked, is a "country where institutions profess to be founded on equality, and which yet maintains the slavery of black men. . . ."

Simply because slavery was in truth a denial of American equalitarian pretensions, it increasingly dominated the affairs of the Republic. And even as it dominated the thinking of men and women, it was shaping Americans, both black and white, for a long time to come.

## *1.* THE PECULIAR INSTITUTION

Slavery was an inheritance from the colonial period, and one common to all the states of the new Republic. In the course of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, however, several of the northern states found the institution at once repugnant to their conception of liberty and of little import in their economic life. Under

such a combination of blights, slavery withered and died in a number of states before 1800; and in those states in the North where it did not, it was clearly on the road to extinction. Happily enough, farther south there was some promise of the same result if sufficient time were allowed. Southern leaders of the Revolution like Washington, Madison, Jefferson, and Patrick Henry frankly looked forward to the day when slavery would be gone completely from the Republic, though they usually meant that they wanted blacks to go, along with slavery.

The prospects for such a future were propitious in the latter part of the eighteenth century, inasmuch as tobacco, the staple of the slave-manned plantations of the South, was becoming an increasingly unprofitable crop. Should the economic and libertarian forces of the period pull in the same direction long enough, it was felt by many and hoped by even more, the anomaly of slavery among a people who believed that "all men are created equal" would soon cease to exist.

But toward the very end of the eighteenth century, two historical developments combined to infuse a new vigor into American slavery. The first and most important of these was the mechanization of English manufacturing, or the Industrial Revolution. Among the earliest industries to respond to mechanization was cotton textile manufacturing, with the immediate consequence of a precipitous increase in the demand for raw cotton, which in turn drove the price to very high levels. Prior to the Revolution no cotton of measurable quantities had been grown on the American mainland, though the West Indies had long exported the snowy "wool." The new rise in cotton prices, however, offered great incentive for the American production of the fiber. States like Georgia and South Carolina found that long-fiber cotton, which was readily separated from the seed, could be grown along their littorals and coastal islands. But efforts to expand cultivation of this sea-island cotton to the interior lands failed. The only cotton which would grow successfully on the uplands was a type in which the fiber tenaciously adhered to the seed, a fact which rendered its separation a tedious and expensive process even with slave labor.

With such economic incentive for ingenuity, it was inevitable that soon some device would be invented which would quickly and



cheaply separate the short-fiber cotton from its seed. The inventor and the invention arrived in 1793 in the form of Eli Whitney and his gin. Immediately recognized as the answer to the ambitious planters' prayers, the gin and the unflagging English demand for cotton provided the necessary encouragement for the development of the Cotton Kingdom on the lands of western Georgia and South Carolina and in the new lands to the west. Intent upon reaping their profits as quickly as possible, the planters turned to the plantation and black slaves as the most expeditious means of production. Slavery was reborn, soon to flourish as never before.

By as early as the 1820's and the 1830's slavery was firmly established in the economy of the South. Even southern states like Kentucky, Virginia, North Carolina, and Missouri, which grew little or no cotton, gained a new economic interest in slavery from the fact that they found a ready market for their excess slaves in the rapidly expanding cotton states to the south. Moreover, these upper southern states continued to use Negro slave labor on their tobacco and hemp plantations.

At the same time in the North, however, slavery had either ceased to exist or was well on the way to legal extinction. This parting of the ways between the two sections of the country was freighted with ominous significance for the South and for the future of the Republic.

Though cotton cultivation certainly brought new life to the failing institution of slavery, this is not to say that the southern people thereby became a nation of slaveholders. In fact, despite the tons of paper and myriad hours of oratory expended on the slavery question in the ante-bellum years, the slaveholder was far from being the typical Southerner. The great majority of the southern white people held no slaves at all and therefore had no direct interest in or even connection with the institution. Out of a total of some 1.6 million white families in the South in 1860, only 384,000 owned the four million slaves. And even those who held slaves did not possess them in the number legendarily associated with the Old South of magnolias and white-pillared mansions. In 1860, 20 per cent of the slaveholders owned only a single Negro; fully two thirds of them possessed fewer than twenty slaves each. Over 99 per cent of the slaveowners held 100 or fewer slaves. The possession of 500 or more slaves, according to

the Census of 1860, was indeed a rarity, since only fourteen "millionaires" enjoyed that distinction in all of the South.

Such census statistics should destroy any lingering illusion that the planter and his hundreds of slaves were typical or even common figures in Dixie. Indeed, the Southerner with any slaves at all, alone hundreds, was in the distinct minority, a curiosity amid the millions of plain people who owned no slaves at all and who, perhaps, rarely saw one. Statistically, the small yeoman farmer, working his land unassisted by the labor of black people, was the typical white Southerner in the ante-bellum era.

Furthermore, as the figures on slaveholding imply, the plantation itself was not typical either; small individually operated farms far exceeded plantations in number. In 1850, for example, the census reported 568,000 agricultural units in the South, of which only 101,335, or 18 per cent of the total, could be classified as plantations —that is, a unit producing marketable quantities of one or more of the five basic staples of cotton, tobacco, sugar, rice, or hemp. If another definition of plantation is used, such as U. B. Phillips', of a farm with twenty or more slaves, then the proportion of plantations to farms shrinks still further, to less than one in ten.

But such figures on slaveholding and plantations, though often cited to demonstrate the relative unimportance of slavery in the antebellum South, are quite misleading if one seeks to measure the economic significance of slavery.[1] It was the function in the economy performed by Negro slave labor which gave slavery its crucial place in the life of the South. For though it is true that slaves made up a minority of the labor force, and their typical habitat, the plantation, comprised a very small proportion of the region's agricultural units, the slaves on the plantations produced the bulk of the section's marketable surplus, for, by definition, the plantation was a producer of surplus.

It was from the plantations that the exports came which paid for the South's imports from the shops, factories, and warehouses of

[1] As L. C. Gray has pointed out, the census figures can be expressed in such a way as to give quite a different picture of the incidence of slavery in the South. One out of every two persons in the southern population of 14 million was either a slave or a member of a slaveholding family.



Europe; the labor of slaves provided the wherewithal to maintain lawyers and actors, cotton factors and publishers, musicians in Charleston, Senators in Washington, and gamblers on the Mississippi River boats. In short, it was slavery which maintained, as the South realized, the culture and civilization of the region. Furthermore, the majority of the planters, agrarian and status-minded as they delighted in portraying themselves, were actually adventurously, and often ruthlessly, bent on profit and reinvestment. That is, they were agricultural entrepreneurs in a capitalist society; their central importance as a class resided not in their numbers, which was admittedly small, but in their ability to accumulate surplus for investment.

Moreover, to focus attention, as some historians have done, on the large number of slaveowners who held only a few slaves is to obscure the more significant fact that the majority of the slaves were held in units of a size well adapted to surplus-producing plantations. In 1860, according to the calculation of L. C. Gray, 53 per cent of the slaves in the South were held in parcels of twenty or more. If ten is taken as a good working unit for staple production, as it might well be, then three quarters of the slaves fell into this grouping. As a labor force, then, the slaves, though fewer than the working white farmers, were much more important in the economy because black labor, unlike white, was heavily concentrated in the surplus-producing sector. In substance, whether considered as capital or as labor, the slave regime was central to the southern economy.

Implicit in what has been said up to now about the importance of slavery in the economy has been the assumption that it was profitable. Because the profitability of the plantation regime has been frequently questioned, more extended comment is in order here.

Unfortunately, in discussing this question commentators and historians have not always been clear as to what they are proving. Though ostensibly showing the unprofitability of slavery, they often merely show that it is less efficient than a hypothetically free labor system. Charles Sydnor, for example, an astute modern historian who questioned the profitability of slavery, was actually doing nothing more than arguing that it was less efficient than free labor. Frederick Olmsted, the well-known northern traveler in the antebellum South, was guilty of the same error in his discussions of the

profits derived from bound Negro labor.

There are several good general reasons for believing that, for the South as a whole, the slave regime was a profitable one during the decades immediately before the War.[2] According to the computations of Thomas Govan, for instance, the value of real and personal estate in the southern states between 1850 and 1860 jumped from $2.8 billion to $6.2 billion—an increment of over 100 per cent. It is difficult to believe that such economic growth could have taken place if slavery were unprofitable. Moreover, the ease with which the South, as compared with the other two sections, hurdled the Panic of 1857 suggests a sound and prosperous economy rather than one struggling to make ends meet.

The rising price curve for slaves—often erroneously cited as a reason why slavery would cease to show profits—is actually another proof that the South enjoyed an expanding rather than a stagnant or contracting economy. Under a slave system, as in a unionless free economy, a rising price for labor (wages in a free society) is an indication that enterprise is expanding at such a rate that the supply of labor is inadequate. The planter on old and wornout lands, it is true, may have found a rising price curve in slaves a brake upon his acquisitions of labor. But for the planter on new land, who, after all, was bidding up the price, the slave was well worth it; only with black labor could the planter reap the maximum advantage from the good cotton prices. Besides, even if the price of slaves climbed too high, demand would then fall off and the price would drop to accommodate itself to the shrunken demand.[3] In short, slavery would continue to

[2] Specific examples of profit rates do not answer the question because we have too few of them to establish their representativeness, but they do illustrate the level of return on some plantations. James K. Polk's Mississippi plantation, according to John Bassett's examination, yielded annual profits ranging from 14 to 25 per cent. Elizafield, a Georgia rice plantation, produced enough wealth for its owner to add $10,000 in real estate value and $13,000 in personal property, including slaves, in the years between 1850 and 1860. Thomas Govan has carefully calculated, from records extending over periods of from four to eleven years during the 1840's and 1850's, that three plantations, two in Georgia and one in South Carolina, earned average annual profits of 3.7 per cent (after a managerial salary of $5,000 had been deducted), 6.6 per cent, and 12 per cent, respectively.

[3] It is often argued that slavery "froze" the South's capital in labor and thereby prevented the growth of manufacturing in that region. Whatever strictures may be laid against slavery as an economic situation, this is not one of them. The argument that putting capital into slaves rendered it unavailable for investment in manufacturing confuses the capital of the individual slaveholder with that of the section. It is true that by investing his profits in additional slaves, the planter had no excess for investment in manufacturing. But those who advance this argument forget that the southern slave trader, to whom the planter paid over his cash for the labor, was perfectly free to put the money into manufacturing, if he so desired. The failure of the ante-bellum South to develop manufacturing on a scale comparable with the contemporary North is therefore not traceable, in any direct sense, to the prevalence of slavery. Rather it would seem to be bound up with the general profitability of agriculture and the outlook of an agriculturally oriented people and society.



produce profits for the economy as a whole. Finally, the researches of several modern economic historians leave no doubt that cotton production through the medium of the slave plantation was generally profitable for planters. In fact, the returns were quite competitive with what the planters could have earned if they had invested their money in northern bonds—about eight per cent a year. Since slavery was so profitable, the contention by some older historians that the Civil War was a needless war because slavery was on the way to extinction for lack of economic usefulness seems more wishful thinking than hard fact. Indeed, given the profits being returned by slave plantations, it is hard to imagine how slavery would have been ended without a war.

But there was more to the South's defense of slavery than economics; there was also race. All the profits of all the plantations cannot explain the tenacity, the passion, with which the little people of the South—that majority of the people who held no slaves—rallied to the defense of the slave system, both before the war and in the armies of the Confederacy. Their stake in slavery is found in that institution's undoubted ability to prevent Negro domination and to provide psychological status where there was no other. For few Southerners hated the Negro so much as those whose economic position was almost indistinguishable from that of the slaves. Even nonslaveholders who happened to abhor the institution for moral or economic reasons were often silenced by slavery's undoubted ability to control the Negroes.

One such back-country farmer confessed his dilemma to Olmsted. "I wouldn't like to hev 'em free, if they gwine to hang around . . . because they is so monstrous lazy. . . . Now suppose they was free, you see they'd all think themselves just as good as we. . . ." Then came the fear of intermarriage: "How'd you like to hev a nigger

steppin' up to your darter? Of course you wouldn't; and that's the reason I wouldn't like to hev 'em free; but I tell you, I don't think it's right to hev 'em slaves so; that's the fac—taant right to keep 'em as they is."

In 1860 Andrew Johnson, acknowledged spokesman for the South's little people against the pretensions of the slaveocracy, promised on the floor of Congress that in the defense of slavery all white men would be united. "When there was agitation in Tennessee, in 1856," he recalled, "I saw that the non-slaveholder was the readiest man to rise up and join the master in extirpating, if necessary, this race from existence, rather than see them liberated and turned loose upon the country."

When all is said and done, then, profits and fear of the black man offer the most succinct explanation as to why the South, in the full glare of nineteenth-century humanitarianism, hugged to its bosom the moral and economic anachronism of slavery.

## 2. ALL SLAVES ARE BLACK

In the minds of many modern white Americans, the Negro is pictured as a man who was once a slave and one, moreover, who was essentially content in that status. This reading of the past has more than academic import, for, intended or not, it partly determined the subordinate status assigned blacks in modern American culture. Other races, it is said, would not and could not have remained content in so degraded a status. But the Negro, the argument goes, is truly inferior simply because he has proved to be so adaptable to an inferior status.

There are a number of arguments which have been advanced to establish the essential contentment of the Negro in slavery, but perhaps the most persuasive is the fact that during the war, when the men were away from the plantations, there were very few slave revolts in the South. Indeed, all through the history of slavery, it can be added, the number of slave revolts was remarkably small. True, over two hundred revolts have been uncovered by diligent research, but even that number is insignificant when it is recalled that they spread out to something like two a year in an area the size of western



Europe and among a servile population of two to four millions. Furthermore, many of these revolts were nothing more than temporary labor stoppages under a system which did not provide a means whereby dissatisfaction with immediate working conditions could be registered.

Furthermore, even the most celebrated instrument of protest, the Underground Railroad, heroic as its "conductors" and "passengers" were, tells us little about the attitude of the majority of the slaves. At most, according to the Road's sympathetic historian, an average of 2,000 slaves escaped annually between 1830 and 1860; compared with the millions held in bondage, these runaways are numerically and economically inconsequential.

In the same way, the sporadic suicides, self-mutilations by a sensitive slave, or the murder of a baby by a slave mother may illustrate the extremes to which some were driven by slavery, but they afford us little insight into the feelings of the many. Most unsatisfactory in shedding light on the Negro's conception of slavery are the reminiscences of the slaves themselves. Taken down long after freedom was attained, suffused with the romantic haze of years, or written by militant Negro abolitionists, they merely inform us of the variety of reactions to the system, but tell us little of the response of the slaves in general.

Actually, the arguments summarized above and rejected as inadequate reveal more about those who advanced them than about the attitude of the Negroes toward bondage. In looking for militant opposition to slavery, historians, northern and southern alike, have viewed slavery through their own stereotypes. Both used the same test for the Negroes' reaction to slavery—militant revolt. When the rebellions did not occur in the profusion expected, the liberal historian exaggerated those he did find; the Southerner, on the other hand, concluded that the Negro was content in slavery. But because the criterion of revolts was unrealistic from the outset, it revealed little about the Negro's attitude toward his status.

Widespread revolts were just not to be expected under the conditions of southern slavery. Psychological and physical obstacles to revolt were virtually insuperable. For example, the inevitable human element in slavery—the paternalistic, reciprocal relationship obtain-

ing between many masters and their slaves—created bonds which greatly reduced the possibilities of successful or widespread revolt. E. F. Frazier, the black sociologist, for example, has observed that in many abortive conspiracies it was the faithful house slave who, to save his master, gave away the plot. Furthermore, the very rural, often frontier character of the South rendered any large-scale, organized revolt almost an impossibility, though individual, localized revolts could and did take place.

Those very areas, moreover, most susceptible to antislavery influences from the North—the border states—were also the localities where the treatment of the slave was traditionally most humane and consonant with the reciprocal loyalties of a big family. In such areas pressure for revolt was relatively weak, and distaste for violence against a good master was greatest. Moreover, it was in these same border states that the Underground Railroad was most active—a fact which meant, perforce, that the most aggressive and capable leaders were drawn off, leaving the least capable to cope with the formidable obstacles to organized revolt.

Finally, slavery must have seemed to many blacks raised within its confines a part of the natural order, with which they might not be satisfied, but toward which they were incapable of militant and aggressive opposition because of their long acculturation.

But revolts are not the only criteria which can be used for the detection of dissatisfaction with slavery. Any standards which are used, though, must take into consideration the limitations which slavery imposed on the Negroes' ability and opportunities to express discontent. Once we cease to look for revolts as the major test of dissatisfaction under slavery, then we can find important evidence of widespread discontent.

The slave songs, for example, as the expression of a whole people, reveal much about the inner reactions of the Negroes to their lot. Rarely can a song of real exaltation be found; but the words of discouragement, dissatisfaction, and melancholy appear in profusion: "Nobody knows de trouble I've had"; "Why don't you give up de world?"; "My Father, how long?"; "We'll soon be free, de Lord will call us home." Sometimes the songs made direct reference to the burdens and anxieties of slavery, as in "O run, nigger, run, for the patrol will catch you"; "[Plantation] Bell da ring"; "Go in the wilderness"; then, finally, there are the many songs which bemoan the separation from loved ones—certainly a reflection of the realities of slavery.



Additional evidence that the Negroes were generally discontented with slavery is found in the fact that they escaped when a real opportunity to do so was presented to them. During the war, thousands of slaves deserted the plantations as the federal troops approached, seeking refuge and freedom within the Union lines. Moreover, over 185,000 Negroes, most of whom were former slaves, voluntarily joined the Union Army to make war on the slave South.

Another indication of the widespread discontent under slavery is the superstitious reverence and awe in which many blacks held the name of their emancipator. This sentiment was prevalent among former slaves even before Lincoln suffered his martyr's death and while they still had not tasted much of the sweets of freedom. It might also be added that southern slaveholders themselves testified to the Negro's desire for freedom when they acknowledged that manumission was the greatest boon a master could bestow upon a faithful Negro.

When these signs of pervasive discontent are taken together with the sporadic revolts, the conspiracies, the runaways, and the individual acts of defiance, a pattern of mass dissatisfaction with slavery is the inescapable conclusion. Contrary to the apologetics of southern slavery and modern myths, blacks were no more natural slaves than other people.

In an earlier chapter we have already seen that the close association between the stigma of slavery and the Negro began early in the history of American society. The reinvigoration of slavery during the nineteenth century rendered that original attachment even more close. The most obvious measure of the stigma that had been fastened upon the Negro race by the middle of the nineteenth century was the legal status of the southern free Negro, of whom there were about 250,000 in 1860.[4]

[4] There were also about a quarter of a million free Negroes in the North in 1860. There they were subjected to as severe social discrimination as in the South, but legal discrimination was much milder.

The freedom of Negroes was entirely dependent upon their ability to maintain it; all men of black or brown skin in the South were presumed to be slaves unless their freedom papers or custom could prove the contrary. With zealous slave catchers not always careful to notice the limits of their authority, the tendency of the law was strongly in the direction of slavery. Indeed, sometimes the special criminal law for free Negroes created avenues for a return to bondage, as in Maryland, where punishment for first offenders included sale outside the state for a term of years—and some so punished apparently never returned to freedom.

But even if the blacks could prove their freedom, the quality of their liberty was strained. They could not travel in the same cars, live in the same hotels, or attend the same churches as whites; in some states, like North Carolina, they were excluded from the slaves' church meetings as well. Economically their job opportunities were limited by law and custom; and though political opportunities and privileges were denied them, they were taxed the same as whites, where additional taxes were not levied upon them.[5]

In a society justifying slavery as the proper status for the black race, there was little place for the free Negro; he was a pariah. As the defense of slavery in terms of race mounted through the 1850's, southern legislation increasingly reflected this view in a most literal fashion. In most states of Dixie, for instance, all newly manumitted Negroes were required to leave the state, an additional price thus being exacted from them for their liberty. Tennessee, Texas, Louisiana, and Maryland, in the last years of the slave era, enacted legislation designed to facilitate the enslavement of these anomalous persons. Arkansas actually passed legislation in 1859 to compel the emigration, on pain of enslavement, of all free Negroes in the state.

[5] Despite such restrictions on their economic opportunities, free Negroes in the South, particularly in cities like Charleston and New Orleans, owned considerable amounts of property. Estimates of the property run to several millions of dollars, including, in some cases, ownership of Negro slaves. The life of one free Negro, that of William Johnson of Natchez, has been documented by the publication of his diary in 1951, edited by W. R. Hogan and E. A. Davis. Johnson was born a slave in 1809, was emancipated in 1820, and soon became a respectable barber for whites. His business flourished in Natchez, where he employed several other free Negroes in his barber shop and earned enough to lend money and invest in local enterprises. He often employed white men on his farm and even owned several Negro slaves. He was murdered in 1851 by a white man, who could not be convicted, though three trials were held, because the only witnesses to the slaying were Negroes—and they could not testify against a white man. At his death, Johnson was worth at least $25,000, a huge sum in 1850.



Unless he accepted the protection of slavery, the southern free person of color was visited with all the responsibilities of freedom and precious few of its privileges and immunities. Is it any wonder, then, that free Negro William Bass petitioned in 1859 for permission to submit to a master? His position as free Negro, he wrote, "is more degrading, and involves more suffering in this State, than that of a slave, who is under the care, protection and ownership of a kind and good master." As a free person of color, he continued, he "is preyed upon by every sharper," has little money, though able-bodied and capable of working. Moreover, he "is charged and punished for, every offense," whether guilty or not, "committed in the neighborhood."

For all his inferior position, however, the free Negro was feared in the South, for he always stood as a potential nucleus around which servile insurrection might organize. It was for this reason that the southern states in the 1840's and 1850's increased the obstacles to manumission, often to the point of prohibition. Some states, as we have seen, endeavored to hound them out of the community completely. South Carolina and five other southern states decreed, in their unassuageable anxiety, that free Negroes who came into port as ships' crew members had to spend the time of their sojourn in jail.

But the enduring impress of slavery was most deeply felt by the Negro who was a slave, and in 1860 over four million of the 4.3 million Negroes who lived in the South were held in bondage. To all intents and purposes, therefore, the image in which the Negro beheld himself, and in which white men beheld him, was largely determined by his actual status under slavery.

Unlike the Indian who was enslaved, blacks entered American slavery largely stripped of their native culture. Even anthropologists like Melville Herskovits, who maintain that some African cultural traits survived in America, cannot list more than a handful of minor customs of speech and dress to buttress their case. The culture of the Negroes was inevitably limited to that which slavery provided and which a slave status permitted them to absorb from the white men with whom they lived and worked.

The very demeanor of blacks was conditioned by slavery. Under

the duress of the whip they learned the need for deferential behavior, recognized that they must present happy faces to masters and mistresses, and that to appear too smart or too ready around white folks could be dangerous. Habits of work, responsibility, and self-respect were geared to the low standard set by slavery. Compelled to work, though deriving very little direct benefit from it, and exercising little responsibility in their work, slaves could easily become shiftless and careless, as their masters often complained. Some masters, it is true, offered work incentives to their slaves, but most thought that if too many opportunities were provided, the slaves would become "uppity" and hard to handle. One Charlestonian, for example, spoke of the "baneful effects" of hiring out slaves because the practice produced in them an unwillingness "to return to the regular life and domestic control of the masters." Laws in most of the southern states prohibited the teaching of reading and writing to slaves; and though some planters did not obey the law, there were many who did not need the law to remind them that even a partly educated slave could be at least difficult and at most dangerous. In the clearer air of the eighteenth century, Southerner Thomas Jefferson recognized the moral crippling which slavery inflicted upon the Negro. "That disposition to theft," he wrote, with which they "have been branded must be ascribed to their situation, and not to any depravity of their moral sense."

Perhaps the most enduring monument to slavery and its effects upon blacks was the elaboration of the doctrine of Negro inferiority. As we have seen, this belief began as early as the seventeenth century; but during the last decade of the ante-bellum period, the doctrine was dressed up in pseudoscientific garb and elevated to the position of a principal argument in justification of a labor system the world's morality had outgrown. "The Negro races stand at the lowest point in the scale of human beings, and we know no moral or physical agencies which can redeem them from their degradation," wrote Dr. J. C. Nott, the South's leading ethnologist in the 1850's. "It is clear," he concluded, "that they are incapable of self-government, and that any attempt to improve their condition is warring against an immutable law of nature." Slavery's boldest and learned apologist, publicist J. D. B. De Bow, contended that the physical differences between



Negro and Caucasian rendered them morally and politically different. The "physical differences between the two races," he wrote, are so great "as to make what is wholesome and beneficial for the white man, as liberty, republican and free institutions, etc., not only unsuitable to the Negro race, but actually poisonous to its happiness."

The disabilities which slavery imposed made proof of black people's inferiority deceptively easy. As a slave the Negro was trained to be an inferior; then this very inferiority was used to support the argument that he was incapable of improvement. Only an occasional example of a successful free Negro could refute this circular reasoning, but such evidence was so limited that it could easily be dismissed as exceptional. In the 1980's, with discrimination against blacks continuing, although less virulently and pervasively after the civil rights achievements of the 1960's, a variety of the old vicious circle remains, confusing the thinking of white Americans on the nature and potentialities of black Americans.

### 3. BUT ALL WHITE PEOPLE ARE NOT FREE

Unquestionably, blacks felt the impress of slavery more profoundly than any other Southerners, but the whites of the region were also touched by an institution which was central to their way of life. This was true despite the fact that the bulk of the white people had no immediate connection with the "peculiar institution."

By far the largest class of white men were yeoman farmers, of whom perhaps as many as 80 per cent, according to Frank Owsley, owned their own land—a happy situation not duplicated in the twentieth-century South. Generally prospering in the expanding southern economy of the fifties, the common man of that section was quite remote from the conventional poor white conjured up by the fertile imagination of the abolitionists of that day or dwelt upon by the southern "realists" of our own.

But with all due respect to these independent, hard-working, God-fearing farmers of the Old South, their numerical superiority does not overbalance the influence exerted by the slaveholding class. Through the possession of black labor, the small class of slaveowners actually dominated the economic, political, and intellectual institutions of the

whole white South. And by virtue of this fact the South's civilization was increasingly shaped to fit the needs of the slave system.

In the fundamental matter of land distribution, for example, the owners of slaves tended to command the richest soil areas—a situation which was at once an explanation and a consequence of their prominent position in the Old South. It is true, as some southern historians have made clear, that the elbowing out of the yeoman by the slaveholder was not absolute, for these historians have shown that the two classes often held adjacent farms. But the contention that the slaveholders and nonslaveholders generally held lands of equal quality is hard to accept in the face of other evidence. It has been shown, for example, that on 300 selected holdings in Alabama and Mississippi, the cash value of the land per acre increased as the size of the holding. Thus in farms of one to fifty acres, the value per acre was $7.20; but in farms of 501 to 1,000 acres the value was $19.81 per acre, over twice as much. Furthermore, on a broader scale, as is well known, areas of the South having a high concentration of slaves coincided remarkably well with the richest land areas, e.g., along the Mississippi River Delta and in the so-called black belts stretching across central Georgia and Alabama.

The superior position of the slaveholder consisted of more than his having the best land; his class were more often landholders than were the nonslaveholders. In 1860 in the Georgia black belt, for instance, 92 per cent of the slaveowners were also owners of land, but only 58 per cent of the nonslaveholders were. Even in eastern Tennessee, generally thought to be the stronghold of the nonslaveholders, 92 per cent of the holders of slaves owned land, while only 55 per cent of the slaveless farmers were so fortunate. About the same proportions for the two classes obtained in the cotton-growing western part of the state. As a matter of fact, these proportions of land distribution among slaveholders and nonslaveholders held generally for all the states studied by Frank Owsley and his students at Vanderbilt University. It seems clear, therefore, that the great bulk of the landless folk in the South were nonslaveholders.

Such a distribution of the land further emphasizes what was obvious to the travelers and commentators of the period, namely, that to rise in southern ante-bellum society one needed slaves; the source and measure of wealth in this highly commercialized agriculture were not merely acres, but land worked by blacks. In this situation lies the weakness of considering the plain folk the backbone of the antebellum South. Significance in a capitalistic economy, as we have observed before, is measured by wealth accumulation, not by numbers of persons.



Even southern white men remote from the plantation, like urban wage laborers, felt the effects of slavery. Negro bondage, for instance, must bear a good share of the responsibility for the fact that labor organization in the South lagged behind that in the North. In the South, "the courts were openly antagonistic to striking workers," Richard Morris has written, because many southern officials believed "that strike action, like anti-slavery agitation, was an attack on their 'peculiar' institution." And where official attitudes played no part, the success of a strike was always threatened by the omnipresent possibility that slaves could be hired to break it as happened at the Tredegar Iron Works at Richmond in 1847.

In still other ways, nonslaveholders were involved in the protection of slavery. It was the yeomen who held no slaves who were expected to make up the slave patrols which acted as the rural police of the slave society. Furthermore, the law prescribed severe penalties for any white Southerner who seemed to threaten the slave system. Heavy fines awaited the man who traded with slaves or taught them to read or write. In several states a white man was liable to capital punishment if he encouraged or aided a slave to escape. All the southern states declared it a felony to write or say anything which directly or indirectly might lead to rebellion or discontent among the Negroes. Even fraternization between a white man and another man's slave could catch the former in the tangles of the law.

Finally, it should not be forgotten that because the defense of slavery required Negroes to be incompetents in the law, justice sometimes miscarried. For example, when Professor George Whyte of William and Mary was poisoned by his nephew, the culprit could not be convicted because the principal witness against him was a Negro, legally incapable of testifying against a white person.

Since the law was so solicitous of the peculiar institution, it comes as no surprise that slaveholders dominated the political life of the

South. This is not to say, it should be quickly added, that the South was ruled by a hereditary aristocracy or anything like it. That is no more than a hoary legend which ignores the many leaders of the region, like Alexander Stephens, Albert Gallatin Brown, Andrew Johnson, and Joseph Brown, who came from the very bottom of southern society. Indeed, the bulk of the Cotton Grandees of the late antebellum South were self-made men rather than sons of wealthy planters or aristocrats.

But regardless of their social and economic origins, the slaveholders dominated the political leadership of the South, especially on the national stage. Because slavery was wealth and because slavery was race, the peculiar institution lay at the core of southern politics, determining issues and influencing men in relation to itself, just as it ran like a dark thread through the fabric of the economy. Whereas in the 1830's and 1840's the South enjoyed two major political parties, by the middle of the fifties there was only one. The need to defend slavery at all costs destroyed the once powerful Whig party of the South. The great planters had long been more Whiggish than Democratic, but the tendency of northern Whigs to be antislavery by 1850 pushed more and more of the southern Whig planters into the once detested Democracy. At one time in the South—during the 1830's and 1840's—nonslaveholders and slaveholders had strongly disagreed over matters like the National Bank, the tariff, Andrew Jackson, and popular government, but the growing necessity to defend slavery finally overrode all these differences. In the name of racial solidarity, the issue of slavery covered over class antagonisms and gave a new, but false, unity to southern political thought. For more than a century thereafter Southerners were effectively denied an adequate two-party system to express the diversity of their interests and political objectives. Only since the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the re-enfranchisement of blacks in the South has a two-party system returned to the southern states.

Since the preservation of slavery was now the South's litmus test of acceptable politics, it was hardly to be expected that the frankly but mildly antislavery Republican party could receive a hearing in the Cotton Kingdom. And this despite the fact that the only antislavery principle of which the Republicans were guilty—opposition to the extension of slavery into the territories—was one in which most small southern farmers had no direct economic interest. So finely meshed was the political screening in the South in 1860 in behalf of slavery that Abraham Lincoln's name never appeared on a ballot in ten of the eleven states which were to make up the Confederacy. For millions of southern voters the compulsive defense of slavery and the fear of the Negro effectively restricted their choice of candidates as compared with that enjoyed by voters in the rest of the nation.



It should not be forgotten, however, that this political identification of the nonslaveholders with the interests of the slaveholders was freely undertaken, for it was carried out within the context of almost universal white manhood suffrage. To the majority of Southerners, the acquisition of slaves and the augmentation thereof were obviously a *summum bonum,* a recognized and desirable avenue of upward social movement. If the coin of economic and political advancement was slave ownership, few whites in the South thought the coinage base. But it was precisely this popular acceptance of slavery which made the institution the determinant of the contours of southern life.

If political freedom of choice was circumscribed by the demands of slavery, other fields of thought could not escape either. Already we have noticed that slavery saddled the southern people with a belief in the racial inferiority of Negroes which has persisted into our own time. Slavery also seemed to require the repudiation of one of the South's most precious gifts to America: the Jeffersonian, humanistic belief in the equality of all men.

In the waning years of the eighteenth century, the great Virginians had defended slavery only as an unwelcome inheritance from the past —necessary but evil. By the 1830's, the South was prepared to defend it as both necessary and good. "But let me not be understood as admitting," John C. Calhoun said in 1837, "even by implication, that the existing relations between the two races in the slaveholding States is an evil:—far otherwise: I hold it to be a good, as it has thus far proved itself to be to both and will continue to prove so if not disturbed by the fell spirit of abolition."

Caught in the contradiction between equality and slavery, the South chose slavery. Particularly was Jefferson's disquieting Declaration singled out for attack and scorn. "Is it not palpably nearer the

truth to say," asked Chancellor Harper of South Carolina, "that no man was ever born free and that no two men were ever born equal, than to say that all men are born free and equal?" "It is as much in the order of nature," he further wrote, "that men should enslave each other, as that other animals should prey upon each other." For many Southerners the paradox of the Declaration of Independence and slavery was sufficiently embarrassing for them to want to forget it. After 1840, the Democratic party, out of deference to southern sensibilities, ceased to include the manifesto of its founder in its platform. The suspicious profusion in which the defenses of inequality were advanced betrayed the moral conflict within the mind of the South. As early as the 1830's, Senator Pickens of South Carolina had conceded that "the truth is, the moral power of the world is against us. It is idle to disguise it." By mid-century the conflict of values had taken on excruciating sharpness. For by that time few nations of western European civilization still tolerated, much less defended, human slavery. It was true that semicivilized and reactionary Imperial Russia persisted in retaining serfdom, but that only further threw in embarrassing relief the anachronistic nature of American slavery.

During the forties and fifties, with the moral condemnation of slavery growing ever stronger outside the South, the demand for conformity and repression of dissent within the South became more frantic and insistent. Slowly the region was retreating into a pattern of life increasingly divergent from that of the rest of the nation. The South at one time had been the home of abolitionist societies, radical political clubs, and deistic thinkers, but now it was turning increasingly hostile to all thought which seemed to threaten the stability or survival of the slave system.

Reformers found an uncongenial atmosphere south of Mason and Dixon's line, because it was well known that reformers interested in temperance, women's rights, international peace, and so forth, frequently maintained close ties with abolitionists. Taking cognizance of these interconnections, one North Carolina editor boasted that the southern press "has uniformly rejected the isms which infest Europe and the Eastern and Western states of this country." Southern scientist Henry Ravenal urged the South to "shrink intuitively from all the novel and revolutionary notions which are infecting the masses of



Europe and the free states of the North." Nor was it an accident that out of the 130 co-operative utopias established in the United States between 1800 and 1860, only two of them were in the South. The liberal fringes of religious life were snipped off too. By 1860 the Unitarian Church had all but disappeared from the South—a casualty, in large part, to the fact that most of its ministers were antislavery. "Scratch a reformer and you'll find an abolitionist" was the southern response to the intellectual and social ferment of the age of Emerson and Amelia Bloomer.

Where the ideas of the nineteenth century were congenial to southern ante-bellum values, they spread extravagantly. Though the novels of a romantic like Sir Walter Scott were popular in North and South alike, it was in the latter section that he became a literary idol. Upon his death Richmond newspapers were edged in black. Only in the South were knightly joustings held in full pseudo-mediaeval armor and regalia. It was from Scott's books that Southerners lifted the word "southron," which they self-consciously applied to themselves. The romantic picture of the organic, status society of the Middle Ages, which Scott dwelt on in several of his novels, seemed to shore up southern conservative ideas on society and slavery. Hence, south of the Ohio, Scott found a welcome place denied to contemporaries like Dickens and Shelley, who mixed their romanticism with urban, humanitarian, and irreligious beliefs largely foreign to the South.

Though in the main most Southerners supported slavery and were preapred to sacrifice their freedom of thought in its behalf, coercion and even bloodshed were still needed to provide that degree of uniformity which the peculiar institution seemed to require. Southern postmasters in the 1830's, for example, were given the power to remove abolitionist literature from the mails. Between 1830 and 1860, southern life was punctuated with numerous raids and mobbings of abolitionists and antislavery printers and speakers.

Northerners resident in the South were suspect merely on the ground of their nativity. For example, two northern teachers living in South Carolina were asked to leave town by a local committee, with the town's newspaper justifying such a manifestation of xenophobia in the following fashion: "Nothing definite is known of their abolition or insurrectionary sentiments," the paper conceded, "but

being from the North and therefore necessarily imbued with doctrines hostile to our institutions their presence in this section has been obnoxious and at any rate suspicious." Even a proslavery, though Northern-born, educator, President Barnard of the University of Mississippi, was compelled to leave the South because of suspicion arising out of his nativity.

Nor were native Southerners exempt from coercive action. A college student who was discovered in Tennessee with abolitionist literature was given twenty lashes as a warning. An antislavery man in western Virginia in the 1850's was stripped, tied to a tree, and beaten until he agreed to sell his property and leave the state. Though violence of this kind could be duplicated in the North during the 1830's, by the last decade of the ante-bellum period denial of civil liberties to abolitionists in the free states was over. But in the South such restrictions increased and were actually extended to include anyone suspected of unorthodox sentiments, antislavery or otherwise.

Increasingly aware that southern ideas were different from those commonly accepted in the North, southern newspapers sought to insulate the section from outside ideas by calling for the purging of textbooks used in southern schools. They also urged the establishment of new colleges in the South in order to keep southern students out of the northern institutions, meanwhile suggesting that southern boys refrain from going North for their education. Southern xenophobes rejoiced when dozens of southern students left their northern schools in protest against the John Brown raid in 1859. A Professor Hedrick at the University of North Carolina was dismissed because he admitted that he intended to vote for Free-Soiler and Republican John C. Frémont in the election of 1856. The Raleigh *Standard* justified such tactics by writing "If there be Frémont men among us, let them be silenced or required to leave. The expression of Black Republican opinion in our midst is incompatible with our honor and safety as a people."

The South retreated within itself in the area of religion. In his book *Freedom of Thought in the Old South,* Clement Eaton attributes, in part, the growth of a narrow religious orthodoxy and the decline of Jeffersonian deism in the South of the 1830's and 1840's to the exigencies of the defense of slavery. "Only by a narrow and literal interpretation of the Scriptures," Eaton writes, "could slavery be given the high moral sanction of the Church." By the middle of the 1840's, southern and northern Baptists and Methodists could no longer remain in the same national organizations, so sectional churches were formed.



The significance of these efforts at conformity lies not in the force which may or may not have been employed. The important point is that on the whole the southern people during these years acquiesced in the suppression of free speech, free press, free assembly, and the free circulation of ideas in the name of slavery and the society which flourished upon it.

In this is to be seen the tremendous impact of Negro slavery upon the white South; the immediate victim was the liberalism of the eighteenth-century Virginians who had done so much to create a free Republic. The long-range consequence was a heritage of mob violence and extralegal sanctions in support of racial superiority—a heritage which has cast a pall over southern justice ever since. Truly history, in the form of slavery, laid a terrible curse upon the South, and by the middle years of the nineteenth century its exorcising was more difficult than ever before. But unhappily for the future of the region and the nation, the best the leaders of the South could do was to call the curse a blessing. This was the South's and the nation's tragedy.

The central place which slavery occupied in southern life has a direct bearing upon the coming of the Civil War—that culmination of the long history of slavery in America. If one is not concerned with the morality of owning slaves, then the fact that southern leaders were mainly slaveholders and defenders of slavery is no more worthy of comment than the fact that northern leaders usually possessed more land or money than their fellows and ardently defended property. But by the middle of the nineteenth century, for most people of the North and of western Europe, slaves were not property, but human beings. For slavery not only manifestly denied the American creed of equality; it was at variance with the prevailing values of western European civilization.

It is true that at one time Northerners and Europeans held slaves without moral qualms. For this reason, some writers have argued that

Northerners and Europeans were hypocritical to belabor the South for its continued adherence to slavery. But this kind of argument misses the point that morals change over time; what was quite acceptable morally in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries was no longer so in the nineteenth. To many people of the North, southern slavery was not an economic question, which the Southerners insisted it should be, but a moral issue transcending economic interests. The more the support of slavery was made the test of loyalty to the South, the more the region was estranged from the rest of the nation and the world of the nineteenth century.

Under such circumstances, it was not surprising that Southerners should begin to think of themselves as a separate people with their own culture and way of life. In an important sense, therefore, slavery and the agricultural setting in which it flourished constituted the primary "cause" for the Civil War.

Incidents like the Kansas-Nebraska Act, "Bleeding Kansas," the Osawatomie Massacre, the beating of Senator Sumner, the Dred Scott decision, the John Brown raid, all played their parts in the drama by providing occasions for the hardening of the differences between the sections. But underlying all of these circumstances and events was the broad and fundamental fact that a people who adhered to a slave system in the middle of the nineteenth century inevitably became a people different from those Americans who did not. As Calhoun said at the end of his life, it was "difficult to see how two people as different and hostile can exist together in one common Union." The various incidents of the 1850's fed the rising fires of southern nationalism, until in 1860–61 the South demanded self-determination. "When you deny to us the right to withdraw from a Government which . . . threatens to be destructive of our rights," Jefferson Davis told the Senate in 1861, "we but tread in the path of our fathers when we proclaim our independence, and take the hazard." The Civil War was actually the War for Southern Independence.

### 4. THE AMERICAN DILEMMA

Slavery furnished more than the basis for southern nationalism; it also aroused a powerful counterforce in the North. Though the abolition movement was a part of the general reform impulse of the 1840's and 1850's, the broader antislavery movement which culminated in the Republican party was almost as much a consequence of the South's interminable search for total security for its "peculiar institution" as it was the result of the reform movement.



Apart from the restrictions on freedom in the South, which were demanded in the name of slavery, southern leaders also insisted that the North co-operate in the preservation of slavery. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which the South had won as a concession in the Compromise of that year, was an example of this. Under the new law the cards were heavily stacked in favor of the slave catcher. Jury trials for runaways were eliminated in the act because freestate juries were notoriously partial to escaped slaves. In a further effort to aid in the return of fugitives, the act prescribed that any commissioner who adjudged a Negro defendant a bona fide slave was to receive double the ordinary fee for his services.

Considering the proclivity of slave catchers for seizing any Negro and returning him or selling him into slavery, this law appeared to many in the North as an endeavor to extend the southern limitations on freedom into virgin fields. As a consequence, in many of the free states the act became a nullity. Then when the South, with the Kansas-Nebraska Act, further insisted upon northern support for the extension of slavery into areas where it had heretofore been prohibited, and to which it was obviously unsuited, a new political party sprang into being. This new Republican party was dedicated to halting the seemingly endless demands which the South advanced in behalf of slavery.

Prior to the advent of the Republican party in 1854–56, the opposition to slavery had come primarily from abolitionists, reformers who, out of deep moral conviction, hated slavery more than they loved the Constitution or the Union. William Lloyd Garrison, archpriest of abolition, said he would gladly permit the Constitution to be scrapped and the nation permanently divided if only Negro slavery could be ended in the United States. "No Union with Slaveholders" was the abolitionists' slogan. To such reformers slavery was a moral cancer consuming the essence of America, as it was also an insufferable injustice to blacks; to achieve its extirpation no price was too costly, no pain too great.

Despite the fact that the abolitionists were amazingly active and provocatively articulate, they never won acceptance among most Americans either north or south of the Ohio. Northerners, it is true, ceased to mob abolitionist speakers by the late 1840's, but most of the people in the North would have little to do with such radicals. Part of this glacierlike hostility stemmed from the abolitionists unabashed repudiation of the Constitution. Since slavery found sanction and legality in that document, abolitionists like Garrison called it "a covenant with death and an agreement with hell." After expressing such unconcealed contempt for the most venerated of American symbols, the abolitionists could not but fail in their attempt to galvanize the latent American belief in equality.

But if the abolitionists were unsuccessful in their efforts to arouse the North to a crusade against slavery, they did bequeath martyrs and heroes, like Owen Lovejoy, John Brown, Sojourner Truth, and many others, to the radical tradition of America. They also left an ideological Pandora's Box. For in their argument that there was a higher law than a Constitution which sanctioned slavery, they were preaching the dangerous doctrine that resistance to unjust laws is morally permissible.

The abolitionists were not the first nor the last Americans to justify breaking the law in the name of a higher morality. The speakeasy visitor during the prohibition era did it; so did the proslavery Southerner when he hurled abolitionists' printing presses into the river to silence them. More recent examples are white Southerners who refused to accept desegregation and students who resisted the draft because of the war in Vietnam. This slippery principle that laws may be broken if they flout moral opinion is obviously fraught with danger to a government of law, for there is no way to distinguish rationally among the reasons for disobeying the law. Yet, in the service of noble causes, the doctrine of the higher law has righted injustice, resisted tyranny, and protected the individual. It has also been nothing more than mob rule, denial of individual rights, and the end of government by law. In both forms, however, the idea of the higher law is historically and distinctly American.

Where the abolitionists failed, the Republican party was notably successful. Gunnar Myrdal, in his monumental study of the Negro



*in America*, has described what he calls the American dilemma—the conflict between the traditional egalitarian creed and the actual treatment accorded the Negro. Already in the 1850's the moral conflict was dividing Americans against themselves. In the South the dilemma was resolved, or at least covered over, by the outright denial of the principle of equality; the Declaration of Independence was called, among other things, a tissue of "glittering generalities." But in the North, equality was increasingly accepted as a moral imperative. The newly formed Republican party now incorporated the disquieting Declaration of Independence in its appeal to Americans. Lincoln advised in 1858, "let us discard all this quibbling about this man and the other—this race and that race, and the other race being inferior. . . . Let us discard all these things, and unite as one people, throughout this land, until we shall once more stand up declaring that all men are created equal." At another time he said, "in relation to the principle that all men are created equal, let it be as nearly reached as we can."[6]

Though the Republicans seemed to subscribe to all kinds of divergent political and economic ideas, they were united in their opposition to the spread of slavery.[7] This is not to say, however, that they were abolitionists. On at least two counts the average Republican differed from an abolitionist. For one thing, very few Republicans, though they opposed slavery, believed in social equality for Negroes.

[6] The irony inherent in the transfer of Jefferson as a party idol from the Democrats to the Republicans was not lost upon Lincoln. When asked in 1859 to participate in a Republican celebration of Jefferson's birthday, he noted that the new party now claimed the Sage of Monticello, "while those claiming political descent from him have nearly ceased to breathe his name everywhere." It was in this letter that Lincoln made his famous remark that the Republicans, unlike the Democrats with their defense of slave property, "are for both the *man* and the *dollar;* but in cases of conflict, the man before the dollar."

[7] The heterogeneity of the Republican party was not much different from that of most American political parties of importance. But in 1860, Howell Cobb, the Georgia statesman, pointed out that the heterogeneity also emphasized its essential antislavery bias. "The Black Republican party had its origin in the antislavery feeling of the North," he told his constituents. "The fact that it was composed of men of all previous parties, who then and still advocate principles directly antagonistic upon all other questions except slavery as it exists in the fifteen Southern States, was the basis of its organization and the bond of its union. Free-trade Democrats and protective-tariff Whigs, internal improvement and anti-internal improvement men, and indeed all shades of partisans, united in cordial fraternity upon the isolated issue of hostility to the South, though for years they had fought each other upon all other issues."

Lincoln spoke for many of his fellow Republicans when he said during the debates with Douglas in 1858 that he was not in favor of social equality for Negroes. The Negro, he said, "is not my equal in many respects—certainly not in color, perhaps not in moral or intellectual endowment. But in the right to eat the bread, without leave of anybody else, which his own hand earns," Lincoln added, "he is my equal and the equal of Judge Douglas, and the equal of every living man." In short, slavery was an evil because it denied the dominant American value of equality of opportunity. On this great issue, radical abolitionists and conservative Whigs, nativists and Jacksonian Democrats, could join hands in the formation of a new antislavery party.

The second point on which the Republicans differed from the abolitionists was in the lengths to which they would go to oppose slavery. The abolitionists were willing to pull the Union down about their ears if it would end slavery. The Republicans, however, were conservatives who cherished the Union and fully endorsed the safeguards which the Constitution bestowed upon slavery in the South. They would not scrap the Constitution in a frantic effort to eliminate slavery, much as they might abominate the institution.

But, when, as Lincoln said, slavery seemed about to expand into areas heretofore prohibited to it, then a stand had to be taken against it. And, in such a setting, a stand could be made without repudiating the Constitution or the sanctuary which slavery enjoyed in the South. For it had always been held—at least before the Dred Scott decision—that Congress could constitutionally prohibit slavery in the territories.

Many modern historians and some contemporaries like Daniel Webster have called the opposition to the extension of slavery into the territories a trivial reason for bringing the nation to the brink of civil war inasmuch as the area was unsuited for plantation agriculture. But once the constitutionally conservative character of the Republican party and the American people is acknowledged, then the titanic struggle over slavery in the western territories takes on a deeper meaning. Everywhere else, slavery rested on the bedrock of the Constitution; only in this narrow, constitutional sphere could the great moral issue of slave versus free labor be fought out by a people convinced of the sanctity of their Constitution.



With the formation of the Republican party, the breakup of the Union became unavoidable. The new party's very reason for being stood athwart the South's drive for the expansion of slavery, and its almost immediate popularity in the more populous and growing North stood as a warning to the slave states that in time an antislavery government would gain power in Washington.

By the late 1850's the only alternatives to disruption of the Union, given the alignment of parties and the hardening sectional attitudes, were that the North should become a slaveholding area or that the South should cease to be one. The first possibility, despite some wild predictions by Southerners like George Fitzhugh and some politically inspired warnings by Northerners like Lincoln and Seward, was out of the question. The second was equally unlikely when weighed against the profits of slavery and the anodyne which the institution provided for southern racial fears.

Tightly wrapped in their own cultural assumptions, Northerners and Southerners were now incapable of compromise. All that was left was mounting recrimination. The North was here more often the aggressor because the force of European moral opinion was on its side; for the same reason the South could not help but be apprehensive. But because the South dominated the largest and oldest political party in the country, it was also defiant.

When in 1860 the South's political ascendancy seemed about to end, the region turned to secession as the final salvation for its peculiar institution and the civilization which was built around it. Secession, though, could serve as an answer to the South's problem only if the rest of the nation agreed. As it turned out, the new Republican party proved to be not only antislavery but strongly nationalistic.

Thus the immediate consequence of slavery was a terrible and costly war between the North and the South. At bottom, all the issues between the sections, whether of an incidental nature, like the John Brown raid, or of a broad character, like the conflicts over the tariff or the homestead bill, were in fact and in logic reducible to the question of slavery. To the men at the time and to an increasing number of modern historians, without the issue of slavery to divide the two sections, there would have been no Civil War.

Once the war came, however, it brought to an abrupt close one period of American history and opened the door to another of a much different order. The Civil War was not only a testing of the American people as a nation; it was a watershed in their history.

CHAPTER VII

# Bringing Forth a New Nation

THE disruption of the American Union in 1861 has been explained in many ways, but, viewed against the perspective of European civilization as a whole, it was primarily the work of two of the most powerful forces then abroad in the world. One, as we have seen, was the rising tide of reform; the other was the elemental emotion of nationalism.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, nationalism was spreading like a fever through the ancient body of Europe; in America it seized the imaginations of the people, too, leading them into the most costly and bloody war of the century. For two decades the southern people had been growing in the conviction that their culture, entwined about the institution of Negro slavery, made them a separate nation. The election of 1860 precipitated this feeling into secession from the Union and an experiment in nationhood. But developing alongside this southern nationalism was another, one which insisted that the Union was eternal and indissoluble. Of this brand of nationalism, Abraham Lincoln was the Bismarck, as Jefferson Davis was the Kossuth of the South. It was Lincoln who with "blood and iron" sustained and cemented the loose confederation of the Fathers and created a new nation.

"Again and again it has been proved," wrote Heinrich Treitschke, the German nationalist, "that it is war which turns a people into a nation, and that only great deeds, wrought in common, can forge the