

VII

The Irrepressible Conflict

In the heat of the congressional campaign of 1858, Senator William H. Seward of New York described two sharply different ways in which his countrymen then viewed the American sectional conflict. Some, he said, "think it is accidental, unnecessary, the work of interested or fanatical agitators, and therefore ephemeral. . . ." Seward did not agree with them. Rather, in a memorable phrase, he argued that "It is an irrepressible conflict between opposing and enduring forces. . . ." In advancing this deterministic concept Seward did not mean to suggest that a civil war was inevitable—he did not himself think that to be the case—only that the issues dividing North and South were genuine and substantial and that conflict between them was a natural and logical result. He thus defined a problem that troubled the politicians of his generation as it has since troubled American historians: Was the conflict that ultimately culminated in the Civil War *repressible* or *irrepressible*?

Among historians the problem is an old one, and over the years they have argued the case for each interpretation to near exhaustion. Yet, this historiographical debate is worth

reviewing, first, because its nonhistorical sources need clarification, second, because the present generation of historians has not resolved the issues, and, third, because an analysis of the implications of each position is a productive way to get at the question of Civil War causation.

The irrepressible conflict, as Seward perceived it, arose "from two radically different political systems: the one resting on the basis of servile labor, the other on the basis of voluntary labor of free men." As the country developed economically and expanded geographically these "antagonistic systems" came into closer contact, and collisions resulted. Sooner or later, Seward believed, the country would "become either entirely a slave-holding nation or entirely a free-labor nation." Similarly, Abraham Lincoln, in his "House Divided" speech, maintained that the Union could not "endure, permanently half *slave* and half *free*"; it would become "*all* one thing, or *all* the other." Lincoln, too, believed that the sectional conflict was both real and irrepressible and that in some manner it had to be resolved. "All knew that this [slave] interest was somehow the cause of the war," he said in his second inaugural address. "To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union even by war."

From a different perspective, Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States of America, also found slavery to be at the root of an irrepressible conflict. In a message to the Confederate Congress, April 29, 1861, Davis attributed the conflict to "a persistent and organized system of hostile measures . . . devised and prosecuted" by northern congressmen "for the purpose of rendering insecure the tenure of property in slaves." With an interest of such "overwhelming magnitude," "worth thousands of millions of dollars" and "indispensable" to the prosperity of southern agriculture, jeopardized by the conduct of the North, Davis said, "the people of the Southern States were driven . . . to the adoption of some

course of action to avert the danger with which they were openly menaced."

After the Civil War Seward's concept of an irrepressible conflict involving issues of fundamental importance became, in various forms, the predominant view among historians of the sectional crisis. In the early postwar years, New England partisans, such as Henry Wilson and James Schouler, described an essentially moral struggle between northern champions of free labor and an aggressive southern Slave Power.¹ Around the turn of the century, James Ford Rhodes depicted an irrepressible conflict in a more balanced and less judgmental style, but he still located the source in the moral issue of slavery, especially in efforts to expand it into western territories, which embittered the politics of the 1840s and 1850s. Though acknowledging the "risk in referring any historical event to a single cause," Rhodes nevertheless was convinced that slavery alone caused the Civil War. Indeed, he asserted, "The question may be isolated by the incontrovertible statement that if the negro had never been brought to America, our Civil War could not have occurred." The inability of North and South to reconcile the "opposing moral and social forces" generated by slavery made the conflict "inevitable."²

Twentieth-century historians who focused on slavery as the source of an irrepressible conflict usually placed the sectional crisis in a richer social and cultural context. For example, Edward Channing related slavery to "the social and material distinctions which separated the country into two irreconcilable sections." In effect, the South had become a nation within a nation, and the "War for Southern Independence," as Channing called it, resulted from the inability of two societies with profound cultural differences "to live side by side within the walls of one government."³ In like manner, Arthur C. Cole wrote of the "throbbing forces of enlightenment, culture, and humanitarian reform" in the North "that challenged the social institutions of the South," until the Re-

publican victory of 1860 "severed the last bonds that held the cotton kingdom within the Union."⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., though returning to a moralistic interpretation somewhat akin to that of writers of the late nineteenth century, emphasized that every "moral movement in history has required a certain configuration of social and economic conditions for success. . . ." Ultimately, "the emotion which moved the North . . . to battlefield and bloodshed was moral disgust," but only after "the claims of the South began to constitute a concrete threat to Northern political intentions. . . . The political grounds of antislavery were as indispensable as the religious, and perhaps more potent in stirring up the common man."⁵

The most ambitious synthesis of what might be termed the slavery-cultural interpretation is incorporated in Allan Nevins's *Ordeal of the Union*. Nevins's conclusion that the "main root of the conflict . . . was the problem of slavery," together with the related problem of "race adjustment," caused some reviewers to classify his work as a modern version of Rhodes. However, he wrote at length about a conflict of cultures and concluded that "South and North . . . were rapidly becoming separate peoples. . . . With every passing year, the fundamental assumptions, tastes, and cultural aims of the two sections became more divergent." Cultural differences in turn created an atmosphere "in which emotions grew feverish; in which every episode became a crisis, every jar a shock."⁶ *Ordeal of the Union* is a monument to the historiographical triumph of the concept of an irrepressible conflict arising from the divergent cultures and values associated with the free-labor and slave-labor systems of North and South.

In recent years two Marxist historians have developed another version of the slavery-cultural interpretation of sectionalism. Eugene D. Genovese, dissatisfied with the strict historical materialism of traditional Marxist thought, premised his analysis on the existence of a paternalistic slave-plantation

system, from which emerged a ruling class with a world view and a cluster of "prebourgeois" values markedly different from those of the middle-class North. Rejecting "the crass, vulgar, inhuman elements of capitalist society," Southerners found it increasingly difficult to coexist with a "hostile, powerful, and aggressive Northern capitalism." By the mid-nineteenth century the South had developed "a special civilization built on the relationship of master to slave," and, according to Genovese, this was "the root of its conflict with the North." The slaveholders' decision to secede was both a recognition of the threat of the bourgeois world and their ultimate protest against it.⁷ Eric Foner, focusing on the North, stressed the free-labor ideology of the Republicans, "their devotion to the mores and values of northern society, and . . . their conviction of the superiority of the North's civilization to that of the South." The final crisis grew out of the Republicans' confidence "that in the sectional struggle, which one newspaper summarized as a contest between 'Northern Progress and Southern Decadence,' southern civilization must give way before the onslaught of the modern world."⁸ Thus Genovese and Foner together portrayed two sections with goals and cultural values so antagonistic as to make conflict a logical if not inevitable result.

Early in the twentieth century some historians, while equally certain that the sectional conflict was irrepressible, denied the importance of the slavery issue and emphasized instead the differences between the northern and southern economies and the clash, not of cultures and ideologies, but of material interests. "To say that the Republican party was organized, or the Civil War waged to abolish chattel slavery," argued the Marxist Algie M. Simons, "is but to repeat a tale invented . . . as a means of glorifying the party of plutocracy. . . ." Rather, the crisis took shape with the emergence of a northern capitalist class, which, by 1850, was "destined soon to seize the reins of political power." When at last this political revolution

occurred, the southern slaveholders had no alternative but to secede. "The Civil War therefore was simply a contest to secure possession of the 'big stick' of the national government"; it was fought "that the capitalist class might rule."⁹

However, economic determinism as a frame of reference for the irrepressible conflict made its impact on American historiography less through the writings of Marxists than through those of the Progressive Charles A. Beard. Noting the tendency of historians to stress slavery as the source of sectional tension, Beard observed that slavery was "no simple, isolated phenomenon." It was a labor system, "the foundation of the southern aristocracy." This aristocracy, in alliance with western farmers, opposed public policies that were favorable to capitalism and thus frustrated the efforts of northern merchants and manufacturers to obtain federal protection and support. Hence, Beard contended, "It took more than a finite eye to discern where slavery as an ethical question left off and economics—the struggle over the distribution of wealth—began." He found the southern claim that state rights was the basic issue equally superficial. At the root of every congressional debate over state rights and federal power was some concrete economic issue, not a mere constitutional abstraction. Thus, again, "It took more than a finite eye to discern where . . . [southern] opposition to the economic system of Hamilton left off and . . . their affection for the rights of the states began." Beard thought it significant that in the North abolitionists were always a small minority, that no major party ever wrote a platform demanding the abolition of slavery, and that Southerners were far from consistent supporters of state rights.¹⁰

Turning to the productive systems of the North and South, Beard explained the sectional crisis as a consequence of their "inherent antagonisms" intensified during a period of rapid economic growth. "The periphery of the industrial vortex of the Northeast was daily enlarging, . . . and the area of vir-

gin soil open to exploitation by planters was diminishing with rhythmic regularity—shifting with mechanical precision the weights which statesmen had to adjust in their efforts to maintain the equilibrium of peace." Spokesmen for the planters charged that their northern economic rivals had organized politically to plunder the agricultural interest, while northern entrepreneurs viewed the planters as "a huge, compact, and self-conscious economic association bent upon . . . the possession of the government" for the aggrandizement of their class. Given the irrepressible conflict between these antagonistic interests, Beard was convinced that a violent resolution—"a transfer of the issues from the forum to the field"—was bound to come. "Each side obdurately bent upon its designs and convinced of its rectitude, by the fulfillment of its wishes precipitated events and effected distributions of power that culminated finally in the tragedy foretold by Seward."¹¹

Beard's concept of the irrepressible conflict was a logical extension of his earlier portrayal of the federal Constitution as an economic document and of its framers as motivated primarily by economic self-interest. It was the background for his interpretation of the Civil War era as a "Second American Revolution" marking the triumph of the masters of capital over the tillers of the soil. His economic determinism, with its unsentimental assumption that practical economic concerns, not vague ideologies, were at the core of reality, won numerous converts among historians of his day, especially among graduate students during the depression years of the 1930s. As late as 1951, C. Vann Woodward, in his study of the sectional Compromise of 1877, paid tribute to Beard "as the originator of the concept of the Civil War and Reconstruction as . . . the Second American Revolution" and acknowledged that his own book was "built upon that conception."¹²

Ultimately, Beard's economic determinism as applied to the sectional conflict failed to supersede the slavery-cultural interpretation—indeed, in recent years, the number of its advo-

cates has diminished, primarily because a convincing case for it has not been made. Although Nevins's *Ordeal of the Union* was essentially a synthesis of modern scholarship, it nevertheless rejected Beard's schema, declaring that "of all the monistic explanations for the drift to war, that posited upon supposed economic causes is the flimsiest."¹³

Most historians of the sectional conflict, whatever differences they may have on other matters, now see no compelling reason why the divergent economies of the North and South should have led to disunion and civil war; rather, they find stronger practical reasons why the sections, whose economies neatly complemented one another, should have found it advantageous to remain united. Beard oversimplified the controversies relating to federal economic policy, for neither section unanimously supported or opposed measures such as the protective tariff, appropriations for internal improvements, or the creation of a national banking system. Except for the nullification crisis of 1832-33, economic issues, though sometimes present, were not crucial in the various sectional confrontations. During the 1850s, federal economic policy gave no substantial cause for southern disaffection, for policy was largely determined by prosouthern Congresses and administrations. Finally, the characteristic posture of the conservative northeastern business community was far from antisouthern. Most merchants, bankers, and manufacturers were outspoken in their hostility to antislavery agitation and eager for sectional compromise in order to maintain their profitable business connections with the South.

The conclusion seems inescapable that if economic differences, real though they were, had been all that troubled relations between North and South, there would be no substantial basis for the idea of an irrepressible conflict. In the historiography of sectionalism the slavery-cultural concept easily survived the challenge of Beardian economic determinism and remains the dominant interpretation.

In the long run, the more interesting and persistent challenge to the slavery-cultural concept came from historians who thought the sectional conflict was, in Seward's words, "accidental, unnecessary, the work of interested or fanatical agitators, and therefore ephemeral." This alternative hypothesis has always had its ardent champions in the course of a long and sometimes tempestuous life, and, though in recent years rather on the wane, it is by no means dead. Avery Craven, a distinguished exponent of the idea of an unnecessary, or repressible, conflict, once labeled it "revisionism," and that, unfortunately, is the name by which it has been known ever since.¹⁴ It originated among certain of Seward's contemporaries who believed that no sectional difference was too serious to be disposed of by compromise, if only irresponsible agitators would hold their tongues. These precursors of revisionism, who went by many names, were numerous among northern Democrats, southern Whigs, border-state people of all parties, and northern businessmen. During the 1850s, Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois was the most influential spokesman for this point of view; in a sense, he was the original revisionist, for most of the ideas associated with that interpretation can be found in his speeches and writings.

Revisionist historians were not all alike. Some advanced certain parts of the case for a repressible conflict but ignored or rejected others. One, Avery Craven, tried to combine revisionism with a measure of Beard's economic determinism; another, James G. Randall, considered the idea of economic causation to be as superficial as all other supposedly rational causes propounded in support of the concept of an irrepressible conflict. In portions of *Ordeal of the Union* Nevins appeared to be attempting to reconcile the case for revisionism with that for a slavery-cultural interpretation, but he did not succeed and merely introduced an element of ambiguity in his work. In spite of the differences among revisionists, it has been the custom to treat them as a fairly coherent group and

to associate them with a historiographical trend during a rather short period of time. But revisionism is in fact best understood as a body of ideas about the sectional conflict first advanced by certain politicians of the 1850s, and then by various historians in a variety of ways from the late nineteenth century to the present day.¹⁵

The case for a repressible conflict rested on a foundation of beliefs about slavery as a moral question, of attitudes toward antislavery agitators, and of conclusions about slavery expansion as a political issue. In their earliest form revisionist ideas and attitudes often betrayed, either implicitly or explicitly, a kind of racist resentment that Negroes should have been the source of so much political turmoil in antebellum years. Stephen A. Douglas, though no defender of slavery, resorted to much racial demagoguery in denouncing those who joined the antislavery crusade. Slavery, he repeatedly said, was a matter that concerned the South alone, and he was willing to let white Southerners deal with it as they saw fit. If the people of a western territory wanted slavery, "let them have it," and that would be "entirely satisfactory" to him. This attitude of moral indifference—the feeling that slavery was hardly a matter over which sane men and women would create a crisis—is evident in much revisionist writing. Ulrich B. Phillips's influential study of southern slavery was in this respect a decidedly revisionist work, for it portrayed the institution as, in the main, benevolent and a civilizing force which did much good for the blacks at little cost to them. As Phillips understood them, the slaves were, "by racial quality," "submissive," "light-hearted," "amiable," "ingratiating," and "imitative," and their progress "was restricted by the fact of their being negroes."¹⁶ The slave-plantation system aroused in him not ethical concerns but nostalgia.

Without the explicit racism of Phillips, the theme that slavery was nothing to get excited about and a matter which historians of the irrepressible conflict emphasized too much, was

fundamental to revisionism. Frank L. Owsley, whose writings wavered uncertainly between Beardian economic determinism and the concept of a repressible conflict, asserted that "slavery as a moral issue has too long been the red herring dragged across the trail," for it "was no essential part of the agrarian civilization of the South."¹⁷ Randall was perplexed by the moral fervor of antebellum abolitionists, for, like Phillips, he found little justification for their passionate attacks. According to Randall, black slaves "adapted . . . to bondage with a minimum of resistance, doing cheerfully the manual work of the South. . . ." As for abuses, "there was truth in the common declaration that Southern abuse of the slave was often a matter of mistreatment through leniency"; thus, "in a real sense the whites were more enslaved by the institution than the blacks." Randall's admiration for the statesmanship of Douglas was based in part on Douglas's effort "to subordinate the slavery factor to larger issues."¹⁸ Craven's estimate of the significance of slavery was evident in his assertion that the differences between North and South "were not much greater than those existing between East and West." Abolitionist agitation made it "very difficult to understand the more modest place . . . [slavery] occupied in the actual life of the section and of the Negro." According to Craven, what slavery "added to the usual relationship between employer and employee . . . is difficult to say," but in most ways the lives of slaves were "much like those of other American workers." During all the controversy over slavery, "The patient Negro . . . went on with his tasks generally unconscious of the merits or the lack of them in the system under which he toiled." Craven concluded: "Perhaps the idea [of slavery] was always worse than the fact itself."¹⁹

David Potter, whose thoughtful writings about the antebellum period revealed his many revisionist attitudes, believed that a compromise permitting slavery to survive and even expand had the merit at least "of being better than war." He

conceded that the Civil War had the "immense value" of emancipating four million slaves, but he found it appalling that it cost the life of one soldier for every six slaves who were freed. "A person is entitled to wonder," he wrote, whether "the slaves could not have been freed at a smaller per-capita cost."²⁰ While Potter suggested no alternative solution—instead, endorsed the Crittenden Compromise, which would have guaranteed slavery perpetually in the southern states and protected it in the territories south of the Missouri Compromise line—he probably had in mind a fundamental assumption of nearly all revisionist historians: by the 1850s, slavery had reached the "natural limits" of its potential expansion and would soon have died of natural causes.

That the westward expansion of slavery was controlled by geographical conditions was a common idea among contemporary advocates of compromise. Douglas, taking a deterministic position, held that slavery would spread only into areas where soil and climate were hospitable to the cultivation of staple crops, and that none of the remaining territories, including Kansas, was suitable for that purpose. Revisionists defended Douglas's statesmanship in part because they believed that his principle of popular sovereignty—permitting the people living in a territory to decide the question of slavery for themselves—would have prevented slavery expansion as surely as federal intervention. Among them, Charles W. Ramsdell developed the natural-limits hypothesis most fully and effectively. Insisting that the growth of slavery was tied to the expansion of the Cotton Kingdom, Ramsdell concluded that by the eve of the Civil War "the western limits of the cotton growing region were already approximated." From this it followed that "the institution of slavery had virtually reached its natural frontiers"—there was "no further place for it to go."²¹ Echoing Ramsdell, another revisionist, Henry H. Simms, affirmed that the territorial question "was a mere abstraction. . . . Congress might legislate and courts might ad-

judicate, but the inexorable laws of nature had decreed that slavery had no place in the western territories."²² Since slavery lacked room for expansion, revisionists concluded that it could not have survived much longer.

However, their belief in slavery's imminent decline did not rest on the natural-limits idea alone, for they found other forces at work which, if left undisturbed, would have helped to bring the institution to a peaceful and orderly end. After the Civil War southern partisans frequently recalled the anti-slavery attitudes of their ancestors in Washington's and Jefferson's day, and they claimed that a promising manumission movement had been destroyed by attacks from the outside. In due course this claim became an integral part of the revisionist case. Had it not been for northern meddling, Phillips contended, "it is fairly probable that . . . slavery would have been disestablished in some peaceable way in response to the demand of public opinion in the South."²³ Owsley asserted that slavery "must have soon begun to decline and would probably have ceased to exist before the end of the nineteenth century,"²⁴ while Randall was convinced that it "was crumbling in the presence of nineteenth century tendencies."²⁵ Craven stressed the substantial southern opposition to slavery in the early years of the republic and concluded: "The impartial observer might have prophesied a peaceful solution of the problem because of . . . the presence of a vague undercurrent of belief in the ultimate extinction of the evil."²⁶

According to some revisionists, even after the collapse of the southern antislavery movement certain impersonal and irreversible conditions made the peaceful demise of slavery inevitable. Ramsdell believed that after 1860 the development of labor-saving machinery, as well as overproduction and low cotton prices, would have made slaves a burden to their owners and thus changed southern attitudes. Therefore, he concluded that "within a comparatively short time [slavery] would have begun to decline and eventually have been abol-

ished by the Southerners themselves."²⁷ Since revisionists viewed slavery as an institution whose evils were much exaggerated, which in any case had passed its prime, and which was destined soon to disappear, one can understand the disgust Ramsdell expressed for antebellum politicians. Those who wanted slavery abolished, he wrote, "had only to wait a little while—perhaps a generation, probably less. . . . One is tempted at this point to reflections on what has passed for statesmanship on both sides of that long dead issue. But I have not the heart to indulge them."²⁸

Ramsdell's bitter comment drove to the heart of the problem as revisionists understood it—what it was that *really* caused the sectional conflict and, ultimately, the Civil War. Douglas offered a partial answer as early as 1858 when he asked, "Why should this slavery agitation be kept up? . . . Who does it benefit except the Republican politicians, who use it as their hobby to ride into office?" Former President James Buchanan, in his recollection of the crisis, placed the blame on the "misguided fanatics" who wasted the time of Congress "in violent debates on the subject of slavery" and provoked Southerners to form a party "as fanatical in advocating slavery as were the abolitionists of the North in denouncing it."²⁹ This, in brief, is what eventually became the revisionist explanation: political opportunists and irresponsible agitators exaggerated sectional differences that could easily have been resolved peacefully, fomented an artificial crisis, and thus brought on a needless war.

Historians of the repressible conflict, in their individual ways, wrote variations on this theme. Mary Scrugham, minimizing the differences between the sections and emphasizing the element of irrationality, suggested that "there need have been no appeal from the ballot to the bullet in 1861, had the American people of that day possessed sufficient political sagacity to distinguish between appearance and reality."³⁰ Ramsdell, describing what he considered the pointless con-

test between proslavery and antislavery forces for control of Kansas, argued that, in essence, the North "fought rancorously for what it was bound to get without fighting," while the South "with equal rancor contended for what in the nature of things it could never use." In the "cold facts of the situation," there was no rational cause for controversy over slavery expansion, but "there was still abundant opportunity for the politician to work his own ends, to play upon prejudice and passion and fear. Blind leaders of the blind!"³¹ George Fort Milton, in an admiring biography of Douglas, "a realistic statesman," developed the idea that a needless war "marked the defeat of a brave body of patriots and statesmen who had striven to keep the peace." The war was brought on by "inflamed minorities"—"zealots urging abstract causes"—who played on the emotions of the American people.³² Simms contended that the angry controversy over fugitive slaves was out of all proportion to the number who actually escaped, and he reasoned that "sound statesmanship might have found some solution to questions of such little practical significance."³³

The prolific writings of Randall and Craven from the 1930s to the 1950s provided the fullest development of the revisionist case for a repressible conflict. Randall, in demonstrating how a "blundering generation" of politicians and agitators "whipped up" a crisis that culminated in war, rejected *all* rational explanations—economic, moral, social, or cultural. Take all the causes traditionally advanced by historians, he wrote, "and it will be seen that only by a kind of false display could any of these issues, or all of them together, be said to have caused the war if one omits the elements of emotional unreason and overbold leadership." If one were to choose a word to explain the war, it would have to be "fanaticism (on both sides), misunderstanding, misrepresentation, or perhaps politics." In the prewar years the people had their own peaceful concerns—"shipowners were interested in the merchant ma-

rine, writers in literature, captains of industry in economic enterprises"—but, unfortunately, "certain groups of politicians and agitators" were more interested in "factors of sectional agitation."

Turning specifically to the most vexing aspects of slavery—fugitives and territorial expansion—Randall found them "trivial as to the interests that were in fact threatened," but "tragically important as a popular and political troublemaker." Sectional partisans seized the territorial question—"almost a fabricated issue"—and "produced quarrels out of things that would have settled themselves were it not for political agitation." During the 1850s, Republicans saw "the party advantage of having what seemed a big issue not as a thing to settle but as a thing to agitate. . . ." Randall urged historians to study national crises that did *not* lead to war—for example, the Venezuelan boundary dispute of the 1890s—when, after a peaceful settlement, "reasonable men . . . recognized how artificially and how mistakenly the 'issues' had been misrepresented by those who gave out the impression of 'inevitable' war." He concluded that one can make as good a case for an irrepressible conflict preceding "the wars that were avoided or prospectively imagined" as one can for the Civil War.³⁴

In Craven's view, the Civil War occurred because "a generation of well-meaning Americans . . . permitted their short-sighted politicians, their overzealous editors, and their pious reformers to emotionalize real and potential differences and to conjure up distorted impressions of those who dwelt in other parts of the nation." He believed that "any kind of sane policy in Washington" would have prevented war, for there existed between the sections no "inherent difference great enough to make war 'inevitable' or 'irrepressible.' . . . That was to be an artificial creation of inflamed minds." The reason why the sections went to war lay in "emotions, cultivated hostilities, and ultimately . . . hatred between sections. . . . Differences were but the materials with which passions

worked. . . . The conflict was the work of politicians and pious cranks!"³⁵

In his later writings, beginning with an essay in 1947, Craven shifted his position in some respects and presented what can best be described as a recasting of the revisionist case. He became somewhat ambiguous about whether the sectional conflict was repressible; and, while emphasizing the "psychological causes which ultimately permitted emotions to take the place of reason," he explicitly recognized that the Civil War had "economic causes, constitutional causes, social causes, moral causes, [and] political causes." He agreed that slavery, "a great evil," provoked "a sharp moral reaction against it which had a major part in producing the Civil War." The error of the South was its failure to recognize that its institutions "were not safe anywhere in the nineteenth century and the emerging modern world." Craven's heightened emphasis on industrialization and the northern free-labor ideology made him sound somewhat more Beardian and indicated a partial acceptance of the slavery-cultural interpretation.

However, the result of Craven's revised revisionism was not so much a coherent new synthesis as a lumpy mixture of contradictions, in which the flavor of the old revisionism was still most pronounced. His portrait of the abolitionists remained highly unflattering; he claimed that Lincoln and Seward "brought the moral issue [of slavery] into politics and used it to advance their political fortunes"; and he described a South under "relentless attack," being forced to "yield its ways and values," facing an adversary wearing an air of "moral superiority and self-righteousness." Moreover, having conceded that the Civil War did have rational causes, Craven insisted that "the important question is not *what* the North and South were quarreling about half as much as *how* their differences got into such shape that they could not be handled by the process of rational discussion, compromise, or the tolerant acceptance of majority decision." Thus he turned away

from the causes and, as in his earlier writings, stressed the exaggerations and distortions, the oversimplification of concrete issues into abstract questions of right and wrong. In short, it was still not the issues themselves but the "blundering which made the war inevitable."⁸⁶ Even so, Craven's later writings are perhaps the most interesting in the historiography of revisionism, because they define a problem that is relevant to all interpretations of the sectional conflict: how the crisis of the 1850s ended in war and thus came to represent the greatest failure of the democratic process in American political history.

In 1960, David Donald propounded a modified and subtle version of one crucial revisionist theme. Rejecting the view that antebellum politicians were exceptionally incompetent or malignant, Donald argued that they were logical products of contemporary American society—a society in which "all the recognized values of orderly civilization were gradually being eroded," in which precedents were being rejected and authority repudiated. The adoption of white manhood suffrage made it increasingly difficult to cope with problems "requiring subtle understanding and delicate handling." Suffering from an "excess of liberty," Americans were "unable to arrive at reasoned, independent judgments upon the problems which faced their society. . . . Fads, fashions, and crazes swept the country," along with "hysterical fears and paranoid suspicions," and the electorate was ripe for the "propagandist, the agitator, the extremist." Donald described the political crises of the 1850s as "not in themselves calamitous experiences. Revisionist historians have correctly pointed out how little was actually at stake." After accepting the argument that slavery would not have spread into the territories, he concluded: "When compared to crises which other nations have resolved without great discomfort, the true proportions of these exaggerated disturbances appear."⁸⁷ Thus, after shifting responsibility from irresponsible individuals to a more general condition of society, Donald joined the revisionists in minimizing

concrete issues and stressing the abnormal state of the public mind. He also came close to suggesting, as did Randall, that historians would profit from studying wars that did not occur.

In recent years some historians of the antebellum period have either discarded or drastically revised the traditional approaches of both the revisionists and those who present a slavery-cultural framework for an irrepressible conflict. "New political historians," utilizing computer technology to analyze state and county election returns, have stressed local ethno-cultural issues at the expense of national issues, such as slavery expansion, to explain voter behavior and, to some extent, the birth of the Republican party. Others have interpreted the sectional conflict as part of a process of "modernization," thus developing in a more complex way the Beardian concept of tension between the progressive, industrializing, urbanizing North and the backward, agrarian, slave-labor South. Yet the writings of both groups address, at least implicitly, the old questions: the significance of slavery as a moral issue, the reality or unreality of the controversy over slavery expansion, the degree of rationality and irrationality in the political behavior of voters and party leaders, and the repressibility or irrepressibility of the sectional conflict. In general the new political historians lean toward the revisionists, for they portray a rather irrational electorate responding to the appeals of temperance advocates and nativist bigots rather than to clearly defined national issues.⁸⁸ On the other hand, the modernization school lends support to the slavery-cultural interpretation, for it offers a plausible explanation of why slavery was one of the crucial ingredients of an irrepressible conflict. Though both groups have deepened our understanding of the antebellum era, they have not yet closed the debate on that perennial question: What caused the Civil War?

Notwithstanding these recent trends, the old approaches to the sectional conflict continue to flourish in current historical

literature. The slavery-cultural interpretation still remains dominant,³⁹ but the ideas of the revisionists survive as a comprehensive counterhypothesis. For example, in 1978, Ludwell H. Johnson contributed a vintage revisionist analysis similar in most respects to the writings of Craven, including their Beardian overtones. Like Craven (and Beard), Johnson found slavery to be less a moral issue than a weapon used to advance northern interests. "If it is true that there would have been no Civil War without slavery," he wrote, "it is equally true that slavery would never have come to dominate national politics without a conflict of economic interests between the sections." In his account both abolitionists and Republicans emerged as a rather shabby lot. Johnson believed that the fugitive-slave law of 1850 "was largely symbolic and . . . was used effectively for political purposes" by those who appreciated its "enormous potentialities." By the late 1850s, the question of slavery expansion was "an abstraction only tenuously connected with the real world." Finally, the debate over John Brown's sanity was beside the point. Rather, Johnson argued, "The mind of the American people, not Brown's mind, is the proper object of investigation."⁴⁰

Michael F. Holt, in a political study of the 1850s, also published in 1978, explicitly dissociated himself from the slavery-cultural "fundamentalists" and agreed with the revisionists "that individual decisions of politicians were important in exacerbating" the sectional conflict. Holt was less judgmental than earlier revisionists, distributing responsibility evenly among northern and southern politicians and expressing no opinion about the repressibility of the conflict. However, like the revisionists, he focused his analysis not on causes and issues but on political behavior. Echoing one of Craven's later essays, he wrote: "The important question is not what divided North from South, but how the nation could control that division for so long and then allow it suddenly to erupt into war." Holt's explanation was that politicians, "looking for a

new issue," tried to "exploit the revived sectional conflict." Thus, he asserted, "The Kansas-Nebraska Act had been shaped largely by the divergent intentions of politicians who had specifically partisan and not sectional goals in mind." He agreed with a Kentucky editor who charged that politicians "constructed a new arena for party gladiators at the expense of the repose and temper of the nation." One of Holt's major generalizations restated the concept of a "whipped-up" crisis:

The sectionalization of American politics was emphatically *not* simply a reflection or product of basic popular disagreements over black slavery. . . . [It] is a mistake to think of sectional antagonism as a spontaneous and self-perpetuating force that imposed itself on the political arena against the will of politicians. . . . Some one has to politicize events. . . . Politicians who pursued very traditional partisan strategies were largely responsible for the ultimate breakdown of the political process. Much of the story of the coming of the Civil War is the story of the successful efforts of Democratic politicians in the South and Republican politicians in the North to keep the sectional conflict at the center of political debate. . . . Republican politicians quite consciously seized on the slavery and sectional issue in order to build a new party.⁴¹

Clearly, the thesis that political agitators were the source of the sectional conflict has not altogether lost its appeal.

The origin of revisionism, with its concept of a repressible conflict and needless war, has been explained in various ways. Craven himself simply dismissed the "orthodox" point of view as a biased "northern explanation of events" and claimed that it had been upset by the findings of scholars who went back to the sources "as scientists and not as partisans." Equating revisionism with a new objectivity, he denied that he had been "interested in defending or attacking any sec-

tion." Rather, he had tried "to come as nearly to the truth as possible regardless of personal or sectional interests."⁴² Several revisionists, including Scrugham, Randall, and Craven, linked their interpretations to the insights of modern psychology. Thus, Craven, in his assessment of the abolitionists, observed:

The modern psychologist . . . talks of youthful experiences, maladjustments, inferiority complexes, and repressed desires. He is not sure about the sources of the reform impulse or the unselfish character of the reformer. The student of social affairs is likewise less inclined to grant unstinted praise to the fanatic and is not certain about the value of the contribution. . . . He sees the triumph of emotion over reason in the extremist's course and sometimes wonders if the developments of history might not have been more sound without him.⁴³

Similarly, Randall suggested that, "When nations stumble into war, . . . there is at some point a psychopathic case. Omit the element of abnormality . . . and diagnosis fails." Given "the artificiality of war-making agitation," the theory that "fundamental motives make war" is one of "the most colossal misconceptions." Accordingly, Randall concluded: "to suppose that the Union could not have been continued or slavery outmoded without war . . . is hardly an enlightened assumption."⁴⁴ These explanations of the psychological foundations of revisionism were obviously premised on a belief that rationality is the norm in human behavior and that the irrational element in the sectional conflict was a tragic exception.

One critic, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., described Randall's interpretation as "optimistic sentimentalism" which "evades the essential moral problems in the name of a superficial objectivity and asserts their unimportance in the name of an invincible progress." Accepting Reinhold Niebuhr's tragic view of the human predicament, Schlesinger found in revisionism "a

touching afterglow of the admirable nineteenth-century faith in the full rationality and perfectibility of man; the faith that the errors of the world would all in time be 'outmoded' . . . by progress." According to Thomas J. Pressly, revisionists thought that "war was always useless, that war never settled any issue in a desirable manner, and that war was always the worst possible alternative in human relations." Contrary to this alleged revisionist view, Schlesinger insisted that historians must face the "unhappy fact . . . that man occasionally works himself into a log-jam; and that the log-jam must be burst by violence."⁴⁵ Written during the Cold War following World War II, the Schlesinger and Pressly critiques seemed to represent tough realism; a quarter-century later the realists in this historiographical dispute might be somewhat more difficult to discern.

Harry V. Jaffa, in a study of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, developed an equally unflattering but less presentist explanation of the revisionists. He, too, found implicit in their writings a naïve belief in the inevitability of progress, but he considered this belief the only possible moral justification of Douglas's policy, "as of revisionist historiography." However, Jaffa reasoned that if, as the revisionists think, Douglas could have kept slavery out of the territories, and if Lincoln kept the issue alive solely for political reasons, Lincoln is given "a character that, in the profundity of its immorality, is beyond treason." Jaffa rejected the premise and concluded that the needless-war doctrine was "an apology for the South."⁴⁶ Don E. Fehrenbacher found the sources of revisionism in the horrors of four years of Civil War and in the traditional negative view of Reconstruction disseminated by William A. Dunning and his students. "Thus an intense dissatisfaction with the consequences of the war encouraged revolt against the deterministic view of its coming" and tempted some sensitive scholars "to confront Americans with the impatient question, 'Was it worth the price?'"⁴⁷

By far the most common explanation of the needless-war doctrine was that it reflected the disillusionment of the 1930s with the involvement of the United States in the First World War. Bernard DeVoto attributed it to the "climate of the time"—to the fact that "an intellectual fashion was developing the (erroneous) thesis that the United States could and should have stayed out of the First World War and the (false) theorem that we were betrayed into it by propaganda." Howard K. Beale thought it significant that revisionism reached its peak "at a time when men were feeling the futility of one world war and facing the possibility of another."⁴⁸ Thomas N. Bonner speculated more cautiously that there may have been a connection between revisionism and "the feeling of disillusionment and futility regarding war which overtook Americans in the 1920's, followed by the economic collapse, wars, and threats of war in the 1930's and 1940's."⁴⁹ Pressly noted the widespread belief in the 1930s "that the entrance of the United States into war in 1917 came not because of any justifiable concern over important issues but because certain 'devils' had employed 'propaganda' to stir up emotions and thereby induce people to fight." These were the attitudes that "furnished the general framework" for the revisionist interpretation.⁵⁰ In short, a clear relationship existed between attitudes toward involvement in the First World War and attitudes toward the Civil War and wars in general. The exposure of the prowar propagandists of 1914-17 presumably stimulated a more critical view of the agitators of the 1850s.

Beale, without really believing it, advanced one small caveat: "This timing may be accidental."⁵¹ He was right—and therein lies a caution to historians who are necessarily involved with problems of human motivation and ever tempted to advance "obvious" but simplistic explanations. In actual fact, although several prominent revisionists did much of their writing during the 1930s, there is no evidence of a significant connection between what they said about the causes of the

Civil War and what some other historians were then saying about the causes of America's declaration of war in 1917. The needless-war argument, of course, antedated the First World War, and it was still evident in much historical writing after the Second. Yet it was not a dominant trend in Civil War historiography even between the First and Second World Wars, for in the 1930s Beard's economic determinism made a considerably stronger appeal. Most important, no historiographical study has demonstrated convincingly that a single revisionist projected disillusionment with American involvement in the First World War back to the sectional crisis prior to the Civil War. Indeed, Scrugham, who is sometimes mistakenly identified as the first revisionist, appears to have based her interpretation of the Civil War in part on her *satisfaction* with the results of the First World War. Writing shortly after the formation of the League of Nations and the World Court, she affirmed optimistically that public opinion was turning against war as a means of settling international disputes and concluded: "Because of this new trend . . . the civilized world may yet reverse its present decision on the Civil War."⁵² Scrugham's faith in progress—her naïve belief that the recent war marked a fortuitous turning point in human affairs—not postwar disillusionment, informed her Civil War revisionism.

Randall was the only revisionist who made frequent allusions to twentieth-century international crises and wrote more generally about the problem of war causation, but he provided no basis for the belief that his view of the Civil War originated in disillusionment with the results of the First World War. Quite the reverse, in an essay entitled "Lincoln's Peace and Wilson's," Randall strongly defended Wilson's foreign policy, American participation in the war, and the League of Nations, and he held American isolationists and those who appeased the Nazis responsible for the outbreak of another World War. "One [cannot] . . . base successful in-

ternational policy on isolation," he wrote. "Realities cannot be ignored. Human interdependence cannot be violated with impunity."⁵³

Since those comments appeared in 1943, they might be seen simply as evidence of a changed Randall made wiser by Pearl Harbor. However, his writings thereafter continued to support an unmodified revisionist interpretation of the sectional conflict; moreover, the tone of his earlier and best-known revisionist essay, "A Blundering Generation," was quite consistent with that of the essay comparing Lincoln and Wilson. In its original form the earlier essay concluded with a rather misleading analogy between revisionist writing about the Civil War and revisionist writing about the First World War: "Just as Americans beginning about 1935 executed something like an about-face in their interpretation of the World War, including American participation in it and attitudes preceding it, so the retelling of the Civil War is a matter of changed and changing viewpoints." In a later version, published in 1947, this analogy was deleted, perhaps because it sounded rather dated after the Second World War.⁵⁴ Whatever the reason, both versions of the essay make it clear that Randall does not agree with revisionist writings about the First World War and that they were not the inspiration for his interpretation of the Civil War.

In his blundering-generation essay Randall drew his illustrations of the irrationality of war-making in the twentieth century exclusively from the examples of German, Italian, and Japanese nationalism and expansionism. In the case of the Germans, he doubted that "war arose from valid fundamental motives of culture or economics." He discounted all rational explanations for the aggressions of the Axis powers, and, applying his blundering-generation analysis to them, he concluded: "War-making is too much dignified if it is told in terms of broad national urges, of great German motives, or of compelling Italian ambitions."⁵⁵ The "abnormality," the "bo-

gus leadership," the "psychopathic cases" about which he wrote involved only the leaders of those countries, not the Wilson or Franklin D. Roosevelt administrations, or the governments of the European allies. Randall made no unfavorable reference to American involvement in the First World War, and in no respect did he betray disillusionment with its results. In short, as an internationalist and firm supporter of the League of Nations, he drew his analogy between the irresponsible politicians and antislavery agitators of the Civil War generation and the war-making adversaries of the United States in two World Wars. Revisionist historians of the First World War received no support from him.

Several critiques of Civil War historiography alluded briefly to another possible explanation of revisionism. Jaffa, as noted above, asserted that it was "an apology for the South," and Fehrenbacher suggested that the "emotional basis of 'revisionism' was . . . to some extent an affection for the South."⁵⁶ Bonner stated with more certainty that historians of the repressible conflict belong "to a 'southern school' of interpretation," and he demonstrated it by locating their geographic origins in the former Confederate states. Noting the "natural aversion of Southerners for a moral interpretation of the Civil War," Bonner concluded that southern historians had always favored one "which is least unflattering to the motives of the defeated South, yet consistent with good scholarship and academic respectability."⁵⁷ Pressly, though finding it understandable that revisionists could be accused of "pro-Southernism," was not satisfied with that explanation and preferred to make a distinction between them and three southern historians (Phillips, Ramsdell, and Owsley) whose writings he labeled "The New Vindication of the South."⁵⁸ The distinction is a tenuous one, for all three contributed to the development of, and subscribed to, major tenets of the revisionist case. Though it is true that by no means all southern historians of the sectional conflict have been revisionists, it is also true that nearly

all revisionists have been Southerners, the one notable exception being Randall.⁵⁹

The dominant interpretation of the sectional conflict, in both its late nineteenth-century moralistic form and its less judgmental twentieth-century slavery-cultural form, was always easier for Northerners than for Southerners to accept. Craven understood this when he called it the "Northern interpretation" and when he complained that the antebellum South was "hidden by the lingering clouds of abolitionist propaganda." His intention was to be objective, but in his major revisionist work he explained that he would approach the sectional conflict "from the angle of the South" in order to distinguish "realities" from "distortions."⁶⁰ One must take care not to substitute one facile explanation of the revisionists as victims of postwar disillusionment for an equally facile explanation of them as mere southern apologists. Yet, Southerners they were, and as a group they did show considerable affection for the Old South.

In revisionist writings the sectional conflict developed not because of the survival and expansion of slavery but because of the northern attack upon it. Though southern fire-eaters bore a share of the responsibility for precipitating a needless war, northern troublemakers were almost always the aggressors, and hence primary responsibility belonged to them. "The abolitionists made certain false charges against the Southern system," wrote Phillips. "In repelling these calumnies the Southern leaders thought it advisable . . . to praise the institution . . . and to advocate its permanent maintenance instead of its gradual disestablishment. This change in the Southern attitude was to a large extent involuntary."⁶¹ Simms found that radical groups in both sections resorted to "exaggeration and violent abuse" but that "the bitter verbal assault" began "with the abolitionists."⁶² Chauncey S. Boucher denied the charge of aggression hurled at the antebellum South—a charge that persisted because most historical works

"have been based on sources which, in the final analysis, are really of abolitionist origin." According to Boucher, the South was "on the defensive throughout almost the entire antebellum period," though individual Southerners sometimes did take "a stand which may perhaps best be termed 'aggressively defensive.'"⁶³

Craven had no doubt who the aggressors were. To him, writing a narrative of the sectional conflict was a matter of tracing "the steps by which the South was pounded into self-consciousness and moved to ultimate secession. . . ." Southern unity "was primarily the result of a drive launched first against her labor system and then broadened into an attack against the character of her people and their entire way of life." Craven held abolitionists responsible for the fact that the South's "intellectual life was almost frozen, not so much to justify a questionable labor system as to repel a fanatical attack!"⁶⁴ Owsley's explanation of the sectional conflict was much like Craven's, except that his resort to hyperbole made it a good deal more colorful. The crisis, he claimed, occurred because Northerners failed to respect the dignity of Southerners and assaulted them with "crude, discourteous, and insulting language." Indeed, even the Nazi propagandist Dr. Goebbels did not "plumb the depths of vulgarity and obscenity reached and maintained by . . . abolitionists of note." Eventually, Owsley concluded, a "slow and consuming fury" took hold of the southern people; but even then the response of the fire-eaters "was not usually coarse or obscene in comparison with the abolitionists. . . ."⁶⁵

As the revisionists took up the various episodes of the sectional conflict, almost invariably they put the onus for each crisis on northern politicians and agitators. Thus, the Gag Rule of the 1830s, which prevented either house of Congress from hearing or discussing antislavery petitions, resulted from "the action of overzealous [northern] fanatics."⁶⁶ The Wilmot Proviso, a proposal to exclude slavery from territories

ceded by Mexico, was motivated by the pure opportunism of certain northern politicians. During the 1850s, though Southerners showed considerable indifference to affairs in Kansas, a crisis in that territory was brought on by northern agitators. The disastrous Dred Scott decision resulted from the personal ambition of two northern Associate Justices, who forced the majority to consider the subject of congressional power over slavery in the territories. Crazy John Brown's attack on Harpers Ferry did not alarm the South as much as the fact that prominent Northerners made him a hero and a martyr. Finally, when secession came in 1860-61, war resulted not from the action of Southerners but from the refusal of northern Republicans to support a reasonable settlement, such as the Crittenden Compromise. In short, revisionism is something like Rhodes's history of the sectional crisis stood on its head.

Perhaps no military conflict in history has produced more anguished writing about whether it was evitable or inevitable than the American Civil War. The problem, of course, is one that can never be solved conclusively even by the most exhaustive research, because it involves metaphysical questions about free will and psychological questions about the limits of human choice. Yet historians do sometimes indulge in "counterfactual history"—informed speculation about how things would have been if certain other things had or had not happened—and that essentially is the kind of history that revisionists have written. They were interested not only in explaining why the Civil War occurred but in showing how, by a different course of action, it could have been avoided and how much better off the country would have been if its history had been one of continued peace.

The Civil War settled the issues of the sectional conflict at a cost of more than half a million lives. The revisionists' alternative to the war was compromise, delay, patience, and the avoidance of recrimination and confrontation in order to

maintain a milieu of political tranquillity in which sectional differences could have been rationally resolved. Their conviction that evolutionary forces would soon have ended slavery peacefully was a basic premise of their case. In his account of the crisis, James Buchanan contended that, "If left to the wise ordinances of a superintending Providence, which never acts rashly, [slavery] would have been gradually extinguished in our country . . . without bloodshed. . . ."67 Ramsdell, though relying on economic and geographic forces rather than Providence, made this the moral of his argument that slavery had extended to its natural limits. "[Can] we say with conviction," he asked, "that this war accomplished anything of lasting good that could not and would not have been won by the peaceful processes of social evolution? Is there not ground for the tragic conclusion that it accomplished little which was not otherwise attainable?"68 E. Merton Coulter made the point concisely: "The Civil War was not worth the cost. . . . What good the war produced would have come with time in an orderly way; the bad would not have come at all."⁶⁹

Precisely when slavery's peaceful end would have come no revisionist could say, but most of them guessed that it could have lasted no longer than another generation, or no later than the end of the nineteenth century. In any event, when emancipation came, it would not have cost the life of one soldier for every six slaves freed—a per capita cost that Potter quite understandably found rather staggering. On the other hand, the postponement of emancipation for a generation, while saving the lives of soldiers, would have exacted its own price. It would have meant that the four million slaves of 1860, as well as their descendants, would have remained in bondage until the forces anticipated by the revisionists moved white masters in their own good time to grant freedom to their black laborers. How to balance the lives of half a million soldiers against the prolonged bondage of four million slaves is

a question with profound moral implications; how one resolves it will doubtless depend in part on one's judgment of slavery itself. Clearly, the revisionists believed that the survival of black bondage for another generation would not have been too high a price for avoiding the bloodshed of the Civil War. Given their characteristic view of southern slavery, their resolution of this moral dilemma was logical enough.

In considering the plausibility of the case for a repressible conflict, one must note that the writings of historians who advanced it were not always models of measured and temperate discourse.⁷⁰ Some revisionists wrote with a passion that approached the intensity of those antebellum orators whose verbal excesses they so roundly condemned. More important than style, however, was a logical inconsistency that lay at the heart of their argument. Revisionists advanced a highly deterministic explanation of how slavery would have been abolished if the Civil War had not occurred. Unalterable conditions and uncontrollable trends—the realities of western soil and climate, the impact of the laws of supply and demand on cotton and slave prices, “the processes of social evolution,” and the resulting realization of rational Southerners that slavery was a burden—would have led inevitably to the ultimate adaptation of southern agriculture to a free-labor system. Yet, revisionists rejected the deterministic concept of an irrepressible conflict as an explanation of the Civil War itself. They discerned no logical, fundamental forces operating to bring on this great and tragic event, only the unnecessary, irrational behavior of a blundering generation of politicians and agitators. But if one generation of Northerners could produce a needless war over issues irrationally perceived, might not another generation of Southerners have defied all the presumably sound reasons for abandoning slavery and preserved it for irrational—say, for example, racist—reasons? Revisionists, though apparently assuming that history normally follows a rational course, by their analysis of the sectional crisis, them-

selves made a substantial case for irrational behavior as a historical force. Thereby, they compromised their optimistic hypothesis that slavery, in a logical progression, was destined “within a comparatively short time” to be abolished without war.

Assuming that historians of the repressible conflict were justified in their optimistic belief that sectional problems were amenable to resolution without violence, the problem still remains of determining how the antebellum crises could have been avoided while the benevolent forces of peaceful change did their work. The revisionist answer was clear enough: abolitionists should not have carried on their agitation; Free-Soilers should have trusted Douglas's principle of popular sovereignty to keep slavery out of the territories; Republicans should not have made political issues of the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, the Kansas question, or the Dred Scott decision; in short, Northerners should have avoided provoking Southerners and left the resolution of the slavery issue to them. Apart from its transparent one-sidedness, this exercise in counterfactual history contains a serious analytical flaw. To question the necessity of certain specific incidents in antebellum sectional relations is one thing; to object wholly to the temper of an age is quite another.

A plausible analysis of antebellum politics and of the options that were reasonably open to that generation must begin with the assumption that an antislavery movement would exist in the northern states. That such a movement did exist was hardly the unfortunate result of some perverse historical accident, such as the emergence of a William Lloyd Garrison, or the outbreak of an epidemic of acute neuroses in the northern population, as the portraits of abolitionists in revisionist literature would seem to suggest. Characterizations of them as “pious cranks” troubled with “maladjustments, inferiority complexes, and repressed desires” may describe accurately a

few of the more bizarre figures attracted to the movement, but not the members or leaders in general. No historian has demonstrated convincingly that neurotics were proportionally more numerous among abolitionists than among their critics. Nor has a persuasive case been made for the hypothesis that abolitionist leaders were a displaced elite, victims of the industrial revolution, losing status and finding an outlet for their discontents in a crusade against slavery. The idea that abolitionists responded not to an objective, external social problem but to their own internal psychic problems and status anxieties is not adequate to describe a group with as varied personalities and economic, social, and cultural backgrounds as Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Arthur and Lewis Tappan, Theodore Dwight Weld, James G. Birney, Sarah and Angelina Grimké, Gerrit Smith, James Russell Lowell, Theodore Parker, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson.⁷¹

A recent variation of the status-revolution hypothesis described abolitionists as both victims of a period of rapid social change and crusaders against the resulting materialism and moral decay they saw around them.⁷² The trouble with this interpretation is not that it is necessarily wrong but that it is too vague and general and has been used to explain too much. Various historians have taken the concept of rapid social change and applied it not only to abolitionists but, among others, to militant antiabolitionists, religious revivalists, nativists of the 1850s, post-Civil War Liberal Republicans, Mugwumps of the 1880s, and late nineteenth-century immigration restrictionists. The value of this concept as historical explanation is minimized by the fact that since colonial times every decade has been in some respects a time of rapid social change, each with its beneficiaries and victims. Hence, to recognize the existence of this phenomenon at a particular time is merely to identify a persistent force in American history. In the case of the abolitionists, their ranks contained

both beneficiaries and victims of the rapid social changes occurring during their lives.

The necessity to assume the existence of an antebellum abolitionist movement that would attract quite normal people arises from the existence then of powerful secular intellectual trends associated with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and nineteenth-century Romanticism, and religious trends associated with evangelical Protestantism, trends that explain the crusade against slavery not as a historical aberration but as a logical and predictable development of Western, including American, culture.⁷³ In a society notable for its doctrinaire belief in individual liberty, its plethora of reform movements, and its religious revivals in a millennial context, the failure of an abolitionist crusade to materialize would have been a difficult fact for historians to explain. To presuppose abolitionism in this manner still leaves room for speculation about why it was stronger in some northern regions than in others, why it made more of an impact on some Protestant churches than on others, and why it appealed to some individuals and repelled others.

Abolitionism, of course, was always a movement of a minority, for even in an era of reform most men and women were absorbed in the problems of their own daily lives and were either indifferent to reformers or regarded them as disturbing nuisances. Nationalists disliked abolitionists for disregarding constitutional restraints and endangering the Union; practical men of business viewed them as a threat to their rich southern trade; and conservative clergymen feared them as a disruptive force in the churches. Above all, the racism that was nearly universal in nineteenth-century America, by fostering anxieties about the consequences of liberating millions of black slaves, severely limited the abolitionist appeal. Indeed, as historians have amply demonstrated, the abolitionists themselves, though far in advance of their contemporaries,

were by no means free of race prejudice.⁷⁴ To appreciate the importance of racism as a deterrent to abolitionism one needs merely to consider how much stronger the movement would have been if the South's slave population had been white rather than black.

Revisionists disparaged the abolitionists by observing that their purpose was to disrupt the southern economy and promote radical social change at no cost to themselves or risk to their own society. The point was a telling one, especially when revisionists noted in addition that most abolitionists were indifferent to the problems of northern factory workers. Unfortunately, their criticism described a general characteristic of nearly all reform movements. As British abolitionists crusaded for emancipation at the expense of planters in the distant West Indies, so northern abolitionists crusaded for emancipation at the expense of planters in the South. Reform movements seem always to attract mostly those whose own interests and security are not too deeply involved, not only because they will not bear the cost and the risks but because their judgment and sense of justice are not clouded by self-interest, as those of white Southerners were. Being an abolitionist did in fact entail certain risks, for more than a few activists were victims of violent attack by northern mobs. In any case, abolitionism, with all its defects and limitations, was a normal product and inextricable part of antebellum northern society.

Not only must antislavery be accepted as a given, its characteristic rhetoric, tactics, and goals must also be recognized as quite normal for that age. As Martin Duberman has argued, "the evangelical rhetoric of the movement, with its thunderous emphasis on sin and retribution . . . [was] in its day common enough to abolitionists and nonabolitionists alike."⁷⁵ The highly moralistic tone of abolitionist lectures and literature was as characteristic of the British crusade as of the American—in fact, the two movements were very much alike.

Both contemporaries and historians criticized abolitionists more often for their commitment to "immediatism" than for any other alleged shortcoming. Only impractical, irresponsible fools, they charged, would ignore all the social problems of emancipation, the need for a period of gradual transition, and call for slavery's immediate end. But this criticism was an oversimplification of the abolitionist goal and took it out of the context of the times. Immediatism, as abolitionists usually understood the term, was not a naïve program to abolish slavery in a day; rather, it meant that the process of abolishing slavery, a sin, should commence at once, though its completion would probably take some time. It also meant a rejection of the gradualism that would postpone even the commencement of emancipation until some future date.

To this antebellum generation of reformers, familiar with religious revivalism, with the spectacle of mass responses to the sermons of preachers such as Charles G. Finney, and with the miraculous experience of conversion and the instant renunciation of sin, the goal of immediatism did not seem unrealistic. In the early years of their crusade, abolitionists dared hope that their tactic of "moral suasion"—trying to convince slaveholders that slavery was sinful and imperiled their salvation—might, like a great revival, bring masses of slaveholders to an immediate decision to emancipate their slaves. In any case, moral suasion was the only tactic open to them, for the federal government had no power to interfere with slavery in the southern states, and the abolitionists, committed as they were to peaceful methods, did not countenance a slave insurrection. They never addressed their appeals to the slaves themselves, only to white masters, and the danger of slave rebellions if emancipation were not adopted was a persistent theme in their literature.

Thus, it is possible to argue that historians who developed the concept of a repressible conflict and needless war have looked in the wrong place for the abnormality which they

believed would explain the antebellum period. The abnormal irritant that created sectional tensions and placed so great a burden on the American political structure was the persistence of southern slavery far into the nineteenth century. The revisionists were also mistaken in holding abolitionists responsible for the failure of Southerners to develop their own program of emancipation. In the states of the Deep South an organized antislavery movement never existed, and individual public expressions of antislavery sentiment were rare even during the Revolutionary generation and almost unheard of thereafter. In the Upper South, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, private emancipations increased and some public men acknowledged the evils of slavery and hoped for its abolition at some future and more propitious time. But even then the number of voluntary emancipations never approached the natural increase of the slave population, and the great majority of Virginia slaveholders defended slavery and resented discussions of the subject in the state legislature.⁷⁶

Though as late as the 1820s a scattering of manumission societies existed in the Upper South, early in the next decade organized antislavery activity virtually ceased, not as a reaction to northern abolitionism but as a result of conditions in the South itself. The manumission movement collapsed because of the growing profitability of slavery, the expanding market for surplus slaves in the new areas of the Southwest, the general belief that whites and free blacks could not live together in peace, the harsh state laws designed to suppress antislavery agitation, and mob violence. The critics never posed a serious threat to slavery in any southern state, and in the end they were unable to point to a single success. In January 1832, after the Nat Turner insurrection, Virginia's emancipationists waged their last battle in the state legislature and went down to overwhelming defeat. At the Tennessee constitutional convention of 1834 the antislavery forces could muster only ten votes. In 1849, Kentucky emancipationists

failed to elect a single delegate to a state constitutional convention, and the proslavery forces underscored their victory by inserting a clause protecting slave property in the new constitution's bill of rights.

Northern reformers thus saw all the optimistic predictions of Revolutionary liberals that slavery would soon succumb to the progressive tendencies of an enlightened age end in disappointment, the efforts of southern manumissionists a total failure. Meanwhile, except for Cuba and Brazil, slavery was abolished in the West Indies and Latin America, but in the Model Republic to the north it was spreading through the Southwest and across the Mississippi River into Missouri, Arkansas, and Texas. It could no longer be viewed as a decrepit institution about to die; rather it showed enormous vitality, remarkable flexibility as a labor system, and every prospect of a long life.

One event of the 1820s brought home with special force how deeply embedded slavery had become in the social and economic life of the South. In 1824, the Ohio legislature adopted resolutions proposing a plan of gradual emancipation, colonization of the freed blacks outside the boundaries of the United States, and federal compensation to slaveholders "upon the principle that the evil of slavery is a national one, and that the people and the states of this Union ought mutually to participate in the duties and burthens of removing it." Eight northern states endorsed Ohio's conservative proposals, and Senator Rufus King of New York urged that the proceeds from the sale of public lands be used to defray the cost of the plan. The response of the Upper South was negative, that of the Deep South hostile and threatening. The South Carolina Senate vowed that it would not permit slave property "to be meddled with or tampered with" by outsiders, and Governor George M. Troup of Georgia denounced the "combination of fanatics" who sought to destroy "everything valuable in the Southern country." He urged the

legislature "to step forth, and having exhausted the argument, to stand by your arms."

A decade before the northern abolitionist movement began, a citizens' meeting in Charleston had petitioned the legislature to expel all free blacks "that we may extinguish at once every gleam of hope which the slaves may indulge of ever being free." Finally, in 1836, the Mississippi legislature gave its answer to the appeal of the northern moral suasionists. It resolved that the people of the state regarded slavery "not as a curse, but a blessing . . . and that they hope to transmit this institution to their posterity, as the best part of their inheritance. . . . We hold discussion upon this subject as . . . impertinent . . . and we will allow no present change, or hope of future alteration in this matter." Northern abolitionism, then, did not destroy the southern antislavery movement; rather, the failure of that movement and the vitality of slavery, together with the temper of the age, ultimately produced abolitionism. The northern movement would never have developed to wage a campaign against a declining institution which Southerners themselves seemed ready to abandon.

If abolitionism of a moralistic, immediatist type is accepted as a logical and quite inescapable product of antebellum society, and slavery as an exotic aberration, the task of historians who would make a case for a repressible conflict is not to wish away the abolitionists but to explain how an atmosphere favorable to political tranquillity, compromise, and patient delay might have been maintained in spite of the irritant of an antislavery crusade. This would require a rather radical reformulation of the problem as revisionists customarily perceived it, for much of the responsibility for avoiding sectional confrontation would be transferred from the North to the South. In effect, antebellum Southerners asked for the tolerant acceptance of an institution which, however vital it may have been economically, was a moral anachronism in their age, until they found a convenient and safe way to give it up.

They asked a great deal of their generation, and their best hope of avoiding a national crisis—of keeping the conflict repressible—was to defuse the antislavery movement by minimizing its appeal to the northern public, and thus to soften the impact of some quite compelling ideological forces. To consider how this might have been possible involves another exercise in counterfactual history, one premised on the existence of *both* southern slavery and northern antislavery.

The first requirement was that Southerners avoid aggressively proslavery postures which would diminish the traditional expectation that through a natural progression slavery would give way to a free-labor system. The fact that many post-Revolutionary Southerners conceded the evils of slavery and assumed at least a vague antislavery stance encouraged northern reformers to be temperate and patient. However, the gradual change to a less apologetic tone—a change that antedated abolitionism—eventually altered perceptions of the possibility for emancipation without intervention from the outside.

During the eighteenth century some Southerners had defended slavery occasionally on racial and religious grounds; during the Missouri controversy they justified it more vigorously; and during the following decade their defense accelerated until, in 1832, Thomas R. Dew of Virginia published the first book-length treatise upholding slavery as a positive good. As the defense became increasingly sweeping, invoking biblical authority, historical experience, scientific evidence, and racist concepts, southern intellectuals romanticized slavery into an ideal paternal relationship beneficial to both master and slave. Reacting to these changed circumstances, a northern reformer expressed dismay at "the sentiments openly expressed . . . that slavery is not an evil . . . [and] that it is criminal toward the South . . . to indulge even a hope that the chains of the captive may some day or other, no matter how remote the time, be broken." The positive-good hypoth-

esis, an aggressive vindication of slavery about which many Southerners themselves had uneasy feelings, by shocking northern reformers into organized activity, played a major role in undermining sectional peace. It was, in the terminology of revisionism, an irresponsible blunder that needlessly heightened tensions between North and South.

A second basic condition for the preservation of political tranquillity was a southern program to reform the institution of slavery in those aspects where it was most exposed to sensational abolitionist attacks. To this end, and at the cost of compromising somewhat the property rights of slaveholders, southern legislatures should have given legal protection to slave marriages, prohibited the breakup of slave families when estates were sold for debt or divided among heirs, reduced the brutal aspects of the slave trade, given slaves greater protection from violent assault, defined the rape of a slave woman as a crime, given slaves a stronger position in courts of law, regulated more strictly their labor and living conditions, and repealed the laws against teaching them to read and write, thus shifting the emphasis in the legal codes from slaves as property to slaves as persons. Reforms such as these would not have made bondage acceptable to abolitionists, but they would have blunted their attack by depriving them of some of their most effective propaganda weapons. The vulnerable slave woman, exposed to her master's lust, faced with the dissolution of her family at her master's will, required to engage in heavy field labor; the slave coffles driven to the plantations of the Southwest by unfeeling traders; the physical punishment inflicted by some callous masters—these were the materials from which abolitionists constructed their accounts of slavery. By improving the condition of the slave the southern states would not only have reduced the abolitionist appeal but checked the growing sense that without external pressure nothing would ever change.

The most significant reforms in the post-Revolutionary South were the laws defining the deliberate killing of a slave as murder in the same degree as if it were committed on a white person. All the codes recognized the humanity of the slaves and provided some limited regulation of labor and living standards, but the conditions which the abolitionists exploited most frequently remained unchanged. Indeed, the codes became more rigorous in some respects, especially in the control of slave movement and assemblages, and private emancipations were made more difficult by various restrictive acts. In 1860, it was still possible for Senator Charles Sumner, in a typical abolitionist attack, to stress all the old themes in portraying "The Barbarism of Slavery":

Slavery paints itself . . . in its complete *abrogation of marriage*, recognized as a sacrament by the Church, and as a contract by the civil power wherever civilization prevails. Under the Law of Slavery no such sacrament is respected, and no such contract can exist. The ties formed between slaves are all subject to the selfish interest or more selfish lust of the master, whose license knows no check. Natural affections which have come together are rudely torn asunder: nor is that all. Stripped of every defense, the chastity of a whole race is exposed to violence, while the result is recorded in telltale faces of children, glowing with master's blood, but doomed for their mother's skin to Slavery through descending generations. . . . Surely, Sir, is not Slavery barbarous?

Sumner's description of slavery was hardly fair to the average slaveholder, but he and other abolitionists were able to say with perfect truth that this was what the laws of the southern states tolerated. That southern churches failed to call for state action to meliorate the conditions of bondage, especially to demand legal protection for slave families, is one of the most distressing chapters in the history of American Christianity.

By their timidity the churches, too, shared responsibility for arming the abolitionists and for another major blunder of the antebellum South.

A third essential requirement for avoiding an irrepressible conflict was acceptance of a federal policy of confining slavery to the fifteen states that recognized it at the time of the Mexican War. Nothing alarmed Northerners more than the aggressive demand of southern politicians that the western territories be opened to slavery; nothing lent more credence to the abolitionist charge that a Slave Power conspired to make slavery a national institution. The fact that much of the northern opposition to slavery expansion was less an expression of moral feelings than of race prejudice does not in the least diminish its importance as a political force.⁷⁷ Traditionally, historians of the repressible conflict placed the onus on the North for agitating what they thought was an issue without substance; but Daniel E. Somes, a congressman from Maine, shifted the responsibility to those who probably most deserved to bear it. "You say it is a mere abstraction for which we are contending," he told Southerners. "And yet you regard this abstraction of so much importance to you that you say you are willing to dissolve the Union . . . to secure it. If it is an abstraction with us, of course it must be an abstraction with you." For this alleged abstraction, this issue without substance, southern politicians waged a bitter fight against the adoption of the Wilmot Proviso. In 1854 they secured the repeal of the Missouri Compromise before they would permit the passage of legislation to organize the territories of Kansas and Nebraska, thus provoking an unprecedented uprising of the northern people, encouraging the formation of the purely sectional Republican party, and doing severe damage to the conservative national Democratic party.

By the 1850s many southern politicians and editors supported Calhoun's doctrine that the Constitution protected

slavery in all the territories; and in 1857 they rallied behind the Supreme Court's decision in the Dred Scott case, which denied that slavery could be barred by either Congress or a territorial legislature. Subsequently, when Douglas claimed that, in spite of the Court's decision, the people of a territory could exclude slavery simply by refusing to protect it, southern politicians proposed a remedy so extravagant as to suggest not merely irresponsibility but a flight from reality. They demanded that Congress adopt a code protecting slavery in all the territories and, in 1860, that the Democratic party incorporate their demand in its national platform. The reckless southern agitation of the slavery expansion issue was a blunder whose consequences included the fragmentation of national political organizations and the destruction beyond repair of the conditions essential to continued sectional peace.

A fourth requirement was that Southerners set an example of temperate response to antislavery criticism and of open-mindedness to moderate proposals for eventual manumission. Instead, southern defenders of slavery sought to prevent discussion altogether; they seemed prepared, if necessary, to violate the federal Bill of Rights and thus to threaten the liberties not only of black slaves but of white freemen as well. Southern laws designed to protect the white community from slave insurrections were interpreted so broadly as to prevent all discussion of slavery in the schools and colleges, in the press, or in public meetings. "The expression of Black Republican opinions in our midst is incompatible with our honor and safety as a people," wrote a North Carolina editor during the presidential campaign of 1856. "Let our schools and seminaries of learning be scrutinized, and if Black Republicans be found in them, let them be driven out. That man is neither a fit nor a safe instructor of our young men, who even inclines to . . . Black Republicanism." By constructing an "intellectual blockade," as Clement Eaton called it, proslavery

Southerners gave northern reformers additional reason to despair that slavery would ever be abolished by internal forces alone.⁷⁸

One of the most serious tactical blunders southern politicians ever made was supporting the passage of a Gag Rule to prevent congressional discussion of petitions and memorials relating to slavery. Between 1836 and 1844, while the rule was in effect, the right of petition was seriously compromised, and abolitionists could argue plausibly that the Slave Power would even subvert the Constitution to preserve their evil institution. Rather than reducing agitation, the Gag Rule increased the flood of petitions and enabled abolitionists to present their cause to the country in a manner most favorable to them. Meanwhile, angry southern congressmen made wild threats and uttered indiscreet remarks that provided more grist for the abolitionists' mill.

In addition to encroaching on freedom of speech and the press and the right of petition, Southerners violated the United States mails in order to prevent the circulation of abolitionist literature. In 1835, the American Anti-Slavery Society, as part of its campaign of moral suasion, began to mail abolitionist pamphlets to slaveholders. The pamphlets were never addressed to slaves or designed to incite an insurrection, only to persuade white masters that slavery was a sin. Nevertheless, in July 1835, a mob broke into the Charleston post office, seized packages of the pamphlets, and burned them in the streets. Similar seizures occurred in other southern communities. Mob violence of this kind was hardly calculated to advance the cause of sectional harmony, nor was the response of a southern Postmaster General, Amos Kendall, and a southern President, Andrew Jackson. Though admitting that he had no authority to exclude antislavery literature from the mails, Kendall did not condemn the action taken in Charleston. "We owe an obligation to the laws," he wrote, "but a higher one to the communities in which we live." A

postmaster who refused to distribute "inflammatory papers" would "stand justified before country and all mankind." President Jackson, in his annual message to Congress in 1835, erroneously described the antislavery pamphlets as "inflammatory appeals addressed to the passions of the slaves." He placed full responsibility on the "misguided" abolitionists and urged Congress (unsuccessfully) to adopt legislation prohibiting, "under severe penalties, the circulation in the Southern States, through the mail, of incendiary publications intended to instigate the slaves to insurrection."⁷⁹

Matching all the other blunders relating to civil liberties was the southern demand, as a fundamental provision of the Compromise of 1850, for a new fugitive-slave law to replace the old law of 1793. As adopted the law was a tissue of injustices and a standing provocation to the North. It provided for the appointment of federal commissioners in each county to hear cases involving blacks alleged to be fugitives, and it empowered federal marshals to require citizens to assist in their capture. In all hearings the alleged fugitive was denied trial by jury and the right to testify in his own behalf; the commissioner received a fee of \$10 if he found the black to be a slave, and \$5 if the black was released. During the 1850s, though several sensational slave rescues occurred, the law was effectively and vigorously enforced, not only against recently escaped fugitives but against some who had escaped many years earlier. Northern conservatives promised to respect the law, but it was a disrupting irritant; even those who hated abolitionists and were strongly infected with racism were sometimes moved by accounts of fugitives captured and carried back to slavery. If, in the 1850s, the North experienced a steady growth of hostility to the South and slaveholders, the fugitive-slave law was a significant force in building these negative attitudes.

Having flouted every requirement for the preservation of an atmosphere conducive to compromise and political tran-

quillity, politicians of the Deep South committed the ultimate blunder of attempting secession after the election of the first Republican President, Abraham Lincoln. Their action was swift and impetuous—all seven states had seceded within less than three months after the election—and they gave Congress no opportunity to consider a compromise plan. As early as December 13, 1860, thirty southern congressmen signed a letter to the southern people declaring, "The argument is exhausted. All hope of relief in the Union . . . is extinguished. . . . We are satisfied the honor, safety and independence of the Southern people require the organization of a Southern Confederacy." Before the end of January nearly all the congressmen from the Deep South had resigned, and northern and border-state moderates had no one with whom to discuss a compromise and the restoration of peace and political tranquillity.

Since only one of the seceding states submitted its ordinance of secession to popular ratification, the debate among historians whether the secession conventions represented the will of the people will doubtless go on indefinitely. Yet, granted that the people might have changed their minds six months or a year later, there is little reason to doubt that secession was the will of a substantial majority at the time the decision was made. The majority for secession was overwhelming in every secession convention, the closest vote being 61-39 in Alabama. Texas was the only state to provide for a popular referendum, and there secession was approved by a plurality of approximately three to one.

Northern and southern conservatives argued in vain that secession was a reckless act, that, so far from giving the South greater security, secession would heighten the dangers it faced and threaten the supreme disaster of defeat in war. They reminded secessionists that Lincoln was not an abolitionist, that he acknowledged slavery to be a local institution over which the federal government had no jurisdiction, and that he rec-

ognized his duty to enforce the fugitive-slave law. Secession, they warned, would prevent slaveholders from recovering fugitives, for the federal government would no longer be obligated to assist them; it would strengthen the abolitionists, for love of the Union would cease to be an inhibiting force; and it would deprive the seceding states of all the territories, for none would be open to them. The conservatives insisted that Lincoln's election was not a threat to the South, for as a minority President with less than 40 percent of the popular vote his position would be weak. The new Congress would have an anti-Republican majority; hence the Republican legislative program would be effectively blocked, and Lincoln's appointments would require the approval of a hostile Senate. Finally, the conservatives described the Republicans as internally divided, a loose coalition of discordant elements which might fall apart before the next presidential campaign. How, then, could secession be viewed as anything but the last and greatest blunder of an irrational and irresponsible generation of southern politicians?

Since traditional revisionism and the alternative interpretation suggested here are both attempts at counterfactual history, it is tempting to speculate further about what might have happened to the Republican party during the four years after Lincoln's election if secession and the Civil War had not occurred. Given the embarrassingly weak position in which the election of 1860 had placed it, the party's record of positive achievement could hardly have been impressive. Moreover, it is difficult to imagine what damage Lincoln could have done to the southern slaveholding interest, especially if one accepts the revisionist belief that slavery expansion was an issue without substance. Thus, had the South remained in the Union, Lincoln's presidency could still have afforded it additional time to make a peaceful transition from slavery to a system of free labor. But that was not to be. In the end, Southerners themselves, by their decision to disrupt the

Union, took the decisive step that ended all hope for the compromises, delays, and rational decisions that eventually might have brought the issues of the sectional conflict to a peaceful resolution. Accordingly, the burden of responsibility for the failure of the democratic process falls rather heavily on the politicians of the South.

The alternative case for a repressible conflict presented here has the merit of taking into account some of the fundamental conditions of northern antebellum society that traditional revisionists chose to ignore. But in a different way it, too, is flawed. While accepting northern antislavery tendencies as an inescapable force in sectional relations, it is premised on an assumption that Southerners were exposed to no comparable social pressures—that they were free to choose between the acts they committed, which brought on a profound crisis and Civil War, and a more rational, controlled, and peaceable course. In short, like the old revisionist interpretation, it is one-sided, for it fails to recognize the predicament of the South.

In a slave society, especially one in which racial and cultural differences separated masters and slaves, certain intrinsic stresses existed that added another factor to the antebellum political equation and made southern behavior as understandable and predictable as the rise of abolitionism in the North. These southern stresses, together with the circumstances that produced northern antislavery, make untenable either the revisionist concept or the alternative concept of a repressible conflict. They bring us back to Seward's "irrepressible conflict between opposing and enduring forces," but not to the clash of economic interests seen by Beard, or even to the clash of cultures variously described by, among others, Channing, Nevins, and Genovese. Slavery produced in the South not a unique culture in any primordial sense, but a special set of problems.⁸⁰

Slavery, of course, was at bottom a labor system, and property in slaves constituted the largest capital investment of most masters. That the South's nearly 400,000 slaveholders should have been reluctant to surrender this vast interest may not have been admirable, but it was hardly irrational. James H. Hammond of South Carolina was being coldly realistic when he posed his well-known rhetorical question: "[Were] ever any people, civilized or savage, persuaded by arguments, human or divine, to surrender, voluntarily, two billion dollars?" That a proslavery argument should have been devised to defend an interest of such magnitude was not surprising, and it is logical to assume that a substantial number of slaveholders, by accepting its validity, truly believed in the morality of slavery and thus insulated themselves from the abolitionist assault.

As a justification of a viable labor system and large capital investment the proslavery argument was in part a product of the practical realities of southern economic life. However, in its most common form, it was not a defense of slavery in general but, more specifically, of the subordination of black slaves to white masters. The racial dimension of southern bondage explains, perhaps better than the economic interests involved, the violent and sometimes irrational response to antislavery attacks.⁸¹ Slavery thus injected not one but two ineluctable realities into southern life: first, the large economic interest is represented, and second, the emotion-laden race issue which deeply concerned slaveholders and nonslaveholders alike. In 1860, black slaves constituted nearly one-third of the southern population. In two states (South Carolina and Mississippi) they outnumbered the whites; in four others (Florida, Georgia, Alabama, and Louisiana) the number of slaves and of whites was about equal. If racism was a powerful force in the northern states, which contained a scant quarter-million free blacks, it was a force of overwhelming proportions in the southern states, where one-third as many

whites lived with a quarter-million free blacks and four million black slaves.

Given the almost universal conviction, heavily stressed in the proslavery argument, that blacks were not only physically but intellectually and emotionally different from and inferior to whites, and that assimilation would be a racial disaster, slavery had great significance as a system of control. Slavery was—so went the conventional wisdom—the only sure way to maintain the supremacy of the white race. Phillips identified white Southerners as “a people with a common resolve indomitably maintained—that [the South] shall be and remain a white man’s country. The consciousness of a function in these premises, whether expressed with the frenzy of a demagogue or maintained with a patrician’s quietude, is the cardinal test of a Southerner and the central theme of Southern history.”⁸² This statement may border on hyperbole, but it was inspired by the knowledge that many white Southerners, nonslaveholders not the least among them, made the preservation of white supremacy a central concern of their lives. Accordingly, an attack on slavery was a threat not only to the southern economy but to the entire white race.

However, if Southerners preserved slavery in part to govern an alien race, they relied on a system with some serious built-in dangers. The volatile ingredient inherent in a slave society was the unpredictable behavior of the slaves, who were controlled primarily by force or the threat of force. Individual acts of violence against whites were not uncommon; organized conspiracies and insurrections occurred infrequently, but the danger was ever present. Southerners never forgot the Santo Domingo insurrection of the 1790s, in which most of the white population was exterminated, or the Gabriel conspiracy in Richmond in 1800, or the Denmark Vesey conspiracy in Charleston in 1822, or the Nat Turner insurrection in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831, in which nearly sixty whites lost their lives. In the South the white

population had to be forever on guard—to maintain special patrols, to restrict the movements of slaves, to prohibit them from gathering in large numbers unless whites were present, to give whites despotic power over slaves, and almost never to question a white man for his treatment of a slave. The antebellum South was a land troubled by a nagging dread of slave insurrections; indeed, it is impossible to understand the psychology of white Southerners, or the events of the sectional conflict, without taking this fact into account.

If the fear of slave violence was a constant, at certain times, when a conspiracy was discovered, or more commonly, when rumors of a conspiracy were afloat, the fear bordered on the pathological, if it did not explode into pure hysteria. John Randolph once told his fellow congressmen: “I speak from facts when I say, that the night bell never tolls for fire in Richmond, that the mother does not hug the infant more closely to her bosom. I have been witness to some of the alarms in the capital of Virginia.” In 1822, a group of Charlestonians sent a memorial to the state legislature asserting that there was “only [one] principle that can maintain slavery, the ‘principle of fear.’ . . . We should always act as if we had an enemy in the very bosom of the state, prepared to rise upon and surprise the whites, whenever an opportunity afforded.”

These candid statements of the anxieties that were endemic in the antebellum South tell a great deal about the sources of the American sectional conflict. In the name of white supremacy and to protect the South from the horrors of Santo Domingo, as well as to secure the slaveholders’ economic interests, the agitation of abolitionists *had* to be suppressed, the Gag Rule enforced, the mails censored, the “intellectual blockade” maintained. These were the inescapable imperatives of southern life as surely as abolitionism was an unavoidable product of intellectual currents in the nineteenth-century North. Without these imperatives John Brown’s raid on

Harpers Ferry might have been dismissed as a ridiculous event, at most a minor irritant, and would not have induced the acute slave-conspiracy hysteria that swept the South during the crucial presidential election of 1860.

A significant number of Southerners seemed not to have found the proslavery argument a fully convincing defense of their peculiar institution, and consequently the pressure on them in this tension-ridden society was all the more severe. Many, perhaps most, slaveholders accepted the system because the slaves were black, but great numbers of them were tormented by the accusation that they were parties to a betrayal of the principles embodied in the Declaration of Independence.⁸³ Those who were troubled by moral uncertainties seldom resolved their problem by surrendering their investments and abandoning a profitable labor system, and certainly their private doubts made them love their abolitionist critics none the more. Rather, they united with those who firmly believed in the morality of slavery in a desperate attempt to escape the threat of abolitionism from without and to minimize the danger of slave rebellion from within. As a last resort they sought both security and tranquillity through independence.

The historians of the repressible conflict thus failed to reconcile their case not only with the essential reality of a northern antislavery movement but with certain inescapable facts of southern slave society. Economic interests, racial beliefs, and fear of slave insurrections impelled Southerners to make demands and take actions that precipitated a series of sectional confrontations culminating in the secession crisis of 1860-61.⁸⁴ The Republican party of the 1850s was not an abolitionist party, as most Southerners seemed to think, and slavery in the southern states was never a clear issue in the politics of that decade. But the party was vaguely antislavery; its ranks contained an articulate minority of strong-minded abolitionists; and, for both racist and moral reasons, it was

firmly committed to keeping slavery out of the territories. This is what gave substance to the southern perception of the Republican party as a threat to its peculiar institution. The interplay of these proslavery and antislavery forces, not the irresponsible blunders of northern or southern politicians, or economic conflict, or irreconcilable cultural differences, brought on the irrepressible conflict about which Seward spoke.

There still remains the question of the evitability or inevitability of the Civil War itself—a question that will probably continue to be, as it is now, unanswerable. It may well be that the country reached a point sometime in the 1850s when it would have been almost impossible to avoid a violent resolution of the sectional crisis. During that decade, northern antislavery and southern proslavery radicals became increasingly militant and prone to anticipate an ultimate resort to armed conflict; and the point of no return may have been reached in 1857 with the Dred Scott decision, the Kansas crisis, Douglas's break with the Buchanan administration, and the severe economic panic of that year. This, of course, is sheer speculation, for, as Seward would have reminded us, to make a case for an irrepressible conflict is not to prove the inevitability of war. But somehow the war came, and it seems no less tragic because it resulted from conditions and events more substantial than the irresponsible acts of a blundering generation. The irrepressible conflict of antebellum years made the war, if not inevitable, at least an understandable response to its stresses by men and women no more or less wise than we.

THE
IMPERILED UNION

*Essays on the
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