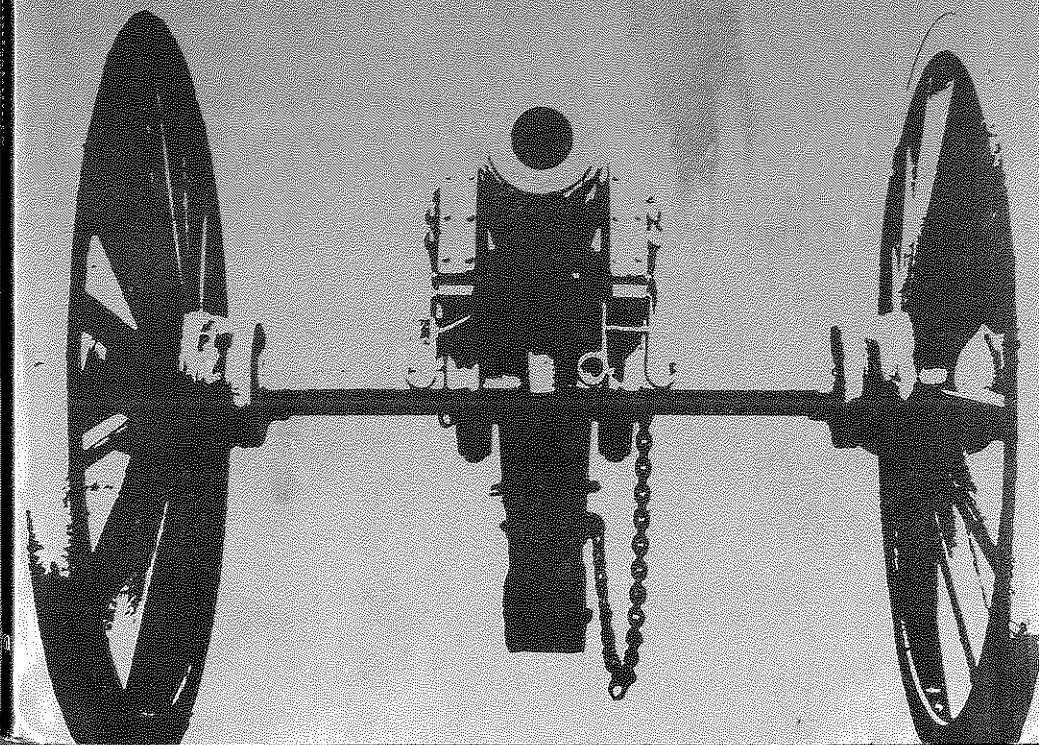


APOSTLES OF DISUNION

Southern Secession Commissioners and
the Causes of the Civil War

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Conclusion: Apostles of Disunion, Apostles of Racism

JOHNSmith Preston spent the war years in uniform. After serving in a number of different staff positions in the army, he found a home in the Confederate Bureau of Conscription. He took over that agency in 1863, was promoted to the rank of brigadier general in 1864, and headed the Conscript Bureau until the South went down to defeat. Preston lived for a time in England after the war, but in 1868 he went back to South Carolina.¹ His reputation as an orator still intact, Preston was invited to return to his native state in 1868 to address the Washington and Jefferson Societies of the University of Virginia. On June 30 of that year, Preston spoke in Charlottesville to the young Virginians.

Much of his address was an eloquent tribute to the Founding Fathers and their principal handiwork—the Revolution, the state constitutions, and the Constitution of the United States. Through their efforts “your fathers achieved that liberty which comes of a free government, founded on justice, order and peace,” Preston said. In order to preserve the principles and the constitutional forms established by the Revolutionary generation, “you, the immediate offspring of the founders, went forth to that death grapple which has prevailed against you,” he continued. It was the North, “the victors,” who rejected “the principles,” destroyed “the forms,” and defeated “the promised

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destiny of America,” Preston charged. “The Constitution you fought for”—the Confederate Constitution—“embodied every principle of the Constitution of the United States, and guaranteed the free Constitution of Virginia. It did not omit one essential for liberty and the public welfare,” he claimed. The Confederacy was in ashes, however, and so was true constitutional liberty. “That liberty was lost, and now the loud hosanna is shouted over land and sea—‘Liberty may be dead, but the Union is preserved. Glory, glory, glory to Massachusetts and her Hessian and Milesian mercenaries,’” Preston declaimed. Yet all was not lost. Even though “cruel, bloody, remorseless tyrants may rule at Fort Sumter and at Richmond . . . they cannot crush that immortal hope, which rises from the blood soaked earth of Virginia,” Preston believed. “I see the sacred image of regenerate Virginia, and cry aloud, in the hearing of a God of Right, and in the hearing of all the nations of the earth—ALL HAIL OUR MOTHER.”²

Passionate, unregenerate, unapologetic, unreconstructed—all these and more apply to Preston’s remarks on this occasion. But so do words like “conveniently forgetful,” “strongly revisionist,” and “purposely misleading.” Nowhere to be found are references to many of the arguments and descriptions he had used over and over again before the Virginia Convention in February 1861—things like “the subject race . . . rising and murdering their masters” or “the conflict between slavery and non-slavery is a conflict for life and death,” or his insistence that “the South cannot exist without African slavery,” or his portrait of the “fermenting millions” of the North as “canting, fanatics, festering in the licentiousness of abolition and amalgamation.” All this was swept aside as Preston sought to paint the Civil War as a mighty struggle over differing concepts of constitutional liberty. Like Jefferson Davis and Alexander H. Stephens in their postwar writings, Preston was trying to reframe the causes of the conflict in terms that would be much more favorable to the South.

Preston was not the only former secession commissioner to launch such an effort after the war. Jabez L. M. Curry, who had served as Alabama's commissioner to Maryland in December 1860, became a leading figure in the drive to improve primary and secondary education in the postwar South. As agent for both the Peabody and Slater Funds and as supervising director of the Southern Education Board, Curry worked tirelessly to establish public schools and teacher training for both races in the states of the former Confederacy. Curry also worked diligently to justify the Lost Cause of the Confederacy. In his *Civil History of the Government of the Confederate States, with Some Personal Reminiscences*, published in Richmond in 1901, Curry offered an analysis of the coming of the war that closely paralleled the argument used by John S. Preston in 1868. "The object in quitting the Union was not to destroy, but to save the principles of the Constitution," Curry wrote. "The Southern States from the beginning of the government had striven to keep it within the orbit prescribed by the Constitution and failed."³ The Curry of 1901 would hardly have recognized the Curry of 1860, who told the governor of Maryland that secession meant "deliverance from Abolition domination," and who predicted that under Republican rule the South's slave-based social system would "be assaulted, humbled, dwarfed, degraded, and finally crushed out."

In 1860 and 1861 Preston, Curry, and the other commissioners had seen a horrific future facing their region within the confines of Abraham Lincoln's Union. When they used words like "submission" and "degradation," when they referred to "final subjugation" and "annihilation," they were not talking about constitutional differences or political arguments. They were talking about the dawning of an abominable new world in the South, a world created by the Republican destruction of the institution of slavery.

The secession commissioners knew what this new and hateful

world would look like. Over and over again they called up three stark images that, taken together, constituted the white South's worst nightmare.

The first threat was the looming specter of racial equality. The commissioners insisted almost to a man that Republican ascendancy in Washington placed white supremacy in the South in mortal peril. Mississippi commissioner William L. Harris made this point clearly and unambiguously in his speech to the Georgia legislature in December 1860. "Our fathers made this a government for the white man," Harris told the Georgians, "rejecting the negro, as an ignorant, inferior, barbarian race, incapable of self-government, and not, therefore, entitled to be associated with the white man upon terms of civil, political, or social equality." But the Republicans intended "to overturn and strike down this great feature of our Union . . . and to substitute in its stead their new theory of the universal equality of the black and white races." Alabama's commissioners to North Carolina, Isham W. Garrott and Robert H. Smith, predicted that the white children of their state would "be compelled to flee from the land of their birth, and from the slaves their parents have toiled to acquire as an inheritance for them, or to submit to the degradation of being reduced to an equality with them, and all its attendant horrors." South Carolina's John McQueen warned the Texas Convention that Lincoln and the Republicans were bent upon "the abolition of slavery upon this continent and the elevation of our own slaves to an equality with ourselves and our children." And so it went, as commissioner after commissioner—Leonidas Spratt of South Carolina, David Clopton and Arthur F. Hopkins of Alabama, Henry L. Benning of Georgia—hammered home this same point.

The impending imposition of racial equality informed the speeches of other commissioners as well. Thomas J. Wharton, Mississippi's attorney general and that state's commissioner to Tennessee,

said in Nashville on January 8, 1861, that the Republican Party would, “at no distant day, inaugurate the reign of equality of all races and colors, and the universality of the elective franchise.”⁴ Commissioner Samuel L. Hall of Georgia told the North Carolina legislature on February 13, 1861, that only a people “dead to all sense of virtue and dignity” would embrace the Republican doctrine of “the social and political equality of the black and white races.”⁵ Another Georgia commissioner, Luther J. Glenn of Atlanta, made the same point to the Missouri legislature on March 2, 1861. The Republican platform, press, and principal spokesmen had made their “purposes, objects, and motives” crystal clear, Glenn insisted: “hostility to the South, the extinction of slavery, and the ultimate elevation of the negro to civil, political and social equality with the white man.” These reasons and these reasons alone had prompted his state “to dissolve her connexion with the General Government,” Glenn insisted.⁶

The second element in the commissioners’ prophecy was the prospect of a race war. Mississippi commissioner Alexander H. Handy raised this threat in his Baltimore speech in December 1860—Republican agents infiltrating the South “to excite the slave to cut the throat of his master.” Alabamians Garrott and Smith told their Raleigh audience that Republican policies would force the South either to abandon slavery “or be doomed to a servile war.” William Cooper, Alabama’s commissioner to Missouri, delivered a similar message in Jefferson City. “Under the policy of the Republican party, the time would arrive when the scenes of San Domingo and Hayti, with all their attendant horrors, would be enacted in the slaveholding States,” he told the Missourians. David Clopton of Alabama wrote the governor of Delaware that Republican ascendancy “endangers instead of insuring domestic tranquility by the possession of channels through which to circulate insurrectionary documents and disseminate insurrectionary sentiments among a hitherto contented servile popula-

tion.” Wharton of Mississippi told the Tennessee legislature that Southerners “will not, cannot surrender our institutions,” and that Republican attempts to subvert slavery “will drench the country in blood, and extirpate one or other of the races.”⁷ In their speeches to the Virginia Convention, Fulton Anderson, Henry L. Benning, and John S. Preston all forecast a Republican-inspired race war that would, as Benning put it, “break out everywhere like hidden fire from the earth.”

The third prospect in the commissioners’ doomsday vision was, in many ways, the most dire: racial amalgamation. Judge Harris of Mississippi sounded this note in Georgia in December 1860 when he spoke of Republican insistence on “equality in the rights of matrimony.” Other commissioners repeated this warning in the weeks that followed. In Virginia, Henry Benning insisted that under Republican-led abolition “our women” would suffer “horrors . . . we cannot contemplate in imagination.” There was not an adult present who could not imagine exactly what Benning was talking about. Leroy Pope Walker, Alabama’s commissioner to Tennessee and subsequently the first Confederate secretary of war, predicted that in the absence of secession all would be lost—first, “our property,” and “then our liberties,” and finally the South’s greatest treasure, “the sacred purity of our daughters.”⁸

No commissioner articulated the racial fears of the secessionists better, or more graphically, than Alabama’s Stephen F. Hale. When he wrote of a South facing “amalgamation or extermination,” when he referred to “all the horrors of a San Domingo servile insurrection,” when he described every white Southerner “degraded to a position of equality with free negroes,” when he foresaw the “sons and daughters” of the South “associating with free negroes upon terms of political and social equality,” when he spoke of the Lincoln administration consigning the citizens of the South “to assassinations and her

wives and daughters to pollution and violation to gratify the lust of half-civilized Africans," he was giving voice to the night terrors of the secessionist South. States' rights, historic political abuses, territorial questions, economic differences, constitutional arguments—all these and more paled into insignificance when placed alongside this vision of the South's future under Republican domination.

The choice was absolutely clear. The slave states could secede and establish their independence, or they could submit to "Black Republican" rule with its inevitable consequences: Armageddon or amalgamation. Whites forced to endure racial equality, race war, a staining of the blood—who could tolerate such things?

The commissioners sent out to spread the secessionist gospel in late 1860 and early 1861 clearly believed that the racial fate of their region was hanging in the balance in the wake of Lincoln's election. Only through disunion could the South be saved from the disastrous effects of Republican principles and Republican malevolence. Hesitation, submission—any course other than immediate secession—would place both slavery and white supremacy on the road to certain extinction. The commissioners were arguing that disunion, even if it meant risking war, was the only way to save the white race.

Did these men really believe these things? Did they honestly think that secession was necessary in order to stay the frenzied hand of the Republican abolitionist, preserve racial purity and racial supremacy, and save their women and children from rape and slaughter at the hands of "half-civilized Africans"? They made these statements, and used the appropriate code words, too many times in too many places with too much fervor and raw emotion to leave much room for doubt. They knew these things in the marrow of their bones, and they destroyed a political union because of what they believed and what they foresaw.

But, we might ask, could they not see the illogicality, indeed the

absurdity, of their insistence that Lincoln's election meant that the white South faced the sure prospect of either massive miscegenation or a race war to the finish? They seem to have been totally untroubled by logical inconsistencies of this sort. Indeed, the capacity for compartmentalization among this generation of white Southerners appears to have been practically boundless. How else can we explain Judge William L. Harris's comments before the Mississippi State Agricultural Society in November 1858? "It has been said by an eminent statesman," Harris observed on this occasion, "that nothing can advance the mass of society in prosperity and happiness, nothing can uphold the substantial interest and steadily improve the general condition and character of the whole, but this one thing—compensating rewards for labor."⁹ It apparently never occurred to Harris that this observation might apply to the hundreds of thousands of slaves working in Mississippi in 1858 as well as to the white farmers and mechanics of his adopted state. His mind could not even comprehend the possibility that slaves, too, were human beings who, if given the opportunity, might well respond to "compensating rewards" for their labor.

In setting out to explain secession to their fellow Southerners, the commissioners have explained a very great deal to us as well. By illuminating so clearly the racial content of the secession persuasion, the commissioners would seem to have laid to rest, once and for all, any notion that slavery had nothing to do with the coming of the Civil War. To put it quite simply, slavery and race were absolutely critical elements in the coming of the war. Neo-Confederate groups may have "a problem" with this interpretation, as the leader of the Virginia Heritage Preservation Association put it. But these defenders of the Lost Cause need only read the speeches and letters of the secession commissioners to learn what was really driving the Deep South to the brink of war in 1860–61.