

# BATTLE CRY OF FREEDOM

The Civil War Era

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Secession was an unequivocal act which relieved the unbearable tension that had been building for years. It was a catharsis for pent-up fears and hostilities. It was a *joyful* act that caused people literally to dance in the streets. Their fierce gaiety anticipated the celebratory crowds that gathered along the Champs-Élysées and the Unter den Linden and at Piccadilly Circus in that similarly innocent world of August 1914. Not that the flag-waving, singing crowds in Charleston and Savannah and New Orleans wanted or expected war; on the contrary, they believed that "the Yankees were cowards and would not fight"—or said they did, to assure the timid that there was no danger. "So far as civil war is concerned," remarked an Atlanta newspaper blithely in January 1861, "we have no fears of that in Atlanta." A rural editor thought that women and children armed with popguns firing "Connecticut wooden nutmegs" could deal with every Yankee likely to appear in Georgia. Senator James Chesnut of South Carolina offered to drink all the blood shed as a consequence of secession. It became a common saying in the South during the secession winter that "a lady's thimble will hold all the blood that will be shed."<sup>7</sup>

Cooperationists were not so sure about this. "War I look for as almost certain," wrote Alexander Stephens, who also warned that "revolutions are much easier started than controlled, and the men who begin them [often] . . . themselves become the victims."<sup>8</sup> But Stephens's prescient warning was lost in the wind, and he joined the revolution himself when his state went out. Before that happened, however, the cooperationists had demonstrated considerable strength in each state except South Carolina and Texas. In elections for convention delegates, candidates representing some kind of cooperationist position polled at least 40 percent of the vote in those five states. Many eligible voters had not gone to the polls in these elections, leading to a belief that the potential cooperationist electorate was even larger. In Alabama and Georgia, 39 and 30 percent respectively of the delegates voted against the final res-

6. Channing, *Crisis of Fear*, 251; Nevins, *Emergence*, II, 321.

7. Donald E. Reynolds, *Editors Make War: Southern Newspapers in the Secession Crisis* (Nashville, 1970), 174; E. Merton Coulter, *The Confederate States of America 1861-1865* (Baton Rouge, 1950), 15.

8. Stephens to \_\_\_\_\_, Nov. 25, 1860, in Ulrich B. Phillips, ed., *The Correspondence of Robert Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb*, in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association*, 1911, vol. II (Washington, 1913), 504-5.

olution of secession despite the enormous pressures brought on them to go along with the majority.

This caused many northerners and some historians to exaggerate the strength of unionism in the lower South. As late as July 1861, Lincoln expressed doubt "whether there is, to-day, a majority of the legally qualified voters of any State, except perhaps South Carolina, in favor of disunion." A century later several historians echoed this faith in a silent majority of southern unionists. "It can hardly be said that a majority of the South's white people deliberately chose to dissolve the Union in 1861," wrote one. "Secession was not basically desired even by a majority in the lower South," concluded another, "and the secessionists succeeded less because of the intrinsic popularity of their program than because of the extreme skill with which they utilized an emergency psychology."<sup>9</sup>

Though an emergency psychology certainly existed, the belief in a repressed unionist majority rests on a misunderstanding of southern unionism. As a Mississippi "unionist" explained after Lincoln's election, he was no longer "a Union man in the sense in which the North is Union." His unionism was conditional; the North had violated the condition by electing Lincoln. Cooperationists in Alabama who voted against secession cautioned outsiders not to "misconstrue" their action. "We scorn the Black Republicans," they declared. "The State of Alabama cannot and will not submit to the Administration of Lincoln. . . . We intend to resist . . . but our resistance is based upon . . . unity of action, with the other slave states." Or as a Mississippi cooperationist put it: "Cooperation before secession was the first object of my desire. Failing this I am willing to take the next best, subsequent cooperation or cooperation after secession."<sup>10</sup> This was the position of most delegates who initially opposed immediate secession. It was a weak foundation on which to build a faith in southern unionism.

Was secession constitutional? Or was it an act of revolution? The

9. CWL, IV, 437; Charles Grier Sellers, "The Travail of Slavery," in Sellers, ed., *The Southerner as American* (Chapel Hill, 1960), 70; David M. Potter, *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis* (New Haven, 1942, reissued 1962 with new preface), 208.

10. Percy Lee Rainwater, *Mississippi: Storm Center of Secession 1856-1861* (Baton Rouge, 1938), 173; J. Mills Thornton III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge, 1978), 416-17; Dwight L. Dumond, *The Secession Movement 1860-1861* (New York, 1931), 200-202.

Constitution is silent on this question. But most secessionists believed in the legality of their action. State sovereignty, they insisted, had preceded national sovereignty. When they had ratified the Constitution, states delegated some of the functions of sovereignty to a federal government but did not yield its fundamental attributes. Having ratified the Constitution by a convention, a state could reassert total sovereignty in the same manner. This theory presented a slight problem for states (five of the seven) that had come into the Union after 1789. But they, too, despite the appearance of being creatures rather than creators of the Union, could assert the prior sovereignty of their states, for each had formed a state constitution (or in the case of Texas, a national constitution) *before* petitioning Congress for admission to the Union.

Those southerners (mostly conditional unionists) who found this theory a bit hard to swallow could fall back on the right of revolution. Senator Alfred Iverson of Georgia conceded that while no state had a constitutional right to secede "each State has the right of revolution. . . . The secession of a State is an act of revolution." The mayor of Vicksburg described secession as "a mighty political revolution which [will] result in placing the Confederate States among the Independent nations of the earth."<sup>11</sup> A Confederate army officer declared that he had "never believed the Constitution recognized the right of secession. I took up arms, sir, upon a broader ground—the right of revolution. We were wronged. Our properties and liberties were about to be taken from us. It was a sacred duty to rebel."<sup>12</sup>

Sporting blue cockades (the symbol of secession), some of these enthusiastic revolutionaries even sang "The Southern Marseillaise" in the streets of Charleston and New Orleans.<sup>13</sup> Ex-Governor Henry Wise of Virginia, who urged the formation of committees of public safety, glo-

11. CG, 36 Cong., 2 Sess., 10–11; Peter F. Walker, *Vicksburg: A People at War* (Chapel Hill, 1960), 43.

12. George Ward Nichols, *The Story of the Great March* (New York, 1865), 302.

13. Part of the lyrics went like this:

Sons of the South, awake to glory!  
Hark! hark! what myriads bid you rise.  
Your children, wives, and grandsires hoary,  
Behold their tears and hear their cries.

To arms! to arms! ye brave,  
Th' avenging sword unsheath! (Reynolds, *Editors Make War*, 184).

ried in his reputation as the "Danton of the Secession Movement in Virginia." Carried away by an excess of Robespierrian zeal, a Georgia disunionist warned cooperationists that "we will go for revolution, and if you . . . oppose us . . . we will brand you as traitors, and chop off your heads."<sup>14</sup>

But the American Revolution, not the French, was the preferred model for secessionists. *Liberté* they sought, but not *égalité* or *fraternité*. Were not "the men of 1776 . . . Secessionists?" asked an Alabamian. If we remain in the Union, said a Florida slaveholder, "we will be deprived of that right for which our fathers fought in the battles of the revolution." From "the high and solemn motive of defending and protecting the rights . . . which our fathers bequeathed to us," declared Jefferson Davis, let us "renew such sacrifices as our fathers made to the holy cause of constitutional liberty."<sup>15</sup>

What were these rights and liberties for which Confederates contended? The right to own slaves; the liberty to take this property into the territories; freedom from the coercive powers of a centralized government. Black Republican rule in Washington threatened republican freedoms as the South understood them. The ideology for which the fathers had fought in 1776 posited an eternal struggle between liberty and power. Because the Union after March 4, 1861, would no longer be controlled by southerners, the South could protect its liberty from the assaults of hostile power only by going out of the Union. "On the 4th of March, 1861," declared a Georgia secessionist, "we are either *slaves in the Union or freemen out of it*." The question, agreed Jefferson Davis and a fellow Mississippian, was "Will you be slaves or will be independent? . . . Will you consent to be robbed of your property" or will you "strike bravely for liberty, property, honor and life?"<sup>16</sup> Submission to Black Republicans would mean "the loss of liberty, property, home, country—everything that makes life worth having," proclaimed a South Carolinian. "I am engaged in the glorious cause of liberty and justice,"

14. Emory M. Thomas, *The Confederacy as a Revolutionary Experience* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1971), 31; Johnson, *Patriarchal Republic*, 39.

15. Alabamian and Floridian quoted in James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (New York, 1982), 240, 239; Rowland, *Davis*, V, 43, 202.

16. Johnson, *Patriarchal Republic*, 36; Moore, ed., *Rebellion Record*, VI, "Documents," 299; William L. Barney, *The Secessionist Impulse: Alabama and Mississippi in 1860* (Princeton, 1974), 192.

wrote a Confederate soldier, "fighting for the rights of man—fighting for all that we of the South hold dear."<sup>17</sup>

What stake did nonslaveholding whites have in this crusade for the freedom of planters to own slaves? Some secessionists worried a great deal about this question. What if Hinton Rowan Helper was right? What if nonslaveowners were potential Black Republicans? "The great lever by which the abolitionists hope to extirpate slavery in the States is the aid of non-slaveholding citizens in the South," fretted a Kentucky editor. How would they ply this lever? By using the patronage to build up a cadre of Republican officeholders among nonslaveowners—first in the border states and upcountry where slavery was most vulnerable, and then in the heart of the cotton kingdom itself. Governor Joseph E. Brown of Georgia feared that some whites would be "bribed into treachery to their own section, by the allurements of office." When Republicans organized their "Abolition party . . . of Southern men," echoed the *Charleston Mercury*, "the contest for slavery will no longer be one between the North and the South. It will be in the South, between the people of the South."<sup>18</sup>

The elections of delegates to secession conventions seemed to confirm this fear. Many upcountry districts with few slaves sent cooperationist delegates. In the conventions, delegates supporting delay or cooperation owned, on the average, less wealth and fewer slaves than immediate secessionists. The implications of these data should not be pushed too far. A good many low-slaveholding Democratic counties voted for immediate secession, while numerous high-slaveholding Whig counties backed cooperation. And of course cooperationism did not necessarily mean unionism. Nevertheless, the partial correlation of cooperationism with low slaveholding caused concern among secessionists.<sup>19</sup>

17. *Charleston Mercury*, Oct. 11, 1860, in Dwight L. Dumond, ed., *Southern Editorials on Secession* (New York, 1931), 181; Michael Barton, "Did the Confederacy Change Southern Soldiers?" in Harry P. Owens and James J. Cooke, eds., *The Old South in the Crucible of War* (Jackson, 1983), 71.

18. *Kentucky Statesman*, Oct. 5, 1860, in Dumond, *The Secession Movement*, 117n.; Allen D. Candler, ed., *The Confederate Records of the State of Georgia*, 5 vols. (Atlanta, 1909–11), I, 47; *Charleston Mercury*, Oct. 11, 1860, in Dumond, ed., *Southern Editorials*, 179.

19. Seymour Martin Lipset, "The Emergence of the One-Party South—The Election of 1860," in Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics* (Anchor Books ed., New York, 1963), 372–84; Potter, *Impending Crisis*, 503–4; Johnson, *Patriarchal Republic*, 63–78; Peyton McCrary, Clark Miller, and Dale Baum, "Class and Party

So they undertook a campaign to convince nonslaveholders that they too had a stake in disunion. The stake was white supremacy. In this view, the Black Republican program of abolition was the first step toward racial equality and amalgamation. Georgia's Governor Brown carried this message to his native uplands of north Georgia whose voters idolized him. Slavery "is the poor man's best Government," said Brown. "Among us the poor white laborer . . . does not belong to the menial class. The negro is in no sense his equal. . . . He belongs to the only true aristocracy, the race of *white men*." Thus yeoman farmers "will never consent to submit to abolition rule," for they "know that in the event of the abolition of slavery, they would be greater sufferers than the rich, who would be able to protect themselves. . . . When it becomes necessary to defend our rights against so foul a domination, I would call upon the mountain boys as well as the people of the lowlands, and they would come down like an avalanche and swarm around the flag of Georgia."<sup>20</sup>

Much secessionist rhetoric played variations on this theme. The election of Lincoln, declared an Alabama newspaper, "shows that the North [intends] to free the negroes and force amalgamation between them and the children of the poor men of the South." "Do you love your mother, your wife, your sister, your daughter?" a Georgia secessionist asked non-slaveholders. If Georgia remained in a Union "ruled by Lincoln and his crew . . . in TEN years or less our CHILDREN will be the *slaves* of negroes."<sup>21</sup> "If you are tame enough to submit," declaimed South Carolina's Baptist clergyman James Furman, "Abolition preachers will be at hand to consummate the marriage of your daughters to black husbands." No! No! came an answering shout from Alabama. "Submit to have our wives and daughters choose between death and gratifying the hellish lust of the negro!! . . . Better ten thousand deaths than submission to Black Republicanism."<sup>22</sup>

To defend their wives and daughters, presumably, yeoman whites therefore joined planters in "rallying to the standard of Liberty and

in the Secession Crisis: Voting Behavior in the Deep South," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 8 (1978), 429–57; and Ralph Wooster, *The Secession Conventions of the South* (Princeton, 1962), passim, esp. 259–66.

20. Johnson, *Patriarchal Republic*, 48; Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850–1890* (New York, 1983), 86–87.

21. Reynolds, *Editors Make War*, 125–26; Johnson, *Patriarchal Republic*, 47–48.

22. Channing, *Crisis of Fear*, 287; Barney, *Secessionist Impulse*, 228.

Equality for white men" against "our Abolition enemies who are pledged to prostrate the white freemen of the South down to equality with negroes." Most southern whites could agree that "democratic liberty exists solely because we have black slaves" whose presence "promotes equality among the free." Hence "freedom is not possible without slavery."<sup>23</sup>

This Orwellian definition of liberty as slavery provoked ridicule north of the Potomac. For disunionists to compare themselves to the Revolutionary fathers "is a libel upon the whole character and conduct of the men of '76," declared William Cullen Bryant's *New York Evening Post*. The founders fought "to establish the rights of man . . . and principles of universal liberty." The South was rebelling "not in the interest of general humanity, but of a domestic despotism. . . . Their motto is not liberty, but slavery." Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence spoke for "Natural Rights against Established Institutions," added the *New York Tribune*, while "Mr. Jeff. Davis's caricature thereof is made in the interest of an unjust, outgrown, decaying Institution against the apprehended encroachments of Natural Human Rights." It was, in short, not a revolution for liberty but a counterrevolution "reversing the wheels of progress . . . to hurl everything backward into deepest darkness . . . despotism and oppression."<sup>24</sup>

Without assenting to the rhetoric of this analysis, a good many disunionists in effect endorsed its substance. The signers of the Declaration of Independence were wrong if they meant to include Negroes among "all men," said Alexander Stephens after he had become vice president of the Confederacy. "Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery . . . is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first in the history of the world based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth." Black Republicans were the real revolutionaries. They subscribed to "tenets as radical and revolutionary" as those of the abolitionists, declared a New Orleans newspaper. These "revolutionary dogmas," echoed numerous southerners, were "active and

bristling with terrible designs and as ready for bloody and forcible realities as ever characterized the ideas of the French revolution."<sup>25</sup> Therefore it was "an abuse of language" to call secession a revolution, said Jefferson Davis. We left the Union "to save ourselves from a revolution" that threatened to make "property in slaves so insecure as to be comparatively worthless." In 1861 the Confederate secretary of state advised foreign governments that southern states had formed a new nation "to preserve their old institutions" from "a revolution [that] threatened to destroy their social system."<sup>26</sup>

This is the language of counterrevolution. But in one respect the Confederacy departed from the classic pattern of the genre. Most counterrevolutions seek to restore the *ancien régime*. The counterrevolutionaries of 1861 made their move before the revolutionaries had done anything—indeed, several months before Lincoln even took office. In this regard, secession fit the model of "pre-emptive counterrevolution" developed by historian Arno Mayer. Rather than trying to restore the old order, a pre-emptive counterrevolution strikes first to protect the status quo before the revolutionary threat can materialize. "Conjuring up the dangers of leaving revolutionaries the time to prepare their forces and plans for an assault on *their* terms," writes Mayer, "counterrevolutionary leaders urge a preventive thrust." To mobilize support for it, they "intentionally exaggerate the magnitude and imminence of the revolutionary threat."<sup>27</sup>

Though Mayer was writing about Europe in the twentieth century, his words also describe the immediate secessionists of 1860. They exaggerated the Republican threat and urged pre-emptive action to forestall the dangers they conjured up. The South could not afford to wait for an "overt act" by Lincoln against southern rights, they insisted. "If I find a coiled rattlesnake in my path," asked an Alabama editor, "do I wait for his 'overt act' or do I smite him in his coil?" When conditional unionists tell us "that it will be several years before Lincoln will have control of the sword and the purse through the instrumentality of Congress," observed a Mississippian, that only "furnishes additional argu-

23. LINCOLN ELECTED! Broadside from Bell County, Texas, Nov. 8, 1860, McLellan Lincoln Collection, John Hay Library, Brown University; Thornton, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society*, 321, 206–7; *Richmond Enquirer*, April 15, 1856, quoted in Oakes, *The Ruling Race*, 141.

24. *New York Evening Post*, Feb. 18, 1861; *New York Tribune*, March 27, 1861, May 21, 1862.

25. *Augusta Daily Constitutionalist*, March 30, 1861; *New Orleans Bee*, June 25, 1860, quoted in Reynolds, *Editors Make War*, 23; Thornton, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society*, 416; *Columbia Daily South Carolinian*, Aug. 3, 1860, in Dumond, ed., *Southern Editorials*, 154.

26. Rowland, *Davis*, V, 50, 72, IV, 357; O.R. Navy, Ser. 2, Vol. 3, pp. 257–58.

27. *The Dynamics of Counterrevolution in Europe, 1870–1956: An Analytic Framework* (New York, 1971), 86.

ment for action NOW. Let us rally . . . before the enemy can make good his promise to overwhelm us. . . . Delay is dangerous. Now is the time to strike.”<sup>28</sup>