

PART I

BETTER ECONOMIC TIMES GENERATE WORSE DEMOCRATIC DILEMMAS

During the first two decades of the slavery controversy, 1835–54, the huge majority of Southerners believed that the William L. Yanceys counterproductively exaggerated the South's peril. Then, in the mid- and late 1850s, a more respectable minority of Southerners believed that the secessionists offered a productive escape from imminent danger. Yet at the very time more Southerners saw themselves as disastrously afflicted politically, their economic afflictions largely lifted. Why should a sunnier economic outlook have coincided with a stormier political mood?

In part because the South's stormiest disunionists, the South Carolina aristocrats, enjoyed less of the brighter economic prospects. In part because southern prosperity elsewhere widened the section's provoking divisions: not only between contracting South Carolinians and expanding Southwesterners but also between slaveholders and nonslaveholders, between black belt and white belt areas, between the Lower South and the Border South. Meanwhile, at the very time that southern divisions widened, northern antagonism swelled. Never had the minority of masters in the South, or the minority of Southerners in the Union, or the minority of South Carolinians in the master class felt so vulnerable, defending an unrepublican institution inside republican government.

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CHAPTER 1

Democracy and Despotism, 1776–1854: *Road*, Volume I, Revisited

As in *Road to Disunion*, Volume I, let us focus on the immersion of the world's most powerful slaveholders in the world's most advanced republic, for that phenomenon most paved the southern road to disunion.¹ From the moment that road began amidst the American Revolution, republican ideology and government posed special threats to despotism's antirepublican essence. Yet the American republican system also lent special protections to an aggressively defensive slavocracy. The dialectic between extra threats and extra protection tipped toward slaveholder safety until the mid-1850s. Then the balance shifted, at the very time the slavocracy's internal divisions widened.

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Where republican rule over whites required free speech and the consent to be governed, dominion over blacks invited dictatorial compulsions and the coercion of the nonconsenting. The slaveholders needed an All-Mighty Color Line to keep such irreconcilable regimes severed. But the color line leaked. Whites freed some blacks. Some citizens became so-called poor white trash—trashier than slaves. Some masters used supposedly inferior blacks to direct their slaves. Many enslavers inhibited white antislavery debate, lest the enslaved—or the citizens—challenge despotism's compatibility with democracy. At their most undemocratic, white censors deployed lynch mobs, anticipating the most savage postwar South's terrorizing.

Yet the democrat in the slaveholder resisted physical violence against white citizens. Rather than impose lynch law, the establishment preferred nonviolent pressure to conform, especially the accusation that hesitation about proslavery tactics revealed softness on slavery. Every four years in presidential campaigns and whenever agitation about slavery threatened, southern politics featured loyalty finger pointing. Accusations of “traitor” became rife and politically lethal.²

The slaveholding democrat found the relentless brutalizer of slaves as repulsive as the relentless lyncher of citizens. Masters preferred to control their slaves with familial kindness, Christmas presents, and soothing concessions (especially the granting of private garden plots). Slaves, mastering their job of wrenching maximum concessions from would-be paternalists, often played the role that slaveholders desired. They pretended to love their patriarch and to consent, just like citizens, to his supposedly fatherly dominion.

Sometimes, pretense edged toward reality, among both the charade's would-be "fathers" and its would-be "boys." The ideal master's most revealing word for the ideal servile was not "boy," not even "Sambo," but "Cuffee." Just cuff a childish black, declared the condescending word, and he will become that alleged impossibility, the consenting slave.

But most often, Cuffee's and Massa's role slipped, belied by duplicity on both sides of the color line. Dubious paternalists regularly faced exasperating slaves' lies, misunderstood orders, slovenly work, and dark glances. Occasionally pretenses altogether disappeared. In the nineteenth century, massive slave revolts almost never ripped apart the Massa-Cuffee charade. The last slave revolt, Nat Turner's in 1831, came to seem ages ago. But individual slaves who ambushed masters were not as rare. Individual slave runaways were not rare at all, especially in the South closest to the North.

Thus Massa faced the impossible, indispensable task of discovering whether Cuffee's act of consent was true blue. The underling here taught the superior that life was a charade, that professions of loyalty must be scrutinized, and that affectations of friendship must be doubted. Cuffee's lessons bore painfully on loyalty politics among whites. Southern politicians' extravagant professions of love for slavery might be a charade. As for northern declarations of true-blue friendship, who could trust a Yankee con man after experiencing Cuffee, the ultimate pretender? To live with Cuffee was to disbelieve the world out there. Thus did the master form the slave and the slave form the master, and the two together generate a hothouse culture, too dictatorial to be comfortably democratic.

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The discomforts of 1860 took centuries to become consuming. Early English migrants to future United States areas comfortably planted slavery inside the most republican (for white men) New World society, for almost no one yet considered slavery a problem. Seventeenth-century British republicans, the most advanced in the Old World, came in far larger numbers, compared to nonwhite native or imported peoples, than did white European colonists to other New World slavocracies. With their late eighteenth-century Declaration of Independence, and especially its announcement that all men are created equal, this most republican concentration of ex-Europeans theoretically gave equal rights to all humans, whatever their race, sex, or economic position.

Then the compatibility of despotism and democracy became a widely perceived problem.

Black slavery pockmarked all thirteen of England's revolting colonies in 1776. Indeed slavery's contagion spread in an odd New World direction: away from North America's most tropical habitats. True, in 1776, slavery already massed thickest in the constricted Georgia and especially South Carolina coastal swampland. Here, dense concentrations of slaves tilled rice and a rare, silklike fleece called Sea Island cotton. Here, an especially top-heavy social structure lent an especially intractable aristocratic mentality to the slaveholder as republican.

But rice and Sea Island cotton only flourished within a few dozen miles of the Atlantic Ocean. Few eighteenth-century entrepreneurs could envision a staple to grow in the thousands of miles west of the coastal swamps. At first, capitalists considered the Lower South too far north to grow the lush South American money crops, coffee and sugar. The Lower South also seemed too far south to grow the Upper South's crucial cash crop, tobacco.

With white capitalists considering the Lower South's western expanse relatively unpromising in 1776, three times more slaves grew tobacco and grains in the Middle South's Virginia and in the Border South's Maryland than toiled in Georgia and South Carolina. Furthermore, many more slaves grew grains in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and New York than inhabited all Lower South areas west of the U.S. coastal jungles. With slavery also a New England legality and reality, the institution was as national as the American Revolution. Slavery also posed the greatest national embarrassment to those who would build a nation atop the Declaration's foundations.

The more northern of the original thirteen states, by striking against the embarrassment, first indicated slavery's special peril in republican America. But the qualified nature of the first strike also indicated slavery's special strength in this especially republican (for white men) culture. Pennsylvania scored the (auspiciously blunted) first strike. The state's legislature passed the New World's first antislavery law in 1780. This pathbreaking edict, however, liberated only blacks born after the enactment and only after the afterborn reached twenty-eight years of age. The law indirectly consigned all slaves born before 1780 to permanent thralldom. The edict also freed no slave until a third of a century after the American Revolution.

Blacks' prospects in the largest northern slave state, New York, remained still bleaker. New York's legislature, acting two decades after Pennsylvania's, also freed only the afterborn and only after they reached adulthood. This legislation, intended to liberate no one until a half century after the American Revolution, ultimately failed to free a third of its intended belated beneficiaries. Many New York masters sold slaves down South, into permanent enslavement, before emancipating birthdays. In 1827, New Yorkers freed their last remaining slave. Then New Jersey still had 2200 and Pennsylvania 400 slaves.

Northern slavery persisted partly because natural rights to property countered natural rights to liberty. Northern slaveholders fought to delay or to circumvent seizure of their (human) property. Their persistence helped delay an uncompromising northern attack on southern slavery. Finally in 1831, a whopping fifty-five years after the Declaration of Independence and four years after New York became altogether free soil, Massachusetts's William Lloyd Garrison used his new *Liberator* to pledge all-out attack on U.S. slavery. True to Garrison's pledge, the growth rate of northern abolition led the New World for a decade. But after this auspicious beginning, U.S. abolitionists hit a wall around 1840. No more than 2 percent of prewar Yankee voters ever demanded that slavery be wiped out of southern states.

Once again, republican ideology proved to be a two-edged antislavery sword. While slaves' natural right to liberty sharpened thrusts for emancipation, slaveholders' natural right to property blunted emancipators' parries. Furthermore, the Garrisonian army, where white women and blacks fought alongside white men, violated the no-trespass sign of American republicanism: Only white men shall govern. Garrisonians' female agitators enraged male chauvinists, who believed that women must only speak in the home. Black agitators also infuriated white supremacists, who believed that the supposedly inferior race must only assume menial positions.

Worse still for U.S. abolitionists, most Northerners equated American republicanism with (white men's) Union. Thus Southerners, by threatening to break up the Union, aroused Northerners against abolitionists' pleas for liberty. Furthermore, few Yankees wanted liberated blacks in their neighborhood. They hoped to deport freedmen to Africa, just as Native Americans had been exiled to western reservations. Then all Americans would be liberated—and lily-white. This pervasive racism heaped crushing burdens atop the Garrisonians' drive to liberate all humans.

The burden afflicted the national Congress as much as state legislatures. The first generation of national congressmen, impelled in part by the Declaration's ideology, helped ease the national institution into a southern peculiarity. The congressional Northwest Ordinance of 1787 barred future slaves from five future midwestern states. Then the national government abolished the African slave trade in 1807. Slaveholders stood proscribed from taking or importing new slaves into half the nation's territory and from importing overseas slaves.

Yet if the first national leaders helped corner an underpopulated slavocracy, they also helped arm slaveholder defenses. While the congressmen of 1787 banned new slaves from entering the northwestern territories, they emancipated no slave already on the ground. The result: Persisting Illinois slaveholders led an ominous, albeit failed, drive to perpetuate the system in the 1820s. The Founders also expanded the white men's republic southward, without ensuring that only free republicans could enter. The result: Slaveholders enslaved the national republic's vast new tropical empire. President Thomas Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase and President James Monroe's Florida

purchase added a Slave Power colossus to the United States: the future states of Louisiana, Florida, Arkansas, Missouri, and parts of Mississippi and Alabama.

A late eighteenth-century invention enabled the Founding Fathers' new Lower South empire to become the nineteenth-century slavocracy's new core. In the 1790s, Eli Whitney and others invented cotton gins to process a more common, crude product than Sea Island cotton: short-staple cotton fiber. Slave labor then became profitable in the previously apparently useless Lower South areas west of the Atlantic coast swamps, including upcountry South Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Florida, and after annexation in 1845, Texas. Meanwhile, short-staple cotton cultivation also triumphed in the Middle South's western Tennessee and Arkansas. Furthermore, a lush sugar empire belatedly flourished in the Lower South's Louisiana. No longer did slavery's base swell northward, in Virginia and Maryland tobacco belts. No longer did only the Georgia and South Carolina coastal swamps nurture a Lower South core of slaveholders.

The slaveholding establishment had to become thinner northward to become thicker southward. After the federal government closed the overseas slave trade, Lower South slaveholders could not legally import Africans. Instead, black laborers, some 875,000 of them from 1800 to 1860, drained to the newer South from the older South: from South Carolina, from Virginia, and especially from the Border South.³ While slaves had been 25 percent of the Border South population in 1790, they comprised only 13 percent in 1860, compared to 32 percent in the Middle South and to 47 percent in the Lower South. While in 1790, 21 percent of southern slaves had lived in the Lower South, 59 percent resided in the area in 1860. After this sea change in the slaveholders' geographical base, could the Slave Power's expanding power in new tropical habitats sufficiently offset its shrinking power in old northern bastions? It was a classic question in human affairs: whether a shrinking, unconsolidated periphery could do in an expanding, consolidated core.⁴ In this case, much depended on whether Border South slaveholders, now located at North American slavery's most northern outposts, could cling to their regime more interminably than had the hard-fighting, belatedly extinguished New York and Illinois slavocracies. Few questions better defined the road to disunion—or the path to Appomattox.

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In the most northern South, no Border South state emulated Pennsylvania's or New York's emancipation edicts, although Delaware came close and every border state legislature debated the possibility. More often, border masters manumitted some slaves. Slaveholder expediency augmented antislavery principle. Borderland blacks, compared to blacks deeper in the South, could more easily dash onto northern free soil. That reality led some border masters to grant eventual freedom, if slaves accepted temporary enslavement.

In this “semislavery” system, owners bribed slaves against gambling on flight by promising to grant manumission after a term (usually seven years) of loyal labor. The advantage for the slave: certain eventual freedom rather than the uncertainties of flight, perhaps capture, and then assuredly awful punishment. The advantage for the master: profitable interim labor rather than the peril of an investment tomorrow vanished.⁵ The disadvantage for the whole South: partial erosion of slavery in the borderlands.

By 1850, erosion had proceeded furthest in the eastern borderlands. At midcentury, 89 percent of Delaware blacks and 45 percent of Maryland blacks were free. Manumission occurred far less often in the western borderlands. At midcentury, only 3 percent of Missouri blacks and 5 percent of Kentucky blacks enjoyed freedom. Still, Kentucky contained five times more white nonslaveholding than slaveholding families, and Missouri six times more. Borderland slavery’s erosion could deepen if Border South investors more swiftly cashed in their exposed human property in Lower South auctions, as had so many New Yorkers.

Nothing would sour borderland slave investors faster than a rash of slave runaways. The peril again showed how blacks conditioned whites. Just as Cuffees turned slaveholders into highly suspicious agitators, so runaways turned proslavery politicians into champions of an iron curtain between the most exposed South and the more libertarian North. From 1836 through 1854, the increasingly demanding southern minority won many border consolidations, over the protests of an increasingly awakened northern majority.

Majoritarian government often yields minority control, especially when committed minorities face sleepy majorities. But U.S. republicanism handed the slaveholders extra power to combat any Yankee majority. Since the racist northern majority cared more about white men’s Union than about republicanism for nonwhites, slaveholders’ threat of disunion could secure national protections for slavery. The National Democratic Party lent slaveholders’ threats added leverage. Democrats usually won national elections. They almost always ran strongest in the South, especially in the deepest South. So the minority section wielded the power base of the majority party. When Southern Democrats threatened to quit the party unless northern allies supported a proslavery law, enough Northern Democrats tended to give in, not only to save their republic but also to save their party.

The U.S. Constitution augmented the minority’s leverage. The Constitution’s so-called three-fifths clause added three out of every five nonvoting slaves to a state’s number of voting citizens, when determining the state’s proportion of members in the House of Representatives. So the South in 1860, with 29 percent of the nation’s voting citizens, elected 38 percent of the House. Moreover, each state elected two senators. Since northern states outnumbered southern states by only two, the southern 29 percent of the American white population elected 47 percent of the U.S. Senate in 1860. In addition, each state received one member of the Electoral College, the body electing the president, for each senator and congressman. So the South’s

three in ten white Americans elected four of ten Electoral College voters. As an added bonus, disproportionate southern control over the White House and Congress yielded disproportionate control over the Supreme Court. All this extra power, beyond one citizen, one vote, inspired the North's most loaded political term, Slave Power, meaning that slaveholders possessed arguably unrepugnant power over whites as well as over blacks.

The U.S. constitutional amendment process guarded the Slave Power's power. As William Lloyd Garrison conceded, the federal government would need a constitutional amendment to abolish slavery. Three-fourths of existing states had to approve constitutional amendments. In 1860, the nation contained seventeen free labor states and fifteen slave states. If all fifteen slave states perpetually rejected antislavery, only a Union swollen to sixty states, forty-five of them free labor states, could have forced abolition upon the South. In some future century, the Union might balloon to sixty states. No such gargantuan swelling could be imagined in the mid-nineteenth century.

Thus an antislavery constitutional amendment required some southern consent. If the four Border South states had consented to emancipation, slaveholders would have been sliced to eleven states and free laborers boosted to twenty-one. Subsequently, if twelve more free labor states had been admitted to the Union, the free labor states' three-fourths majority of a forty-four-state Union could have imposed emancipation on the minority. The forty-fourth state would be admitted to the Union in 1890, two years after Brazil, the last New World slaveholding nation, abolished the institution. That possible road to an emancipating constitutional amendment could be imagined in 1860.

If the slaveholders had lost the four Border South states, they would have lost control of Congress long before they lost the power to kill constitutional amendments. Several key antebellum slaveholder victories, especially the annexation of Texas in 1845, required an almost unanimous southern congressional contingent. That necessity left U.S. slaveholders only as politically strong as their weakest link—their Border South hinterland area, where more slaves ran toward the North, where more slaveholders sold slaves toward the deepest South, and where by 1850 the percentage of slaveowning families had sunk to under 12 percent of total white families.

Nonslaveholding majorities commanded not just the Border South but also most southern areas. Only one-third of all citizens, Southwide, owned slaves. But wherever whites extensively owned blacks, in a so-called black belt area, the regime locally, like the slaveholders nationally, exerted far more power than its minority of numbers indicated.

In black belt neighborhoods, defined here as communities with populations 25 percent or more enslaved, rich and poor whites worshipped at the same churches, cherished the same family circles, relished the same political parties, and nurtured the same crops (with a squire often helping rednecks by ginning their cotton or buying their foodstuffs or loaning them small sums). Here, all whites helped control blacks, whether by voting for orthodox candidates or by expelling abolitionist meddlers or by lashing disobedient slaves

when serving on nightly patrols. Here, all whites who helped enchain blacks stormed at Yankees who damned slavery perpetrators. Rednecks and neighboring squires also shared responsibility to perpetuate paternalism in their homes, whether by directing supposedly inferior blacks or by governing supposedly inferior wives and children. In plantation neighborhoods, slaveless whites, while only aspiring to be slaveholders, already savored some of slaveholders' sexist and racist power.

Whites' nineteenth-century egalitarian republican ideology also fused rich and poor in a black belt area. The poorest citizen relished his white skin, which allegedly made him the equal of all white males and superior to all blacks. Proudly equal plebeians could not bear holier-than-thou Yankees, with their posture of moral superiority to all who helped enslave blacks. Nor could rednecks tolerate any abolitionist effort to raise black slaves to the level of white citizens. Egalitarianism, the great reason why some colorblind Yankees opposed slavery, was also the great reason why racist whites massed to keep blacks ground under.

The most superficial question about the Old South is why nonslaveholders in black belts supported slaveholders. The better question is why any nonslaveholder who lived among numerous blacks would want the despised other lower class freed. The psychological wages of being a white man were too treasured among poor whites, and the sting of abolitionists' lordly presumption too wounding, and the fear of competing with free blacks too rife, for a turn against the slaveholders to be inviting in the black belt.

Possibilities of a yeoman resistance to slaveholders increased wherever few slaveholders or slaves or blacks resided. The section's areas with 5 percent or less slaves, here called the white belt South, stretched past its Border South core to cover the most mountainous sections of the Middle South, including western Virginia and eastern Tennessee, and of the Lower South, including northern Georgia and northern Alabama. Here, white belt nonslaveholders lacked black belt nonslaveholders' reasons for proslavery zealotry. Here, few rednecks knew blacks to loathe and to police. Here, few yeomen encountered slaveholders to visit and to emulate. Here, whites usually cared more about preserving the Union than about preserving slavery. Here, most citizens, like most Northerners, would have preferred to rid the nation of slavery, if they could also rid America of blacks and retain the Union of whites. And in this white belt borderland between the black belt South and the free labor North, few whites lamented that the slave drain continued to thin blacks out of their area and to thicken the institution in the most southern South, repeating the turtle-slow erosion of slavery in the most southern North between 1776 and 1830.

Concern about pressure on the most exposed parts of the South precipitated every successful southern deployment of national leverage, always aimed at

shutting down democratic agitation where yeomen and Cuffees might wish to be free of the Slave Power. In the gag rule debates, 1835–44, Southerners sought to silence congressional discussion of slavery in Washington, D.C., itself neighboring the Border South. When Secretary of State Abel P. Upshur first precipitated the Texas annexation issue, the Virginian sought to seal off English agitators from the relatively lightly enslaved (for a Lower South region) Texas Republic and thus from the U.S. slavocracy's southwest border. When Senator James Mason of Virginia precipitated the Fugitive Slave Controversy in 1850, he sought to stop the hemorrhage of slaves from his state's (and the South's) northwestern extremity. When Senator David R. Atchinson of Missouri precipitated the Kansas-Nebraska Act, he sought to solidify the institution on his Border South state's western flank.

After each proposal to fortify hinterland slaveholders against democratic agitation, some southern leaders doubted that the proposed remedy could shore up the slavocracy's peripheral areas. Other leaders saw more hope. But always disagreement over the practicality of the proposed undemocratic consolidation gave way to fury that some Yankees called the proposal—and the proposing slavocracy—barbaric. So what always began as a Southerner's calculated (if arguably futile) strategy to protect the hinterlands always turned into a touchy civilization's enraged spree of self-justification.

Then few black belt Southerners dared turn away from the border's call to the colors; the deserter would be labeled a traitor during the next election campaign. In their competition to prove that their professions of loyalty to slavery were true blue, both Southern Democrats and Southern Whigs demanded that northern party allies support border fortifications. Northern Whigs, with their party's base in the North, always labeled such demands undemocratic blackmail. In contrast, most Northern Democrats, with their party's base in the South, usually appeased the slaveholders.

The National Democratic Party's proslavery laws, protecting slavery in the Union, kept restless disunionists at bay in the South. The Democracy's proslavery laws also weakened Southern Whigs. Southern Democrats derided their partisan foes as traitors to slavery, allied with Yankee defamers who rejected national protections of slavery. After the Democracy's midcentury proslavery laws, first Lower South Whigs, then Upper South Whigs, could no longer risk their political vulnerability. The Whigs were finished as one of the two great national parties.

The surviving National Democratic Party faced severe northern trouble. Yankee appeasers of the slavocracy had been willing to protect slavery, in order to save the Union and the party. But the minority's demands for protection increasingly endangered majoritarian Union. Majority acquiescence in minority demands prevented white men from debating in Congress, then forced white men to return alleged fugitive slaves to slavery without the protection of jury trials, and then led to an antirepublican government in Kansas. So the South's prime appeasers, the Northern Democrats, faced murderous political charges that they had helped white Southerners to enslave white

Northerners. Thus did the issue of republicanism swerve from liberty for blacks, where Yankee abolitionists successfully awakened only so many whites to a colorblind consciousness, to liberty for whites, where no Yankee racist needed a raised conscious.

With Yankees ever more determined to save white republicanism by containing Slave Power aggressiveness, ever more Southerners looked more favorably at disunion. Here again, American republicanism lent the slaveholders extra potency and extra trouble. The Declaration of Independence's basis—a people's right to withdraw their consent to be governed—seemed to make secession theoretically legitimate. But another of republicanism's foundations—that the losers must obey ballot box winners—ill supported a minority's attempt to withdraw consent from an electoral verdict.

If Lower South states opted for disunion, especially after the slaveholders lost a national election, Middle and Border South states would have to decide between protecting the elected majority's right to rule and protecting the departing minority's right to withdraw consent. Their decision would be critical, for as in Congress, southern unity would be mandatory. If a third or more of the South stayed with the North, disunionists' chances in a civil war would plummet. So whether in or out of the Union, the southern core in tropical climes remained dependent on the southern periphery in northern climes. And southern border folk continued to insist on protecting slavery only *in* the Union, not in a seceded southern republic.

But could slavery, particularly at the South's exposed edges, be forever protected inside the national government? That question pressed harder after the Kansas-Nebraska Act, when many more Northern Democrats disavowed any further Slave Power demand for protection. And at this very moment when the slaveholders' national leverage narrowed, a changing southern economy widened the slavocracy's internal divisions, and especially augmented the split between Border and Lower Souths.

CHAPTER 2

Economic Bonanza, 1850–1860

Since revolutionaries must risk life, fortune, and honor, only a plight perceived to be horrendous inspires the gamble. The perceived prerevolutionary horror may take many forms: threats to one's life, one's family, one's reputation, one's psyche, one's religion, one's sacred rights. But economic travail provides the most common goad to revolution.

In only one respect, albeit a crucial one, did economic crisis cause the disunion revolution. Those exceptions to everything normally southern, South Carolina's exceptionally secessionist aristocrats, often faced exceptional economic affliction in the 1850s. Southerners everywhere else usually enjoyed a decade of economic boom. Yet prosperity had its unsettling aspect. Better economic times helped worsen southern social divisions, thereby threatening King Cotton's suddenly well-heeled army of fanciers.

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Like most capitalists, slaveholders tended to do better or worse depending on the era, the locale, and the enterprise. Because they exported staple crops, their fortunes fluctuated according to national and world economic conditions. Two American banking panics, first in 1819 and then in 1837, each ushered in more than a decade of dismal markets for southern agricultural producers. For a few years in the mid-1830s, southern farmers enjoyed better prices. Otherwise, agrarian life after 1820 featured exhausting struggles with poor markets, lashing storms, and pressing bankers.

Battles began in the tobacco-exporting Upper South and especially in Virginia. Eighteenth-century Virginia tobacco planters ranked among the wealthiest Americans. Then, late in the century, the Virginia Dynasty's leaders' economic power shrank while their political power swelled. The George Washingtons, James Madisons, Thomas Jeffersons, and James Monroes watched prices for their tobacco sink, thanks to worldwide overproduction.

Their tobacco yields also sank, thanks to depleted soil. In response, many Virginians moved west, to virgin soil beyond their declining commonwealth. As for stalwarts who loyally remained in debilitated Virginia, they had to retrench, diversify crops, fertilize soils, and sell some slaves. A limping economic endurance ensued.

More financial problems haunted coastal South Carolina, eighteenth-century domain of aristocrats even richer than the Virginians. Off the South Carolina coast, gentlemen's slaves usually planted Sea Island cotton. That luxurious fiber, while normally commanding lucrative returns, periodically suffered from erratic prices and savage hurricanes. Storms also occasionally decimated the main business on South Carolina's coastal mainland, rice production. The unsteady weather helps explain why rice planters, who until the 1850s enjoyed tolerably steady prices and yields, had been economically stressed since the Panic of 1819.

Poor managerial practices compounded rice planters' economic difficulty. Since South Carolina coastal swamps spawned malarial mosquitoes, rich men often fled the area in the April–October growing season. Absentees seldom efficiently managed intricate rice operations. Inefficient plantations seldom sufficiently financed six-month vacations.

South Carolina planters of the coarser short-staple cotton, situated above the sickly coastal swamps on the rolling hills of the piedmont, had long been better managers, yet more imperiled entrepreneurs. South Carolina's healthy upcountry habitat yielded less planter absenteeism and therefore more intensive slaveholder direction than did the state's dank lowcountry. But upcountry producers of crude cotton, compared to lowcountry producers of rice and Sea Island cotton, suffered from worse prices and yields during the period from 1820 to 1850. Upcountry South Carolina, America's first short-staple cotton kingdom, had also been the first to exhaust its soil. In the 1820s and early 1830s, then again in the late 1830s and 1840s, when poor cotton prices compounded poor yields, South Carolinians by the tens of thousands deserted their state. South Carolina, home of the South's densest concentration of blacks and thickest concentration of disunionist reactionaries, thus became the only Lower South state to lose population.

Deserters from South Carolina often brought disunion aspirations to that great land of hustle: the lush river valleys of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, and Arkansas. In the virgin Southwest but not in aging South Carolina, booming yields compensated for lagging prices. Thus a cotton planter's contest against the elements had usually seemed narrowly winnable. During the terrible depression of the early 1840s, however, the entire Cotton Kingdom seemed imperiled. In that dismal period, difficulties also afflicted producers of the South's subsidiary exports, including hemp growers in Missouri, sugar planters in Louisiana, and tobacco farmers in Virginia.

Smaller farmers suffered fewer anxieties. Slaveless yeomen farmers, when living in the cotton belt, sometimes grew and sold a few bales. More often, they exclusively cultivated food for their families. Beyond the plantation

regions, particularly up in mountain habitats, fluctuating worldwide markets even less afflicted self-sufficient yeomen.

Fear of the plantation South's market vulnerability climaxed in 1844 when Mississippi's U.S. Senator Robert J. Walker urged that Texas must be annexed to the United States. Virgin Texas acres, Walker argued, would give hard-pressed planters a safety valve for superfluous blacks. Without Texas's safety valve, Walker gloomed, multiplying and starving black barbarians would inundate the South. Southern entrepreneurs bought into Walker's dismal vision. With that shudder at racial and economic claustrophobia, rich and poor brought to climax their thirty years of struggle, struggle, struggle.

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Then, at midcentury, struggle largely vanished. Cotton prices, sugar prices, tobacco prices shot up, despite extravagant increases in crop production. The big southern cash crop, short-staple cotton, which had sold for some \$74,000,000 a year in the 1840s, sold for some \$169,000,000 yearly in the 1850s. In the four years before the Civil War, the crop yearly averaged some \$207,000,000 in value, almost three times more than the average figure a decade earlier.¹ So too, in the 1850s compared to the 1840s, the Sea Island cotton crop increased 200 percent in value, the sugar crop 150 percent, and the tobacco crop 67 percent.² In comfortable contrast, the southern cost of living during the 1850s eased up less than 33 percent.³

Only those politically crucial gentlemen, South Carolina rice planters, still suffered under dreary economic skies. These squires' debts had multiplied faster than their assets even in the 1820s, when rice yields and prices had remained more immune than cotton figures from the worldwide economic downturn. In the 1850s, rice planters' immunity from market caprices and soil exhaustion ended. Meanwhile, their absentee mismanagement continued. Rice prices increased 6 percent during the 1850s, not beginning to offset the 24 percent decline in rice produced. The average yearly worth of the crop dived from some \$2,500,000 in the 1840s to some \$1,900,000 in the 1850s. In the year of secession, the value of these incensed gentlemen's exports plunged under \$1,400,000, an all-time low. The lowcountry's careful entrepreneurs could still profit with rice production. But care became all the more necessary.⁴

While economic disaster honed a new edge on many South Carolina coastal squires' desire for disunion, entrepreneurs elsewhere sought a fortune rather than a revolution. Southerners developed almost 30,000,000 previously untouched acres during the 1850s, increasing the land under cultivation by over a third. Southern farmland doubled in value during the decade;⁵ southern railroad lines more than tripled in length;⁶ and southern industrial receipts swelled 66 percent.⁷ Compared to the North, the South remained poorly developed industrially and ill connected by railroads. But in the late 1850s, the rate of new development in Dixie surpassed Yankee standards.

In one area, the South set records that Yankees scorned. The price of slaves took off in the 1850s. The average price for a Lower South slave, after hovering around \$925 from 1830 to 1850, averaged \$1240 in 1851–55 and \$1658 in 1856–60, a 79 percent rise in the South's largest capital investment.⁸ After the national Panic of 1857, when the North fell into prolonged depression and the South quickly recovered, Southerners gloated about getting rich quicker than money-mad Yankees.⁹

That fresh swaggering exemplified the new tone in the newest South. Vanished from the Lower South, except from aging South Carolina, were gloomings about stagnating profits, superfluous slaves, and a diseased economy trapped without a safety valve. Omnipresent were visions of new beginnings, of expanding slave empires, even, in some quarters, of importing fresh Africans. What a time this was, in the land where cotton became, almost overnight, a very wealthy king.

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But the true American monarch remained King Numbers, with that sovereign's potential dominion over King Cotton. Since the North possessed more citizens than the South, and the South more nonslaveholders than slaveholders, the slaveholders needed double minority dominion: over sectional and national majorities. Unless southern nonslaveholders cared more about preserving slavery and/or about defying the Yankees than about anything else, other priorities—to the Union, to peace, to prosperity—could bend poor folks' allegiance. Then nonslaveholder nonzeal could yield congressional compromises on slavery or civil war collaboration with Yankee armies.

Unfortunately for the slavocracy's southerly core areas, the better economic times of the 1850s nudged the northerly peripheral areas toward becoming more culturally Yankee. One fact was paramount: Slaves grew dramatically more expensive, almost twice as expensive in 1860 as in 1850. One result was omnipresent: Slaveless farmers could not often afford \$1600 slaves, while big planters could profitably pay the price. One consequence was troublesome: The relative proportion of slaveholders to nonslaveholders shrank fastest in slaveholders' least committed spot, the Border South.

In the whole South during the presecession decade, slaveholding families sank from 43 percent to 37 percent of all southern white families. Meanwhile, the number of white families owning twenty or more slaves boomed six times faster than the number owning one to four slaves. While large slaveholders' holdings grew faster, white belt areas grew whiter. Slaves generated profits faster in Lower South tropical cotton and sugar kingdoms than on Upper South tobacco or grain farms. Fugitive slaves also escaped easiest from the border areas, where slave labor generated smallest profits. So during the 1850s, Border South masters sold some 53,000 slaves and Middle South masters some 84,000 to Lower South capitalists.¹⁰

As blacks drained out of the more northern South, white immigrants from

foreign nations poured in. Between 1850 and 1860, the Border South attracted some 142,000 foreign immigrants, almost three times more laborers than the blacks it lost. Meanwhile, the Middle South gained some 31,000 foreign immigrants, over one-third of the blacks it lost.¹¹ The resulting percentage of slaveowning white families dropped in the Middle South from 30 percent to 25 percent and plunged in the Border South from 23 percent to 16 percent. If nonslaveholder percentages continued to plummet at those rates, the most northern South, within a decade or two, would have the same relatively paltry proportion of slaves, circa 5 percent, as the colonial North had had in 1776, when the area had begun its fifty-year creep toward abolishing slavery.

In one key way, the 1860 Border South was already too Yankee. By 1860, the Border South contained some 419,000 immigrants and free blacks, compared to barely more slaves—some 429,000. In 1860, Maryland contained almost as many foreign immigrants (some 77,000) as it contained free blacks (some 84,000) or slaves (some 87,000). In 1860, Missouri contained 40 percent more foreign immigrants than slaves. The Lower South, in contrast, contained almost fourteen times more slaves than foreign immigrants. As the Border South slowly became less dependent on slave labor and more dependent on immigrant and free black workers, the Lower South became a blacker, more enslaved society—and a culture where higher slave prices made slaveless white yeomen and tenants increasingly less likely to become slaveholders.

While the economic boom drained more slaves from the most northern to the most southern South, South Carolina lost its people at a more alarming pace than ever. Some 7000 whites and 70,000 slaves trooped from South Carolina to the virgin Southwest during the 1850s. The hemorrhage somewhat afflicted upcountry South Carolina cotton planters. These squires' better times, while a relief from previous awful times, could not match booming times on the Lower South frontier. But the stagnating coastal rice fields pressed more people out of debilitated South Carolina. Charleston, mecca of the rice gentry, lost a third of its slaves, with foreign immigrants replacing enslaved laborers. Charleston, to the alarm of its crusty aristocracy, was becoming, of all things, a little like a Yankee free labor city.¹²

Here, as usual, Charlestonians took southern apprehensions to an abnormal extreme. But whether in Charleston, Mobile, or New Orleans, southern cities displayed a new normality: cheap immigrant wage earners replacing expensive black slaves.¹³ So too, not only the contracting South Carolina lowcountry but also the prosperous Upper South tobacco kingdoms extensively dispatched slaves to southwestern cotton and sugar lands. The Southwest, that most prosperous Southland, grew ever more confident, ever more black with slaves, and ever more alienated from the increasingly Yankee-like northern South and the increasingly afflicted Charleston environs.

Such differential prosperity somewhat aided the disunionists. The Lower South area most falling behind, South Carolina, had the classic economic desperation to start a revolution. The Lower South area most marching ahead,

the lush Southwest, had the classic economic confidence to consider war winnable, if South Carolina should start one. How, after all, could the North whip the South in a civil war, when Southerners had routed Northerners at Yankees' own game, getting rich quick? Meanwhile the declining South Carolinians and the ascending Southwesterners, together the core of the plantation South, harbored a cultural center's classic concern about its periphery. The Border South, while still containing 400,000 slaves and very few abolitionists, was drifting toward becoming more a periphery of the North. Why not strike for a southern nation when the Border South periphery might still go along—and before South Carolinians lost the nerve to do any striking at all?

In part because the National Democratic Party still existed and might still protect the slavocracy in the Union. Moreover, in the midst of their newly discovered prosperity, most Southerners, whether inside or outside the Democracy, preferred to get rich quick inside the Union. The ever more Yankee Border South demonstrated especial loathing for disunion.

How could all these increasingly different folk be rallied behind a dangerous revolution? Worse, how could slaveholders forge a single world when their great weapon of social control over blacks, coercive terror, could not generate universal white conformity? Lower South planters could, did, lynch some dissenters in their neighborhoods. But the southern core areas could not invade their peripheral areas, to lynch uncommitted or heretical Border South citizens.

So forging a single southern culture had to begin the democratic way, with fashioning an ideology and building a consensus. All Southerners had to consider slavery a blessing—and dearer than any other blessing. But what proslavery idea could unify the South's ideological superstructure, with the civilization's material substructure more divided than ever?