11-2014

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Recommended Citation

Vail, Nicholas (2014) "Confederate Nationalism and the Authenticity of Southern Ideology," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.

DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2014.040204

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh/vol4/iss2/4>

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Confederate Nationalism and the Authenticity of Southern Ideology

Nicholas Vail

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“Times change, and men often change with them, but principles never! These, like truths, are eternal, unchangeable and immutable.”

Alexander Stephens, 1868¹

Questions of both the content and strength of Confederate nationalism plague historical analysis of the Civil War. Historians, such as Kenneth Stampp, have criticized the strength and legitimacy of Confederate ideology, arguing that the cultural, ethnic, and political similarities between the Confederate States of America (CSA) and the Union preclude describing Confederate nationalism as genuine. These historians explained the South’s failure to win the war in terms of ideological deficiencies, with some attacking the entire notion that a distinct Confederate identity existed.² However, the existence of Confederate imagery in current times suggests that something strong and distinct about Confederate identity survived. Southerners attempted to engender a distinct Southern identity during the Antebellum and war period. Many Southerners were cognizant that the close connections between the North and the South presented problems for the secessionist cause. Reverend H. A. Tupper delivered a sermon in Georgia in 1862 that demonstrated this paradox: “That difference in pursuits, and interests, and institutions, and education, and manners, and political and social views, has made us virtually

¹ Alexander Hamilton Stephens, *A Constitutional View of the Late War Between the States: Its Causes, Character, Conduct and Results VI* (Philadelphia: National Publishing Company 1868) , 9.

² Gary Gallagher, *The Confederate War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 3-6.

two people-as much as any two people can be of the same language and color.”³ Southerners responded by proliferating periodicals and speeches about Southern intellectual distinctiveness and creating a national set of symbols.⁴

The creation of this Southern ideology was effective as it resonated with millions of people. Historians estimate that roughly 61 percent of Southern, military age white males joined the Confederate army at some point during the war. Some generous studies have estimated that over 900,000 men served for the Confederacy.⁵ Against massive economic inequalities and shortage of manpower, the Confederate army fought ferociously against Union forces for almost half a decade. Particularly in the early years of the war, patriotic fervor was widespread in the majority of the Southern states: thousands of men enthusiastically volunteered to repel the Yankee intruders. The genuineness of Confederate nationalism should not be questioned. The question should be: how did Southerners who previously thought of themselves as patriotic Americans become violent rebels? Southerners in the antebellum and Civil War period distinguished themselves from the North on religious, political, and cultural grounds, with slavery amplifying these differences. This Southern identity, not just for slaveholders, was formed around racism and obstinate resistance to the Federal Government that resonated so strongly it still lasts today.⁶

The Religious Character of the South

³ Elizabeth, and Eugene D. Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 111-112.

⁴ Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 7-9.

⁵ Maris Vinovskis, “Have Social Historians Lost the Civil War? Some Preliminary Demographic Speculations” *The Journal of American History* 76, No. 1 (Jun. 1989): 38-40.

⁶ Robert E. Bonner “Flag Culture and the Consolidation of Confederate Nationalism” *the Journal of Southern History* 62, no.2 (May 2002): 329-331.

The establishment of a distinct Christian identity was a vital source of legitimacy for the Confederacy. Southerners always portrayed themselves as more pious than their Northern counterparts, but the war brought on a new character to Southern religious practice and attitude.⁷ Confederate preachers reconciled the peaceful teachings of Christianity with the massive violence of war by evoking the ancient Just War theory, which holds that while war is undesirable, it is necessary under certain moral circumstances. The Confederates extolled a narrative in which Southerners were peaceful Christians forced to violently repel the Union invaders. It was not enough to be politically distinct, Confederates wanted to believe they were divinely chosen to be independent.⁸ R.H. Lafferty delivered a sermon in Georgia in 1862 during a Confederate fasting day, one of many that Jefferson Davis declared in order to preserve food for the war effort. This sermon illustrated how Confederate preachers implemented the just war theory within their vocation. Lafferty stated: “We, my hearers, citizens of these Confederate States, are engaged in a terrible war, in self defence [sic]. It is a war, not of our seeking, but forced upon us.: we only asked them to let us alone, and permit us to work out our own destiny, as a people. We plead for this inalienable privilege and right. This was peremptorily denied us. We then arose in the defence [sic] of our own soil...”⁹ Lafferty’s language reveals the victim mentality that was a recurring theme in Confederate political and theological rhetoric. Southerners insisted that while they may have seceded, the North was aggressive and sinful, while the South was God-fearing and peaceful. Omitting the more complex political and social questions that triggered secession, this theological framing was widely persuasive and

⁷ Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism*, 26.

⁸ Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism*, 25.

⁹ Rev. R. H. Lafferty, *A Thanksgiving Day Sermon Preached in the Church of Sugar Creek, Mecklenburg County, N. C., February 28th, 1862*. Fayetteville, N. C. Printed at the Presbyterian Office, 1862.
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/lafferty/lafferty.html>. 4-5.

effective.¹⁰ Transforming the battle from an ideological to a theological one allowed the Confederacy to draw massive support from the widely Christian population.

Sermons delivered on these fast days are critical to understanding the role religion played in the formation and intensification of Southern identity. Aside from the goal of conserving food, these days were a concerted effort by the highest leaders of the Confederate government to spread and strengthen the resolve of Southerners through religion. Therefore, they are prime examples of the national production of Southern culture that occurred during the war. Further within his sermon, Laffery expands on the idea of how the fast days were not just about saving food, but also about saving souls. He proclaims: “We have declared that we put our trust in God, and therefore virtually have declared that we would obey God, turn from sin, ... our most worthy and beloved President, Jefferson Davis, has recommended that the people throughout these Confederate States observe this day, as a day of fasting, humiliation and prayer, and that we confess our sins, and implore the guidance and protection of God. It is a matter of vast importance that we look at our sins, and mourn over them with a godly sorrow.”¹¹ Confederates believed that the fate of their fledgling nation was inextricably bound with the will of God. The ascetic values forwarded here, recommending all Confederates to fast and reflect, reveal the Southern identity’s religious nature. Material support for the war had to accompany religious purity for the South to win the struggle for independence. The Union also deployed religious rhetoric in justifying the war, but it was not tied to the Northern identity. Confederate codification of these ascetic ideals through national fasting days testifies to the importance of religion for Southerners.

¹⁰ Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism*, 18.

¹¹ Lafferty, *A Thanksgiving Day Sermon Preached in the Church of Sugar Creek, Mecklenburg County, N. C.* 5.

Slavery played a defining role in Antebellum Southern religion. Slavery was foundational in creating a common religious culture that united slaveholders and non-slaveholders.¹² The biblical justification for slavery dominated religious tensions between the North and the South, leading up to the Civil War. Southern theologians stood by a textual interpretation of The Bible, claiming Northern abolitionists were challenging the immutable law of God.¹³ James Thornwell, prominent theologian of the era, argued that slavery had divided the Presbyterian Church. Thornwell summed up his theory when he said the following: “The Antagonism of Northern and Southern sentiment on the subject of slavery lies at the root of all the difficulties which have resulted in the dismemberment of the federal Union, and involved us in the horrors of an unnatural war. ... The Northern section of the church stands... maintaining... that slavery is an evil which ought to be abolished... as a church, let it be distinctly borne in mind that the only rule of judgment is the written word of God... God sanctions it in the first table of the Decalogue, and Moses treats it as an institution to be regulated, not abolished; legitimated and not condemned.”¹⁴ Thornwell was perhaps the most influential Southern theologian of the Antebellum period. His sermons were heard and read by many religious leaders and citizens. Southern religious leaders were forced to take an overtly political position after secession, something they tried to avoid before the war. For example, some prominent Confederate Presbyterians created the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America, which sought to rally all Southern Presbyterians for secession. Religious leaders purposefully used the Church to aid the secessionist cause.

¹² Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, “The Religious Ideals of Southern Slave Society” *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 70, No. 1 (Spring, 1986): 2-3.

¹³ Mark A. Noll, “The Bible and Slavery,” *Religion and the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 44-45.

¹⁴ James Henley Thornwell, *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America* (Steam Power Press Chronicle, 1861) <https://archive.org/details/minutesofgener1861pres>. 55-56.

Thornwell's argument for the acceptance of slavery based off the text from the Bible was ubiquitous and posed problems for moderate Northerners and abolitionists. They had to either argue against slavery on biblical grounds, which was practically impossible, or argue that the Bible's acceptance of slavery was immoral.¹⁵ The latter argument played into Southern depictions of abolitionists as infidels and scoundrels. Thornwell expressed this typical view in a sermon he delivered in 1850: "The parties in this conflict are not merely abolitionists and slaveholders—they are atheists, socialists, communists, red republicans, jacobins, on one side, and the friends of order and regulated freedom on the other. In one word, the world is the battleground—Christianity and Atheism the combatants; and the progress of humanity at stake."¹⁶ This was representative of the schism between Northern and Southern religion since 1820, as Northern Protestantism increasingly focused on institutional changes like abolitionism, socialism, and feminism, while Southern religion continued to emphasize individual duty and personal morality as the only vehicle for salvation.¹⁷ Lafferty's sermon quoted earlier particularizes this individualistic attitude when he maintained that the purity and piousness of his congregation was integral to the success of the Confederacy. While the Southerners were the victims of aggression from irreligious "communist" Northerners, they still had to vigilantly pray and meditate on their own actions and beliefs; otherwise they would lose God's favor.

This purposeful turn towards theology as a means of establishing a distinct identity worked well with the Southern conception of their society as rustic, rural, and idyllic and also enabled them to depict the North as dirty, impure, and sinful. Religion was a crucial vehicle for nationalism because of its accessibility and ubiquity. Particularly in the rural South, churches

¹⁵ Mark A. Noll, "The Bible and Slavery." 43.

¹⁶ James Henley Thornwell, *The Rights and the Duties of Masters* (Press of Walker & James, 1850), 14, <http://books.google.com/books?id=MqARAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

¹⁷ Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism*, 30-31.

were the only public centers where deliberation and communication took place.¹⁸ This cultivation of religious identity affected mostly women and children because most men were absent from these communities. Families took solace in the church in times of hardship and also took proactive measures, creating women's organizations to support the war effort.¹⁹ For many, the violent realities of war and the theological debate over slavery transformed Southern religious distinctiveness from apolitical regional differences in religious practice, into a Holy War.

The Politics of the Antebellum South

Confederate politics were characterized by federalism, classical republicanism, and the codification of slavery. These political differences created a distinct Southern identity that stood in opposition to the North. Southerners thought secession was an integral part of the political repertoire of American politics since colonization. History supported this, as the pilgrims established the secessionist ethos, leaving for Plymouth after a failed attempt to relocate to the Netherlands.²⁰ The Whiskey Rebellion violently rejected Alexander Hamilton's attempts to expand the power and scope of the Federal Government, as farmers favored local politics over national taxes. During the War of 1812, many New England citizens and politicians openly debated disunion in order to form a separate peace agreement with Britain, wanting to distance themselves from the war hungry Federal Government.²¹

¹⁸ Genovese, "The Religious Ideals of Southern Slave Society," 10.

¹⁹ Genovese, "The Religious Ideals of Southern Slave Society," 11.

²⁰ Jay Winik, *April 1865: The Month That Saved America* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001), 15.

²¹ Winik, 15-18.

Confederates believed they were the true heirs of the revolutionary heritage of the United States and constantly compared themselves to the Founding Fathers. They imagined themselves as patriots resisting a dominating and tyrannical power. The South did not want to repudiate the Constitution or core American political values, nor did it need to in order to meet its goals. They saw black Republicanism as a corruption of the system that the Founding Fathers had established. Southerners correctly recalled that most of the Founding Fathers were slaveholders and purposefully excluded blacks from considerations of freedom in the creation of the Constitution.²²

Southern acceptance of core American political values produced a Confederate Constitution that closely resembled the original Constitution of 1789. Entire sections of the Confederate Constitution were copied verbatim from its Federal predecessor, which included the creation of a bicameral legislature constituted by a Senate and Congress, a Supreme Court, and an executive office. Confederates also emulated the American political system by displaying classic American heroes on their currency and symbols. Critics acknowledge this as evidence of the Confederates inauthentic political motivations, however Southerners continued the American political tradition because they saw themselves as the embodiment of authentic American ideals, not because they lacked genuine political grievances.

There was of course, a major difference between these two documents: the Confederate Constitution ensured the lasting legality of the institution of slavery. The Constitution in Section nine states that “(4) No bill of attainder, ex post facto law, or law denying or impairing the right of property in negro slaves shall be passed.”²³ The document did not stop there, as it mentioned slavery in three other sections, which guaranteed the ability of slaveholders to transport their

²² James McPherson, “*American Victory, American Defeat*” Fowler, John D.” *The Confederate Experience Reader: Selected Documents and Essays*. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 410.

²³ *The Constitution of the Confederate States of America*, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/csa_csa.asp.

property between states as well as ensured the legality of slavery in any newly added territories. With this, the questions over fugitive slaves and the expansion of slavery, divisive factors that had triggered the Civil War, were answered definitively. Confederate political thinkers put to rest the debate about whether slaves could be citizens. Alexander Stephens' infamous Cornerstone Speech illustrates this position succinctly: "The new constitution has put at rest, forever ... the proper status of the negro in our form of civilization... Jefferson... anticipated this, as the 'rock upon which the old Union would split'....Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its corner- stone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition."²⁴ While the speech included rhetoric that justified slavery in terms of property rights, it is telling that the cornerstone of the Confederate state according to Stephens is that the inequality of blacks is foundational and unequivocal. The evocation of Thomas Jefferson was predictable, considering the Confederate reliance on 18th century American historical figures to justify secession.²⁵ Stephens's speech broadcasted how confederate's sought to distinguish themselves, as it was delivered before the war, in public to the people of Savannah, Georgia.

Prominent political theorist Louis Hartz called Southern political culture and ideology in the war and antebellum period a "reactionary enlightenment"²⁶. While the Enlightenment extolled secularism, political equality, and empirics, George Fitzhugh and other Southern theorists called for inequality, trust of intuition, and obedience to religious dogma. Fitzhugh, a famous Southern sociologist declared in 1863 that for the South, the Civil War was a great

²⁴ Alexander H. Stephens, "Cornerstone Address", March 21, 1861
<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1861stephens.asp>.

²⁵ James McPherson, "American Victory, American Defeat" 411.

²⁶ Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 145

conservative reaction. Political leaders and thinkers like James De Bow, James Hammond, and Nathaniel Beverly Tucker evoked feudal images and concepts, positioning the South as the conservative and aristocratic opposite of Northern Republicanism.²⁷ While the North rapidly industrialized and moved towards more progressive politics, the South proudly and obstinately clung to tradition.

The structure of Antebellum South Carolina embodied this “reactionary enlightenment” and it translated into material politics in the South.²⁸ Although almost all white males could vote, they only played a small role in the election of most governmental positions. South Carolina stands out as the most politically restrictive states in the Union before the war. A ruling political elite controlled who would run for office, with many candidates running unopposed. James Hammond and other political leaders justified this system by openly embracing a conservative classical republicanism as South Carolina’s governing ideology. Classical republicanism prizes the individual virtue of citizens who must contribute to the public good as the primary method of governance, as opposed to a strong Federal Government. Southern classical republicanism attacked Northern economics on moral grounds, insisting that industrialization brings wealth and luxury that inevitably corrupts virtuous republics. South Carolinians cast themselves in this role as it fit with their own mythical notion of Southerners as rustic and pastoral peoples. Unruly democracy was antithetical to this type of government, which relied on the specialization of elites to protect and preserve virtue.²⁹

Despite the absence of formal political contestation from different parties in the Confederacy, heated political debate raged throughout the emergent Confederate nation. It is

²⁷, Hartz, 146-147.

²⁸ Drew Gilpin Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South: A Design for Mastery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 40.

²⁹ Faust, *James Henry Hammond and the Old South*, 41-42.

often claimed that Confederate political life was stagnant and dominated exclusively by slave-holding elites. George Rable in his *The Confederate Republic: A Revolution Against Politics* found that political contestation occurred outside of legislative party politics. Conflicts between centralists, those supporting a national draft and army nationalization, and libertarian opponents who sought to protect federalism even in the face of crisis produced meaningful political debate. Rable argued that the classical republican ideology prominent in the Antebellum South engendered a rejection of party politics as corrupt and impure, therefore the lack of formal opposition parties was a sign of Southern political culture, not lack thereof.³⁰ Key libertarian figures like Georgia Governor Joseph E. Brown constantly criticized and resisted the attempts of Davis and other centralists to consolidate power in the Federal branch of the Confederacy.³¹ Southerners tried to imagine a political future where the Confederate state struck a balance between core American values and the protection of states' rights.

Louis Hartz incorrectly claimed that this conservative reaction was fraudulent, but he correctly identified that this political position was untenable.³² Southerners adopted a weak and contradictory position within the Western political tradition where they were tied inextricably. The fundamentals of liberalism were still accepted by most Confederate politicians, which made the attempt to turn towards conservative European aristocracy an illusion. The expansion of democracy during the 19th century had reached much of the American South and made it impossible to achieve a truly conservative reaction.³³ This attempt to portray themselves as revolutionary conservatives ultimately hurt the cogency of their platform, as the tension between desire for the past and emphasis on radicalism produced incoherency. The most harmful

³⁰ George C. Rable, *The Confederate Republic: A Revolution Against Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 1-5, 11.

³¹ Wilfred Buck Years, *The Confederate Congress* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010), 83.

³² Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, 149-150.

³³ Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, 151-157.

manifestation of this tension emerged in the CSA's attempt to govern a nation founded on federalism. While Rable found this conflict to prove uniqueness to Confederate political culture, Paul Escott argued that warring political factions in the Confederacy helped accelerate its collapse. He argued that backlash against conscription, resistance to a national army (as opposed to eleven separate armies), and the failure of the government to provide economic assistance to the rural poor of the South proved the failure of Confederate politics.³⁴ While his conclusion about the nature of Confederate nationalism is incorrect, he persuasively showed how the contradictory nature of a centralized CSA harmed Southern politics.

Confederate political ideology returned to the classical republican roots of the Founding Fathers rather than "reinventing the wheel" of American democracy. For Confederates, Northerners had ruined the Founding Father's legacy of limited democracy by expanding political equality and creating a multiple party system. Many Southerners tried to return to older and more conservative, aristocratic ideals by rejecting unruly democracy and industrialization, but had neither the will nor the way to actualize this conservative reaction because of the democratic and liberal tradition that thrived even in the most conservative areas of the South. This turn also faced substantial logistical problems as the emphasis on federalism and American core values hurt Davis's ability to balance domestic politics and war fueled crises. However, Southerners successfully created a political message that demarcated the North from the South.

Slavery as an Ideology

³⁴ Paul D. Escott, *After Secession: Jefferson Davis and the Failure of Confederate Nationalism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 66-77.

Slavery was the proximate cause of secession and the cornerstone of Southern identity. This aspect of the Southern distinctiveness best explains how tension between the North and South escalated into violent civil war. Economic and religious differences constituted important points of contention for Southerners, but they did not incite mass violence. Hon Spratt, editor of the *Charleston Mercury* expresses how slavery was viewed in relation to other issues. He wrote: “The South is now in the formation of a *Slave Republic*... *The contest is not between the North and South as geographical sections...nor between the people of the North and the people of the South, for our relations have been pleasant....the real contest is between the two forms of society* which have become established...Society is essentially different from government... The one is a society composed of one race, the other of two races...The natural expansion of the one must become encroachment on the other, and so the contest was inevitable.”³⁵ It was Spratt’s goal to dispel the idea that the secessionist cause was tied to factors other than slavery. Spratt went further than most Southerners in separating this difference from political or cultural conflicts stating that the core ideological conflict between these two societies overrides any other cultural connections. The rhetoric of inevitability deployed by Spratt justified the secessionist cause because it painted violent conflict as unavoidable, rather than instigated by Southerners.

Slavery was both the material and ideological foundation of Southern Society.

Southerners’ primary concern was to demonstrate why slavery constituted a fundamental distinction between the North and the South. The ideology of slavery motivated a diverse set of Southerners to fight for the protection of the South’s peculiar institution. For many, fighting for the Confederacy was about protecting the right to own their slaves. The legal framework of slavery, defended by the *Dred Scott* decision that declared slaves were considered property, led

³⁵ Hon Spratt, February 17th 1861 in, *The Philosophy of Secession; A Southern View*, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/secession/secession.html>.

many slaveholders to take up arms in order to defend their own interests. Drawing on the political heritage of the Founding Fathers, these slaveholders were spurred to defend their right to property outlined in the Declaration of Independence.³⁶ Many slaveholders went to war for the Confederacy despite the popular characterization of slaveholders as absent from the battlefield. For example, members of the slave-holding class made up a large portion of the Army of Northern Virginia. Almost one third of the soldiers in the army were likely to either own slaves or live in a household with slaves.³⁷ A significant percentage of soldiers in the Confederacy must have kept personal self-interest involved, as many of these Southern men benefitted directly from slavery.

The appeal of slavery extended to beyond those who owned slaves. The majority of Southerners were not slaveholders, but they joined the Confederate cause. Southern society was highly stratified because it relied on the subjugation of the slave as the foundational element of economic, political, and social life. The institution of slavery preserved Southern political and economic structures through two ideological functions. First, it ensured that even the poorest whites were superior to a large segment of the population, thereby smoothing over class tensions created by economic inequality among Southern whites.³⁸ Former head of the U.S. Census Bureau and prominent Southern intellectual James De Bowe, argued this point in his booklet *The Interest in Slavery of the Southern Non-Slaveholder*: “The non-slaveholder of the South preserves the status of the white man, and is not regarded as an inferior or a dependent.... He is a companion and an equal. When in the employ of the slaveholder, ... If a distinction exists, it is only that which education and refinement may give. and this is so courteously exhibited as scarcely to strike attention The poor white laborer at the North is at the bottom of the social

³⁶ James McPherson, “*American Victory, American Defeat*,” 410.

³⁷ Joseph T. Glatthaar, *General Lee's Army: From Victory to Collapse*. (New York: Free Press, 2008). 19-20.

³⁸ Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview* 115-117.

ladder, whilst his brother here has ascended several steps and can look down upon those who are beneath him..."³⁹ DeBow extended the ideology of slavery farther when he claimed that slavery guaranteed the poor white Southerner an advantage over his Northern peer. For DeBow, the slave did not even register on the "social ladder" but it is implicit how slavery supported the status of every white by guaranteeing enduring superiority. DeBow tried to paper over class conflict, which becomes a large problem during the war, by stating that wealth distinctions among whites "scarcely strike attention."

Secondly, slavery was central to the myth of Southern social mobility. The American dream, for Southern whites, entailed achieving pastoral bliss by owning a plantation. Tied in with the desire for classical republicanism, Southern defense of slavery managed to unite non-slaveholders and a small number slaves under this utopian image of a gentle and honorable Southern life.⁴⁰ DeBow's booklet also supported this myth: "The non-slaveholder knows that as soon as his savings will admit, he can become a slaveholder... with ordinary frugality, can, in general, be accomplished in a few years... 6. The large slaveholders and proprietors of the South begin life in great part as non-slaveholders... 7. But should such fortune not be in reserve for the non-slaveholder, he will understand by honesty and industry it may be realized to his children..."⁴¹ Portions of DeBow's booklet utilized manipulated statistics to support his contention that wealth was easily accessible for all Southern whites. However, the ideological function is striking, as non-slaveholder's stake in the plantation economy extended beyond his temporal existence and into the future. DeBow argued that even if you don't make become wealthy in this lifetime, your children will have the opportunity to profit from slavery, making its continuation a necessity.

³⁹ James DeBow, *The Interest in Slavery of the Southern Non-Slaveholder* (London, 1860), 8-9.

⁴⁰ Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview* 118.

⁴¹ James DeBow, *The Interest in Slavery of the Southern Non-Slaveholders*, 9-10.

The dichotomy between slavery and free labor was intensified during the war as a way to engender further distinction between the North and the South. Rejection of free labor was used to justify the social conditions of slavery as well as demonize the North. Many Southerners, in an ironically socialist approach, attacked the system of free labor for the way it disregarded the well being of the worker in favor of profits. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese sum this position up best in their comprehensive work on the ideology of the Antebellum South, *The Mind of the Master Class*: “To Southerners and not just slaveholders, slavery was a bulwark against the corrosive effects of free labor and the loosening of the social bonds that nurtured humane social relations. A consequence was the formation of a distinct Southern people.”⁴² Plantation owners had no qualms about sending their crops and other goods north to be manufactured with free labor, but they still lambasted the condition of many Northern cities. John C. Calhoun elucidated this critique in his speech “Slavery as a Positive Good” to the U. S. Senate. Calhoun said: “Compare his condition with the tenants of the poor houses in the more civilized portions of Europe—look at the sick, and the old and infirm slave, on one hand, in the midst of his family and friends, under the kind superintending care of his master and mistress, and compare it with the forlorn and wretched condition of the pauper in the poorhouse.”⁴³ While many yearned for increased industrialization, the majority of Southerners were content with the agrarian plantation system. Crucial in Calhoun’s statement is the belief that slaves are well off under slavery and would suffer without their masters. George Fitzhugh, while not the first to forward this view, expressed the sentiment of slaveholders and non-slaveholders alike regarding the treatment of slaves in his book *Cannibals All! Or, Slaves Without Masters*: “The negro slaves of the South are the happiest, and in some sense, the freest people in the world. The children and the aged and

⁴² Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview*, 109.

⁴³ John C. Calhoun, “*Slavery a Positive Good*,” Speech to U.S. Senate, 1837. <http://caho-test.cc.columbia.edu/ps/10157.html>.

infirm work not at all, and yet have all the comforts and necessities of life provided for them. They enjoy liberty, because they are oppressed neither by care or labor.”⁴⁴ Even though these claims about the beneficial treatment of slaves were patently false, the debate about the social benefits of slavery in opposition to free labor raged in the 19th century. Therefore, the development of a benign argument for slavery became integral to the Southern cause.

Confederate defense of slavery was the most important element of Southern identity and motivated a non-slaveholding majority to fight for secession. Defense of slavery was about more than protecting property; it was about protecting a way of life. Southerner’s distorted view of slavery as being positive for Africans and the suspicion of free labor turned the material institution of slavery into an ideology that resonated with millions. Even those who gained little from the extension and continuation of slavery fought with vigor to defend the South’s peculiar institution. In this way, slavery and racism tied together poor and wealthy whites into a violent identity, the Southern Rebel.

Conclusion

The argument for seeing Confederate nationalism as authentic and vibrant has been unfashionable in most historians’ account of the war. Historians such as William Freehling and Carl Degler have emphasized weaknesses in Confederate ideology, claiming that a lack of nationalism was a proximate cause of the CSA’s collapse. A common focus of this research posits that internal class tensions between the planter class and yeoman workers mortally weakened the Confederacy. They have pointed to high desertion rates in the Confederate army and the backlash of many farmers to Jefferson Davis’s centralist policies to support their

⁴⁴ George Fitzhugh, *Cannibals All! Or, Slaves Without Masters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.) <http://docsouth.unc.edu/southlit/fitzhughcan/fitzcan.html>, 29-30.

critique.⁴⁵ Other historians, like Paul Escott, have argued the failings of the Confederate political system collapsed the Confederacy. Frank Owsley famously stated that the tombstone of the Confederacy should read “Died of states’ rights.”⁴⁶ Many of these historians have responded to lost cause mythologists, who portray the Confederacy in an idealistic and romantic way. There is very little attractive about describing an ideology founded on aristocracy and racial superiority as genuine nationalism.

Historians would be mistaken to let modern sensibilities influence interpretation of complex historical events. Leading Confederate nationalism scholar, Gary Gallagher has coined the term Appomattox Syndrome to describe this anti-Confederate historiographical trend that has worked backwards from Appomattox to explain Southern defeat. According to this tautological reasoning, because the South lost, its defeat was inevitable.⁴⁷ Rather than explaining the Confederate defeat in terms of Southern failure, the soundest explanation for the outcome of the war lies with what James McPherson calls the external factors thesis. The Union played a large role in winning the war. The Union had considerably more manpower as well as superior manufacturing capabilities. Most of the major railways, factories, and large trading centers resided in the North, making it difficult for the South to produce weapons, rations, and gear for the Confederate army.⁴⁸ The North also exerted strong and effective leadership on the battlefield. Despite the early blunders of the Army of the Potomac, other Union military strategies like the trade blockade and the Western campaign were effective in crippling the South.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Gary Gallagher, “Disaffection, Persistence, and Nation: Some Directions in Recent Scholarship on the Confederacy,” *Civil War History* 55 (Fall 2009): 333-335.

⁴⁶ Frank L. Owsley, *State Rights in the Confederacy* (Chicago, 1925).

⁴⁷ Gary Gallagher, *Disaffection, Persistence, and Nation: Some Directions in Recent Scholarship on the Confederacy*, 346.

⁴⁸ McPherson, “*American Victory, American Defeat*,” 411.

⁴⁹ McPherson, “*American Victory, American Defeat*,” 412.

Despite academic disagreement, the presence of Confederate symbols on houses, clothing, and cars indicates a real continuation of Southern distinctiveness. Therefore it is necessary to investigate the historical origins and cultivation of that differentiation. Three elements of Southern identity---religion, politics, and slavery---were transformed into rallying points in an ideological conflict that culminated in unprecedented violence. In all three areas, Southerners sought to establish themselves as upholders of conservative virtue by defending slavery in the face of corrupt Northern expansion. Confederate religion envisioned itself as actualizing God's will by defending the word of the Bible against irreligious abolitionists. Confederate politics sought to continue the Founding Father's vision of limited democracy in a classical republic in opposition to expanding definitions of political equality. Finally, slavery transcended materiality, emerging as ideological glue that bound together the planter class and the working class into a single proud, white, Southern nation.

About the author

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