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Fateful Lightning: A New History of the Civil War and Reconstruction

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Fateful Lightning: A New History of the Civil War and Reconstruction

Description

The Civil War is the greatest trauma ever experienced by the American nation, a four-year paroxysm of violence that left in its wake more than 600,000 dead, more than 2 million refugees, and the destruction (in modern dollars) of more than \$700 billion in property. The war also sparked some of the most heroic moments in American history and enshrined a galaxy of American heroes. Above all, it permanently ended the practice of slavery and proved, in an age of resurgent monarchies, that a liberal democracy could survive the most frightful of challenges.

In *Fateful Lightning*, two-time Lincoln Prize-winning historian Allen C. Guelzo offers a marvelous portrait of the Civil War and its era, covering not only the major figures and epic battles, but also politics, religion, gender, race, diplomacy, and technology. And unlike other surveys of the Civil War era, it extends the reader's vista to include the postwar Reconstruction period and discusses the modern-day legacy of the Civil War in American literature and popular culture. Guelzo also puts the conflict in a global perspective, underscoring Americans' acute sense of the vulnerability of their republic in a world of monarchies. He examines the strategy, the tactics, and especially the logistics of the Civil War and brings the most recent historical thinking to bear on emancipation, the presidency and the war powers, the blockade and international law, and the role of intellectuals, North and South.

Written by a leading authority on our nation's most searing crisis, *Fateful Lightning* offers a vivid and original account of an event whose echoes continue with Americans to this day. [From the Publisher]

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Reconstruction, Civil War, slavery, states' rights, Abraham Lincoln, Union, Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, assassination, Andrew Johnson, Republican

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Comments

The first chapter of Dr. Allen C. Guelzo's book, *Fateful Lightning*, is available above for download.

A NATION ANNOUNCING ITSELF

Inauguration Day, March 4, 1865, dawned over the city of Washington with a bluster, overcast chill. It rained early in the morning, cleared, then rained again. But even without the cooperation of the weather, thousands upon thousands—"a crowd almost numberless," wrote a visitor—braved the drizzle and cold to watch a giant parade, with now sodden floats, wheel up Pennsylvania Avenue toward the newly completed dome of the Capitol building. There, in the Capitol, the principal actor in this inauguration pageant, Abraham Lincoln, the president of the United States, was already at work, signing the last pieces of legislation passed by the outgoing Congress and witnessing a new Senate being sworn into office.

The ceremonies held few surprises for Lincoln, since this day would mark Lincoln's second presidential inauguration. He had come to the Capitol on March 4, 1861, as a newly elected president, untried and unprepared, and now, four years later, the country had chosen him a second time as its chief executive. When the congressional ceremonies within the Capitol were over, a great file of legislators, cabinet secretaries, ambassadors, and judges streamed out onto the Capitol steps, where a broad platform had been constructed for the president to take his oath of office in public view. Last of all onto the platform came Lincoln, holding in his hand a single large sheet of paper. A band struck up "Hail to the Chief" as "cheer upon cheer arose."¹

1. Ronald C. White, *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), 30–31, 33; Noah Brooks, "Inauguration Day," in *Lincoln Observed: Civil War Dispatches of Noah Brooks*, ed. Michael Burlingame (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 167–68.

Four years before, when he first stood on a platform like this to take his presidential oath, the weather had still been thick with early spring chilliness and damp, but the sun shone with a hard and resolute cheerfulness. And in 1861 the sunshine was almost the only thing smiling upon Abraham Lincoln. Even as he took his first oath of office, swearing to “preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States,” seven of those supposedly united states had renounced their attachment to the Constitution. They had already organized a rival government, elected a rival president, and demanded that any of the property of the United States government sitting at that moment within their boundaries be turned over to them at once. Lincoln refused, and in short order it all came to war, the rebel states insisting that they were now an independent country with a right to determine their own future, and Lincoln insisting that they were only insurgents who had to be suppressed like any other treasonous coup d’état. It was war such as few Americans had ever imagined: four years of it, with horrendous costs in life and property, and the ghoulish echo of homespun place-names made hideous in blood—Gettysburg, Chancellorsville, Shiloh.

And now the spring of 1865 was coming. Lincoln’s armies had finally turned the tide and the war was stumbling toward what looked like the end. In November the country had given Lincoln its vote of confidence by electing him to a second term as president. Now, on this raw March afternoon, as he stepped up to the low dais where he would deliver his inaugural address and take his second oath of office, he was ready to begin asking why the great horror of civil war had spread across his country. At that moment, the clouds parted and the long-hidden sun shone a golden aura down on Lincoln, the Capitol, and the hushed citizens below him.

There were, Lincoln said, three fundamental causes that had pushed the United States into the war. One of them was political, and that was the fact that the United States had been organized since its birth as a *union*. It was the creation of thirteen former English colonies, huddled along the eastern seaboard of North America, that had declared themselves independent states in 1776 but also linked themselves together under a joint congress as a confederation. Ever since, there had been voices within those states arguing irritably that this Union was a bad bargain that ought to be terminated. The voices had come to a crescendo in the Southern states of the Union in 1861, and Lincoln had found himself as president “devoted altogether to *saving* the Union without war” while at the same time having to deal with people who thought it right and proper “to *destroy* it without war—seeking to dissolve the Union, and divide effects, by negotiation.”²

But simply because the Southern states thought the Union should be dissolved did not necessarily mean that it had to be, ought to be, or even could be, and that led Lincoln to the next fundamental reason for civil war. “One eighth of the

2. Abraham Lincoln, “Second Inaugural Address,” in *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy F. Basler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 8:332–33.

whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the Southern part of it." Protecting slavery, Lincoln declared, had become the chief irritant that provoked the Southern states to reach for the solution of disunion. "These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest," one that Lincoln and the northern states of the Union had declared a moral abomination that needed to be contained and suffocated. Though the Southern states hotly denied that they wanted to withdraw from the Union merely for the pleasure of enslaving people, Lincoln insisted that "all knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war." Waving aside all the other supposed reasons for secession and war, Lincoln insisted that "to strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union, even by war."

Even that much did not explain matters fully. Lincoln had come into office in 1861 swearing to uphold the Constitution, which gave a number of vague guarantees to slaveholding in the fifteen Southern states where it was legal, and which gave presidents no power to meddle in state affairs such as slavery. In his first inaugural address, he had taken pains to acknowledge that, as president, he had no "right" and no "inclination" to attack slavery in those states. But across the Mississippi River, out over the broad prairies of the western half of the North American continent, were the immense miles of U.S.-owned territory that had not yet been peopled and organized by white Americans, and which one day would want to be recognized and admitted to the Union as states equal to all the other states. Should slavery be permitted to plant itself in those territories?

There, Lincoln and his party had drawn the line: they would not crush slavery where it was, but they would not allow it to spread, either. The Southern states were outraged at this denial, fearful that if slavery could not grow and extend itself, it was doomed to a slow death. "The government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it," but that was more than sufficient to make the slaveholding South begin thinking of cancelling its membership in the Union. "Both parties deprecated war," Lincoln said, "but one of them would *make* war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would *accept* war rather than let it perish." Lincoln paused for a long moment, looking out over the upturned faces crowding the Capitol steps. "And the war came."

Since Lincoln uttered those words—and they amount to no more than two paragraphs in an inaugural address only four paragraphs long—something close to 50,000 books and articles on the American Civil War have been published. Still, we would be hard-pressed to find a more concise statement of just what it was that caused the American Civil War. If we want to understand what plunged the American republic into its greatest crisis, and map out the paths and highways that led Americans to four years of unplanned-for and unlooked-for carnage, we can hardly do better than to take our bearings from the three signposts that Abraham Lincoln left us.

THE AMERICAN UNION

Underlying everything else that pushed or pulled nineteenth-century Americans toward the abyss of civil war was one very plain fact about the United States of America: its political structure—that of a union of states—was a standing invitation to chaos.

The origins of this situation extend far into the American past, all the way to the founding of the first English-speaking colonies in North America. Beginning in 1607 with Jamestown, Virginia, these settlements had been individually laid out, funded, settled, and organized, with next to nothing in the way of supervision from the English government. Right down to the outbreak of the American Revolution, the British North American colonies operated on different currencies, commissioned separate defense forces, and maintained separate agencies in London to represent their interests to the English Parliament. A dozen years of spectacular political bungling by Parliament provoked thirteen of those colonies to declare themselves independent of British rule in 1776. But even in the face of British armies sent to suppress their revolt, the American colonies were unwilling to cooperate with each other on more than a hit-or-miss basis. The Continental army that the colonies raised as a joint defense force to fight the British was continually starved for men and supplies, while the local colonial militias played politics at home. The Continental Congress that they formed to act as their parliament looked more like a steering committee than a government, and even then its deliberations were racked with dissension and bickering. Frequently on the run from the British, the Continental Congress had no power to levy taxes and only the slimmest public credibility. Even the Congress's Declaration of Independence, which was supposed to be the joint announcement that the colonies were now "Free and Independent States," had been co-opted by several over-eager colonial legislatures that bolted ahead to declare their own separate independence from British rule.³

It took five years after the Declaration of Independence for the Continental Congress to persuade the new states to adopt some form of unified national government, and the states agreed only because they could not obtain an alliance with France (which they needed for survival) without forming themselves into something that the French could recognize as a government. What they finally created in 1781 was based on a flimsy document known as the Articles of Confederation. Under the Articles, each of the thirteen new states would receive equal representation in a new Confederation Congress, regardless of each state's size or population—a formula that amounted to allowing the states to come to the Confederation Congress as separate but equal powers, rather than participants in a national assembly.⁴

3. Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 69–90.

4. Kenneth Stampp, "Unam Aut Plures? The Concept of a Perpetual Union," in *The Imperiled Union: Essays on the Background of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 21–29.

There could have been only one end to this. Soon enough, individual states would find themselves quarreling with each other while the Confederation Congress stood on the sidelines, wringing its hands. Then the quarrels would explode into civil war, and the war would so weaken the United States that some powerful European monarchy (perhaps the British again) would intervene and force the Americans under European control all over again. In the 1780s almost all the rest of the world was still governed by kings who looked upon the kingless American republic as a bad example to their own restless subjects. Those kings had armies and navies that were too close to the American borders for comfort. Britain still occupied Canada to the north, and Spain still ruled the western half of North America and all of Central and South America, and neither of them liked what they saw in the new republic. If the American states divided, the European powers might take the opportunity to conquer.

So it was fear more than unity of purpose that finally drove the Americans to scrap the Articles of Confederation and write a new constitution in 1787. The Constitution equipped the national government with the power to raise its own income by imposing taxes on the states, and created an executive president who had the authority and the means to enforce the decisions of Congress. Even so, there were ambiguities and compromises in the Constitution that allowed the individual states to retain a large measure of their jealously guarded autonomy. The most obvious example of compromise concerned the Congress. The Constitution divided the old Confederation Congress into two houses, the Senate and the House of Representatives. Members of the House were elected directly by the voters of each state, with the population of each state determining how many representatives each state could elect. By contrast, the members of the Senate were elected by the state legislatures, and each state had two senators regardless of size, giving each state equal voice in the Senate, just like in the Confederation Congress. What this meant, in effect, was that in the House, the representatives would speak for the people of the United States as a whole, but in the Senate, the senators were clearly understood to be representing the interests of the states.

There were other telltale problems, too. The Constitution created a confusing and cumbersome system for electing the national president. As it was, the Constitution did not specify who was permitted to vote for the president (the eligibility of voters was a question left to the individual states). For those who could vote, the Constitution specified that they would cast their ballots not for a particular presidential candidate but for a handful of state electors, who would then assemble in an electoral college and vote as state delegations for the next president. So it was not the people of the United States who elected a president, but committees of state electors. Ominously, the states made no pledge in the text of the Constitution to treat the arrangement as a perpetual one. Three of the state conventions that eventually ratified the Constitution—those of New York, Virginia, and Rhode Island—agreed to ratification only after adding resolutions that declared that they still retained the right to retrieve the powers they had surrendered “whensoever it

shall become necessary to their happiness."⁵ And some of them quickly came close to doing just that. In 1798, the second president, John Adams, attempted to quell political opposition to his administration through the so-called Alien and Sedition Acts. In reply, two of the foremost American political thinkers, Thomas Jefferson (the author of the Declaration of Independence) and James Madison (the architect of the Constitution), drafted the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions, which announced to President Adams that the individual states still reserved the privilege of declaring acts of the national Congress unconstitutional and non-operative.

As late as the 1830s, the United States of America looked and behaved more like a league or a compact of states than a single country, and its Constitution was still regarded as something of an experiment, embraced mostly for its practicality. "Asking a State to surrender a part of her sovereignty is like asking a lady to surrender part of her chastity," declared the eccentric Virginia politician John Randolph of Roanoke, who even on the floor of Congress made his loyalties clear by insisting that "when I speak of my country, I mean the Commonwealth of Virginia." The English travel writer George Featherstonhaugh was confounded to hear a South Carolinian declare: "If you ask *me* if I am an American, my answer is, No, sir, I am a South Carolinian." The framers of the Constitution, fearing the possibility that state antagonisms, economic competition, and political corruption would easily derail the national system, appealed to the spirit of union or the virtue of political compromise to defuse the threat of divisive issues, but did not appeal to some elusive national authority.⁶

This is not to say, though, that Americans were not becoming a nation in other ways. No matter how jealously the states regarded and defended their individual political privileges and identities, it would have been hard for a people who spoke the same language, read the same books, heard the same music, and voted in the same elections not to develop some sort of fellow-feeling, irrespective of state boundaries. This was especially true for those Americans who had actually borne the brunt of the fighting in the Revolutionary War, and who carried out of the Revolution a highly different perspective on the unity of the American republic. In the snows of Valley Forge and in the heat of the Carolinas, in victory and in defeat, soldiers from Virginia, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and all the other states had undergone so many hardships together that their different backgrounds faded to unimportance.

One of these soldiers, John Marshall, began the Revolution as a Virginia militiaman, then enlisted in the Continental army, and endured the army's winter at Valley Forge. He remembered later, "I was confirmed in the habit of considering America as my

5. Ralph Ketcham, *The Anti-Federalist Papers and the Constitutional Convention Debates* (New York: Signet Classic, 2003), 225.

6. Robert Dawidoff, *The Education of John Randolph* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), 34, 154; Peter B. Knupfer, *The Union as It Is: Constitutional Unionism and Sectional Compromise, 1787-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 115-17; George Featherstonhaugh, *Excursion Through the Slave States, from Washington on the Potomac to the Frontier of Mexico* (London: John Murray, 1844), 2:341.

country and Congress as my government," not Virginia.⁷ And Marshall would later rise, as chief justice of the Supreme Court, to shape a system of national jurisprudence that transcended state boundaries and loyalties. A South Carolinian (turned Tennessean) named Andrew Jackson lost two brothers and his mother to the Revolution. Captured by the British, he refused a British officer's order to clean the officer's boots and was rewarded with a blow from the officer's sword. It left a scar Jackson carried with him for the rest of his life, and it also left a burning hatred of all enemies of his country, whether they were British invaders or (as it turned out later) fellow Southerners trying to nullify congressional legislation.⁸

By the end of the 1830s, the Union, crisscrossed by "mystic chords of memory," had ascended to the level of a national faith. The belligerent Tennessee parson and newspaper editor William G. Brownlow attacked the notion that the Constitution was merely a temporary political umbrella put up by the individual states to protect their state interests. "The Constitution," insisted Brownlow, was the political creation of the American people as a single nation, and it "was formed by the *people* to govern the *people*, and no single individual State was called upon as a separate 'sovereignty' to sign or ratify that Constitution." Alexander Stephens, who one day would serve as the vice president of the Confederate States, said that for Abraham Lincoln the Union "rose to the sublimity of a religious mysticism," and even a perfectly straightforward politician such as William H. Bissell of Illinois felt no embarrassment in claiming that whenever anyone in the West carelessly broached the idea of "destroying this Union," there would not be "a man throughout that vast region who will not raise his hand and swear by the Eternal God, as I do now, that it shall never be done, if our arms can save it." When, as it turned out, other members of the Union did just that and asked the Lincolns and Bissells to choose between state or local interests and the Union, the answer would more and more be the Union.⁹

The experience of the Revolution and the development of political maturity were only the first steps away from disunity and suspicion. The new political generation of Americans in the 1830s found two other important cultural paths by which to rise above their divisions. One of these was the embrace of a common religion. Although the Constitution forbade Congress from singling out any particular religion or religious denomination as a national "established" church, it was nevertheless clear that Americans in all parts of the country overwhelmingly favored Protestant, evangelical Christianity. The overall number of Christian congregations rose from 2,500 in 1780 to 52,000 in

7. Joseph Story, *A Discourse upon the Life, Character, and Services of the Honorable John Marshall* (Boston: J. Munroe, 1835), 20.

8. Samuel Putnam Waldo, *Memoirs of Andrew Jackson: Major-General in the Army of the United States* (Hartford, CT: Silas Andrus, 1818), 30.

9. William G. Brownlow, *Sketches of the Rise, Progress, and Decline of Secession* (Philadelphia: Applegate, 1862), 227; Alexander H. Stephens, *A Constitutional View of the Late War Between the States* (Philadelphia: National Publishing, 1870), 2:448; Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 179.

1860. Along with the new congregations came new publication agencies, such as the American Bible Society and American Tract Society, which spun off a million Bibles and 6 million religious books and pamphlets each year, and a constellation of interlocked social reform and missionary agencies. Evangelical Protestant churches claimed approximately 15 percent of the American population as full members, and as much as 40 percent of all Americans as “attenders” or “hearers.”¹⁰ There were many differences between various groups of evangelical Protestants, and they organized themselves into more separate and subdivided denominations—Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, Congregationalists, and so on—than there were states. But one thing they had in common was a commitment to the basic outlines of evangelical piety—a direct appeal to the person of Jesus Christ as God, the experience of conversion from unbelief or half belief to fervent piety, reverence for the authority of the Bible, and an ambition to promote the conversion of others for their own good and the good of the larger society.

This broadly embraced Protestant evangelicalism was heightened by the control these denominations exercised over American higher education. Almost all of the seventy-eight American colleges founded by 1840 were church-related, with clergymen serving on the boards and the faculties. Most possessed as president a prominent clergyman, who capped off the senior year of his students with a major course in moral philosophy, based on a handful of Protestant ethics textbooks (the runaway favorite being Francis Wayland’s *Elements of Moral Science*) that were used across the country. In this way, not only American religion but also the development of American ethics and philosophy were shaped by a common Protestant evangelicalism.¹¹

Just as powerful a common bond as evangelical Christianity was the political ideology that Americans embraced in the Revolution. However much the structure of American politics was compromised and frustrated by state demands and state loyalties, Americans in all the states agreed that the states and the federal government alike were to be a republic and follow a republican form of government. Republicanism in the eighteenth century was the political fruit of the Enlightenment, that sea-change intellectual movement whose principal mission was to overthrow authority’s chokehold on European intellectual life and replace it with what was natural, as discovered by reason and experiment. The Enlightenment began in the 1600s when Newton and Galileo overturned the principles of physical science that had been based on Aristotle’s writings and replaced them with a new mechanical physics based on observable patterns of motion. By the 1700s, the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment had extended the reach of nature, reason, and experiment to the realms of politics and society, and proposed to overturn any form

10. Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 270, 278; Richard J. Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 3–18.

11. Donald H. Meyer, *The Instructed Conscience: The Shaping of the American National Ethic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 13; Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 288.

of political organization built on such nonrational factors as monarchy or aristocracy. Enlightenment thought was the principal impulse behind the American Declaration of Independence in 1776, and it had its gospel in the writings of Montesquieu, Cesare Beccaria, James Harrington, Algernon Sidney, and above all John Locke, as well as in the classical examples of ancient Greece and Rome.¹²

But a more practical source of republicanism in America came simply from the governments the Americans had been compelled to improvise in their infancy as British colonies. The British government had taken a hands-off (and no-investment) stance toward the colonies founded in its name on the North American eastern seaboard, allowing the tasks of creation and maintenance to be left to corporate entrepreneurs (such as the Virginia Company) or to religious dissidents (such as the Quakers, Puritans, and Catholics) whom the British crown was only too happy to see disappear westward across the ocean. Not until much later did the British government awaken to (and begin demanding oversight of) the extraordinarily productive successes that three or four generations of this onetime riffraff had created for themselves in America. By 1750, the American colonies had developed in practice what looked for all the world like what Locke and his coadjutors had described on paper—little self-governing commonwealths. The Revolution was in large measure the response of the Americans to a British ultimatum to surrender that self-government.

Self-government meant that political sovereignty originated in the people, who possessed all the competence required for governing, and who should be free from having to cringe before aristocrats or beg their bread from wealthy landowners. Not that Americans ever felt that they needed to, since America possessed no domestic aristocracy to start with and, apart from the great manors of the Hudson River Valley and the plantations of the Virginia tidewater, no vast château-bred landlords. During the Revolution the Whigs proceeded to expel the Tory loyalists who had represented the wealthiest segment of the old colonial society. The new republic was able to begin its life with more than 90 percent of its citizens owning their own property and producing their own sustenance. In the Treaty of Paris the United States also acquired the wilderness beyond the Appalachians, where landowning could be thrown open to new generations; these lands would be organized as federal territories and eventually admitted to the Union as states.¹³

Every new territory wanted to move as swiftly as possible toward statehood, and to do that, they had to meet requirements for minimum numbers of voters. That, in turn, created pressure in the West to lower the eligibility requirements for voting because the more voters who could be counted, the faster a territory could advance to the privileges of statehood. For that reason, the United States would be a republic, but it would be

12. Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 45.

13. Edward J. Renehan, *The Treaty of Paris: The Precursor to a New Nation* (New York: Chelsea House, 2009), 84–85.

driven to become a more and more *democratic* republic. Republics, after all, are simply governments that dispense with kings and aristocrats; the definition of who can be a citizen is what makes a republic more or less democratic. The classical republics of the ancient world were actually very narrow in their definitions of who could be a citizen. The American republic, by contrast, started off on a much more democratic footing than almost any other republic in history, and in its first half century of existence it became increasingly more so, to the point where Americans would use the terms *democracy*, *republic*, *republican*, and *democratic* almost as synonyms.

A common religion and a highly democratic republicanism were cultural tools that helped Americans transcend narrow state loyalties. But there were also forces at work that were just as likely to push in the other direction and increase rather than diminish the instability of the American union.

The most serious of these forces was economic. Enlightenment philosophes struggled to bring economics as much into conformity to the rule of nature and reason as physics and politics were, and the chief among these economists was the Scot Adam Smith. In *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (published, in a significant coincidence, in the same year as the American Declaration of Independence), Smith cast down the restraints on commerce and trade imposed by contemptuous aristocrats all across Europe in favor of allowing the instinctive human passion for competitiveness a free hand in determining economic outcomes. "Every individual," wrote Smith, "intends only his own security; and . . . intends only his own gain, and he is in this . . . led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention," in just the same way that Newton's apple obeyed a law of gravity. Just as it would be absurd to ask governments to intervene in the laws of physics, it should be considered just as absurd for governments to intervene in the laws of the markets. "The obvious and simple system of natural liberty establishes itself of its own accord. Every man, as long as he does not violate the laws of justice, is left perfectly free to pursue his own interest his own way, and to bring both his industry and capital into competition with those of any other man, or order of men." The irony of this, however, is that "by pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually. . . ."¹⁴

Speaking of Adam Smith and *The Wealth of Nations* means that it is also necessary to speak about capitalism, if only because capitalism has become synonymous with Smith's description of a "natural liberty" in economics. Actually, capitalism represents at least four different ways of organizing a nation's production and consumption of goods. Capitalism can be understood as shorthand for the pursuit of profits from the sale of goods or services, and in that sense, capitalism has been around since the dawn of history itself—hence Smith's claim

14. Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. C. J. Bullock (New York: P. F. Collier, 1909 [1776]), 351, 466.

that it was "obvious and simple." Capitalism might also be regarded as a system of economic organization where governments, eager to promote the prosperity of their nations, open a "level playing field" and do no more than wish that the best economic man win. However, it still remains government's task to define the rules and police the boundaries of the playing field, since the great temptation of every competitor is to bribe the referees and kill the competition, literally or otherwise. Capitalists, in that respect, were the last people whom government should wish to entrust with the keys to the playing field's maintenance locker, and Smith was certainly no exponent of removing government's referee role. In the most complicated sense of the word, *capitalism* refers to a system by which the owners of productive mechanisms—whether the "mechanism" is a farm or a factory—employ laborers to whom they pay wages. The wages are never equivalent to the value the laborers put into the goods and services they produce. Because they do not own these mechanisms, laborers have no say in what price the real owners obtain for those goods and services. Hence, the owners sell the goods and services but only pay the producers a wage; the difference between the selling price and the wages (the "surplus value") becomes the owners' capital and is plowed back into the farm or factory to hire more wage laborers and produce more goods. This version—which is how Karl Marx defined capitalism—is also the most negative, as though capitalism were little more than systematic theft of the real value that exploited laborers imparted to goods. On the other hand, at its simplest the term *capitalism* can be used to describe any system in which an attitude of entrepreneurship and self-improvement is the key.

Monarchies were never friendly to capitalism, any more than they were to republicanism. They preferred stability in their nations' economic as well as political lives, and the more rigid the structure of a nation's monarchy, the less favor with which it was likely to look upon the brash self-promotion of shopkeepers, shoemakers, and town burgesses (*burgess* being the term from which *bourgeoisie* developed to describe the class of people most friendly to capitalism). But this self-promotion, based on cleverness, talent, and a strict eye to the main chance rather than noble birth, is also why the Enlightenment, which was in the business of overthrowing irrational appeals to mere authority, found in capitalist entrepreneurs and an independent-minded bourgeoisie its favorite heroes. "I don't know which is the more useful to the state," Voltaire (the pen name of the French satirist François-Marie Arouet) speculated wickedly, "a well-powdered lord who knows precisely what time the king gets up in the morning and what time he goes to bed, and who gives himself airs of grandeur while playing the role of slave in a minister's antechamber, or a great merchant who enriches his country, sends orders from his office to Surat and to Cairo, and contributes to the well-being of the world." Joseph Addison was "wonderfully delighted" to see "the grand scene of business" among London's merchants, "thriving in their own private fortunes, and at the same time promoting the public stock . . . by bringing into the country whatever

is wanting, and carrying out of it whatever is superfluous."¹⁵ The Enlightenment's ideal social order would thus be a mix of mildly democratic republicanism in the political realm and a free-market regime in the economic realm, a combination that became known through the early decades of the nineteenth century simply as liberalism.

France liked to think of itself as the intellectual home of the Enlightenment, but (ironically, for American observers) enlightened French thinkers looked to Britain as their favorite model of a liberal society because there the monarchy's reach was at its weakest in all of Europe, and its shopkeepers and entrepreneurs were at their most vigorous and unrestrained. "Commerce," added Voltaire, "which has brought wealth to the citizenry of England, has helped to make them free, and freedom has developed commerce in its turn."¹⁶ British capitalists were also the most scientific, for it was the British who invented the technology (beginning with the steam engine) that turned the small-scale production of handmade goods and harvest-time services into industrial manufacturing.

To supply the labor for steam-powered production, the British economy moved large segments of its population out of agriculture and into factory production. Since the factory worker did nothing but work in the factory, British capitalists needed new sources for feeding and clothing that new workforce, and they found those sources in American agriculture. Only a few Americans were prepared for this. Before 1800 in the United States, only farmers in the hinterlands of the major ports, such as Philadelphia, Charleston, and Chesapeake Bay, were seriously committed to raising crops to sell for cash on foreign markets, if only because for others the costs of getting those products to markets for sale was greater than any profit that could be reaped from the selling. An ordinary stagecoach ride from Boston to New York cost between \$10 and \$12 in 1820—two weeks' wages—and that said nothing about the cost of shipping produce or driving cattle to market; five weeks were needed to move that stagecoach from Nashville to Washington. Most American farmers were still organized around a household economy that sold little except small surpluses off the farm and which relied on barter and extended loans for the few manufactured goods it needed.¹⁷

But by the 1830s, the allurements of selling agricultural produce to British and foreign markets had become too great to resist, largely because access to those markets had become too easy to ignore. The steam engine, which had made large-scale manufacturing possible among England's "dark, satanic mills," produced an unlooked-for by-product when inventors such as John Fitch and Robert Fulton bolted steam

15. Voltaire, *Philosophical Letters: Letters Concerning the English Nation*, ed. Ernest Dilworth (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1961 [1734]), 40; Addison, "The Spectator No. LXIX" (May 19, 1711), in *The Spectator in Eight Volumes* (Philadelphia: Samuel Bradford, 1803), 1316.

16. Voltaire, *Philosophical Letters*, 39.

17. Paul A. Gilje, "The Rise of Capitalism in the Early Republic," in *Wages of Independence: Capitalism in the Early American Republic*, ed. Paul A. Gilje (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 12.

engines onto riverboats to push them up and down rivers; and then bolted steam engines onto platforms that rolled on iron tram rails. The steamboats and the railroads became the chief force in driving down the costs of access to markets, and slowly, American farmers moved away from multicrop farming and livestock raising for their own subsistence and toward single-crop agriculture, where their produce could be sold for cash, and the cash used to buy manufactured clothing or tools made in other people's factories.¹⁸

It was at this point that the hinge between democratic republicanism and liberal capitalism began to squeak. Republicanism was based upon liberty, and liberty was based upon independence, but who could consider American farmers independent if their well-being now hung on the price their crops or meat or poultry might get on a faraway exchange market? And how independent could a shoemaker be when he was forced to close up his shop because cheaply manufactured British shoes cost less than his handmade ones, and take a wage-based job in a factory or mill built on the British model? On the other hand, how independent would America remain if it stuck its economic head in the sand, persisted in the old patterns of household agriculture, and became a relative weakling among the emerging capitalist economies of Europe?

These questions were posed, in the name of protecting the Republic, by republicans who now found themselves differing seriously from one another. Beginning with Alexander Hamilton and the Federalist Party, liberal republicans argued that American independence depended on the strength and competitiveness of its economy on the world capitalist markets. Hamilton, in particular, favored direct federal government intervention in the American economy to encourage manufacturing development, trade (through publicly financed roads, bridges, and canals), and finance (by chartering a national bank, which could lend money to entrepreneurs). Power, if used judiciously, could actually protect and promote liberty. Classical republicans, championed by Thomas Jefferson and represented in the Democratic Party, argued that the Constitution gave the federal government no such powers of economic intervention. Even if it did, encouraging Americans to join the system of world markets would only mortgage the American republic to foreign interests and encourage Americans to thirst for money and power over their fellow citizens. Classical republicans wrapped themselves in the toga of the Roman republic and reminded modern Americans that in ancient Rome, materialism and self-interest on Adam Smith's scale were unknown:

Then none was for a party;
Then all were for the state;
Then the great man helped the poor,

18. Charles G. Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 8-23, 27-28.

And the poor man loved the great:
 Then lands were fairly portioned;
 Then spoils were fairly sold:
 The Romans were like brothers
 In the brave days of old.¹⁹

Jeffersonian Democrats especially opposed calls for government-financed public works, or “internal improvements,” since it was obvious that the new roads, bridges, and canals could serve only one purpose—to make it easier for farmers to reach distant markets, and for the markets to tempt American farmers into their grasp. It also went without saying that “internal improvements” could be financed only through federal taxation, and farmers who grew or manufactured only for their own households would never be able to find the money to pay those taxes without surrendering their cherished independence and growing what the market would pay them for in cash. Power was toxic, and no amount of it was safe for liberty. “The market is a canker,” warned a contributor to the *New England Farmer* in 1829, “that will, by degrees, eat you out, while you are eating upon it.”²⁰

The Democrats reserved their greatest venom for the two newest instruments of capitalist finance, the bank and the chartered corporation. America had known no banks until the very end of the American Revolution and had only eighty banks by 1810. By 1840, however, there were nearly a thousand of them, including a congressionally chartered “monster” Bank of the United States in Philadelphia, organized in 1816 with an initial capitalization of \$35 million. Democrats hated the banks because the banks were the chief processing agents of the markets: they extended credit for investment (which Democrats attacked as “phony” wealth) and either made windfall profits from manufacturers and farmers when those investments succeeded or else seized the property of those whose enterprises failed. Liberty and virtue dwelt in the hearts of independent farmers sitting under their own vines and fig trees, unmolested by tax agents and bill collectors. “Corruption or morals in the mass of cultivators,” Jefferson wrote in his celebrated *Notes on the State of Virginia*, “is a phenomenon which no age nor nation has furnished an example.” No one seemed to personify that ideal more than Jefferson’s fellow Virginian and virtuous senator, John Taylor of Caroline, who impressed a colleague as “plain and solid, a wise counsellor, a ready and vigorous debater, acute and comprehensive, ripe in all historical and political knowledge, innately republican—modest, courteous, benevolent, hospitable—a skilful, practical farmer, giving his time to his farm and his books, when not called by

19. Thomas Babington Macaulay, “Horatius,” in *Lays of Ancient Rome* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1844), 60.

20. Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780–1860* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 154.

an emergency to the public service—and returning to his books and his farm when the emergency was over.”²¹

Banks, on the other hand, looked like precisely the enormous concentrations of power and self-interest that were the source of corruption, and those fears of corruption were not eased when large-scale banks such as the Bank of the United States began paying handsome retainers to members of Congress to sit on its board of directors. Democrats were equally fearful of chartered corporations, since large-scale corporations could just as easily acquire the same enormous wealth as banks and, with it, the same power for corrupting state and local legislatures. It was a point of pride to John Randolph of Roanoke, one of the sharpest-tongued Jeffersonians in the House of Representatives, that “I am the holder of no stock whatever, except livestock, and had determined never to own any . . . because it is the creation of a great privileged order of the most hateful kind to my feelings, and because I would rather be the master than the slave. If I must have a master let him be one with epaulettes, something that I could fear and respect, something I could look up to—but not a master with a quill behind his ear.”²²

For the first three decades of the American republic, it was clearly the fears of the Democrats that had the upper hand. Of the 4 million people living in the United States in 1790, 3.7 million of them lived in the countryside and only about 200,000 in towns or ports larger than 2,500 people. Although the first two presidents, Washington and Adams, favored development and competition on the world markets as the best method for toughening the independence of the American economy, the costs of that encouragement were federal taxes. A country that had formed in a revolt against British taxes was in no mood to pay them to the federal government. Thomas Jefferson, promising an “empire for liberty,” was swept into the presidency in 1800 in a tremendous landslide, which secured Democratic control of the federal government for the next quarter century. Accordingly, the Democrats allowed banks and corporate charters to wither, and in 1807 Jefferson briefly imposed an absolute embargo on all foreign trade. If the surrounding economic world required that Americans dabble in economic power in order to safeguard political liberty, then better to quarantine the Republic economically rather than surrender it to world markets.²³

What Jefferson had not entirely counted upon was the degree to which isolation really did translate into weakness. Britain, then at the height of its titanic grapple with Napoleon Bonaparte, discovered that an American government without a bank for borrowing or taxes for spending had no way to fund a navy for protection, and

21. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (London: John Stockdale, 1787), 274; Thomas Hart Benton, *Thirty Years' View; or, A History of the Working of the American Government, from 1820 to 1850* (New York: D. Appleton, 1854), 1:45.

22. Hugh A. Garland, *The Life of John Randolph of Roanoke* (New York: D. Appleton, 1850), 2:83.

23. Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789–1825* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 315–16, 376.

so British warships shamelessly boarded American ships and impressed American sailors to fill up depleted British crews. In 1812, Jefferson's handpicked successor as president, James Madison, responded by leading the country into war against the British. It was a catastrophe. "Our commerce [had been] put in fetters by non-importation acts and embargoes; and the crisis that succeeded found us without the most ordinary resources of an independent people," complained John Pendleton Kennedy, a Whig congressman from Maryland. "Our armies went to the frontier clothed in the fabrics of the enemy; our munitions of war was gathered as chance supplied them from the four quarters of the earth; and the whole struggle was marked by the prodigality, waste and privation of a thriftless nation, taken at unawares and challenged to a contest without the necessary armor of a combatant."²⁴ The unprepared American armies were routed by a British empire that was already fighting with one arm tied behind its back by Napoleon, and the household-based American economy fell apart. By the end of the war, only major loans from private bankers kept the United States Treasury from collapse. And only British exhaustion from its European wars kept Britain from turning the American republic back into British colonies.²⁵

The disaster of the War of 1812 frightened many republicans away from Jefferson's fond dream of a nation of liberty-loving but economically powerless farmers. "These disasters opened our eyes to some important facts," Kennedy recalled in 1831. "They demonstrated to us the necessity of extending more efficient protection, at least, to those manufactures which were essential to the defence of the nation" as well as the establishment of "the value of a national currency, and the duty of protecting it from the influence of foreign disturbance" through the shield of a national banking system. Led by Henry Clay of Kentucky, a new party of National Republicans, or Whigs (as Clay renamed them in the 1830s), resurrected the program of government support for internal improvements, government-sponsored banking, and a new program of protective tariffs to keep out cheap imported British manufactured goods and stimulate manufacturing at home. "National independence was only to be maintained by national resistance against foreign encroachments," declared Clay in 1816, "by cherishing the interest of the people, and giving to the whole physical power of the country an interest in the preservation of the nation." Clay went on to endorse the new military program, "a chain of turnpikes, roads and canals from Passamaquoddy to New Orleans," and tariffs to "effectually protect our manufacturers."²⁶

Although the presidency remained firmly in the hands of the Democrats (except for a brief interlude under John Quincy Adams from 1824 to 1828), Clay's influence in Congress pushed large elements of this "American System" into being anyway.

24. John Pendleton Kennedy, "Address of the Friends of Domestic Industry" (October 26, 1831), in *Political and Official Papers* (New York: Putnam, 1872), 119–20, 122–23.

25. Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels* (New York: Knopf, 2010), 46.

26. Robert V. Remini, *Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 136–37.

It was not until the election of Andrew Jackson, an unreconstructed Jeffersonian radical, as president in 1828 that the Democrats struck back. Jackson vetoed congressional appropriations for public roads, effectively destroyed the Bank of the United States by refusing to deposit federal money there, and paid off the national debt so that there would no need for federal taxes and (above all) no need for federal tariffs to protect American industries and corporations.²⁷

Jackson's war against liberal market-based power was, in the long run, far from successful. Clay, in the role of Jackson's nemesis, remained a powerful figure in American politics, and many banks protected themselves from Jackson's wrath by obtaining charters from cooperative state legislatures. Still, that lack of success cannot obscure the anger and violence with which Whigs and Democrats—both supposedly dedicated to republicanism—had come to regard each other. By the 1840s, the Whigs had defined themselves as the party of liberal democracy, of an upwardly mobile middle class, willing to embrace the fluidity of the market and eager to promote national unity and government support for railroad construction, canals, and even steamship lines. They spoke for the small-scale manufacturer who worked beside his employees in making boots and shoes, forging iron, tanning leather; for the banker who lent him the money to start up his business and the lawyer who collected his debts; and for the commercial farmer who grew crops for cash sale on distant markets. In an economy where the average number of employees per manufacturing establishment was only fourteen, it was not unreasonable for the Whigs to see themselves as the friends of "the enterprising mechanic, who raises himself by his ingenious labors from the dust and turmoil of his workshop, to an abode of ease and elegance; the industrious tradesman, whose patient frugality enables him at last to accumulate enough to forego the duties of the counter and indulge a well-earned leisure." Perhaps most important, the Whigs had enlisted the support of a vast majority of Protestant evangelicals, and they wedded their economic gospel of hard work and thrift to the evangelical gospel of moral self-control.²⁸ They were the party of the bourgeoisie, the "middling sort," who bridled at slavery and aristocracy in equal portions, and who wanted nothing but the liberty to "improve" themselves without molestation.

The Democrats remained dedicated to resisting "consolidated" national government with its tariffs and "improvements." They appealed most strongly to the old elite families of the Republic, who feared and resented the ambitious rise of Whig entrepreneurs, and to the poorest farmers and urban workers, who suspected that the Whigs were merely the agents of a "money power" out to rob them, through taxes or

27. Harry Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 132–55.

28. Jeremy Atack and Peter Passell, *A New Economic View of American History, from Colonial Times to 1940*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 192; *New York American*, June 20, 1834, in Remini, *Henry Clay*, 463; Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America*, 103–10; Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 152–78.

through financial chicanery, of the little they had. "An organized, concentrated, and privileged money power is one of deadly hostility to liberty," warned a Democratic convention in Ohio in 1845. That included "any form or reform of banking" and any encouragement to manufacturing. "Manufactures are not of themselves objects of desire to a free people, or of favor for a free government," since they "involve the necessity of a crowded population, subject to a very arbitrary control over their comfort by a few wealthy persons, and devoted to unwholesome employment." Both parties spoke the language of democratic republicanism, but both were also convinced that their brand of democratic republicanism was the best guarantee of liberty. As one historian has summed up, the Whigs were the party of America's hopes, the Democrats the party of its fears.²⁹

The great danger posed by these arguments over power, liberalism, and republics was the possibility that they might find an outlet in the ramshackle structure of the federal Union. During the War of 1812, New Englanders were hard hit by the naval blockade that British warships imposed on them, and the more they suffered from this blockade, the more the suffering seemed to be the fault of people from other parts of the country, such as President Madison (a Virginian), whose section presumably had something to gain from the war that New England did not. In December 1814 delegates from Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island met at Hartford, Connecticut, to express their opposition to the war and make ugly suggestions about seceding from the Union and making a separate peace with Great Britain. The delegations' threats all blew over because the war ended a month later, but the event was a dangerous indication that states or sections of the country who suspected that their liberties were being leached by someone else's thirst for power might take advantage of the autonomy provided them by the federal Union, and leave the Union for good.

A more dramatic example of the intersection of ideology and self-interest occurred in 1832 over the federal tariff. For more than a decade, South Carolina and the other Southern states had been vigorously protesting the use of tariffs to protect American industry. Tariffs such as the one imposed in 1816 boosted the price of imported manufactured goods by 25 percent over their original valuation, and forced consumers to buy American-made goods, which were considerably more costly than the imports had originally been. South Carolina's John Caldwell Calhoun observed that this was fine for New England, which was home to many of America's infant industries, but it was very hard on South Carolina, which specialized in cotton

29. "Letter to the Secretary of the Treasury, on the Effect of the Tariff of 1842, on the Agricultural and Other Interests of the West, by a Committee of the Democratic Convention of Hamilton County, Ohio," August 30, 1845, in *Public Documents Ordered Printed by the Senate of the United States, First Session of the 29th Congress* (Washington, DC: Ritchie and Heiss, 1846), 2:352, 85; Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957), 13; Marc W. Kruman, "The Second American Party System and the Transformation of Revolutionary Republicanism," *Journal of the Early Republic* 12 (Winter 1992): 509-37.

growing and needed to buy manufactured goods from elsewhere. Congress was not inclined to give the South Carolinians relief, and in 1828, Congress passed a tariff so stiff (it imposed import duties up to 50 percent on the value of some imports) that South Carolina dubbed it “the Tariff of Abominations.”

Calhoun saw the tariff not just as an economic issue but also as a challenge by the federal government to South Carolina’s liberty as a state. For two years, while he was serving as Andrew Jackson’s vice president, Calhoun fought the tariff through his political lieutenants in Congress, insisting that South Carolina had the authority to nullify any federal law it deemed unsatisfactory (including tariffs) unless three-quarters of the other states had the opportunity to review the law and approve it. Early in 1830, Robert Hayne of South Carolina, acting as Calhoun’s mouthpiece, delivered a long and powerful polemic on the floor of the Senate, defending the state sovereignty of South Carolina against a “consolidated” Union. Hayne was argued down by Massachusetts senator Daniel Webster, who proclaimed (in words that subsequent generations of American schoolchildren were required to memorize) that the federal government was “the people’s constitution; the people’s government” and the power of the Union should not be splintered by one state under the specious plea of liberty. “Liberty *and* Union,” Webster concluded, must be “now and forever, one and inseparable.”³⁰

Undeterred by Webster’s eloquence, Calhoun hoped to play on the anti-tariff sympathies of President Jackson, calculating that Jackson would not use force to impose a tariff he did not welcome, and certainly not in the state in which he had been born. Jackson was invited by Calhoun and his friends to a Jefferson’s birthday dinner on April 13, 1830, in the hope that Calhoun might prod an anti-tariff statement out of Jackson. After dinner, the toasts went round the table, beginning with Calhoun and building one by one to a carefully orchestrated anthem of praise for state sovereignty. But when Jackson rose to present his toast, he stared point-blank at Calhoun and proposed, “Our Federal Union: it must be preserved!” then held his glass aloft as a sign that the toast was to be drunk standing. Calhoun and the others struggled weakly to their feet, Calhoun spilling a trickle of wine as he trembled in shock. “The Union,” Calhoun gasped in response, “next to our liberty the most dear.”³¹

Calhoun had greatly misjudged Jackson’s loyalty to the Union. Realizing that he had lost all hope of influencing Jackson, he resigned his vice presidency and returned to South Carolina. On November 24, 1832, the Calhounites led a specially called convention in South Carolina to nullify the collection of the tariff within South Carolina, threatening secession from the Union if the federal government interfered. Jackson replied on December 10, 1832, with a proclamation announcing

30. “Speech of Mr. Webster, of Massachusetts,” January 26 and 27, 1830, in *The Webster–Hayne Debate on the Nature of the Union: Selected Documents*, ed. Herman Belz (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2000), 144.

31. “The Autobiography of Martin van Buren,” ed. John C. Fitzpatrick, in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1918* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1920), 2:416; Ted Widmer, *Martin Van Buren* (New York: Times Books, 2005), 82.

that nullification was “incompatible with the existence of the Union. . . . The Constitution forms a government, not a league.” On that note, nullification was dealt a staggering blow, and Jackson went on to take a further swipe at secession by adding, “To say that any state may at pleasure secede from the Union is to say that the United States is not a nation.”

Jackson had no more love than Calhoun for banks, tariffs, and federally funded “improvements” projects, but he was also the president of the United States, and he was not used to challenges from what he called a “coward, hypocrite, conspirator, traitor and fool” such as Calhoun. Jackson obtained from Congress a Force Bill, which authorized him to use the army and navy to suppress South Carolina resistance. Before force became necessary, however, the more conciliatory Henry Clay had produced a compromise measure that provided for the graduated reduction of the tariff. On March 15, 1833, Calhoun and the South Carolinians rescinded their nullification ordinance.³²

They did not, however, renounce the principle of secession. That meant that whatever else Americans might hold in common, their political structure—a Union of sometimes grudging and suspicious states—remained vulnerable in any crisis in which any state with a grievance might try to end its cooperation with the others and stalk out of the Union. “Altho I am for the *Union* & no *Nullifier*,” wrote one uneasy Virginian in January 1833, “yet my southern feelings & prejudice are so strong, that I know I should hate to see a Southern man vanquished by a northern one. . . .”³³ Jackson might have prevented disunion over the tariff, and Clay might have demonstrated how compromise was the best method for disarming confrontation, but as far as Calhoun was concerned, that did not mean that the remedy of secession would not be available for future use if a more demanding set of circumstances called for it. And, as many Americans could already see, such a set of circumstances was very likely to appear in the form of the issue of slavery, as it was practiced in the Southern states. No one less than Andrew Jackson had already glumly predicted, after the nullification crisis had passed, that “the nullifiers in the South intend to blow up a storm on the slave question. . . .” Nullification might be defeated, he told his aide John Coffee, but “they will try to arouse the Southern people on this false tale. This ought to be met, for be assured these men will do any act to destroy the union, & form a southern Confederacy, bounded north, by the Potomac river.”³⁴

But even with all the forces that appeared to be pulling Americans apart—from the fissiparous nature of the federal Union to the clashing economic visions of Whig and Democrat—none of them had the weight to outbalance the forces making the

32. James Parton, *Life of Andrew Jackson* (New York: Mason Bros., 1860), 3:447, 460, 468, 474.

33. Richard E. Ellis, *The Union at Risk: Jacksonian Democracy, States Rights, and the Nullification Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 191.

34. Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Democracy, 1833–1845* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), 42.

American Union stronger with every decade, nor did they have the power by themselves to fracture the Union. That sort of disruption would require the introduction of a catalyst, which would act on all the divisions of Americans to worsen them.

That catalyst would be slavery.

SOCIOLOGY FOR THE SOUTH

Jefferson Davis did not like Yankees.

Born in Kentucky and raised in Mississippi, Davis found it something of a novelty to meet Northerners when he arrived at the United States Military Academy at West Point as a cadet in 1824. But it was not a novelty he enjoyed. He found Yankees tight-fisted, chilly, and unsociable. "The Yankee part of the corps [of cadets] . . . are not . . . such associates as I would at present select." Northerners were dedicated to making money, pinching pennies, and building factories; they were all "vulgar parvenus . . . vulgar landlords, capitalists, and employers." Henry Rootes Jackson, a Georgian who, like Davis, had gone north for his collegiate education, experienced the same revulsion. "Yankees, and Yankee gold" brought in their penny-pinching wake everything "impure, inhuman, uncharitable, unchristian and uncivilized." A Virginian on tour in New England in 1834 was reminded that "*Yankee tricks*, and *Yankee knavery*, are ideas inseparable from the word *Yankee*." Southerners were another quantity altogether. Southerners preferred the relaxed pace of agricultural life close to the rhythms of nature; they were aristocratic, noble-minded, generous, traditional. In fact, Southerners even *looked* different from Northerners. "Foreigners have all remarked on the care-worn, thoughtful, unhappy countenances of our people," George Fitzhugh, a Virginian, wrote in 1854, but that description "only applies to the North, for travellers see little of us at the South, who live far from highways and cities, in contentment on our farms." By 1861, claimed Albert Pike, it had become manifest that "the people of the South and those of the North are essentially two races of men, with habits of thought and action very unlike."³⁵

Fitzhugh and Pike were at least partly right. After the Revolution, European tourists and journalists flocked to America to gawk at the operation of the new republic, and they did agree that the Southern states of the American democracy seemed like a country unto itself, although the watchers did not always mean that observation

35. Davis to Joseph Davis (January 12, 1825), in *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*, ed. H. M. Monroe and J. T. McIntosh (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), 1:18; Shearer Davis Bowman, *At the Precipice: Americans North and South During the Secession Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 74; "Letters from New England No. 2, by a Virginian," July 26, 1834, in *Southern Literary Messenger* 1 (January 1835), 219; George M. Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society* (Richmond, VA: A. Morris, 1854), 258; Albert Pike, "State or Province? Slave or Free?" in *Southern Pamphlets on Secession, November 1860–April 1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 341; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 97.

to be a compliment. The statistics the travelers amassed, or culled from the United States census reports, put a decidedly different spin on Fitzhugh's praise of Southern agriculture. In 1850, the South possessed only one-quarter of the railroad mileage of the Republic, and less than one-fifth of the country's manufacturing capacity. Three times as many Northerners lived in cities, while value of northern farmland was reckoned, acre for acre, at more than twice that in the South. In the North, less than 5 percent of the population was illiterate; in the South, illiteracy ran as high as 40 percent in some areas. For "the first time in the States," wrote English correspondent William Howard Russell as his train crossed through into North Carolina in 1861, "I noticed barefooted people" and "poor broken-down shanties or loghuts" filled with "paleface . . . tawdry and ragged" women and "yellow, seedy-looking" men.³⁶

And yet the impressions of difference that foreign travelers gained from their tours of the South were also likely to miss many of the subtleties of Southern money and manners. The political and social economy of the Southern states was an exceedingly complex affair, compounded by deceptively stable appearances and highly aggressive commercial enterprise. It was a rash traveler indeed who rushed in to announce that the enigma of the South was now solved.

The first appearance that shaped the initial impressions of onlookers was the dominance of cotton agriculture in the South. Single-crop agriculture was actually a habit with a long history in the Southern states, stretching back into colonial times when the South's prosperity had relied almost entirely on tobacco grown around Chesapeake Bay and rice or indigo in the South Carolina lowlands. The soils of the South faded fast, though. Lands farmed for five years had to be left fallow for five or even ten years to regain their fertility. By the time of the Revolution, tobacco and indigo production had gone into decline, and the South faced an agricultural crisis of alarming proportions. Then, in 1793, a New England-born inventor, Eli Whitney, constructed a simple device known as the cotton gin, which was able to take raw cotton, separate the fiber of the cotton from the seeds, and produce a usable product with no more than the effort needed to turn a handle. At one stroke, cotton production became mechanically simple and economically viable.

At virtually the same moment that Whitney's gin simplified the production process, Great Britain's factory-based textile industry began its clamor for new, cheap sources of cotton. Demand met supply, and between the 1790s and 1850, British cotton imports from the South leapt from 12 million pounds a year to 588 million pounds; in the same period, British exports of finished cotton products rocketed from 40 million square yards to 2 billion square yards, while the costs of cotton goods fell by 1850 to 1 percent of what they had been in the 1780s. Cotton brought Britain power and prosperity, employing 1.5 million workers in the textile factories alone. Cotton, in return, brought the South economic and political power in the American republic. By 1860, Southern cotton constituted 57 percent of all American exports;

36. W. H. Russell, *My Diary North and South*, ed. Fletcher Pratt (New York: Harper, 1954), 52.

compared to Northern grain farms, which exported only 5 percent of their total crop, Southern cotton plantations shipped 75 percent of their cotton abroad.³⁷

But cotton brought the South bane as well as blessing. The rage for cotton profits meant that the South was forever having to import manufactured goods, either from the North or else from abroad over the intolerable hurdle of federal tariffs. To buy these goods, Southern planters were compelled to mortgage their next crop to Northern manufacturers and bankers in order to buy the cotton gins and other tools they needed to plant and harvest the crop in the first place. The money that flowed from English cotton buyers back to the South generally came in the form of bills and drafts that were then forwarded to New York banks to pay Southerners' bills to Northern merchants. This created cycles of debt for cotton growers, especially in the oldest parts of the South, and most of the debt was owed to northern bankers. "We have been good milk cows," South Carolinian Mary Boykin Chesnut complained in 1862, "milked by the tariff, or skimmed . . . Cotton pays everyone who handles it, sells it, manufactures it, &c &c—rarely pays the men who make it."³⁸ The faster planters in the old cotton states ran to produce more cotton, the faster they piled up debts for the costs of production. By 1850, some of them were surviving on profit margins as low as 2 or 3 percent.

As a result, some Southerners came to resent the burden that the cotton system placed upon them. As early as 1818, John Taylor of Caroline warned that in the upper South, cotton was accelerating soil exhaustion: "The fertility of our country has been long declining, and . . . our agriculture is in a miserable state," and only a vigorous and intelligent program of manuring, drainage, and crop rotation could save it. Thirty years later, the Virginia planter and amateur agricultural scientist Edmund Ruffin pleaded for more intelligent use of fertilizers and crop rotation, and called for state aid to agricultural societies. Governor James Henry Hammond of South Carolina plowed up strips of ground beside public roads and advertised the use of new fertilizers on them so that passersby could have an example to follow with their own lands. In 1849, Hammond harangued the South Carolina State Agricultural Society on how "a combined system of Agriculture, Manufactures, and Commerce, are essential in promoting the prosperity and happiness of a community." And in 1852, Southerners reorganized the Southern Commercial Convention so that the convention could become an agency for promoting railroads, steamship lines, port facilities, banks, factories, and other market enterprises. Unfortunately, few of these proposals seemed to produce results. J. B. D. DeBow, the publisher of the Southern commercial magazine *DeBow's Review*, was chagrined to discover that Northern purchasers of his *Industrial Resources of the Southern and Western*

37. Allan Nevins, *Ordeal of the Union: Fruits of Manifest Destiny, 1847–1852* (New York: Scribner's, 1947), 466; Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789–1848* (New York: World, 1962), 51–55.

38. Diary entry for July 8–9, 1862, *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, ed. C. Vann Woodward (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 410.

States (1853) outnumbered Southern ones six to one; he was even more chagrined by the fact that two-thirds of his meager 825 *Review* subscribers were in arrears for their subscriptions.³⁹

In their effort to understand why Southerners would set aside the opportunity to diversify their economy, journalists and travelers could only guess that Southerners were in some peculiar way willing to exchange solid modern profits for the social values that came attached to traditional agriculture. They were helped to this conclusion by the unceasing Southern voices that proclaimed their preference for a way of living that (whether it was profitable or not) provided more graciousness of style, more leisure, and more sense of the past than the frantic, money-grubbing lives of modern Northern manufacturers and their armies of faceless wage-paid factory hands. Edward Pollard, the editor of the *Richmond Examiner*, liked to think of the Southern cotton planters as the last survival of a noble and knightly virtue where “the affections were not entirely the product of money,” a sort of American aristocracy holding its own against the onslaught of Yankee capitalism.⁴⁰

They derived encouragement for this sort of thinking from new winds blowing out of Europe. The American republic had been the eldest child of the Enlightenment; when a revolution overthrew the king of France in 1789, it seemed that family of reason, liberalism, and republics was on the increase. But then the French Revolution collapsed into the Reign of Terror, which in turn was replaced by the tyranny of Bonaparte, and by 1815 the rule of reason and the viability of republics had become seriously tarnished. A backlash against the Enlightenment emerged out of the shambles of post-Napoleonic Europe, which snarled at the failures of reason and glorified the romance of authority, especially when it was rooted in knightly myth, chivalrous orders, and medieval faith. Its cultural paladins were Edmund Burke and Sir Walter Scott, Hector Berlioz and Georg Friedrich Hegel, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and Victor Hugo, and its name was Romanticism.⁴¹

The political theorists of the Enlightenment—not just Locke but Montesquieu, Beccaria, Mandeville, Harrington, and Hume—based their politics on the possession by all humanity of “certain inalienable rights,” which could be encoded in

39. John Taylor, *Arator; Being a Series of Agricultural Essays Practical and Political*, ed. M. E. Bradford (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1977), 70; Drew Gilpin Faust, “The Rhetoric and Ritual of Agriculture in Antebellum South Carolina,” in *Southern Stories: Slaveholders in Peace and War* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 32–34; James M. McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 27; Michael O’Brien, *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810–1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 1:542.

40. Fox-Genovese and Genovese, *Mind of the Master Class*, 313.

41. Tim Blanning, *The Romantic Revolution: A History* (New York: Random House, 2011), 67, 95, 121. H. J. Eckenrode, Virginia’s longtime state archivist, once complained that “beyond doubt Scott gave the South its social ideal, and the South of 1860 might be not inaptly nicknamed Sir Walter Scotland.” See Eckenrode, “Sir Walter Scott and the South,” *North American Review* 206 (October 1917): 601.

written (and reasonable) constitutions. Looking out over the wreckage of Napoleon's empire, observers found that this seemed like drivel. Not rights but the ineffable experience of nationhood was what governed politics. "Those who speak the same language are joined to each other by a multitude of invisible bonds by nature herself, long before any human art begins," Fichte proclaimed in 1806; "they understand each other and have the power of continuing to make themselves understood more and more clearly; they belong together and are by nature one and an inseparable whole."⁴² And Hoffman von Fallersleben sang of Germany:

Union, right and freedom ever
 For the German fatherland!
 So with brotherly endeavour
 Let us strive with heart and hand!
 For a bliss that wavers never
 Union, right and freedom stand—
 In this glory bloom forever,
 Bloom, my German fatherland!⁴³

"There is no such thing as man in the world," the revolutionary exile Joseph de Maistre sneered. "During my life, I have seen Frenchmen, Italians, Russians, and so on . . . but I must say, as for man, I have never come across him anywhere. . . ." It was each nation's collective and organic experience that made its people what they were, not some inherent human qualities shared equally by everyone. Albert Taylor Bledsoe, who would serve in the Confederate government, agreed that civil society "is not a thing of compacts, bound together by promises and paper . . . It is a decree of God; the spontaneous and irresistible working of that nature, which, in all climates, through all ages, and under all circumstances, manifests itself in social organizations."⁴⁴

Southerners found Romanticism irresistibly convenient for justifying the plantation culture—even in the older South, where plantation agriculture faced bankruptcy—because the plantation embodied the mystery of Southernness. "The South had an element in its society—a landed gentry—which the North envied, and for which its substitute was a coarse ostentatious aristocracy which smelt of the trade," Pollard explained. He acknowledged that "the South was a vast agricultural country," and its "waste lands, forest and swamps" featured "no thick and intricate nets of internal improvements to astonish and bewilder the traveller." All the same, "however it [the South] might decline in the scale of gross prosperity, its people

42. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Addresses to the German Nation*, trans. R. F. Jones and G. H. Turnbull (Chicago: Open Court, 1922), 223–24.

43. Heinrich Hoffmann von Fallersleben, "German Land Above All Others," in *A Harvest of German Verse*, ed. and trans. Margarete Münsterberg (New York: D. Appleton, 1916), 121–22.

44. De Maistre, "Considerations on France," in *The Works of Joseph de Maistre*, ed. J. Lively (New York: Schocken, 1971), 80; Bledsoe, *An Essay on Liberty and Slavery* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1856), 34.