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Ghosts of the Revolution: Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, and the Legacy of the Founding Generation

Abstract

For the wartime generation, the Civil War in many ways represented a recapitulation of the American Revolution. Both the Union and Confederate civilian populations viewed themselves as the true successors of the Founding Generation. Throughout the Antebellum years and the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis frequently invoked the Founders and their legacy. The two future executives did so in order to both justify their own political ideologies as well as inspire their respective civilian populations. Their sense of ownership over the legacy of the Founders reflected one of the uniquely American conflicts of the Civil War Era.

Keywords

Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, American Revolution, Founding Generation

GHOSTS OF THE REVOLUTION: ABRAHAM LINCOLN, JEFFERSON DAVIS, AND THE LEGACY OF THE FOUNDING GENERATION

Amelia F. Wald

Introduction

Describing the genesis of the United States, Abraham Lincoln referred to the fledgling American Republic as “a new nation, conceived in Liberty” in the now oft-quoted opening lines of his November 1863 Gettysburg Address.¹ A mere five months later, Lincoln also asserted, “The world has never had a good definition of the word liberty, and the American people, just now, are much in want of one. We all declare for liberty; but in using the same *word* we do not all mean the same *thing*.”² The central political and military conflicts during the Civil War revolved around the concept of liberty. Both the Union and the Confederacy perceived their respective nations as the sacred protector of American freedom and liberty. Lincoln’s insightful observation in April 1864 reflected one of the fundamental conflicts of the American Civil War.

Unable to resolve the slavery question, the Founding generation passed the debate onto their posterity. Throughout the antebellum years and the secession crisis,

¹ Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Delbanco, *The Portable Abraham Lincoln* (London: Penguin, 2009), 323.

² *Ibid*, 334.

each side of the conflict called upon the words of the Founders to justify their ideology. Despite fundamental differences in the Republican and Democratic platforms, both parties claimed that their policies reflected the Founders' intent in order to legitimize their political claims. Revolutionary references also served as patriotic inspiration for American civilians both before and during the war. Abraham Lincoln's and Jefferson Davis's deployment of Revolutionary rhetoric during the Civil War revealed a striking paradox. Both executives claimed their beliefs stemmed directly from the Founders, despite their oppositional ideologies. Both Lincoln and Davis battled to claim the Founding Generation's legacy to defend their respective political ideologies and motivate their civilian populations before and during the Civil War.

The Antebellum Years

Throughout the antebellum political debates, Lincoln and Davis frequently invoked the legacy of the Founding generation. Lincoln relied on Revolutionary references to both inspire his audience and instill in them a sense of patriotic responsibility. On January 27, 1838, Lincoln addressed the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, Illinois, expressing his fears that the contemporary generation teetered towards political complacency. Lauding the Founders' republican principles, he proclaimed, "We, when mounting the stage of existence, found ourselves the legal

inheritors of these fundamental blessings.”³ Lincoln’s emphasis on inherited rights placed a particular obligation on the young men in the room. They had not fought for these rights themselves but had received an obligation to act as worthy stewards. The Founding generation bought with blood and resilience the rights which their posterity now enjoyed. This “once hearty, brave, and patriotic but now lamented and departed race of ancestors” could no longer lead the country in the pursuit of liberty.⁴ Now, the younger generation needed to assume the mantle. Lincoln declared, “This task of gratitude to our fathers, justice to ourselves, duty to posterity, and love for our species in general, all imperatively require us faithfully to perform.”⁵ Lincoln’s bold call to action claimed that only the current generation of Americans could carry on the Founders’ vision; however, millions of people depended on the success of the American experiment.

As Lincoln’s political career blossomed, he called upon the Founders’ ideology to justify his antislavery stance. Although he previously held a seat in the federal House of Representatives, Lincoln had declined to seek reelection in 1848 because of his personal philosophy of rotation. After several years practicing law privately and a series of personal tragedies, the Kansas-Nebraska Act invigorated Lincoln to return to politics.⁶ Lincoln supported policies that limited the expansion of slavery; he opposed the Kansas-

³ Ibid, 18.

⁴ Ibid, 18.

⁵ Ibid, 18.

⁶ Ibid, xxiv.

Nebraska Act's implementation of popular sovereignty in the territories, which repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820. Naturally, Lincoln's return to the political stage involved frequent references to the Founders. In 1854, he delivered a powerful speech condemning the Kansas-Nebraska Act in Peoria, Illinois. Recalling the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, Lincoln noted that Thomas Jefferson "who was, is, and perhaps will continue to be, the most distinguished politician of our history...conceived the idea of taking that occasion, to prevent slavery ever going into the northwestern territory."⁷ His Early Republic anecdote involved multiple rhetorical strategies. First, Lincoln established the historic tradition of limiting slavery in the territories. His policy proposal followed a trend predating the Constitution. Second, by invoking the memory of Jefferson, Lincoln highlighted the wisdom of his platform and validated his own argument by aligning himself with the brilliant Founder.

To further prove not only Jefferson's sagacity but also his own, Lincoln informed his audience that the land of the Old Northwest "is now what Jefferson foresaw and intended—the happy home of teeming millions of free, white, prosperous people, and no slave among them."⁸ Having already established that his policy mimicked Jefferson's, Lincoln suggested that the vision had previously proven successful. His statement implied that the lack of slavery in the Old Northwest directly correlated to the

⁷ Ibid, 43.

⁸ Ibid, 44.

political liberty the free white population enjoyed. Slavery threatened the liberty of the white man because it allowed for the rise of aristocratic slaveholding landowners who dominated the political landscape. The Founders envisioned a republic in which every white man enjoyed liberty and political representation. According to Lincoln, limiting the expansion of slavery into the territories served this mission.

Lincoln argued that prohibiting the expansion of slavery not only increased the liberty of the white man but also freed the American republic from accusations of hypocrisy. He implored, “Let us turn slavery from its claims of ‘moral right’ back upon its existing legal rights, and its arguments of ‘necessity.’ Let us return it to the position our fathers gave it; and there let it rest in peace. Let us re-adopt the Declaration of Independence, and with it, the practices, and policy, which harmonize with it....If we do this, we shall not only have saved the Union; but we shall have so saved it, as to make, and to keep it, forever worthy of the saving.”⁹ Lincoln abhorred slavery on moral grounds but respected each state’s power to legislate its own laws on slavery. He believed that the Founders shared his perspective, as evidenced in the Declaration. Limiting slavery’s expansion fell within the power of the federal government and offered a tangible path to slowly ridding the United States of slavery. Lincoln’s emphasis on the congruence between his philosophy and the Founders’ philosophy legitimized his beliefs and placed him in a position to fulfill the Founders’ vision.

⁹ Ibid, 74.

Lincoln effectively asserted that the Founders began the tradition of limiting slavery in the federal territories and that the current generation of white men now reaped the benefits of such policies. He then sought to reinforce the connection between the repealed Missouri Compromise and the Northwest Ordinance. Lincoln plainly stated, “In excluding slavery North of the [Missouri Compromise] line, the same language is employed as in the Ordinance of ’87.”¹⁰ His simple comparison suggested that the Kansas-Nebraska Act overturned a long-running, effective policy for addressing the slavery issue that the Founders had established even before they ratified the Constitution. Lincoln deftly rooted his argument in the legacy of the Founders to persuade his audience to his platform.

Lincoln also turned to the Declaration to expound his moral and political interpretations of slavery. Lincoln constantly battled mislabels: he was antislavery, not an abolitionist; he believed every race deserved equal natural rights, not political ones. Condemning the Dred Scott decision on June 26, 1857, Lincoln professed, “I think the authors of [the Declaration] intended to include *all* men, but they did not intend to declare all men equal in *all respects*.”¹¹ Lincoln hoped his explanation of the Declaration might alleviate misconceptions about his ideology. Although he yearned for an end to slavery, he only wished to interfere with it in the territories, where the Constitution permitted. His distaste for slavery meant he desired that all people enjoy

¹⁰ Ibid, 45.

¹¹ Ibid, 96.

the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, but he still firmly supported white supremacy. The nation's founding document served as a vehicle through which Lincoln could clarify his beliefs.

During the antebellum years, Jefferson Davis capitalized on the Founders' legacy with vigor equal to Lincoln's. In an 1853 letter, Davis proclaimed, "my father and uncles fought through the Revolution of 1776, giving their youth, their blood, and their little patrimony to the constitutional freedom which I claim as my inheritance."¹² The Davis family fought ardently for American liberty. Patriotism ran through Davis' blood. Throughout his political career, Davis capitalized on his familial connection to the Revolution; such connection allowed him to claim special ownership in preserving American republican principles.

While Lincoln claimed that the Founders supported limiting slavery in the territories, Davis argued that the Founders endorsed the continuation of slavery. Speaking on the floor of the House on December 18, 1845, Davis queried, "Had the gentleman [from Massachusetts] forgotten that both the Adamses, and Otis, and Gerry, and Hancock, had all sprung from a State which tolerated slavery?" Davis's question indirectly countered the Massachusetts representative's accusation that "wherever slavery existed there the high moral character and perfectability of man was

¹² Jefferson Davis and William J. Cooper, *Jefferson Davis: The Essential Writings* (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 103.

not to be found.”¹³ The New Englander accused Southerners of moral inferiority because of their slave society. To counter, Davis referenced five Founders who hailed from Massachusetts themselves. The Mississippian reminded his New England contemporary that not only did the Founders favor slavery, but Northern states had also embraced the system in years past. Davis’s decision to incorporate the Founders into his proslavery argument undermined the attempts of Northern politicians to paint slavery as a moral ill. In countering the Massachusetts representative’s statement, Davis demonstrated that indirect criticisms of the Founders’ morality dishonored the Revolutionary generation’s sacrifices and compromised the integrity of the republic’s foundation.

In an 1849 letter to Mississippi editor Malcolm D. Haynes, Davis recalled the Founders to condemn both antislavery sentiments and sectional parties, which he considered intimately connected. Davis erroneously characterized the Liberty Party, Free Soil Party, and any other antislavery proponents as abolitionists. He noted that these groups only held influence in the North and therefore categorized them as sectional parties. Davis implored, “we have to meet the evil which Washington deprecated, the indication of which startled Jefferson like ‘a fire bell at night,’ a geographical party.”¹⁴ By demonizing the sectional nature of abolitionism and antislavery parties, Davis also inherently condemned their ideology. If the Founders

¹³ Ibid, 28.

¹⁴ Ibid, 65-66.

objected to the very existence of such parties, then the legitimacy of those parties' platforms crumbled. Davis transformed resistance to antislavery efforts into a service to the Founders' legacy.

Davis accused sectionalists of disunionism, an affront to the memory of the Revolutionary generation. Speaking to an audience in Portland, Maine in 1858, Davis implored that as long as Americans celebrated and preserved the Founders' contributions, "we cannot sink to the petty strife which would sap the foundations, and destroy the political fabric our fathers erected, and bequeathed as an inheritance to our posterity forever."¹⁵ Celebrating the Founders inspired citizens to emulate their liberty-loving forefathers. Just as Lincoln had done twenty years previously at the Young Men's Lyceum, Davis emphasized the current generation's responsibility to carry on the Founders' work for the benefit of future Americans. For Davis however, the "petty strife" of sectionalism dishonored the Founders, not political complacency. Antislavery sectionalism threatened to destroy the republic that the Founders had labored to create.

Well before the establishment of the Confederacy, Davis advocated for the legality of secession. In Fayette, Mississippi on July 11, 1851, Davis asserted that "The Declaration of Independence recognized the right of secession under circumstances of oppression and injustice."¹⁶ Davis assumed that because the Declaration

¹⁵ Ibid, 149.

¹⁶ Ibid, 97.

announced one instance of secession, the document endorsed every act of secession if a valid complaint accompanied. As the secession crisis reached its peak in the wake of Lincoln's election, Davis would again turn to the pro-secession arguments he espoused in the 1850s.

The Presidential Election and the Secession Crisis

The Republican Party entered the political arena amidst growing sectional tension. Propelled to national prominence as the Republican Party presidential nominee, Lincoln acutely understood the controversy surrounding his party's platform. In an effort to persuade voters and assuage white Southerners' fears, Lincoln delivered a campaign speech addressing his stance on slavery at the Cooper Institute in New York City on February 27, 1860. He unequivocally stated, "We [Republicans] know we hold no doctrine, and make no declaration, which were not held to and made by 'our fathers who framed the Government under which we live.'"¹⁷ Lincoln focused on proving the congruence of Republican ideology with the Founders' intent to justify his position to the nation.

The presidential candidate recapitulated many of the arguments he professed previously in his condemnation of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Lincoln once again reminded his audience that the tradition of limiting the expansion of slavery into the federal territories began with the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. In his campaign speech, however,

¹⁷ Lincoln, 209.

Lincoln intentionally noted that “Washington...had, as President of the United States, approved and signed an act of Congress, enforcing the prohibition of slavery in the Northwestern Territory.”¹⁸ Invoking the name of the first president emphasized the deliberateness of the act. Dispensing a historical lesson, Lincoln informed his audience that “about one year after [Washington] penned it, he wrote La Fayette that he considered that prohibition a wise measure, expressing in the same connection his hope that we should at some time have a confederacy of free States.”¹⁹ Lincoln capitalized on Washington’s writings as a posthumous endorsement of the Republican platform. Furthermore, the Illinois politician positioned himself as the fulfillment of Washington’s hope. Only through limiting the expansion of slavery could the United States eventually become a nation of free states.

In the same speech, Lincoln also called upon Jefferson’s legacy to defend the Republican platform. Quoting Jefferson, Lincoln professed, ““It is still in our power to direct the process of emancipation, and deportation, peaceably, and in slow degrees, as that the evil will wear off insensibly; and in their places be, *pari passu*, filled up by free white laborers.””²⁰ Jefferson advocated for gradual emancipation and “recolonization” in order to eliminate African-Americans from white American society. Decades later, Lincoln deployed the Founder’s words to firmly assure

¹⁸ Ibid, 207-208.

¹⁹ Ibid, 208.

²⁰ Ibid, 211.

his audience that the Republican platform favored the gradual elimination of slavery because it would lead to greater prosperity of the white man. The Presidential candidate clarified, “Mr. Jefferson did not mean to say, nor do I, that the power of emancipation is in the Federal Government... The Federal Government, however, as we insist, has the power of restraining the extension of the institution.”²¹ Lincoln attached his own voice to Jefferson’s to persuade his audience with multiple strategies. First, Lincoln implicitly vowed to his audience that just as the government did in the days of Jefferson, the Republicans would respect the rights of individual states to legislate their own slavery laws. Second, Lincoln also positioned himself as the candidate who could execute Jefferson’s vision. Jefferson understood that the federal government had the power to eliminate slavery through limiting its expansion, yet the issue of slavery continued to divide the nation. Lincoln suggested that finally implementing Jefferson’s proposal with force would eventually rid the United States of the curse of slavery, and all white men would prosper and fully enjoy the benefits of liberty as the Founders intended.

As Southern states began seceding in the wake of Lincoln’s election, the President-elect turned to the Founders in an effort to assuage the fears of both the loyal citizenry and the secessionists. Writing to Alexander Stephens on December 22, 1860, Lincoln expressed his horror that Southerners feared “that a Republican administration would, *directly*, or *indirectly*, interfere with their slaves.” He

²¹ Ibid, 211.

pledged, “The South would be in no more danger in this respect, than it was in the days of Washington.”²² By selecting the nation’s founding as his point of reference rather than another historical period, Lincoln conveyed that his administration would respect the fundamental rights for which the Revolutionary generation fought. His comment established that the Southern states could continue to enjoy the same rights they did when they first decided to revolt against Great Britain and join the Union. Lincoln made such assurances based on his often-communicated premise that the federal government exercised its right to limit the expansion of slavery in the territories since before the Constitution.

In his 1861 Inaugural Address, Lincoln referenced historical memory to offer healing and reconciliation to the recently seceded states. The President intoned, “The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”²³ Without listing any specific Founder, Lincoln conjured up an inspiring image of not only the Revolutionary generation but also every subsequent generation that carried on the Founders’ work. For the new President, preservation of the Union remained paramount; Lincoln owed a responsibility to the Founders to preserve the Republic they had envisioned. While he extended a forgiving and

²² Ibid, 224.

²³ Ibid, 235.

compassionate offer for reunion, Lincoln also firmly established that he would not tolerate the unconstitutional act of secession. Speaking as a lawyer, the President plainly stated, “in legal contemplation, the Union is perpetual, confirmed by the history of the Union itself. The Union is much older than the Constitution.”²⁴ For Lincoln, the Union remained unbroken, and rebellious states needed to return to the flock. Secession threatened to destroy the Union not because the United States would lose a handful of states but because secession undermined the entire political authority of the U.S. If states could leave the Union at-will, then the United States would lose all political credibility with European powers. Foreign powers would not trade with a nation whose member states remained in flux. The dissolution of the Union would prove the Europeans despots correct, and the Founders’ republican experiment would collapse in failure. Lincoln would especially emphasize this fear during the outset of the war.

While Lincoln attempted to link the Republican platform with the Founders’ intent, Davis invoked the Revolutionary generation to decry Republican policies. Speaking on the floor of the Senate on February 29, 1860, Davis verbally attacked Senator William Seward of New York. Describing Seward, Davis stated, “He tells us this is a Government which we will learn is not merely a Government of the States, but a Government of each individual of the people of the United States; and he refers to that doctrine of coercion which the great mind of

²⁴ Ibid, 229.

Hamilton...said was a proposition not to provide for a union of the States, but for their destruction."²⁵ Davis alluded to a fundamental division between the Republican and Democratic ideologies. Republicans averred that the Constitution, based on a union of the American people, formed United States government. Democrats, however, insisted that both the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution formalized a compact between the American states, not independent American people. The latter assumption would later serve as the justification for secession. At the outset of the presidential campaign, however, Davis focused on undermining the Republican platform, not justifying secession. By juxtaposing Seward's political ideology with that of Hamilton, Davis accused the entire Republican Party of promulgating ideas that not only inspired disunion but also contradicted the Founders' philosophy.

After Lincoln's election as President, Davis integrated the Founders' memory into his justification for seceding from the very Union they had established. On January 20, 1861, one day before his farewell speech in the U.S. Senate, Davis wrote to Franklin Pierce to inform the former president that the senator would follow Mississippi as it departed the Union. Davis made clear that the Revolutionary generation remained heavily on his mind. He opened, "the hour is at hand which closes my connection with the United States, for the independence and Union of which my Father bled and in the service of which I have

²⁵ Davis, 168.

sought to emulate the example he set for my guidance.”²⁶ Davis invoked his familial connection to the blood of the Revolution at this critical political juncture. As Davis approached secession, he meditated on his intimate connection to America’s history and birth. He fervently loved the founding principles of the United States, but the current stewards had corrupted Union to the point it no longer resembled the Founders’ vision. As a son of the Revolution, Davis left the Union to safeguard the rights that the Revolutionary generation held dearest.

The same day, Davis wrote another letter, this one to his friend George W. Jones. The senator lamented, “I am sorry to be separated from many true friends at the North, whose inability to secure an observance of the Constitution does not diminish our gratitude to them for the efforts they have made.”²⁷ Davis made clear that a fear of losing Constitutional rights prompted Mississippi to secede. The state suspected that the Republicans’ anti-expansionist platform would quickly evolve into an abolitionist crusade. With growing population in the Northern states, soon the Northern, Republican agenda would dominate legislation. To safeguard their property rights in the form of slave labor, the future Confederate states elected to leave the Union and author their own constitution.

In his January 21 farewell speech, Davis professed that his once-beloved Union now betrayed the Founders’ legacy. Explaining Mississippi’s reason for seceding, Davis

²⁶ Ibid, 189.

²⁷ Ibid, 188.

declared, “It has been a conviction of pressing necessity, it has been a belief that we are to be deprived in the Union of the rights which our fathers bequeathed to us.”²⁸ The Founders broke from Great Britain to bestow freedom and liberty onto their posterity. According to Davis, the states had then entered into a national compact in order to secure that liberty. Now, however, the Union that was intended as a safeguard for the liberty of its states and citizens actually deprived them of their rights. Both for self-preservation and reverence for the Revolutionary generation’s sacrifices, Mississippi accepted that secession remained the only option. At his inauguration as provisional President of the Confederacy on February 18, 1861, Davis emphasized that in seceding, the Confederate states “merely asserted a right which the Declaration of Independence of 1776 had defined as inalienable.”²⁹ The new President understood secession as both an extreme measure and a fundamental right. Although Mississippi did not arrive at the decision lightly, once the state felt the Union no longer protected its rights, secession seemed like the natural progression of events.

Davis made clear that for Confederate states, secession represented a recapitulation of the Founders’ battle for liberty. On February 16, 1861, in Montgomery, Alabama, Davis preached, “if we must again baptise in blood the principles for which our fathers bled in the Revolution, we shall show that we are not degenerate sons, but will redeem the pledges they gave to preserve the sacred rights

²⁸ *Ibid*, 193.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 199.

transmitted to us, and show that Southern valor still shines as brightly as in the days of '76."³⁰ Davis offered both a call-to-action to the Confederate citizens and a warning to the loyal states. Even before the firing upon Ft. Sumter, Davis fortified the civilian population for a fight to defend the fabric of their society. For secessionists, only the Confederate government could preserve the sacred property rights for which the Founders fought. The survival of the Founders' vision rested on the shoulders of Confederates, who needed to prepare for a bloody struggle. Davis's bold statement also melded the assurance of Confederate victory with religious language. In Davis' mind, Providence had delivered triumph to the Revolutionary generation and would likewise reward Confederate devotion.

The proximity in time of Davis's February 1860 speech in the Senate and Lincoln's speech at the Cooper Institute reflected the intellectual battle raging over the legacy of the Founders. Both politicians internalized enormous responsibility to safeguard the republican principles for which the Revolutionary generation fought. For Lincoln, the destruction of the Union innately meant the betrayal of the Founders' legacy and American liberty; republicanism would collapse if the Union could not preserve political autonomy. For Davis, the Union had utterly failed to preserve the rights that the Revolutionary generation bought with blood; only by creating a new American republic could posterity enjoy the same liberty as the Founders. Both executives recognized that calling upon

³⁰ *Ibid*, 197.

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the Founders represented effective rhetorical strategies to persuade voters and civilians. As the political battle erupted into martial combat, Lincoln and Davis vigorously fought for the Founders' legacy.

The War Years

During a special session of Congress on Independence Day of 1861, Lincoln relayed his understanding of the rebellion's outbreak. The President praised the loyalty of the common soldier in the face of multiple officers who deserted the U.S. army for the Confederacy. He lauded, "they understand, without an argument, that destroying the government, which was made by Washington, means no good to them."³¹ Lincoln's admiration for the common soldiers also played into his larger understanding of the conflict itself. The President identified the United States government as Washington's creation to convey that the current government still maintained the values of the Founders. The soldiers who remained loyal inherited the mantle of the Continental Army. Lincoln suggested that their loyalty proved not only wise but brave. Lincoln rhetorically pursued not only the moral superiority of the Union but also a morale boost. By stating that the Confederates' rebellion "means no good to them," Lincoln implied that the secessionist movement would eventually disintegrate as the Confederate civilian population realized the folly of their actions.

³¹ Lincoln, 254.

In the same speech, Lincoln also sought to disprove secessionists' justifications for withdrawing from the Union. Secessionists asserted that, because the states had freely entered into a compact, they could just as easily leave it. Lincoln countered his opposition's political philosophy with references to the Declaration and the Constitution. When defining the Founder's intent for the Declaration, Lincoln stated, "the object plainly was not to declare their independence of one another, or of the Union; but directly the contrary, as their mutual pledge, and their mutual action, before, at the time, and afterwards, abundantly show."³² From the inception of the United States, the Founders understood that the Union did not mean a temporary association. With the ratification of the Constitution, the Founders solidified the perpetuity of the Union. Under the Constitution, "the States have their *status* IN the Union, and they have no other *legal status*. If they break from this, they can only do so against the law, and by revolution."³³ Lincoln did not equivocate. According to the nation's two foundational documents, states did not possess a right to secede. Given his presidential oath, Lincoln would not tolerate secession and open rebellion.

Following months of difficult fighting, Lincoln discarded any hopes of a quick victory. By August 1862, Lincoln had decided an Emancipation Proclamation would offer the Union a desperately needed strategic advantage. The commander-in-chief elected to withhold issuing a

³² Ibid, 249-250.

³³ Ibid, 250.

preliminary proclamation until the Union Army delivered an adequate military victory. Such an opportunity did not arise until the Battle of Antietam in September, but in the interim, Lincoln practiced a new rhetorical strategy that incorporated the Founders.

The President hoped that free black people would participate in a recolonization experiment. He also understood, however, that most members of the black community considered their home America, not Africa. On August 22, 1862, Lincoln met with several black leaders in the White House to discuss the feasibility of a black colony in South America. In an attempt to convince the men to agree to a colonization attempt, Lincoln narrated, “in the American Revolutionary war sacrifices were made by men engaged in it; but they were cheered by the future. Gen. Washington himself endured greater physical hardships than if he had remained a British subject. Yet he was a happy man, because he was engaged in benefiting his race.”³⁴ Lincoln offered a transgressive, unprecedented comparison. Even as he implored the black leaders to accept policies that removed them from American soil, Lincoln placed the freemen on the same plane as Washington. He invited African-Americans and former slaves to share in the legacy of the Founders, a legacy which had historically only included white Americans. Throughout his career, Lincoln proved a deft executor of rhetorical strategies that invoked the Revolutionary generation. As the Emancipation Proclamation lay in the back of his mind, Lincoln expanded

³⁴ Ibid, 267.

his rhetorical skills to previously undiscovered territory. By offering the black community a share in the Founders' legacy, Lincoln could then effectively invite them to join in the efforts to defeat the rebellion. As the Civil War tested the President's limits, Lincoln constantly adapted, deploying tested strategies in innovative ways.

As Davis accepted the executive office of the Confederacy, he repeatedly called upon the memory of the Revolutionary generation to justify the Confederacy's existence. In his Inaugural Address on February 22, 1862, Davis declared, "The experiment instituted by our revolutionary fathers, of a voluntary Union of sovereign States for purposes specified in a solemn compact, had been perverted by those who, feeling power and forgetting right, were determined to respect no law but their own will."³⁵ Under Davis' logic, not only did the Confederate states always possess the right to secede from the United States, but the Union they first agreed to join effectively no longer existed. Although the Confederate states chose to secede, the Republicans represented the true enemies of the American Union. Between the Republicans' interpretation of the Union as a compact between people rather than states and the party's clear platform condemning the expansion of slavery in the territories, Confederates could not fathom a world in which Republicans did not attempt to interfere with slavery laws within each state. Confederates could assuage any guilt about leaving the Union of their fathers, since the Republican administration allegedly threatened to corrupt

³⁵ Davis, 226.

the Union beyond recognition. Davis's reasoning allowed Confederates to end their association with the United States while maintaining a link between each other and their forefathers.

Davis emphasized that the immense strife the Confederacy currently faced mimicked the struggle of the Revolutionary generation, thereby giving new life to the cause of liberty. The Confederate President encouraged, "To show ourselves worthy of the inheritance bequeathed to us by the patriots of the Revolution, we must emulate that heroic devotion which made reverse to them but the crucible in which their patriotism was refined."³⁶ The trials the Founders faced produced a thriving republic dedicated to liberty and the respect of property rights. Although the United States had strayed from those principles, the Confederacy offered a beacon of hope that the Founders' vision still lived. Nearly a year into the war, Davis's Inaugural Address served as both an apology for the Confederacy as an institution and a galvanizer for a civilian population in the midst of a bloody war.

Throughout the war, Davis continued to paint the Confederate effort as the Revolution reincarnated. Addressing the Army of Tennessee on October 14, 1863, Davis lauded, "nobly have you redeemed the pledges given in the names of freedom to the memory of your ancestors and the rights of your posterity."³⁷ Just as the Revolution heavily focused on the impact on posterity, Confederates

³⁶ *Ibid*, 229.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 323.

gained pride knowing they fought to secure the right to own slaves for their descendants. Recalling the Founders also gave hope to the Confederates, since the former emerged victorious. The Continental Army under Washington offered the ideal example of a small nation rebelling against a formidable foe. Washington simply needed to keep his army extant and in the field, and eventually Britain relented due to the continuous drain on resources. The Confederacy relied on their resilience to break Union morale. Davis's hopeful and inspiring speeches galvanized his civilian population to continue the fight.

Conclusion

Rhetoric invoking the Revolutionary generation's legacy continued to mark each executive's public communication through the remainder of the war. As the fighting grew in intensity, each side became even more convinced that the Founders' legacy depended on their respective side's victory. Even after the war's conclusion, neither president could escape the ghosts of the Revolution. Davis continued to profess that the Founders supported state sovereignty into the 1880s.³⁸ In death, Lincoln stood immortalized on a bronze medallion as the Union's Martyr next to Washington, its Father.³⁹ Both before and during the war, Lincoln and Davis invoked the same individuals,

³⁸ Ibid, 433.

³⁹ Gary W. Gallagher, *The Union War* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2012), 139.

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documents, and generation to argue polar opposite philosophies. The rhetorical conflicts between the two presidents of the Civil War reflected the uniquely American nature of the war. Confronting a fundamental question of how to navigate through a paradoxical, nebulous political landscape, two nations made of one group of people battled physically and intellectually to claim the legacy of the Founding generation.

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