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BATTLE CRY OF FREEDOM

★ THE CIVIL WAR ERA ★

JAMES McPHERSON

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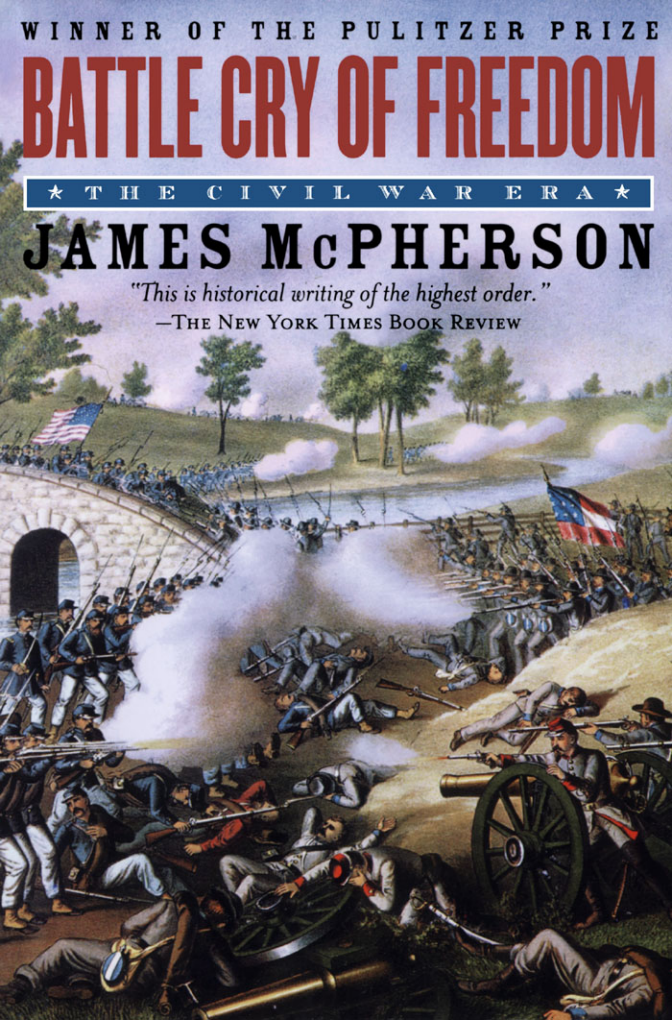

Battle Cry of Freedom

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BATTLE CRY OF FREEDOM

The Civil War Era

JAMES M. McPHERSON

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To Vann and Willie

and to the
memory of

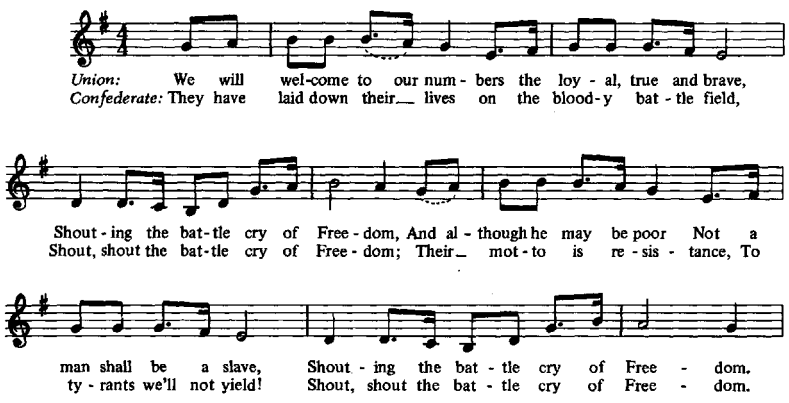
Glenn and Bill

Who introduced me to the world
of history and academia in the
good old days at Hopkins

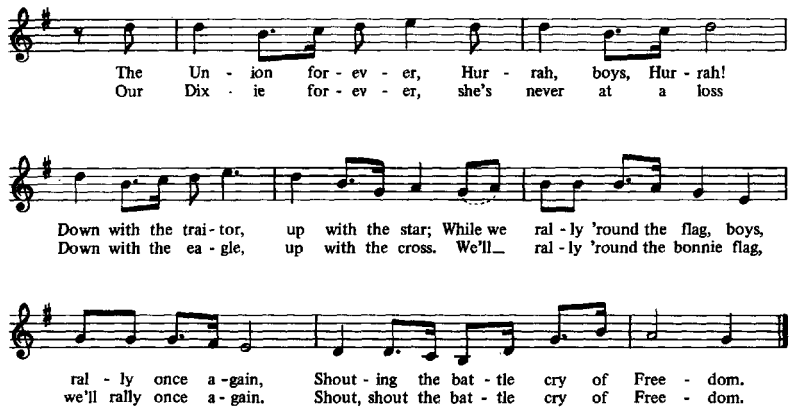
BATTLE CRY OF FREEDOM

The original words and music of this sprightly song were written in the summer of 1862 by George F. Root, one of the North's leading Civil War composers. So catchy was the tune that southern composer H. L. Schreiner and lyricist W. H. Barnes adapted it for the Confederacy. The different versions became popular on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line. Reproduced here are Verse 3 and the Chorus of each version.

VERSE 3



CHORUS



Preface

Both sides in the American Civil War professed to be fighting for freedom. The South, said Jefferson Davis in 1863, was "forced to take up arms to vindicate the political rights, the freedom, equality, and State sovereignty which were the heritage purchased by the blood of our revolutionary sires." But if the Confederacy succeeded in this endeavor, insisted Abraham Lincoln, it would destroy the Union "conceived in Liberty" by those revolutionary sires as "the last, best hope" for the preservation of republican freedoms in the world. "We must settle this question now," said Lincoln in 1861, "whether in a free government the minority have the right to break up the government whenever they choose."

Northern publicists ridiculed the Confederacy's claim to fight for freedom. "Their motto," declared poet and editor William Cullen Bryant, "is not liberty, but slavery." But the North did not at first fight to free the slaves. "I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with slavery in the States where it exists," said Lincoln early in the conflict. The Union Congress overwhelmingly endorsed this position in July 1861. Within a year, however, both Lincoln and Congress decided to make emancipation of slaves in Confederate states a Union war policy. By the time of the Gettysburg Address, in November 1863, the North was fighting for a "new birth of freedom" to transform the Constitution written by the founding fathers, under which the United States had become the

world's largest slaveholding country, into a charter of emancipation for a republic where, as the northern version of "The Battle Cry of Freedom" put it, "Not a man shall be a slave."

The multiple meanings of slavery and freedom, and how they dissolved and re-formed into new patterns in the crucible of war, constitute a central theme of this book. That same crucible fused the several states bound loosely in a federal *Union* under a weak central government into a new *Nation* forged by the fires of a war in which more Americans lost their lives than in all of the country's other wars combined.

Americans of the Civil War generation lived through an experience in which time and consciousness took on new dimensions. "These are fearfully critical, anxious days, in which the destinies of the continent for centuries will be decided," wrote one contemporary in a sentence typical of countless others that occur in Civil War diaries and letters. "The excitement of the war, & interest in its incidents, have absorbed everything else. We think and talk of nothing else," wrote Virginia's fire-eater Edmund Ruffin in August 1861, a remark echoed three days later by the Yankee sage Ralph Waldo Emerson: "The war . . . has assumed such huge proportions that it threatens to engulf us all—no preoccupation can exclude it, & no hermitage hide us." The conflict "crowded into a few years the emotions of a lifetime," wrote a northern civilian in 1865. After Gettysburg, General George Meade told his wife that during the past ten days "I have lived as much as in the last thirty years." From faraway London, where he served his father as a private secretary at the American legation, young Henry Adams wondered "whether any of us will ever be able to live contented in times of peace and laziness. Our generation has been stirred up from its lowest layers and there is that in its history which will stamp every member of it until we are all in our graves. We cannot be commonplace. . . . One does every day and without a second thought, what at another time would be the event of a year, perhaps of a life." In 1882 Samuel Clemens found that the Civil War remained at the center of southern consciousness: it was "what A.D. is elsewhere; they date from it." This was scarcely surprising, wrote Twain, for the war had "uprooted institutions that were centuries old . . . transformed the social life of half the country, and wrought so profoundly upon the entire national character that the influence cannot be measured short of two or three generations."

Five generations have passed, and that war is still with us. Hundreds of Civil War Round Tables and Lincoln Associations flourish today. Every year thousands of Americans dress up in blue or gray uniforms

and take up their replica Springfield muskets to re-enact Civil War battles. A half-dozen popular and professional history magazines continue to chronicle every conceivable aspect of the war. Hundreds of books about the conflict pour off the presses every year, adding to the more than 50,000 titles on the subject that make the Civil War by a large margin the most written-about event in American history. Some of these books—especially multi-volume series on the Civil War era—have achieved the status of classics: James Ford Rhodes's seven-volume *History of the United States* from the Compromise of 1850 to the Compromise of 1877; Allan Nevins's four-volume *Ordeal of the Union* from 1847 to 1861, and four more on *The War for the Union*; David M. Potter's 600-page study *The Impending Crisis 1848–1861*; Bruce Catton's three volumes on the Army of the Potomac (*Mr. Lincoln's Army*; *Glory Road*; and *A Stillness at Appomattox*), his three additional volumes, *The Centennial History of the Civil War*, plus two volumes on Ulysses S. Grant's Civil War career; Douglas Southall Freeman's magnificent four-volume biography *R.E. Lee* and his additional three-volume *Lee's Lieutenants*; and Shelby Foote's *The Civil War*, three engrossing volumes totaling nearly three thousand pages.

Alongside these monumental studies the present effort to compress the war and its causes into a single volume seems modest indeed. Nevertheless, I have tried to integrate the political and military events of this era with important social and economic developments to form a seamless web synthesizing up-to-date scholarship with my own research and interpretations. Except for Chapter 1, which traces the contours of American society and economy in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, I have chosen a narrative framework to tell my story and point its moral. This choice proceeds not only from the overall design of the *Oxford History* but also from my own convictions about how best to write the history of these years of successive crises, rapid changes, dramatic events, and dynamic transformations. A topical or thematic approach could not do justice to this dynamism, this complex relationship of cause and effect, this intensity of experience, especially during the four years of war when developments in several spheres occurred almost simultaneously and impinged on each other so powerfully and immediately as to give participants the sense of living a lifetime in a year.

As an example: the simultaneous Confederate invasions of Maryland and Kentucky in the late summer of 1862 occurred in the context of intense diplomatic activity leading toward possible European intervention in the war, of Lincoln's decision to issue an emancipation procla-

mation, of anti-black and anti-draft riots and martial law in the North, and of hopes by Peace Democrats to capture control of the Union Congress in the fall elections. Each of these events directly affected the others; none can be understood apart from the whole. A topical or thematic approach that treated military events, diplomacy, slavery and emancipation, anti-war dissent and civil liberties, and northern politics in separate chapters, instead of weaving them together as I have attempted to do here, would leave the reader uninformed about how and why the battle of Antietam was so crucial to the outcome of all these other developments.

The importance of Antietam and of several other battles in deciding "the destinies of the continent for centuries" also justifies the space given to military campaigns in this book. Most of the things that we consider important in this era of American history—the fate of slavery, the structure of society in both North and South, the direction of the American economy, the destiny of competing nationalisms in North and South, the definition of freedom, the very survival of the United States—rested on the shoulders of those weary men in blue and gray who fought it out during four years of ferocity unmatched in the Western world between the Napoleonic Wars and World War I.

The most pleasant task in writing a book is the expression of gratitude to people and institutions that have helped the author. The resources of the Firestone Library at Princeton University and of the Henry E. Huntington Library in San Marino, California, provided most of the research material on which this book is based. A year at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, where part of this book was written, supplemented an earlier sabbatical year at the Huntington to give me the time and opportunity for reading, research, and writing about the Civil War era. These two rich and rewarding years in California were financed in part by Princeton University, in part by fellowships funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, and in part by the Huntington Library and the Behavioral Sciences Center. To all of them I am especially indebted for the support that made the writing of *Battle Cry of Freedom* possible. To Gardner Lindzey, Margaret Amara, and the staff of the Behavioral Sciences Center who helped me gain access to the riches of the Stanford and Berkeley libraries I also express my appreciation. The staff of the Manuscripts Collection of the Library of Congress, and Richard Sommers as Archivist-Historian at the U.S. Army Military History Institute at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, extended me every courtesy and assistance dur-

ing research visits to these superb repositories. I also thank the staffs of the photographs and prints divisions at the libraries where I obtained photographs for the illustrations in this book. To Armstead Robinson I express belated thanks for permission to quote material from the manuscript of his forthcoming book *Bitter Fruits of Bondage.*

George Fredrickson read an early draft of this book and offered valuable suggestions for improvement, as did my colleague Allan Kulikoff who kindly read Chapters 1 and 20. Sheldon Meyer, Senior Vice President of Oxford University Press, has been in on the project from the beginning and has shepherded it through to conclusion with an expert helping hand. Managing Editor Leona Capeless at Oxford refined the manuscript with her careful editing and cheerful encouragement. To Vann Woodward I owe more than I can express. Teacher, friend, scholar, editor, he has guided my growth as an historian for nearly thirty years, offered the highest example of craftmanship, and done more than anyone else to bring this book to fruition. To Willie Lee Rose also I owe much as a friend and fellow graduate student at Johns Hopkins who did more than anyone else except Vann to introduce me to the mysteries of the guild.

Without the love and companionship of my wife Patricia this volume could never have come into existence. Not only did she help with some of the research and read early drafts with a sharp eye for confused or overblown rhetoric; she also joined me in the tiresome but essential task of correcting proofs, and suggested the title. Finally to Jenny, and to Dahlia and her friends, I express warm appreciation for helping me understand the potential as well as problems of Civil War cavalry.

Princeton J. M. M.
June 1987

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Maps

MAPS

Editor's Introduction

No period of American history makes greater demands on the historian than that of the Civil War. To meet this extraordinary challenge all the classic accounts have resorted to multivolume solutions. The one by Allan Nevins, for example, required eight large volumes, and another has used that many without attempting to be comprehensive. One of the remarkable aspects of the present achievement is that the author has been able to cover the period so completely and admirably within the covers of one volume. It is a large volume, to be sure, and will probably be the longest of the ten in *The Oxford History of the United States*. That it should, despite its size, cover the shortest period assigned calls for some comment on the part of the editor.

First, a look at the disparity between the length of the book and the brevity of the period. Precious little correlation exists between the importance, complexity, and abundance of historical events and the length of the time it takes for them to occur. Some history of momentous consequence requires centuries to unfold, while history of comparable importance can take place with staggering speed. Here we are clearly dealing with history of the latter type. In his Preface to this volume, James McPherson has spoken of the Civil War generation as having "lived through an experience in which time and consciousness took on new dimensions." These new dimensions have to be reckoned with by the historians recording the experience. If participants in that era had the experience of "living a lifetime in a year," historians can reasonably

demand more pages and chapters to do justice to such years. That also helps to explain why far more has been written about these particular years than any others in American history. The more written, the more disclosed, and the more questions and controversies to be coped with by latter-day historians.

Given the latitude granted in the matter of pages, is it not reasonable to expect a more complete treatment of all aspects and themes of the period? Normally so, yes. But again, this is hardly a normal period. What normality can be claimed for it consists largely of the continuation of familiar themes of American history: westward expansion and settlement, Indian removal and resistance, economic growth and development, the tides of European immigration, the back-and-forth of diplomatic exchange. None of these classic themes are missing from the Civil War period, and all get some attention in these pages, but they are necessarily subordinated to the dominant theme or integrated with it. It is hard to imagine a historian in his right mind pausing between the roar of Gettysburg and the fall of Vicksburg for a topical chapter on internal improvements or the westward movement. Like other historians engaged in writing the *Oxford History*, McPherson has made agreements with the authors of the previous and following volumes regarding responsibility for full treatment of overlapping themes.

Of the ten periods covered in this series there is not one when Americans were not involved in some war or other. Two of them are called world wars—three counting one in the eighteenth century. What then is to be said to justify the exceptional attention and space allotted to this particular war? There are numerous criteria at hand for rating the comparative magnitude of wars. Among them are the numbers of troops or ships committed, the years the conflict lasted, the amount of treasure spent, the numbers of objectives gained or lost, and so on. One simple and eloquent measurement is the numbers of casualties sustained. After describing the scene at nightfall on September 17, 1862, following the battle called Antietam in the North and Sharpsburg in the South, McPherson writes:

> The casualties at Antietam numbered four times the total suffered by American soldiers at the Normandy beaches on June 6, 1944. More than twice as many Americans lost their lives in one day at Sharpsburg as fell in combat in the War of 1812, the Mexican War, and the Spanish-American War *combined*.

And in the final reckoning, American lives lost in the Civil War exceed the total of those lost in all the other wars the country has fought added together, world wars included. Questions raised about the proportion of space devoted to military events of this period might be considered in the light of these facts.

C. Vann Woodward

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Battle Cry of Freedom

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Prologue
From the Halls of Montezuma

On the morning of September 14, 1847, brilliant sunshine burned off the haze in Mexico City. A mild breeze sprang up to blow away the smell of gunpowder lingering from the bloody battle of Chapultepec. Unshaven, mud-stained soldiers of the United States army in threadbare uniforms marched into the Plaza de Armas, formed a ragged line, and stood at weary attention as a shot-torn American flag rose over the ancient capital of the Aztecs. Civilians looked on in disappointed wonder. Were these tattered *gringoes* the men who had vanquished the splendid hosts of Santa Anna?

Martial music suddenly blared from a street entering the plaza. Jaunty dragoons with drawn sabers cantered into the square escorting a magnificent bay charger ridden by a tall general resplendent in full-dress uniform with gold epaulets and white-plumed chapeau. The Mexicans broke into involuntary applause. If they must endure the humiliation of conquest, they preferred their conquerors to look the part. As the band played *Yankee Doodle* and *Hail to the Chief,* General Winfield Scott dismounted and accepted formal surrender of the city. Cross-belted U.S. marines soon patrolled the Halls of Montezuma while at nearby Guadalupe Hidalgo the American envoy Nicholas Trist negotiated a treaty that enlarged the territory of the United States by nearly one-quarter and reduced that of Mexico by half. During the sixteen previous months, American forces under Generals Scott and Zachary Taylor had won ten major battles, most of them against larger Mexican armies defending

fortified positions. The Duke of Wellington had pronounced Scott's campaign against Mexico City the most brilliant in modern warfare.

But ironies and squabbles marred the triumphs. The war had been started by a Democratic president in the interest of territorial expansion and opposed by Whigs whose antiwar position helped them wrest control of the House in the congressional elections of 1846. Yet the two commanding generals in this victorious war were Whigs. Democratic President James K. Polk relieved Whig General Scott of command after Scott had ordered the court-martial of two Democratic generals who had inspired newspaper articles claiming credit for American victories. The president recalled his own envoy for appearing to be too soft toward the Mexicans; Trist ignored the recall and negotiated a treaty which obtained all of Mexico that Polk had hoped for originally but less than he now wanted. Polk nevertheless sent the treaty to the Senate, where a combination of Whigs who wanted no Mexican territory and Democrats who wanted more came within four votes of defeating it. The antiwar party nominated war hero Zachary Taylor for president in 1848 and won; the same party nominated war hero Winfield Scott for president four years later and lost. Congressmen from northern states tried to enact a proviso banning slavery from the territories acquired by a war in which two-thirds of the volunteer soldiers had come from slave states. General Taylor was a slaveholder but opposed the expansion of slavery when he became president. The discord generated by the Mexican War erupted fifteen years later in a far larger conflict whose foremost hero was elected president two decades after he, as Lieutenant Sam Grant, had helped win the decisive battle of Chapultepec in a war that he considered "one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation."[1]

The bickering Americans won the Mexican War because their adversaries were even more riven by faction. They won also because of the marksmanship and élan of their mixed divisions of regulars and volunteers and above all because of the professionalism and courage of their junior officers. Yet the competence of these men foreshadowed the ultimate irony of the Mexican War, for many of the best of them would fight against each other in the next war. Serving together on Scott's staff were two bright lieutenants, Pierre G. T. Beauregard and George B. McClellan. Captain Robert E. Lee's daring reconnaissances behind Mexican lines prepared the way for two crucial American victories. In

1. *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*, 2 vols. (New York, 1885), I, 53.

one of his reports Captain Lee commended Lieutenant Grant. The latter received official thanks for his role in the attack on Mexico City; these thanks were conveyed to him by Lieutenant John Pemberton, who sixteen years later would surrender to Grant at Vicksburg. Lieutenants James Longstreet and Winfield Scott Hancock fought side by side in the battle of Churubusco; sixteen years later Longstreet commanded the attack against Hancock's corps at Cemetery Ridge, an attack led by George Pickett, who doubtless recalled the day that he picked up the colors of the 8th Infantry in its assault on Chapultepec when Lieutenant Longstreet fell wounded while carrying these colors. Albert Sidney Johnston and Joseph Hooker fought together at Monterrey; Colonel Jefferson Davis's Mississippi volunteers broke a Mexican charge at Buena Vista while artillery officers George H. Thomas and Braxton Bragg fought alongside each other in this battle with the same spirit they would fight against each other as army commanders at a ridge a thousand miles away in Tennessee. Lee, Joseph E. Johnston, and George Gordon Meade served as Scott's engineer officers at the siege of Vera Cruz, while offshore in the American fleet Lieutenant Raphael Semmes shared a cabin with Lieutenant John Winslow, whose *U.S.S. Kearsarge* would sink Semmes's *C.S.S. Alabama* seventeen years later and five thousand miles away.

The Mexican War fulfilled for the United States its self-proclaimed manifest destiny to bestride the continent from sea to shining sea. But by midcentury the growing pains of this adolescent republic threatened to tear the country apart before it reached maturity.

1

The United States at Midcentury

I

The hallmark of the United States has been growth. Americans have typically defined this process in quantitative terms. Never was that more true than in the first half of the nineteenth century, when an unparalleled rate of growth took place in three dimensions: population, territory, and economy. In 1850, Zachary Taylor—the last president born before the Constitution—could look back on vast changes during his adult life. The population of the United States had doubled and then doubled again. Pushing relentlessly westward and southward, Americans had similarly quadrupled the size of their country by settling, conquering, annexing, or purchasing territory that had been occupied for millennia by Indians and claimed by France, Spain, Britain, and Mexico. During the same half-century the gross national product increased sevenfold. No other nation in that era could match even a single component of this explosive growth. The combination of all three made America the *Wunderkind* nation of the nineteenth century.

Regarded as "progress" by most Americans, this unrestrained growth had negative as well as positive consequences. For Indians it was a story of contraction rather than expansion, of decline from a vital culture toward dependence and apathy. The one-seventh of the population that was black also bore much of the burden of progress while reaping few of its benefits. Slave-grown crops sustained part of the era's economic growth and much of its territorial expansion. The cascade of cotton

from the American South dominated the world market, paced the industrial revolution in England and New England, and fastened the shackles of slavery more securely than ever on Afro-Americans.

Even for white Americans, economic growth did not necessarily mean unalloyed progress. Although per capita income doubled during the half-century, not all sectors of society shared equally in this abundance. While both rich and poor enjoyed rising incomes, their inequality of wealth widened significantly. As the population began to move from farm to city, farmers increasingly specialized in the production of crops for the market rather than for home consumption. The manufacture of cloth, clothing, leather goods, tools, and other products shifted from home to shop and from shop to factory. In the process many women experienced a change in roles from producers to consumers with a consequent transition in status. Some craftsmen suffered debasement of their skills as the division of labor and power-driven machinery eroded the traditional handicraft methods of production and transformed them from self-employed artisans to wage laborers. The resulting potential for class conflict threatened the social fabric of this brave new republic.

More dangerous was the specter of ethnic conflict. Except for a sprinkling of German farmers in Pennsylvania and in the valleys of the Appalachian piedmont, the American white population before 1830 was overwhelmingly British and Protestant in heritage. Cheap, abundant land and the need for labor in a growing economy, coupled with the pressure of population against limited resources in northern Europe, impelled first a trickle and then a flood of German and Irish immigrants to the United States in the generation after 1830. Most of these new Americans worshipped in Roman Catholic churches. Their growing presence filled some Protestant Americans with alarm. Numerous nativist organizations sprang up as the first line of resistance in what became a long and painful retreat toward acceptance of cultural pluralism.

The greatest danger to American survival at midcentury, however, was neither class tension nor ethnic division. Rather it was sectional conflict between North and South over the future of slavery. To many Americans, human bondage seemed incompatible with the founding ideals of the republic. If all men were created equal and endowed by the creator with certain inalienable rights including liberty and the pursuit of happiness, what could justify the enslavement of several millions of these men (and women)? The generation that fought the Revolution abolished slavery in states north of the Mason-Dixon line; the new states north of the Ohio River came into the Union without bondage. South

of those boundaries, however, slavery became essential to the region's economy and culture.

Meanwhile, a wave of Protestant revivals known as the Second Great Awakening swept the country during the first third of the nineteenth century. In New England, upstate New York, and those portions of the Old Northwest above the 41st parallel populated by the descendants of New England Yankees, this evangelical enthusiasm generated a host of moral and cultural reforms. The most dynamic and divisive of them was abolitionism. Heirs of the Puritan notion of collective accountability that made every man his brother's keeper, these Yankee reformers repudiated Calvinist predestination, preached the availability of redemption to anyone who truly sought it, urged converts to abjure sin, and worked for the elimination of sins from society. The most heinous social sin was slavery. All people were equal in God's sight; the souls of black folks were as valuable as those of whites; for one of God's children to enslave another was a violation of the Higher Law, even if it was sanctioned by the Constitution.

By midcentury this antislavery movement had gone into politics and had begun to polarize the country. Slaveholders did not consider themselves egregious sinners. And they managed to convince most nonslaveholding whites in the South (two-thirds of the white population there) that emancipation would produce economic ruin, social chaos, and racial war. Slavery was not the evil that Yankee fanatics portrayed; it was a positive good, the basis of prosperity, peace, and white supremacy, a necessity to prevent blacks from degenerating into barbarism, crime, and poverty.

The slavery issue would probably have caused an eventual showdown between North and South in any circumstances. But it was the country's sprawling growth that made the issue so explosive. Was the manifest destiny of those two million square miles west of the Mississippi River to be free or slave? Like King Solomon, Congress had tried in 1820 to solve that problem for the Louisiana Purchase by splitting it at the latitude of 36° 30′ (with slavery allowed in Missouri as an exception north of that line). But this only postponed the crisis. In 1850 Congress postponed it again with another compromise. By 1860 it could no longer be deferred. The country's territorial growth might have created a danger of dismemberment by centrifugal force in any event. But slavery brought this danger to a head at midcentury.

II

At the time of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 the United States was an insignificant nation on the European periphery. Its population was about the same as Ireland's. Thomas Jefferson thought that the empire for liberty he had bought from Napoleon was sufficient to absorb a hundred generations of America's population growth. By 1850, two generations later, Americans were not only filling up this empire but were spilling over into a new one on the Pacific coast. A few years after 1850 the United States surpassed Britain to become the most populous nation in the Western world save Russia and France. By 1860 the country contained nearly thirty-two million people, four million of them slaves. During the previous half-century the American population had grown four times faster than Europe's and six times the world average.[1]

Three factors explained this phenomenon: a birth rate half again as high as Europe's; a death rate slightly lower; and immigration. All three were linked to the relative abundance of the American economy. The ratio of land to people was much greater than in Europe, making food supply more plentiful and enabling couples to marry earlier and to have more children. Though epidemics frequently ravaged North America, they took a lesser toll in its largely rural environment than among Europe's denser population. The land/people ratio in the United States raised wages and offered opportunities that attracted five million immigrants during that half-century.

Although the United States remained predominantly rural in this period, the urban population (defined as those living in towns or cities with 2,500 or more people) grew three times faster than the rural population from 1810 to 1860, going from 6 percent to 20 percent of the total. This was the highest *rate* of urbanization in American history. During those same decades the percentage of the labor force engaged in non-agricultural pursuits grew from 21 to 45 percent.[2] Meanwhile the rate of natural increase of the American population, while remaining higher than Europe's, began to slow as parents, desiring to provide their children with more nurture and education, decided to have fewer of them. From 1800 to 1850 the American birth rate declined by 23 per-

1. Peter D. McClelland and Richard J. Zeckhauser, *Demographic Dimensions of the New Republic* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 87.
2. Stanley Lebergott, "Labor Force and Employment, 1800–1960," in Dorothy Brady, ed., *Output, Employment and Productivity in the U.S. after 1800*, Studies in Income and Wealth (Princeton, 1966), 119.

cent. The death rate also declined slightly—but probably no more than 5 percent.[3] Yet the population continued to grow at the same pace through the whole period—about 35 percent each decade—because rising immigration offset the decline of the birth rate. For the half-century as a whole, the margin of births over deaths caused three-quarters of the population increase while immigration accounted for the rest.[4]

Economic growth fueled these demographic changes. The population doubled every twenty-three years; the gross national product doubled every fifteen. Economic historians do not agree when this "intensive" rate of growth began, for the data to measure it are fragmentary before 1840. What remains clear is that until the early nineteenth century economic growth was "extensive"—virtually the same as population growth. At some point after the War of 1812—probably following recovery from the depression of 1819–23—the economy began to grow faster than the population, producing an estimated *per capita* increase of national output and income averaging 1.7 percent annually from 1820 to 1860.[5] The fastest rates of growth occurred in the 1830s and 1850s, interrupted by a major depression from 1837 to 1843 and a lesser one in 1857–58.

Although most Americans benefited from this rise of income, those at the top benefited more than those at the bottom. While average income rose 102 percent, real wages for workers increased by somewhere between 40 and 65 percent.[6] This widening disparity between rich and

3. An improved diet and standard of living, which should have lowered the death rate more than this, were partly offset by urbanization and immigration. Mortality rates were always higher in cities before the twentieth century, and many immigrants suffered an initially higher death rate as they entered a new disease environment. Large numbers of Irish immigrants arrived with lowered resistance because of malnutrition; they also crowded into the poorest districts of cities.
4. McClelland and Zeckhauser, *Demographic Dimensions*, 101, 108–9; Robert V. Wells, *Revolutions in Americans' Lives: A Demographic Perspective on the History of Americans, Their Families, and Their Society* (Westport, Conn., 1982), 92–104.
5. For a summary of recent research on this question, see Susan Lee and Peter Passell, *A New Economic View of American History* (New York, 1979), 52–62; Robert E. Gallman, "Economic Growth," in Glenn Porter, ed., *Encyclopedia of American Economic History*, 3 vols. (New York, 1980), 133–50; and Stanley L. Engerman and Robert E. Gallman, "U.S. Economic Growth, 1783–1860," *Research in Economic History*, 8 (1983), 1–46.
6. This is the range of estimates contained in three studies of the subject, all of them based on fragmentary data: Alvin H. Hansen, "Factors Affecting the Trend of Real Wages," *American Economic Review*, 15 (1925), 27–41; Donald R. Adams, Jr.,

poor appears to have characterized most capitalist economies during their early decades of intensive growth and industrialization. American workers probably fared better in this respect than those of most European countries. Indeed, a debate still rages over whether British workers suffered an *absolute decline* of real wages during the first half-century of the industrial revolution.[7]

Improved transportation was a prerequisite of economic development in a country as large as the United States. Before 1815 the only cost-efficient means of carrying freight long distances were sailing ships and downriver flatboats. Most American roads were rutted dirt paths all but impassable in wet weather. The cost of transporting a ton of goods thirty miles inland from an American port equalled the cost of carrying the same goods across the Atlantic. To travel from Cincinnati to New York took a minimum of three weeks; the only feasible way to ship freight between the same two cities was down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers to New Orleans and then by salt water along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts—a trip of at least seven weeks. It is not surprising, therefore, that America's transatlantic trade exceeded internal commerce, that most manufactured goods purchased in the United States came from Britain, that artisans sold mainly custom goods in local markets, that farmers living more than a short distance from navigable water consumed most of what they raised—and that the economy grew little if any faster than population.

All this changed after 1815 as a result of what historians, without exaggeration, have called a transportation revolution. Private companies, states, even the national government financed the construction of all-weather macadamized roads. More important, New York state pioneered the canal era by building the Erie Canal from Albany to Buffalo, linking New York City to the Northwest by water and setting off a frenzy of construction that produced 3,700 miles of canals by 1850.

"Prices and Wages," in Porter, ed., *Encyclopedia of American Economic History*, 229–46, which summarizes all relevant research up to the time of its writing; and Donald R. Adams, Jr., "The Standard of Living During American Industrialization: Evidence from the Brandywine Region, 1800–1860," *Journal of Economic History*, 42 (1982), 903–17.

7. For a summary of that debate for Britain and other countries, see John Komlos, "Stature and Nutrition in the Habsburg Monarchy: The Standard of Living and Economic Development in the Eighteenth Century," *AHR*, 90 (1985), 1149–51. See also Donald R. Adams, Jr., "Some Evidence on English and American Wage Rates, 1790–1830," *Journal of Economic History*, 30 (1970), 499–520.

During those same years, steamboats made Robert Fulton's dream come true by churning their way along every navigable river from Bangor to St. Joseph. The romance and economic importance of steamboats were eclipsed in both respects by the iron horse in the 1850s. The 9,000 miles of rail in the United States by 1850 led the world, but paled in comparison with the 21,000 additional miles laid during the next decade, which gave to the United States in 1860 a larger rail network than in the rest of the world combined. Iron ribbons breached the Appalachians and bridged the Mississippi. An even newer invention, the telegraph, sent instant messages along copper wires and leaped beyond the railheads to span the continent by 1861.

These marvels profoundly altered American life. They halved overland transport costs by road to 15 cents a ton-mile. But roads soon became unimportant except for short hauls and local travel. Canal rates dropped to less than one cent a ton-mile, river rates even lower, and rail charges to less than three cents by 1860. Despite higher rates, the railroad's greater speed and dependability (most canals froze in winter; rivers became unnavigable in low water or floods) gave it an edge. Towns bypassed by the tracks shriveled; those located on the iron boomed, especially if they also enjoyed water transport. Springing from the prairie shores of Lake Michigan, Chicago became the terminus for fifteen rail lines by 1860, its population having grown by 375 percent during the previous decade. Racing at breakneck speeds of thirty miles an hour, the iron horse cut travel time between New York and Chicago from three weeks to two days. Train wrecks soon exceeded steamboat explosions as a prime cause of accidental death. But together these modes of transport reduced the shipment time of freight between, for example, Cincinnati and New York from fifty days to five. Cincinnati became the meatpacking capital of the United States. The difference between the wholesale price of western pork in Cincinnati and New York declined from $9.53 to $1.18 a barrel; the difference in the wholesale price of western flour between the same two cities dropped from $2.48 to 28 cents.

The telegraph provided instant quotations on these and other price changes all over the country. Along with the railroad and with technological innovations in printing and paper-making, the telegraph vastly increased the influence of newspapers, the country's principal medium of communication. The price of a single issue dropped from six cents in 1830 to one or two cents by 1850. Circulation increased twice as fast as population. The "latest news" became hours rather than days old.

Fast trains carried weekly editions of metropolitan newspapers (like Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*) to farmers a thousand miles away, where they shaped political sentiments. In 1848 several major newspapers pooled resources to form the Associated Press for the handling of telegraphic dispatches.[8]

The transportation revolution refashioned the economy. As late as 1815, Americans produced on their farms or in their homes most of the things they consumed, used, or wore. Most clothing was sewn by mothers and daughters, made from cloth that in many cases they had spun and woven themselves by the light of candles they had dipped or by natural light coming through windows in houses built of local materials from a nearby sawmill or brickyard by local carpenters or masons or by the male members of the household. Shoes were made by members of the family or by the village cordwainer from leather cured at a local tannery. Blacksmiths forged the tools and farm implements used in the community. Even firearms were built with handicraft skill and pride by a nearby craftsman. In larger towns and cities, master tailors or shoemakers or cabinetmakers or wheelwrights presided over small shops where they worked with a few journeymen and an apprentice or two who turned out fine custom or "bespoke" goods for wealthier purchasers. In an age of slow and expensive overland transport, few of these items were sold more than twenty miles from where they were made.

This pre-industrial world could not survive the transportation revolution, which made possible a division of labor and specialization of production for ever larger and more distant markets. More and more farmers specialized in crops for which their soil and climate were most suitable. With the cash from sale of these crops they bought food and clothing and hardware previously made locally or by themselves but now grown, processed, or manufactured elsewhere and shipped in by canal or rail. To sow and reap these specialized crops, farmers bought newly invented seed drills, cultivators, mowers, and reapers that a burgeoning farm machinery industry turned out in ever-increasing numbers.

In towns and cities, entrepreneurs who became known as "merchant capitalists" or "industrialists" reorganized and standardized the production of a variety of goods for large-volume sale in regional and eventually national markets. Some of these new entrepreneurs came from the

8. An enormous literature has grown up to describe and analyze these changes in transportation and communications; perhaps the most vivid account remains George Rogers Taylor, *The Transportation Revolution, 1815–1860* (New York, 1951).

ranks of master craftsmen who now planned and directed the work of employees to whom they paid wages by the day or by the piece instead of sharing with them the work of fabricating a product and the proceeds of its sale. Other merchant capitalists and industrialists had little or no prior connection with the "trade" (shoemaking, tailoring, etc.). They were businessmen who provided capital and organizing skills to restructure an enterprise in a more efficient manner. This restructuring took various forms, but had one dominant feature in common: the process of making a product (shoes or furniture, for example), which had previously been performed by one or a few skilled craftsmen, was broken down into numerous steps each requiring limited skills and performed by a separate worker. Sometimes the worker did his task with hand tools, but increasingly with the aid of power-driven machinery.

Highly mechanized industries like textiles went early to the factory system, where all operations were housed under one roof with a single source of power (usually water, sometimes steam) to drive the machines. This system enabled the New England textile industry to increase its annual output of cotton cloth from 4 million yards in 1817 to 308 million in 1837. In less mechanized enterprises like garment-sewing, operations took place in smaller shops with part of the process being "put out" to semiskilled workers—often women and children—in their homes and returned to the shop for finishing. This remained true even after the invention in the 1840s of the sewing machine, which could be operated in the home as well as in a factory.

Whatever the precise mixture of power machinery and hand tools, of central shop and putting out, the main characteristics of this new mode of production were division and specialization of labor, standardization of product, greater discipline of the labor force, improved efficiency, higher volume, and lower costs. These factors reduced wholesale commodity prices by 45 percent from 1815 to 1860. During the same years consumer prices declined even more, by an estimated 50 percent.[9]

By 1860 the nascent outline of the modern American economy of mass consumption, mass production, and capital-intensive agriculture

9. Adams, "Prices and Wages," in Porter, ed., *Encyclopedia of American Economic History*, 234. The choice of 1815 as a base year for measurement distorts the picture somewhat, for prices in that year were still inflated from the War of 1812. Even if one chooses the depression year of 1819, however, the decline of wholesale and consumer prices over the next 40 years was an impressive 24 and 41 percent respectively.

was visible. Its development had been uneven across different regions and industries. It was far from complete even in the most advanced sections of the country like New England, where many village blacksmiths and old-time shoemakers could still be found. On the frontier west of the Mississippi and on many internal frontiers in the older sections where the transportation revolution had not yet penetrated—the upland and piney woods regions of the South, for example, or the forests of Maine and the Adirondacks—it had scarcely begun. Many Americans still lived in a nearly self-sufficient handicraft, premarket economy not much different from what their grandparents had known. But the more advanced sectors of the economy had already given the United States the world's highest standard of living and the second-highest industrial output, closing in fast on their British cousins despite the latter's half-century head start in the industrial revolution.[10]

Those cousins had begun to sit up and take notice. The victory of *America* over fourteen British yachts in the 1851 race of the Royal Yacht Squadron shocked the world's leading maritime power. The race occurred during the international industrial exhibition at the Crystal Palace in London, where the products of American industry evoked great curiosity. It was not so much the quality of American muskets, reapers, locks, and revolvers that impressed Britons, but the way in which they had been produced by machine-made interchangeable parts. The concept of interchangeability was not new in 1851. Nor was it exclusively American. The French arms industry had pioneered interchangeable parts for muskets as early as the 1780s. But most of those parts had been fashioned by skilled craftsmen working with hand tools. Their interchangeability was at best approximate. What was new to European observers in 1851 was the American technique of making each part by a special-purpose machine, which could reproduce an endless number of similar parts within finer tolerances than the most skilled of craftsmen could achieve. The British named this process "the American system of manufactures," and so it has been known ever since.[11]

The interchangeability of parts fabricated by this "system" was often

10. Edgar Winfield Martin, *The Standard of Living in 1860: American Consumption on the Eve of the Civil War* (Chicago, 1942), 400–401.

11. The best studies of the origins of the American system of manufacturers are Nathan Rosenberg, ed., *The American System of Manufactures* (Edinburgh, 1969); David A. Hounshell, *From the American System to Mass Production 1800–1932* (Baltimore, 1984); and Otto Mayr and Robert C. Post, eds., *Yankee Enterprise: The Rise of the American System of Manufactures* (Washington, 1981).

less than advertised. Hand-filing was sometimes necessary to attain an exact fit. Precision machines and gauges with tolerances within a thousandth of an inch came a generation or two later. Nevertheless, a test of ten randomly selected muskets each made in a separate year from 1844 to 1853 at the Springfield (Massachusetts) armory convinced British skeptics. A workman disassembled the parts, jumbled them in a box, and reassembled ten muskets flawlessly.

It was no coincidence that interchangeability was first perfected in small-arms manufacture. In wartime an army needs a large number of weapons in a hurry and must be able to replace damaged parts in an equal hurry. The U.S. government armories at Springfield and Harper's Ferry had gradually developed the process during the generation before 1850. The British imported American machinery to establish the Enfield Armoury during the Crimean War. Samuel Colt also set up a revolver factory in London stocked with machinery from Connecticut. These events symbolized a transfer of world leadership in the machine-tool industry from Britain to the United States.

During the 1850s, delegations of British industrialists visiting America sent back reports on a wide variety of products manufactured by special-purpose machines: clocks and watches, furniture and a host of other wood products, nails and screws, nuts and bolts, railroad spikes, locks, plows, and so on. "There is nothing that cannot be produced by machinery," Samuel Colt told a committee of Parliament in 1854—and by then the British were ready to believe him.[12]

The principles of mass production in America extended to what seemed unlikely practices: for example, the building of houses. This was the era in which "balloon-frame" construction was invented. Today at least three-quarters of American houses are built this way. Before the 1830s, however, houses were generally built in one of three ways: of logs rough-hewn by axes; of brick or stone; or of heavy timbers shaped by carpenters and joined by mortoise and tenon fastened with wooden pegs. The first was cheap but drafty and hardly satisfactory for a growing middle class of rising affluence; the latter two were solid but expensive and slow to build, requiring skilled masons or carpenters who were in short supply in overnight cities, like Chicago, that required a great deal of housing in a hurry. To meet these needs the first balloon-frame buildings appeared during the 1830s in Chicago and in Rochester, a boom town on

12. Eugene S. Ferguson, "Technology as Knowledge," in Edwin T. Layton, Jr., ed., *Technology and Social Change in America* (New York, 1973), 23.

the Erie Canal. These houses were constructed with the now familiar combination of machine-sawed boards fastened together with factory-produced nails to form the skeleton of a frame house. Machine-sawed siding and shingles and factory-made doors and window parts filled in the frame. Skeptics scoffed that these "balloon frames" would blow away in the first high wind. But in fact they were remarkably strong, for the boards were nailed together in such a way that every strain went against the grain of the wood. These houses could be put up in a fraction of the time and at a fraction of the cost of houses built by traditional methods. So successful was this "Chicago construction" that it spread quickly to every part of the country.[13]

Balloon-frame houses illustrated four of the factors cited then and later to explain the emergence of the American system of manufactures. The first was what economists call demand and what social historians might call a democracy of consumption: the need or desire of a growing and mobile population for a variety of ready-made consumer goods at reasonable prices. Considering themselves members of the "middling classes," most Americans in the 1850s were willing and able to buy ready-made shoes, furniture, men's clothing, watches, rifles, even houses. If these products lacked the quality, finish, distinction, and durability of fine items made by craftsmen, they were nevertheless functional and affordable. A new institution, the "department store," sprang up to market the wares of mass production to a mass public. European visitors who commented (not always favorably) on the relationship between a political system of universal (white) manhood suffrage and a socioeconomic system of standardized consumption were right on the mark. Grinding poverty and luxurious wealth were by no means absent from the United States, but what impressed most observers was the broad middle.

Another factor that gave rise to the American system was the shortage and consequent high cost of labor. A deficiency of skilled carpenters, for example, spawned the balloon-frame house. "The labouring classes are comparatively few," reported a British industrial commission that visited the United States in 1854, "and to this very want . . . may be attributed the extraordinary ingenuity displayed in many of these labour-saving machines, whose automatic action so completely supplies the place of the more abundant hand labour of the older manufacturing

13. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The National Experience* (New York, 1965), 148–52.

countries." Europeans found surprisingly little opposition to mechanization among American workers. With labor scarce in the first place, new machines instead of displacing workers, as they often did elsewhere, tended rather to multiply each worker's productivity. American "workmen hail with satisfaction all mechanical improvements," reported a British industrialist (with exaggeration), "the importance and value of which, as releasing them from the drudgery of unskilled labour, they are enabled by education to understand and appreciate."[14]

While not rejecting this labor-scarcity thesis, some historians emphasize a third reason for the capital-intensive nature of the American system—the high resource endowment of the United States. Resources are a form of capital; three outstanding examples in this period were land, wood, and abundant water-power sites especially in New England. The high ratio of land to people encouraged a form of agriculture that would have been wasteful elsewhere but made economic sense in the United States, where the use of machinery achieved a modest yield per acre but a high yield per man-hour of labor. Wood was as plentiful in America as it was scarce in Europe; consequently it had a myriad uses in the new world—fuel for steamboats and locomotives, lumber for houses, frames and parts for machines, and so on. American machine tools were developed first in woodworking industries, where they shaped almost anything made of wood: furniture, musket stocks, axe handles, wheel spokes, doors, and hundreds of other items. Machined products were far more wasteful of wood than handcrafted items, but economically rational where wood was cheap and labor expensive. The American lead in woodworking machines laid the groundwork for an emerging superiority in metalworking machines after 1850. Fast-flowing streams provided a cheap source of energy for American mills that enabled water to retain its status as the principal source of industrial power in the United States until 1870.[15]

A fourth reason offered by British observers to explain American economic efficiency was an educational system that had produced wide-

14. Quotations from H. J. Habbakuk, *American and British Technology in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1967), 6–7, and Douglass C. North, *The Economic Growth of the United States 1790–1860* (Englewood Cliffs, 1961), 173.

15. Paul A. David, *Technical Choice, Innovation and Economic Growth: Essays on American and British Experience in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1975), 87–90; Rosenbereg, ed., *American System*, 58–59; Dolores Greenberg, "Reassessing the Power Patterns of the Industrial Revolution: An Anglo-American Comparison," *AHR*, 87 (1982), 1237–61.

spread literacy and "adaptative versatility" among American workers. By contrast a British workman trained by long apprenticeship "in the trade" rather than in schools lacked "the ductility of mind and the readiness of apprehension for a new thing" and was "unwilling to change the methods which he has been used to," according to an English manufacturer. The craft apprenticeship system was breaking down in the United States, where most children in the Northeast went to school until age fourteen or fifteen. "Educated up to a far higher standard than those of a much superior social grade in the Old World . . . every [American] workman seems to be continually devising some new thing to assist him in his work, and there is a strong desire . . . to be 'posted up' in every new improvement."[16]

This was perhaps putting it a bit strongly. But many American technological innovations were indeed contributed by workers themselves. Elias Howe, a journeyman machinist in Boston who invented a sewing machine, was one of many examples. This was what contemporaries meant when they spoke of Yankee ingenuity. They used "Yankee" in all three senses of the word: Americans; residents of northern states in particular; and New Englanders especially. Of 143 important inventions patented in the United States from 1790 to 1860, 93 percent came out of the free states and nearly half from New England alone—more than twice that region's proportion of the free population. Much of the machine-tool industry and most of the factories with the most advanced forms of the American system of manufactures were located in New England. An Argentine visitor to the United States in 1847 reported that New England migrants to other regions had carried "to the rest of the Union the . . . moral and intellectual aptitude [and] . . . manual aptitude which makes an American a walking workshop. . . . The great colonial and railroad enterprises, the banks, and the corporations are founded and developed by them."[17]

The connection made by British observers between Yankee "adaptative versatility" and education was accurate. New England led the world in educational facilities and literacy at midcentury. More than 95 per-

16. Rosenberg, ed., *American System*, 203; John E. Sawyer, "The Social Basis of the American System of Manufacturing," *Journal of Economic History*, 14 (1954), 377–78.

17. Roger Burlingame, *March of the Iron Men: A Social History of Union Through Invention* (New York, 1938), 469–76; Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, *Sarmiento's Travels in the United States in 1847*, trans. Michael A. Rockland (Princeton, 1970), 198.

cent of its adults could read and write; three-fourths of the children aged five to nineteen were enrolled in school, which they attended for an average of six months a year. The rest of the North was not far behind. The South lagged with only 80 percent of its white population literate and one-third of the white children enrolled in school for an average of three months a year. The slaves, of course, did not attend school and only about one-tenth of them could read and write. Even counting the slaves, nearly four-fifths of the American population was literate in the 1850s, compared with two-thirds in Britain and northwest Europe and one-fourth in southern and eastern Europe. Counting only the free population, the literacy rate of 90 percent in the United States was equaled only by Sweden and Denmark.[18]

The rise of schooling in these countries since the seventeenth century had grown out of the Protestant Reformation. The priesthood of all believers needed to know how to read and understand God's word. In the nineteenth century, religion continued to play an important role in American education. Most colleges and many secondary schools were supported by church denominations. Even the public schools still reflected their Protestant auspices. Since 1830 a rapid expansion and rationalization of the public school system had spread westward and southward from New England—though it had not yet penetrated very far below the Ohio. As secretary of the Massachusetts State Board of Education and a tireless publicist, Horace Mann presided over reforms which included the establishment of normal schools to train teachers, the introduction of standardized graded curricula, the evolution of various kinds of rural district schools and urban charity schools into a public school *system*, and extension of public education to the secondary level.

An important purpose of these schools remained the inculcation of Protestant ethic values "of regularity, punctuality, constancy and industry" by "moral and religious instruction daily given," according to the Massachusetts superintendent of schools in 1857. These values, along

18. Albert Fishlow, "The Common School Revival: Fact or Fancy?" in Henry Rosovsky, ed., *Industrialization in Two Systems* (New York, 1966), 40–67; *A Compendium of the Seventh Census of the United States* (Washington, 1854), 141–51; Carlo M. Cippolla, *Literacy and Development in the West* (Harmondsworth, Eng., 1969); Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schooling and American Society, 1780–1860* (New York, 1983), 13–74; Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens, *The Rise of Literacy and the Common School in the United States: A Socioeconomic Analysis to 1870* (Chicago, 1981), 89–142.

with cognitive skills and knowledge, also served the needs of a growing capitalist economy. Schools were "the grand agent for the development or augmentation of national resources," wrote Horace Mann in 1848, "more powerful in the production and gainful employment of the total wealth of a country than all the other things mentioned in the books of the political economists."[19] Textile magnate Abbott Lawrence advised a Virginia friend who wanted his state to emulate New England's industrial progress that "you cannot expect to develop your resources without a general system of popular education; it is the lever to all permanent improvement." "Intelligent laborers," added another Yankee businessman in 1853 as if in echo of British visitors, "can add much more to the capital employed in a business than those who are ignorant."[20]

III

Recent scholarship has challenged the observations quoted earlier that American workers readily embraced the new industrial order.[21] Skilled artisans in particular appear to have resisted certain features of capitalist development. They formed trade unions and workingmen's parties which attained considerable strength in the 1830s, when tensions caused by the transition from a localized craft economy to an expanding capitalism were most acute. Disputes about wages and control of the work process

19. Michael B. Katz, *The Irony of Early School Reform: Educational Innovation in Mid-Nineteenth Century Massachusetts* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), 43; Horace Mann, "Annual Report of 1848," in *The Life and Works of Horace Mann*, 5 vols. (Boston, 1891), IV, 245–51.

20. Abbott Lawrence, *Letters to William C. Rives of Virginia* (Boston, 1846), 6; Arthur A. Ekirch, *The Idea of Progress in America, 1815–1860* (New York, 1944), 197.

21. This and the following paragraphs have drawn on some of the numerous studies of the antebellum working class that have appeared in recent years, including Alan Dawley, *Class and Community: The Industrial Revolution in Lynn* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976); Anthony F. C. Wallace, *Rockdale: The Growth of an American Village in the Early Industrial Revolution* (New York, 1978); Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826–1860* (New York, 1979); Jonathan Prude, *The Coming of Industrial Order: Town and Factory Life in Rural Massachusetts, 1810–1860* (Cambridge, 1983); Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* (New York, 1984); Walter Licht, *Working for the Railroad: The Organization of Work in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 1983); Steven J. Ross, *Workers on the Edge: Work, Leisure, and Politics in Industrializing Cincinnati, 1788–1890* (New York, 1985); Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* (New York, 1986).

provoked strikes and other forms of conflict. Worker activism declined after 1837 as the depression generated unemployment which drew the fangs of militancy. After recovery from the depression, vastly increased immigration intensified ethnic and religious divisions within the working class. Nativism, temperance, and the growing sectional conflict took precedence over the economic issues that had prevailed in the 1830s. Nevertheless, frictions persisted in the workplace and occasionally erupted, as in the Massachusetts shoemakers' strike of 1860.

Technological innovation was not the main cause of worker unrest. To be sure, machines displaced some craftsmen or downgraded their skills. But most machines during this era executed simple repetitive motions previously performed by unskilled or semiskilled workers. And even when more complex machine tools replaced some artisans, they expanded other categories of highly skilled workers—machinists, tool-and-die makers, millwrights, civil and mechanical engineers—whose numbers doubled during the 1850s.[22] The transportation and communications revolutions created whole new occupations, some of them skilled and well paid—steamboat pilots, railroad men, telegraphers. The latter two categories increased fivefold in the 1850s. The rapid westward expansion of the urban frontier, the extraordinary mobility of the American population, and regional differentials in the pace of technological development meant that skilled workers who were displaced by new technology in one part of the country could go west and find a job. European observers who contrasted workers' resistance to innovation in their own countries with workers' receptivity toward change in the United States were not off the mark.

Nor was declining income the principal cause of worker unrest in the United States. Despite bursts of inflation in the mid-1830s and mid-1850s, and periods of unemployment caused by depressions, the long-term trend of real wages was upward. Of course people live in the short run, and the average worker trying to make ends meet during economic downturns in, say, 1841 or 1857 lacked the mollifying perspective of an historian. Moreover, the wages of male artisans in certain occupations suffered erosion when the introduction of new methods or new machines enabled employers to hire "green hands" or "slop workers," often women and children, to perform separate parts of a sequential process previously done entirely by skilled workers. It was no coincidence that

22. Calculated from the occupational lists in the 1850 and 1860 censuses.

much of the unrest occurred in specific trades experiencing this deskilling process: shoemakers, tailors, weavers, cabinetmakers, printers.

Then, too, despite the generally rising trend of real wages, workers at the bottom of the scale, especially women, children, and recent immigrants, labored long hours in sweatshops or airless factories for a pittance. They could make a living only if other members of their families also worked. For some of these laborers, however, the pennies they earned as domestic servants or factory hands or stevedores or seamstresses or hod-carriers or construction workers represented an improvement over the famine conditions they had left in Ireland. Nevertheless, poverty was widespread and becoming more so among laborers in large cities with a substantial immigrant population. New York packed an immense populace of the poor into noisome tenements, giving the city a death rate nearly twice as high as London.[23]

Although the working poor of New York would explode into the worst riot of American history in 1863, these people did not provide the cutting edge of labor protest in the antebellum era. It was not so much the level of wages as the very concept of wages itself that fueled much of this protest. Wage labor was a form of dependency that seemed to contradict the republican principles on which the country had been founded. The core of republicanism was liberty, a precious but precarious birthright constantly threatened by corrupt manipulations of power. The philosopher of republicanism, Thomas Jefferson, had defined the essence of liberty as independence, which required the ownership of productive property. A man dependent on others for a living could never be truly free, nor could a dependent class constitute the basis of a republican government. Women, children, and slaves were dependent; that defined them *out* of the polity of republican freemen. Wage laborers were also dependent; that was why Jefferson feared the development of industrial capitalism with its need for wage laborers. Jefferson envisaged an ideal America of farmers and artisan producers who owned their means of production and depended on no man for a living.

But the American economy did not develop that way. Instead, skilled craftsmen who owned their tools and sold the products of their labor for a "just price" found themselves gradually drawn into a relationship where they sold their labor. Instead of working for themselves, they worked for someone else. Instead of earning a just price for their skill, they earned

23. Martin, *Standard of living in 1860*, 174.

wages whose amount was determined not by the intrinsic value of their labor but by what an increasingly distant "market" would bear. No longer were "master" and "journeyman" bound together by the commonality of their trade and by the journeyman's expectation of becoming a master himself. More and more they were separated into "employer" and "employee," with different and sometimes conflicting interests. The employer wanted to maximize profits, which meant improving the efficiency and controlling the costs of production, including wages. The employee became dependent on the "boss" not only for wages but also for the means of production—machines that the worker himself could no longer hope to own. The emergence of industrial capitalism from 1815 to 1860 thus began to forge a new system of class relations between capitalists who owned the means of production and workers who owned only their labor power. Journeymen artisans who experienced this process did not like it. They and their spokesmen offered a sharp critique of emerging capitalism.

Capitalism was incompatible with republicanism, they insisted. Dependence on wages robbed a man of his independence and therefore of his liberty. Wage labor was no better than slave labor—hence "wage slavery." The boss was like a slaveowner. He determined the hours of toil, the pace of work, the division of labor, the level of wages; he could hire and fire at will. The pre-industrial artisan had been accustomed to laboring as much or as little as he pleased. He worked by the job, not by the clock. If he felt like taking time off for a drink or two with friends, he did so. But in the new regimen all laborers worked in lockstep; the system turned them into machines; they became slaves to the clock. Manufacturers encouraged the temperance movement that gathered force after 1830 because its Protestant ethic virtues of sobriety, punctuality, reliability, and thrift were precisely the values needed by disciplined workers in the new order. Some employers banned drinking on the job and tried even to forbid their workers to drink *off* the job. For men who considered their thrice-daily tipple a right, this was another mark of slavery.

In the eyes of labor reformers, capitalism also violated other tenets of republicanism: virtue, commonweal, and equality. Virtue required individuals to put the community's interest above their own; capitalism glorified the pursuit of self-interest in the quest for profits. Commonweal specified that a republic must benefit all the people, not just favored classes. But by granting charters and appropriating money to establish banks, create corporations, dig canals, build railroads, dam streams,

and undertake other projects for economic development, state and local governments had favored certain classes at the expense of others. They had created *monopolies*, concentrations of power that endangered liberty. They had also fostered a growing inequality of wealth (defined as ownership of real and personal property). In the largest American cities by the 1840s, the wealthiest 5 percent of the population owned about 70 percent of the taxable property, while the poorest half owned almost nothing. Although wealth was less unequal in the countryside, in the nation as a whole by 1860 the top 5 percent of free adult males owned 53 percent of the wealth and the bottom half owned only 1 percent. Age as well as class accounted for this disparity—most twenty-one-year-olds owned little or nothing while most sixty-year-olds owned something, and the average man could expect to increase his wealth fivefold during the passage from youth to maturity. Nevertheless, ownership of property was becoming an elusive goal for Americans at the lower end of the economic scale.[24]

Denunciations of this state of affairs rang with republican rhetoric. Wage labor was "drawing the chains of slavery, and riveting them closer and closer around the limbs of free labor," declared one orator. The factory bound its workers "hand and foot by a system of petty despotism as galling as ever oppressed the subjects of tyranny in the old world."[25] A versifier drew the parallel between America's fight for liberty in 1776 and the workers' struggle a half-century later:

> For liberty our fathers fought
> Which with their blood they dearly bought,
> The Fact'ry system sets at nought. . . .
> Great Britain's curse is now our own,
> Enough to damn a King and Throne.[26]

To counter the power of this new tyranny a worker had only the right to withdraw his labor—to quit and go elsewhere, or to strike. This was more power than chattel slaves had, but whether it was sufficient to

24. Edward Pessen, *Riches, Class and Power Before the Civil War* (Lexington, Mass., 1973), esp. chap. 3; Lee Soltow, *Men and Wealth in the United States 1850–1870* (New Haven, 1975), 99, 180, 183; Ross, *Workers on the Edge*, 75; Jeffrey G. Williamson and Peter H. Lindert, *American Inequality: A Macroeconomic History* (New York, 1980), 36–39.

25. Dawley, *Class and Community*, 82; John Ashworth, *"Agrarians & Aristocrats": Party Political Ideology in the United States, 1837–1846* (London, 1983), 31.

26. Prude, *The Coming of Industrial Order*, 120.

redress the balance with capital was endlessly debated then and ever since. Radicals did not think so. They proposed a variety of schemes to equalize wealth and property or to circumvent the wage system by producers' cooperatives. There was also a proliferation of communitarian experiments in the 1830s and 1840s, ranging from the Transcendentalists' rather tame venture at Brook Farm to John Humphrey Noyes's notorious Oneida Community, where marital partners as well as property were held in common.

But these were pinpricks on the periphery of capitalism. Closer to the center was an antimonopoly crusade that channeled itself through the Jacksonian Democratic party. This movement united trade unions and labor spokesmen with yeoman farmers, especially those in the upland South and lower Northwest who stood on the edge of the market revolution apprehensive of being drawn into it. These groups evinced a producers' consciousness based on the labor theory of value: all genuine wealth is derived from the labor that produced it and the proceeds of that wealth should go to those who created it. These "producing classes" did not include bankers, lawyers, merchants, speculators, and other "capitalists" who were "bloodsuckers" or "parasites" that "manipulated 'associated wealth' " and "have grown fat upon the earnings of the toil worn laborer."[27] Of all the "leeches" sucking the lifeblood of farmers and workers, bankers were the worst. Banks in general and the Second Bank of the United States in particular became the chief symbol of capitalist development during the 1830s and the chief scapegoat for its perceived ills.

Part of the capital for the American industrial revolution came from state and local governments, which financed roads, canals, and education. Part came from foreign investors who sought higher yields in the fast-growing American economy than they could get at home. Part came from retained earnings of American companies. But state-chartered banks were a growing source of capital. Their numbers tripled while their assets increased fivefold from 1820 to 1840. After standing still during the depression of the 1840s, the number and assets of banks doubled again from 1849 to 1860. Their notes constituted the principal form of money in the antebellum era.[28]

Important as banks were to economic development, they were even

27. *Ibid.*, 218; Dawley, *Class and Community*, 44.
28. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States* (Washington, 1960), 623–25.

more significant as a political issue. A two-party system of Democrats and Whigs formed around Andrew Jackson's veto of the recharter of the Second Bank of the United States in 1832. For a dozen years or more after the Panic of 1837 the banking question remained the most polarizing issue in state politics, pitting pro-banking Whigs against anti-banking Democrats. The latter portrayed the concentration of wealth in banks as the gravest threat to liberty since George III. "Banks have been the known enemies of our republican government from the beginning," they proclaimed, "the engine of a new form of oppression . . . a legacy that the aristocratic tendencies of a bygone age has left, as a means to fill the place of baronial usurpation and feudal exactions." Banks caused "the artificial inequality of wealth, much pauperism and crime, the low state of public morals, and many of the other evils of society. . . . In justice to equal rights let us have no banks."[29]

In reply, supporters of banks ridiculed such sentiments as puerile and reactionary. The "credit system," they declared, was "the offspring of free institutions," an agency of economic growth that had brought unprecedented prosperity to all Americans. "Our want is capital," said an Ohio Whig in 1843. "We want, through the facilities of well-regulated . . . banks, to be able to develop the great resources of our State." The man "who should at this day recommend an entire abandonment of our credit system" was no less antediluvian than "he who should attempt to substitute a Pennsylvania wagon for a locomotive or a canal packet, or should endeavor to stem the restless current of the Mississippi in a flatboat."[30]

Northern Whigs and their Republican successors after 1854 elaborated a free-labor rationale for their vision of capitalist development. To the artisan argument that the system of wages and division of labor alienated workers from employers, Whigs replied that greater efficiency benefited both alike by raising wages as well as profits. "The interests of the capitalist and the laborer are . . . in perfect harmony with each other," wrote Whig economist Henry Carey of Philadelphia. "Each derives advantage from every measure that tends to facilitate . . . growth."[31]

29. James Roger Sharp, *The Jacksonians versus the Banks: Politics in the States after the Panic of 1837* (New York, 1970), 313; William G. Shade, *Banks or No Banks: The Money Issue in Western Politics, 1832–1865* (Detroit, 1972), 157, 117, 124.
30. Sharp, *Jacksonians versus the Banks*, 198; Ashworth, *"Agrarians & Aristocrats,"* 82.
31. Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York, 1970), 19.

To the claim that all wealth was created by labor, Whigs replied that the banker who mobilized capital, the entrepreneur who put it to work, and the merchant who organized markets were "laborers" that created wealth just as surely as did the farmer or craftsman who worked with his hands. To the proposition that wages turned the worker into a slave, the free-labor ideology replied that wage dependency need be only temporary; that in an economy of rapid growth and a society of equal opportunity and free public education, a young man who practiced the virtues of hard work, self-discipline, self-improvement, thrift, and sobriety could pull himself up by his own bootstraps and become self-employed or a successful employer himself.

Americans in the mid-nineteenth century could point to plenty of examples, real as well as mythical, of self-made men who by dint of "industry, prudence, perseverance, and good economy" had risen "to competence, and then to affluence."[32] With the election of Abraham Lincoln they could point to one who had risen from a log cabin to the White House. "I am not ashamed to confess that twenty five years ago I was a hired laborer, mauling rails, at work on a flat-boat—just what might happen to any poor man's son!" Lincoln told an audience at New Haven in 1860. But in the free states a man knows that "he can better his condition . . . there is no such thing as a freeman being fatally fixed for life, in the condition of a hired laborer." "Wage slave" was a contradiction in terms, said Lincoln. "The man who labored for another last year, this year labors for himself, and next year he will hire others to labor for him." If a man "continue through life in the condition of the hired laborer, it is not the fault of the system, but because of either a dependent nature which prefers it, or improvidence, folly, or singular misfortune." The "*free* labor system," concluded Lincoln, "opens the way for all—gives hope to all, and energy, and progress, and improvement of condition to all." It was precisely the lack of this hope, energy, and progress in the slave South that made the United States a House Divided.[33]

However idealized Lincoln's version of the American Dream may have been,[34] this ideology of upward mobility mitigated class conscious-

32. Ashworth, "*Agrarians & Aristocrats*," 66–67.
33. CWL, II, 364, III, 478, 479, IV, 24.
34. Stephan Thernstrom, *The Other Bostonians: Poverty and Progress in the American*

ness and conflict in the United States. "There is not a working boy of average ability in the New England States, at least," observed a visiting British industrialist in 1854, "who has not an idea of some mechanical invention or improvement in manufactures, by which, in good time, he hopes to better his position, or rise to fortune and social distinction." A Cincinnati newspaper reported in 1860 that "of all the multitude of young men engaged in various employments of this city, there is not one who does not desire, and even confidently expect, to become rich."[35] The Gospel of Success produced an outpouring of self-improvement literature advising young men how to get ahead. This imparted a dynamism to American life, but also a frenetic pace and acquisitive materialism that repelled some Europeans and troubled many Americans.

Whigs and Republicans supported all kinds of "improvements" to promote economic growth and upward mobility—"internal improvements" in the form of roads, canals, railroads, and the like; tariffs to protect American industry and labor from low-wage foreign competition; a centralized, rationalized banking system. Many of them endorsed the temperance crusade, which sobered up the American population to the extent of reducing the per capita adult consumption of liquor from the equivalent of seven gallons of 200-proof alcohol annually in the 1820s to less than two gallons by the 1850s. During the same years the per capita consumption of coffee and tea doubled. Whigs also supported public schools as the great lever of upward mobility. Common schools, said New York's Whig Governor William H. Seward, were "the great levelling institutions of the age . . . not by levelling all to the condition of the base, but by elevating all to the association of the wise and good." Horace Mann believed that education "does better than to disarm

Metropolis, 1880–1970 (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), 220–61, surveys the findings of various studies of occupational mobility in the United States. They indicate that in the nineteenth century about one-third of Americans moved from lower to higher occupational status during their lives (and one-tenth moved the other way), while a larger percentage of their sons moved up. This was not the same as moving from wage labor to self-employment, of course, since a worker moving from an unskilled to a skilled job or to white-collar status probably remained a wage-earner. These studies trace the career patterns of only that half of the population who remained in the same area from one census to the next. The extraordinary geographical mobility of Americans may indicate an even higher level of upward social mobility, for people tend to move in order to better themselves.

35. Rosenberg, ed., *American System*, 204; Foner, *Free Soil*, 14.

the poor of their hostility toward the rich; it prevents their being poor."[36]

People who subscribed to these Whig-Republican principles tended to be those who had succeeded in the market economy, or aspired to. Numerous studies of antebellum voting patterns have shown that Whigs and Republicans did best among upwardly mobile Protestants in white-collar and skilled occupations and among farmers who lived near transportation networks that drew them into the market economy. These were "insiders" who welcomed the capitalist transformation of the nineteenth century and for the most part benefited from it. Although some Democrats, especially in the South, were also insiders, the greatest Democratic support came from "outsiders": workers who resented the de-skilling of artisan occupations and the dependency of wage labor; Catholic immigrants at the bottom of the status and occupational ladder who took umbrage at Yankee Protestant efforts to reform their drinking habits or force their children into public schools; heirs of the Jefferson-Jackson distrust of banks, corporations, or other concentrations of wealth that threatened republican liberty; yeoman farmers in the upcountry or backcountry who disliked city slickers, merchants, banks, Yankees, or anybody else who might interfere with their freedom to live as they pleased.[37]

Given the illogicality of American politics, these generalizations are subject to numerous qualifications. Despite their marginality, the tiny number of black men who lived in the half-dozen northern states that allowed them to vote formed a solid Whig bloc. The Democratic party's professed egalitarianism was for whites only. Its commitment to slavery and racism was blatant in the North as well as the South, while Whig-

36. Ashworth, *"Agrarians & Aristocrats,"* 165; Mann, "Annual Report of 1848," in *Life and Works of Horace Mann*, IV, 251.

37. The studies on which this paragraph is based are too numerous for full citation here: among the most recent and enlightening are Foner, *Free Soil*; Ashworth, *"Agrarians & Aristocrats"*; Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*; Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago, 1979); Ronald P. Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties 1790's–1840's* (New York, 1982); Donald B. Cole, *Jacksonian Democracy in New Hampshire, 1800–1851* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970); J. Mills Thornton III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800–1860* (Baton Rouge, 1978); Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850–1890* (New York, 1983); and Harry L. Watson, *Jacksonian Politics and Community Conflict: The Emergence of the Second American Party System in Cumberland County, North Carolina* (Baton Rouge, 1981).

gery grew in part from the same evangelical reformism that had generated the abolitionist movement. At the other end of the social scale, Democratic leaders in New York included many bankers and merchants who had nothing in common with the Irish-American masses in the tenements except their allegiance to the same party. The generalizations in the preceding paragraph, therefore, describe a tendency, not an axiom.

That tendency was perhaps most visible in the older states of the Northwest—Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Most of the initial settlers there had come from the upper South and Pennsylvania. They populated the southern part of the region and evolved a corn-hog-whiskey economy, selling their small surplus in markets accessible by the Ohio-Mississippi river network. They were called Buckeyes, Hoosiers, Suckers; they dressed in homsepun clothes dyed with the oil of walnut or butternut trees, and hence acquired the generic name Butternuts. They remained rural, southern, and localist in their orientation, hostile toward "Yankees" of New England heritage who settled the northern portions of these states made accessible by the Erie Canal after 1825. These Yankees established a wheat-cattle-sheep-dairy farming economy linked to eastern markets by the burgeoning rail network after 1850. The railroads and the rapidly multiplying banks, industries, towns and cities owned or controlled by the "Yankees" caused these parts of the states to grow faster than the Butternut sections. A quantitative analysis of socioeconomic and cultural variables in Illinois in 1850 found the Yankee areas positively correlated with the production of wheat, cheese, and wool, with farm value per acre and the percentage of improved land, the value of farm machinery, banks and pro-bank sentiment, urbanization, population growth, schools, literacy, Congregational and Presbyterian churches, and temperance and antislavery societies. The Butternut areas were positively correlated with the production of corn, sweet potatoes, and whiskey, with anti-bank and anti-black sentiments, illiteracy, and Baptist churches. Needless to say the Butternut districts were overwhelmingly Democratic while the Yankee counties voted Whig and after 1854 Republican.[38]

Another Democratic voting bloc were literal outsiders—the immi-

38. Shade, *Banks or No Banks*, 136–37. See also Henry B. Hubbart, *The Older Middle West, 1840–1880* (New York, 1936), and Richard Lyle Power, *Planting Corn Belt Culture: The Impress of the Upland Southerner and Yankee in the Old Northwest* (Indianapolis, 1953).

grants. During the first forty years of the republic, immigrants had not come in large numbers. Even in the 1820s arrivals averaged fewer than 13,000 each year. In the next decade, however, this figure quadrupled. The pressure of a growing population on limited resources in Britain, Ireland, and western Germany squeezed thousands into ships bound for higher wages or cheap land in the new world. Despite economic depression in America during the early 1840s, the annual number of immigrants jumped 40 percent over the boom years of the thirties. Recovery from the depression in the United States coincided with the potato-famine years in Ireland and political unrest on the Continent associated with the revolutions of 1848. These push-pull forces impelled three million immigrants across the Atlantic in the decade after 1845. This was the largest proportionate influx of foreign-born in American history.

Before 1840 three-quarters of the immigrants were Protestants, mainly from Britain. Half of all newcomers who joined the labor force went into skilled or white-collar occupations and another third became farmers. But as immigration increased sixfold during the next two decades, its religious and occupational mix changed dramatically. Two-thirds of the new immigrants were Catholics from Ireland and Germany. And while the proportion of farmers (mostly German) held up, the percentage of every other category declined except unskilled and semiskilled laborers, mainly Irish, who jumped to nearly half of the total.[39]

The poverty, religion, and cultural alienation of the Irish made them triple outsiders. Anti-Catholic and ethnic riots occurred in several northeastern cities during the 1830s and 1840s. The worst erupted in 1844 at Philadelphia, where a pair of three-way battles between Protestants, Irish Catholics, and the militia left at least sixteen dead, scores wounded, two churches and dozens of other buildings destroyed. "Nativist" political parties sprang up in various cities with the goals of lengthening the period of naturalization before immigrants could become citizens and voters, and of restricting officeholding to natives. These parties managed to elect a mayor of New York and three congressmen

39. Douglass C. North, "Capital Formation in the United States during the Early Period of Industrialization: A Reexamination of the Issues," in Robert W. Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, eds., *The Reinterpretation of American Economic History* (New York, 1971), 279; North, *Growth of the American Economy*, 98; William F. Adams, *Ireland and Irish Emigration to the New World from 1815 to the Famine* (New Haven, 1932); Robert Joseph Murphy, "The Catholic Church in the United States During the Civil War Period," *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society*, 39 (1928), 293–94.

from Philadelphia. This nativism was actually more anti-Catholic than anti-immigrant. Indeed, Protestant immigrants (especially from northern Ireland) were among the most violent "nativists." Although the movement drew on middle-class leaders, it recruited a large following among skilled Protestant workers. Their ethnic hostility toward fellow laborers did much to abort the Jacksonian birth of worker solidarity. But because of the Whiggish overtones of nativism, it cemented the Democratic allegiance of Catholic immigrants more firmly than ever. Political nativism would explode even more destructively in the 1850s, when it contributed to the breakdown of the two-party system that preceded the Civil War.[40]

The economic transformation had an ambiguous impact on another group of political outsiders—women. The shift of manufacturing from household to shop or factory altered the function of many families from units of production to units of consumption. The transition of agriculture from subsistence to cash crops had a similar though less pronounced effect on farm families. These changes modified the primary economic role of most free women from producers to consumers. (Slave women, of course, continued to work in the fields as they had always done.) Instead of spinning yarn, weaving cloth, making soap and candles and the like at home, women increasingly bought these things at the store.

To be sure, some women took jobs in textile mills or did outwork as seamstresses, milliners, shoe binders, and so on. Though few if any women (except slaves) were counted in the labor force of agriculture (though farm women certainly worked hard), construction, mining, or transportation, many continued to work as domestic servants and laundresses. At midcentury one-fourth of the employees in manufacturing were women, while in the textile industry women and girls constituted nearly two-thirds of the wage workers. Nevertheless, only 25 percent of white women worked outside the home before marriage and fewer than 5 percent did so while married. Many young single women—like the famous Lowell girls who worked in the textile mills of that city—were

40. Michael Feldberg, *The Turbulent Era: Riot and Disorder in Jacksonian America* (New York, 1980), 9–32; Ray Allen Billington, *The Protestant Crusade 1800–1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (New York, 1938), 193–237; David Montgomery, "The Shuttle and the Cross: Weavers and Artisans in the Kensington Riots of 1844," *Journal of Social History*, 5 (1972), 411–46; Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, 315–25.

part of the labor force for only two or three years while they built a dowry for marriage. The middle-class ideal for women was home and motherhood. And the enormous popularity of women's magazines (more than a hundred existed during this era, led by the renowned *Godey's Lady's Book*) diffused this ideal through society.

The economic transformation took men as producers *out* of the home into office or factory. This separation of job from home evoked a notion of separate "spheres" for men and women. Man's sphere was the bustling, competitive, dynamic world of business, politics, affairs of state. Woman's world was the home and family; her role was to bear and nurture children and to make the home a haven to which the husband returned from work each day to find love and warmth at the hearth. To the extent that this "cult of domesticity" removed women from the "real world" and confined them to an inferior sphere, it was a setback to any quest for equal rights and status.[41]

But did domesticity constitute a real setback? Historians have begun to qualify this interpretation. The economic transformation coincided with—and in part caused—a change in the quality of family life as well as the quantity of children. As the family became less an economic unit it ripened into a covenant of love and nurturance of children. The ideal of romantic love increasingly governed the choice of a marriage partner, a choice made more and more by young people themselves rather than by their parents. And if wives now had a lesser economic role, they enjoyed a larger familial one. Patriarchal domination of wife and children eroded in urban areas as fathers went away from home for most waking hours and mothers assumed responsibility for socializing and

41. A stimulating and growing literature on the history of women and the family in the nineteenth century has made this an exciting field of study. The list of important books is too long for citation here; my account has been influenced by the following works, among others: Catherine Clinton, *The Other Civil War: American Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1984); Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven, 1977); Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven, 1973); Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790–1865* (Cambridge, 1981); Carl N. Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York, 1980); Ellen Carol DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage: The Emergence of an Independent Women's Movement in America 1848–1869* (Ithaca, 1978); Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784–1860* (New York, 1984); and Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York, 1982).

educating the children. Affection and encouragement of self-discipline replaced repression and corporal punishment as the preferred means of socialization in middle-class families. These families became more child-centered—a phenomenon much noted by European visitors. Childhood emerged as a separate stage of life. And as parents lavished more love on their children, they had fewer of them and devoted more resources to their education by sending them to school in greater numbers for longer periods of time.

This helps explain the simultaneous decline of the birth rate and the rise of education in the nineteenth century. Women played a crucial part in these developments and derived significant benefits from them. Middle-class marriages became more of an equal partnership than ever before. In some respects women attained a superior position in the partnership. If men ruled outside the home, women tended to rule within it. The decision to have fewer children was a mutual one but probably most often initiated by women. It required some sacrifice of traditional male sexual prerogatives. The principal means of contraception—continence and *coitus interruptus*—placed the responsibility of restraint on males. Fewer children meant that middle-class women in 1850 were less continuously burdened by pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing than their mothers and grandmothers had been. This not only enabled them to give each child more affection; it also freed them for activities outside the home.

For, in an apparent paradox, the concept of a woman's sphere *within* the family became a springboard for extension of that sphere beyond the hearth. If women were becoming the guardians of manners and morals, the custodians of piety and child-training, why should they not expand their demesne of religion and education outside the home? And so they did. Women had long constituted a majority of church members; during the Second Great Awakening they increased their prevalence in that realm. This evangelical revival also produced a "benevolent empire" of Bible societies, moral reform organizations, and social uplift associations of all kinds—most notably the temperance and abolitionist movements. Women were active in all of these efforts, first in separate female societies but increasingly in "mixed" associations after women abolitionists made this breakthrough in the 1830s.

Women's advances in education were even more impressive. Before the nineteenth century girls in America, as everywhere else, received much less formal education than boys, and a considerably higher proportion of women than men were illiterate. By 1850 that had changed

in the United States, where girls went to elementary school and achieved literacy in virtually the same proportions as boys—the only country where that was yet true. Higher education was still a male domain, but several female "seminaries" for advanced secondary schooling were founded during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Oberlin College admitted both women and men soon after its founding in 1833. Even more important, perhaps, was the feminization of the teaching profession. Like most other social and economic changes, this process began in New England and spread gradually westward and southward. By 1850 nearly three-quarters of the public school teachers in Massachusetts were women.

Another educating profession was opening to women during this era—writing for publication. The new emphasis on home and family created a huge audience for articles and books on homemaking, child-rearing, cooking, and related subjects. Women's magazines proliferated to meet the need. A paying profession arose for female writers. The expanded literacy and leisure of women, combined with the romanticism and sentimentalism of Victorian culture, also spawned a lucrative market for fiction which focused on the tribulations of love, marriage, home, family, and death. A bevy of authors turned out scores of sentimental best sellers—"that damned mob of scribbling women," Nathaniel Hawthorne called them, perhaps in envy of their royalty checks.

Therefore while the notion of a domestic sphere closed the front door to women's exit from the home into the real world, it opened the back door to an expanding world of religion, reform, education, and writing. Inevitably, women who could write or speak or teach or edit magazines began to ask why they should not be paid as much as men for these services and why they could not also preach, practice law or medicine, hold property independently of their husbands—and vote. Thus "domestic feminism"—as some historians label it—led by an indirect route to a more radical feminism that demanded equal rights in all spheres. In 1848 a convention in the upstate New York village of Seneca Falls launched the modern woman's rights movement. Its Declaration of Sentiments, modeled on the Declaration of Independence, proclaimed "that all men and women are created equal" and deserved their "inalienable rights" including the elective franchise. The convention met in a church; one of its two foremost organizers, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, had been educated in the first women's seminary, at Troy, New York; the other, Lucretia Mott, had started her adult life as a schoolteacher; both had been active in the abolitionist movement. These activities con-

stituted part of the back door of domestic feminism which in 1848 nudged open the front door a tiny crack.[42]

IV

The evolution of the child-centered nurturing family during this era helped inspire abolitionists to focus on the greatest perceived sin of American slavery: the tragic irony that caused the institution simultaneously to encourage the slave family and to threaten it with destruction.

Slave marriages had no legal basis in the United States. More than half of the bondsmen in 1850 lived on farms or plantations with fewer than twenty slaves where they had difficulty finding marital partners in the same quarters. But slaves nevertheless married and raised large families. Most slaveowners encouraged this process, in part because abolition of the African slave trade after 1807 made them dependent on natural increase to meet the labor demands of an expanding cotton kingdom. In contrast to the United States, slave economies in most other parts of the western hemisphere reached their peak development while the African slave trade flourished. Thus they relied mainly on imports to keep up their labor supply. They also imported twice as many males as females and discouraged their slaves from forming families. In consequence, while the slave population of the United States doubled by natural reproduction every twenty-six years, slaves in other new world societies experienced a net natural *decrease*.[43]

But North American slavery undermined the same family structure that it simultaneously encouraged. Responsible masters did their best to avoid breaking up slave families by sale or removal. Not all masters felt such a responsibility, however, and in any case they could not reach beyond the grave to prevent sales to satisfy creditors in settlement of an

42. In addition to DuBois, *Feminism and Suffrage*, and Lebsock, *Free Women of Petersburg*, 195–236, see Keith Melder, "Ladies Bountiful: Organized Women's Benevolence in early 19th-Century America," *New York History*, 48 (1967), 231–54; Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public State: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth Century America* (New York, 1984); and Barbara Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, Conn., 1981).

43. Philip D. Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison, 1969); C. Vann Woodward, "Southern Slaves in the World of Thomas Malthus," in Woodward, *American Counterpoint: Slavery and Racism in the North-South Dialogue* (Boston, 1971), 78–106.

estate. The continual expansion of the plantation economy to new frontiers uprooted many slaves who left behind family members as they trekked westward. Recent studies of slave marriages have found that about one-fourth of them were broken by owners or heirs who sold or moved husband or wife apart from the other.[44] The sale of young children apart from parents, while not the normal pattern, also occurred with alarming frequency.

This breakup of families was the largest chink in the armor of slavery's defenders. Abolitionists thrust their swords through the chink. One of the most powerful moral attacks on the institution was Theodore Weld's *American Slavery as It Is*, first published in 1839 and reprinted several times. Made up principally of excerpts from advertisements and articles in southern newspapers, the book condemned slavery out of the slaveowners' own mouths. Among hundreds of similar items in the book were reward notices for runaway slaves containing such statements as "it is probable he will aim for Savannah, as he said he had children in that vicinity," or advertisements like the following from a New Orleans newspaper: "NEGROES FOR SALE.—A negro woman 24 years of age, and two children, one eight and the other three years. Said negroes will be sold separately or together as desired."[45]

Harriet Beecher Stowe used Weld's book as a source for scenes in the most influential indictment of slavery of all time, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (of which more later). Written in the sentimental style made popular by best-selling women novelists, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* homed in on the breakup of families as the theme most likely to pluck the heartstrings of middle-class readers who cherished children and spouses of their own. Eliza fleeing across the ice-choked Ohio River to save her son from the slave-trader and Tom weeping for children left behind in Kentucky when

44. The following studies have found a marriage breakup rate by action of owners ranging from one-fifth to one-third: John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community* (New York, 1972), 89–92; Herbert Gutman and Richard Sutch, "The Slave Family: Protected Agent of Capitalist Masters or Victim of Slave Trade?" in Paul A. David et al., *Reckoning with Slavery* (New York, 1976), 127–29; Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (New York, 1976), 146–47; Paul D. Escott, *Slavery Remembered: A Record of the Twentieth-Century Slave Narratives* (Chapel Hill, 1979), 46–48; and C. Peter Ripley, "The Black Family in Transition: Louisiana, 1860–1865," *JSH*, 41 (1975), 377–78.

45. Weld, *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York, 1839), 165, 168.

he was sold South are among the most unforgettable scenes in American letters.

Although many northern readers shed tears at Tom's fate, the political and economic manifestations of slavery generated more contention than moral and humanitarian indictments. Bondage seemed an increasingly peculiar institution in a democratic republic experiencing a rapid transition to free-labor industrial capitalism. In the eyes of a growing number of Yankees, slavery degraded labor, inhibited economic development, discouraged education, and engendered a domineering master class determined to rule the country in the interests of its backward institution. Slavery undermined "intelligence, vigor, and energy," asserted New York's antislavery Whig leader William Henry Seward in the 1840s. It had produced in the South "an exhausted soil, old and decaying towns, wretchedly-neglected roads . . . an absence of enterprise and improvement." The institution was "incompatible with all . . . the elements of the security, welfare, and greatness of nations." Slavery and free labor, said Seward in his most famous speech, were "antagonistic systems" between which raged an "irrepressible conflict" that must result in the destruction of slavery.[46]

But whether or not slavery was backward and inefficient, as Seward maintained, it was extraordinarily productive. The yield of raw cotton doubled each decade after 1800, the greatest increase for any agricultural commodity. Cotton from the American South grown mostly by slave labor furnished three-fourths of the world's supply. Southern staples provided three-fifths of all American exports, earning foreign exchange that played an important part in American economic growth. And while slavery certainly made the Old South "different" from the North, the question whether differences outweighed similarities and generated an irrepressible conflict remains a matter of interpretation. North and South, after all, shared the same language, the same Constitution, the same legal system, the same commitment to republican institutions, the same predominantly Protestant religion and British ethnic heritage, the same history, the same memories of a common struggle for nationhood.

Yet by the 1850s Americans on both sides of the line separating freedom from slavery came to emphasize more their differences than simi-

46. Foner, *Free Soil*, 41, 51; George E. Baker, ed., *The Works of William H. Seward*, 5 vols. (New York, 1853–84), IV, 289–92.

larities. Yankees and Southrons spoke the same language, to be sure, but they increasingly used these words to revile each other. The legal system also became an instrument of division, not unity: northern states passed personal liberty laws to defy a national fugitive slave law supported by the South; a southern-dominated Supreme Court denied the right of Congress to exclude slavery from the territories, a ruling that most northerners considered infamous. As for a shared commitment to Protestantism, this too had become divisive rather than unifying. The two largest denominations—Methodist and Baptist—had split into hostile northern and southern churches over the question of slavery, and the third largest—Presbyterian—split partly along sectional lines and partly on the issue of slavery. The ideology of republicanism had also become more divisive than unifying, for most northerners interpreted it in a free-labor mode while most southerners insisted that one of the most cherished tenets of republican liberty was the right to property—including property in slaves.

People on both sides began pointing with pride or alarm to certain quantitative differences between North and South. From 1800 to 1860 the proportion of the northern labor force in agriculture had dropped from 70 to 40 percent while the southern proportion had remained constant at 80 percent. Only one-tenth of southerners lived in what the census classified as urban areas, compared with one-fourth of northerners. Seven-eighths of the immigrants settled in free states. Among antebellum men prominent enough to be later chronicled in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, the military profession claimed twice the percentage of southerners as northerners, while the ratio was reversed for men distinguished in literature, art, medicine, and education. In business the proportion of Yankees was three times as great, and among engineers and inventors it was six times as large.[47] Nearly twice the percentage of northern youth attended school. Almost half of the southern people (including slaves) were illiterate, compared to 6 percent of residents of free states.

Many conservative southerners scoffed at the Yankee faith in education. The *Southern Review* asked: "Is this the way to produce producers? To make every child in the state a literary character would not be a good qualification for those who must live by manual labor." The South, replied Massachusetts clergyman Theodore Parker in 1854, was "the foe

47. Rupert B. Vance, "The Geography of Distinction: The Nation and Its Regions, 1790–1927," *Social Forces*, 18 (1939), 175–76.

to Northern Industry—to our mines, our manufactures, and our commerce . . . to our democratic politics in the State, our democratic culture in the school, our democratic work in the community." Yankees and Southrons could no more mix than oil and water, agreed Savannah lawyer and planter Charles C. Jones, Jr. They "have been so entirely separated by climate, by morals, by religion, and by estimates so totally opposite of all that constitutes honor, truth, and manliness, that they cannot longer exist under the same government."[48]

Underlying all of these differences was the peculiar institution. "On the subject of slavery," declared the *Charleston Mercury* in 1858, "the North and South . . . are not only two Peoples, but they are rival, hostile Peoples."[49] This rivalry concerned the future of the republic. To nineteenth-century Americans the West represented the future. Expansion had been the country's lifeblood. So long as the slavery controversy focused on the morality of the institution where it already existed, the two-party system managed to contain the passions it aroused. But when in the 1840s the controversy began to focus on the expansion of slavery into new territories it became irrepressible.

"Westward the course of empire takes its way," Bishop George Berkeley had written of the New World in the 1720s. Westward looked Thomas Jefferson to secure an empire of liberty for future generations of American farmers. Even President Timothy Dwight of Yale University, who as a New England Federalist belonged to the region and group least enthusiastic about westward expansion, waxed eloquent in a poem of 1794:

> All hail, thou western world! by heaven design'd
> Th' example bright, to renovate mankind.
> Soon shall thy sons across the mainland roam;
> And claim, on far Pacific shores, their home;
> Their rule, religion, manners, arts, convey,
> And spread their freedom to the Asian sea.

A half-century later another Yankee who had never been to the West also found its attractions irresistible. "Eastward I go only by force," wrote

48. *Southern Review* quoted in Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic*, 207; Parker quoted in John L. Thomas, ed., *Slavery Attacked: The Abolitionist Crusade* (Englewood Cliffs, 1965), 149; Jones in Robert Manson Myers, ed., *The Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil War* (New York, 1972), 648.

49. John McCardell, *The Idea of a Southern Nation: Southern Nationalists and Southern Nationalism, 1830–1860* (New York, 1979), 270–71.

Henry David Thoreau, "but westward I go free. Mankind progresses from East to West."[50]

"Go West, young man," advised Horace Greeley during the depression of the 1840s. And westward did they go, by millions in the first half of the nineteenth century, in obedience to an impulse that has never ceased. "The West is our object, there is no other hope left for us," wrote a departing migrant. "There is nothing like a new country for poor folks." "Old America seems to be breaking up, and moving westward," wrote one pioneer on his way to Illinois in 1817. "We are seldom out of sight, as we travel on this grand track towards the Ohio, of family groups behind, and before us."[51] From 1815 to 1850 the population of the region west of the Appalachians grew nearly three times as fast as the original thirteen states. During that era a new state entered the Union on the average of every three years. By the 1840s the states between the Appalachians and the Mississippi had passed the frontier stage. It had been a frontier of rivers, mainly the Ohio-Mississippi-Missouri network with their tributaries, which had carried settlers to their new homes and provided their initial links with the rest of the world.

After pushing into the first tier of states beyond the Mississippi, the frontier in the 1840s leapfrogged more than a thousand miles over the semi-arid Great Plains and awesome mountain ranges to the Pacific Coast. This was first a frontier of overland trails and of sailing routes around the horn; of trade in beaver skins from the mountains, silver from Santa Fe, and cattle hides from California. By the 1840s it had also become a farming frontier as thousands of Americans sold their property at depression prices, hitched their oxen to Conestoga wagons, and headed west over the Oregon, California, and Mormon trails to a new future—on land that belonged to Mexico or was claimed by Britain. That was a small matter, however, because most Americans considered it their "manifest destiny" to absorb these regions into the United States. Boundless prospects awaited settlers who would turn "those wild

50. Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Vintage Books ed., New York, 1957), 11; Loren Baritz, "The Idea of the West," *AHR*, 66 (1961), 639.

51. Lewis O. Saum, *The Popular Mood of Pre-Civil War America* (Westport, Conn., 1980), 205; Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *The Trans-Appalachian Frontier: People, Societies, and Institutions 1775–1850* (New York, 1978), 163.

forests, trackless plains, untrodden valleys" into "one grand scene of continuous improvements, universal enterprise, and unparalleled commerce," proclaimed the author of an emigrants' guide to Oregon and California. "Those fertile valleys shall groan under the immense weight of their abundant products; those numerous rivers shall teem with countless steamboats . . . the entire country will be everywhere intersected with turnpike roads, railroads, and canals."[52]

By all odds the most remarkable westward migration before the California gold rush of 1849 was the Mormon hegira to the Great Salt Lake basin. The first indigenous American religion, Mormonism sprang from the spiritual enthusiasm aroused by the Second Great Awakening among second-generation New England Yankees in the "burned-over district" of upstate New York. Founder and Prophet Joseph Smith built not only a church but also a utopian community, which like dozens of others in that era experimented with collective ownership of property and unorthodox marital arrangements. Unlike most other utopias, Mormonism survived and flourished.

But the road to survival was filled with obstacles. The Mormons' theocratic structure was both a strength and a weakness. Claiming direct communication with God, Smith ruled his band with iron discipline. Marshaled into phalanxes of tireless workers, true believers created prosperous communities wherever they settled. But Smith's messiah complex, his claim that Mormonism was the only true religion and would inherit the earth, his insistence on absolute obedience, spawned schisms within the movement and resentment without. Harried from New York and Ohio, the Mormons migrated west to create their Zion in Missouri. But Missourians had no use for these Yankee Saints who received revelations from God and were suspected of abolitionist purposes. Mobs massacred several Mormons in 1838–39 and drove the remainder across the Mississippi to Illinois. There the faithful prospered for several years despite the economic depression. Peripatetic missionaries converted thousands to the faith. They built the river town of Nauvoo into a thriving New England city of 15,000 souls. But Gentile neighbors envied the Saints' prosperity and feared their private army, the Nauvoo Legion. When yet another schismatic offshoot disclosed Smith's latest revelation sanctioning polygamy, the Prophet ordered the dissenters'

52. Lansford Hastings, *Emigrants' Guide to Oregon and California* (1845), quoted in Kevin Starr, *Americans and the California Dream* (New York, 1973), 15.

printing press destroyed. Illinois officials arrested Smith and his brother; in June 1844 a mob broke into the jail and murdered them.[53]

Smith's successor Brigham Young recognized that the Saints could not build their Zion among hostile unbelievers. Thus he led an exodus in 1846–47 to the basin of the Great Salt Lake in Mexican territory, a region apparently so inhospitable that no other white men wanted it. There the only neighbors would be Indians, who according to Mormon theology were descendants of one of Israel's lost tribes whom it was their duty to convert.

Brigham Young proved to be one of the nineteenth century's most efficient organizers. Like Joseph Smith, he had been born in Vermont. What Young lacked in the way of Smith's charisma he more than compensated for with an iron will and extraordinary administrative ability. He organized the Mormon migration down to the last detail. Under his theocratic rule, centralized planning and collective irrigation from mountain streams enabled Mormons to survive their starving time during the first two winters at Salt Lake and to make the desert literally bloom—not as a rose, but with grain and vegetables. As thousands of new converts arrived each year from Europe as well as the United States, the Great Basin Zion attained a population of 40,000 by 1860. Young even managed to prevent the faithful from joining the various gold rushes to California in 1849 and to the Virginia City and Denver regions in 1859. The Mormons earned more from trade with prospectors on their way to the gold fields than most of the miners did after they got there.

The greatest threat to the Saints was conflict with the United States government, which acquired the Great Basin from Mexico just as the Mormons were founding their Zion at Salt Lake. In 1850, Young persuaded Washington to name him governor of the new territory of Utah. This united church and state at the top and preserved peace for a time. But Gentile territorial judges and other officials complained that their authority existed in name only; the people obeyed laws handed down and interpreted by the church hierarchy. Tensions between Mormons and Gentiles sometimes escalated to violent confrontations. American

53. These and subsequent paragraphs are based on Wallace Stegner, *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail* (New York, 1964); Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958); Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (New York, 1985); Newell G. Bringhurst, *Brigham Young and the Expanding Frontier* (Boston, 1985); and Norman F. Furniss, *The Mormon Conflict, 1850–1859* (New Haven, 1960).

opinion turned sharply against the Saints in 1852 when the church openly embraced plural marriage as divinely ordained (Brigham Young himself took a total of 55 wives). In 1856 the first national platform of the Republican party branded polygamy a "barbarism" equal to slavery. In 1857 President James Buchanan declared the Mormons to be in rebellion and sent troops to force their submission to a new governor. During the Saints' guerrilla warfare against these soldiers in the fall of 1857, a group of Mormon fanatics massacred 120 California-bound emigrants at Mountain Meadows. This prompted the government to send more troops. A realist, Young accepted the inevitable, surrendered his civil authority, restrained his followers, and made an uneasy peace with the United States. When the next president, Abraham Lincoln, was asked what he intended to do about the Mormons, he replied that since they were the least of his problems "I propose to let them alone."

Like so much of American history, the westward movement seems to be a story of growth and success. But for the original Americans—the Indians—it was a bitter tale of contraction and defeat. By 1850 the white man's diseases and wars had reduced the Indian population north of the Rio Grande to half of the estimated one million who had lived there two centuries earlier. In the United States all but a few thousand Indians had been pushed west of the Mississippi. Democratic administrations in the 1830s had carried out a forced removal of 85,000 Indians of the five "civilized nations"—Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, Chickasaw, and Seminole—from the southeastern states to an Indian territory set aside for them just west of Arkansas. Also in the 1830s a ruthless repression of Black Hawk's attempt to reclaim ancestral homelands in Illinois and the final suppression of Seminole resistance in Florida brought more than two centuries of Indian warfare east of the Mississippi to an end.

By then the government had decided to establish a "permanent Indian frontier" along roughly the 95th meridian (the western borders of Arkansas and Missouri). Beyond this line, Indians could roam freely in what explorer Zebulon Pike had labeled The Great American Desert. But the idea of a permanent Indian frontier lasted scarcely a decade. The overland westward migrations, the conquest of Mexican territory, and the discovery of gold in California opened this vast region to the manifest destiny of white Americans. So the government revived the burlesque of negotiations with Indian chiefs for cessions of huge chunks of territory in return for annuity payments that were soon soaked up by purchases of firewater and other white man's goods from wily traders. Since there was no more western frontier beyond which to push the

Indians of the Pacific coast, a policy evolved to place them on "reservations" where they could learn the white man's ways or perish. Most reservations were located on poor land, and a good many Indians had little inclination to learn the white man's ways. So they perished—in California alone disease, malnutrition, firewater, and homicide reduced the Indian population from an estimated 150,000 in 1845 to 35,000 by 1860. Although the Great Plains and the desert Southwest remained as yet uncoveted by white settlers, the reservation policy foretokened the fate of the proud warriors of these regions a decade or two later.[54]

The manifest destiny that represented hope for white Americans thus spelled doom for red Americans. And it also lit a slow fuse to a powder keg that blew the United States apart in 1861.

54. Robert M. Utley, *The Indian Frontier of the American West* 1846–1890 (Albuquerque, 1984), 31–64.

2

Mexico Will Poison Us

I

James K. Polk presided over the acquisition of more territory than any other president in American history. During his one-term administration the country expanded by two-thirds with the annexation of Texas, the settlement of the Oregon boundary, and the seizure of all Mexican provinces north of 31°. Having been elected in 1844 on a platform demanding Oregon to a northern boundary of 54° 40′ and Texas to a southern boundary of the Rio Grande River, Polk compromised with Britain on 49° but went to war against Mexico for Texas—with California and New Mexico thrown in for good measure. And thereby hung a tale of sectional conflict that erupted into civil war a decade and a half later.[1]

"Mr. Polk's War" evoked opposition from Whigs in Congress, who voted against the resolution affirming a state of war with Mexico in May 1846. After the Democratic majority passed this resolution, however, most Whigs supported appropriations for the armies confronting enemy forces. Having witnessed the disappearance of the Federalist party after it opposed the War of 1812, a Whig congressman said sardonically that he now favored "war, pestilence, and famine." Nevertheless, Whigs continued to accuse Polk of having provoked the conflict by sending

1. Polk's motives and actions are laid out in detail by Charles G. Sellers, *James K. Polk, Continentalist 1843–1846* (Princeton, 1966).

American troops into territory claimed by Mexico. They sniped at the administration's conduct of the war and opposed territorial acquisition as a result of it. Encouraged by the elections of 1846 and 1847, in which they picked up 38 seats and gained control of the House, Whigs intensified their attacks on Polk. One of these new Whig congressmen, a lanky, craggy Illinoisian with gray eyes, disheveled black hair, and ill-fitting clothes introduced resolutions calling for information about the exact spot where Mexicans had shed American blood to start the war. Though the House tabled Abraham Lincoln's resolutions, it did pass one sponsored by another Whig declaring that the war had been "unnecessarily and unconstitutionally begun by the President."[2]

Like the war, Manifest Destiny was mainly a Democratic doctrine. Since the day when Thomas Jefferson overcame Federalist opposition to the purchase of Louisiana, Democrats had pressed for the expansion of American institutions across the whole of North America whether the residents—Indians, Spaniards, Mexicans, Canadians—wanted them or not. When God crowned American arms with success in the Revolution, vouchsafed a Democratic congressman in 1845, He had not "designed that the original States should be the only abode of liberty on earth. On the contrary, He only designed them as the great center from which civilization, religion, and liberty should radiate and radiate until the whole continent shall bask in their blessing." "Yes, more, more, more!" echoed John L. O'Sullivan, inventor of the phrase Manifest Destiny. "More . . . till our national destiny is fulfilled and . . . the whole boundless continent is ours."[3]

Whigs were not averse to extending the blessings of American liberty, even to Mexicans and Indians. But they looked askance at doing so by force. Befitting the evangelical origins of much Whig ideology, they placed their faith in mission more than in annexation. " 'As a city set upon a hill,' " the United States should inculcate the ideas of "true republicanism" by example rather than conquest, insisted many Whigs.

2. CG, 30 Cong., 1 Sess., 64, 95, and Appendix, 93–95. The best study of opposition to the war is John H. Schroeder, *Mr. Polk's War: American Opposition and Dissent, 1846–1848* (Madison, 1973). But see also Robert W. Johannsen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The War with Mexico in the American Imagination* (New York, 1985), which shows how popular the war was with the public outside of New England and a few other areas along the Atlantic seaboard.

3. John Wentworth of Illinois and O'Sullivan quoted in Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation* (New York, 1963), 28, 52.

Although it would "be a gain to mankind if we could spread over Mexico the Idea of America—that all men are born free and equal in rights," said antislavery clergyman Theodore Parker in 1846, "we must first make real those ideas at home." While the Democratic notion of progress envisioned the spread of existing institutions over *space*, the Whig idea envisaged the improvement of those institutions over *time*. "Opposed to the instinct of boundless acquisition stands that of Internal Improvement," said Horace Greeley. "A nation cannot simultaneously devote its energies to the absorption of others' territories and the improvement of its own."[4]

Acquisition of Mexican territory was Polk's principal war aim. The desire of American settlers in Oregon and California for annexation to the United States had precipitated the dual crises with Britain and Mexico in 1846. Praising these emigrants as "already engaged in establishing the blessings of self-government in the valleys of which the rivers flow to the Pacific," Polk had pledged to extend American law to "the distant regions which they have selected for their homes."[5] A treaty with Britain secured Oregon north to the 49th parallel. But efforts to persuade Mexico to sell California and New Mexico had failed. So Polk decided to use force. Soon after becoming president he ordered the Pacific fleet to stand ready to seize California's ports in the event of war with Mexico. In the fall of 1845 Polk instructed the U.S. consul at Monterey to encourage annexation sentiment among American settlers and disaffected Mexicans.

Americans in California needed little encouragement, especially when they had among them a glory-hunting captain of the army topographical corps, John C. Frémont. Famous for his explorations of the West, Frémont was also the son-in-law of Missouri's powerful Senator Thomas Hart Benton. When rumors of war with Mexico reached the Sacramento valley, Frémont took it upon himself to assist settlers in an uprising that proclaimed an independent California. This "bear flag republic" (its flag bore the image of a grizzly bear) enjoyed a brief existence before its citizens celebrated official news of the war that ensured their annexation by the United States.

4. Schroeder, *Mr. Polk's War*, 75–76; Parker, "A Sermon of War," in Robert E. Collins, ed., *Theodore Parker: American Transcendentalist* (Metuchen, N.J., 1973), 252; Greeley quoted in Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago, 1979), 21.
5. Sellers, *Polk*, 210.

While these proceedings unfolded, Missouri volunteers and a regiment of regulars were marching over the Santa Fe trail to seize the capital of New Mexico. Commanded by Stephen Watts Kearny, these tough dragoons occupied Santa Fe on August 18, 1846, without firing a shot. After raising the American flag, Kearny left behind a garrison and pushed across the desert to California with a hundred men who joined a few hundred sailors, marines, and volunteers to subdue Mexican resistance there by January 1847. During the next several months a string of stunning American victories south of the Rio Grande culminating in the capture of Mexico City ensured the permanence of these American conquests. The only remaining question was how much territory to take.

Polk's appetite was originally sated by New Mexico and California. In April 1847 he sent Nicholas Trist to Mexico as a commissioner to negotiate a treaty for these provinces. But the ease of American conquest made Polk suddenly hungry for more territory. By the fall of 1847 a Democratic movement to annex "all Mexico"—or at least several additional provinces—was in full cry. The whipsaw cuts and rasps of all-Mexico Democrats and no-territory Whigs left Trist on a precarious limb three thousand miles away in Mexico City where the proud Santa Anna proved reluctant to yield up half his country. Polk sided with the hard-liners in Washington and recalled Trist in October 1847. But a breakthrough in negotiations appeared possible just as Trist received the recall dispatch, so he disobeyed orders and signed a treaty that fulfilled Polk's original instructions. In return for a payment by the United States of $15 million plus the assumption of Mexican debts to American citizens, Mexico recognized the Rio Grande boundary of Texas and ceded New Mexico and upper California to the United States.[6] When this Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo reached Washington in February 1848, Polk initially spurned it. On second thought, however, he submitted it to the Senate, where the Whigs would have enough votes to defeat any treaty that sliced off more Mexican territory but might approve one that avoided the appearance of conquest by paying Mexico for California and New Mexico. The strategy worked; the Senate ratified the treaty by a vote of 38-14, with five of the opposition votes coming from Democrats

6. This cession included the present states of California, Nevada, and Utah, most of New Mexico and Arizona, and parts of Oklahoma, Colorado, and Wyoming as well as one-third of Texas.

who wanted more territory and seven from Whigs who wanted none.[7]

This triumph of Manifest Destiny may have reminded some Americans of Ralph Waldo Emerson's prophecy that "the United States will conquer Mexico, but it will be as the man swallows the arsenic, which brings him down in turn. Mexico will poison us."[8] He was right. The poison was slavery. Jefferson's Empire for Liberty had become mostly an empire for slavery. Territorial acquisitions since the Revolution had added the slave states of Louisiana, Missouri, Arkansas, Florida, and Texas to the republic, while only Iowa, just admitted in 1846, had increased the ranks of free states. Many northerners feared a similar future for this new southwestern empire. They condemned the war as part of a "slave power conspiracy" to expand the peculiar institution. Was not President Polk a slaveholder? Had he not been elected on a platform of enlarging slave territory by annexing Texas? Were not proslavery southerners among the most aggressive proponents of Manifest Destiny? Did not most of the territory (including Texas) wrested from Mexico lie south of the old Missouri Compromise line of 36° 30′—a traditional demarcation between freedom and slavery? The Massachusetts legislature indicted this "unconstitutional" war with its "triple object of extending slavery, of strengthening the slave power, and of obtaining control of the free states." James Russell Lowell's rustic Yankee philosopher Hosea Biglow fretted that

> They just want this Californy
> So's to lug new slave-states in
> To abuse ye, an' to scorn ye,
> An' to plunder ye like sin.[9]

Polk could not understand what the fuss was about. "In connection with the Mexican War," he wrote in his diary, slavery was "an abstract question. There is no probability that any territory will ever be acquired from Mexico in which slavery would ever exist." Agitation was thus "not only mischievous but wicked." But a good many congressmen—

7. *Senate Executive Docs.*, 30 Cong., 1 Sess., no. 52, p. 36. The other two opposition votes came from Democrats who disliked the treaty for other reasons.
8. Edward W. Emerson and Waldo E. Forbes, eds., *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 10 vols. (Boston, 1909–14), VII, 206.
9. H. V. Ames, ed., *State Documents on Federal Relations* (Philadelphia, 1906), 241–42; *The Works of James Russell Lowell*, Standard Library ed., 11 vols. (Boston, 1890), VIII, 46–47.

even some in Polk's own party—did not share the president's conviction. They believed agitation of the question necessary. This issue overshadowed all others from 1846 to 1850. Hundreds of congressmen felt moved to speak on the matter. Some of them agreed with Polk that it was an "abstract" issue because "natural conditions" would exclude slavery from these lands. "The right to carry slaves to New Mexico or California is no very great matter," said John J. Crittenden of Kentucky, because "no sensible man would carry his slaves there if he could."[10] But numerous southerners disagreed. They noted that cotton was already grown in river valleys of New Mexico. Slaves had labored in mines for centuries and would prove ideal mineworkers in these territories. "California is peculiarly adapted for slave labor," resolved a southern convention. "The right to have [slave] property protected in the territory is not a mere abstraction." A Georgia newspaper heightened abolitionist suspicions of a slave-power conspiracy by professing a broader purpose in opening these territories to slavery: it would "secure to the South the balance of power in the Confederacy, and, for all coming time . . . give to her the control in the operations of the Government."[11]

Of the congressmen who spoke on this matter, more than half expressed confidence (if southern) or fear (if northern) that slavery would go into the new territories if allowed to do so.[12] Many of them conceded that the institution was unlikely to put down deep roots in a region presumed to be covered with deserts and mountains. But to make sure, northern congressmen voted for a resolution to exclude slavery therefrom. This was the fateful Wilmot Proviso. As Congress neared adjournment on the sultry Saturday night of August 8, 1846, Pennsylvania's first-term Representative David Wilmot rose during the debate on an appropriations bill for the Mexican War and moved an amendment: "that, as an express and fundamental condition of the acquisition of any territory from the Republic of Mexico . . . neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall ever exist in any part of said territory."[13]

10. Milo Milton Quaife, ed., *The Diary of James K. Polk during His Presidency, 1845 to 1849*, 4 vols. (Chicago, 1910), II, 308; Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York, 1978), 77.
11. Robert S. Starobin, *Industrial Slavery in the Old South* (New York, 1970), 18–20; *Milledgeville Federal Union*, Nov. 10, 1846, quoted in Schroeder, *Mr. Polk's War*, 55.
12. Desmond D. Hart, "The Natural Limits of Slavery Expansion: The Mexican Territories as a Test Case," *Mid-America*, 52 (1970), 119–31.
13. *CG*, 29 Cong., 1 Sess., 1217.

More lay behind this maneuver than met the eye. Antislavery conviction motivated Wilmot and his allies, but so did a desire to settle old political scores. Wilmot acted for a group of northern Democrats who were vexed with Polk and fed up with southern domination of the party. Their grievances went back to 1844 when southerners had denied Martin Van Buren the presidential nomination because he refused to endorse the annexation of Texas. The Polk administration had given the patronage in New York to anti-Van Buren "Hunkers." Rate reductions in the Walker Tariff of 1846 embittered Pennsylvania Democrats who thought they had secured a pledge for higher duties on certain items. Polk's veto of a rivers and harbors bill angered Democrats from Great Lakes and western river districts. The administration's compromise on the 49th parallel for the Oregon boundary incensed the many Democrats who had chanted the slogan "Fifty-four forty or fight!" Having voted for the annexation of Texas with its disputed Rio Grande border at risk of war with Mexico, they felt betrayed by Polk's refusal to risk war with Britain for all of Oregon. "Our rights to Oregon have been shamefully compromised," declared an Ohio Democrat. "The administration is Southern, Southern, Southern! . . . Since the South have fixed boundaries for free territory, let the North fix boundaries for slave territories." "The time has come," agreed Connecticut Congressman Gideon Welles, "when the Northern democracy should make a stand. Every thing has taken a Southern shape and been controlled by Southern caprice for years." We must, Welles concluded "satisfy the northern people . . . that we are not to extend the institution of slavery as a result of this war."[14]

When Wilmot introduced his proviso, therefore, he released the pent-up ire of northern Democrats, many of whom cared less about slavery in new territories than about their power within the party. Northern Whigs, who had a more consistent antislavery record, were delighted to support the proviso. This bipartisan northern coalition in the House passed it over the united opposition of southern Democrats and Whigs. This was a dire omen. The normal pattern of division in Congress had

14. *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, June 22, Aug. 5, 1846, quoted in Stephen E. Maizlish, *The Triumph of Sectionalism: The Transformation of Ohio Politics 1844–1856* (Kent, 1983), 56, 60–61; Welles to Martin Van Buren, July 28, 1846, June 30, 1848, quoted in Richard H. Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom: Antislavery Politics in the United States 1837–1860* (New York, 1976), 143; speech by Welles in the House, Jan. 7, 1847, in *CG*, 29 Cong., 2 Sess., 136. See also Eric Foner, "The Wilmot Proviso Revisited," *JAH*, 56 (1969), 262–79.

occurred along party lines on issues such as the tariff, the Bank, federal aid to internal improvements, and the like. The Wilmot Proviso wrenched this division by parties into a conflict of sections. The political landscape would never again be the same. "As if by magic," commented the *Boston Whig*, "it brought to a head the great question that is about to divide the American people."[15]

The full impact of the proviso did not become apparent immediately, for Congress adjourned in 1846 before the Senate could vote on it. But northern Democrats reintroduced it at the next session, prompting an anguished lament from the president, who began to comprehend the whirlwind he was reaping as the result of his war. "The slavery question is assuming a fearful . . . aspect," wrote Polk in his diary. It "cannot fail to destroy the Democratic party, if it does not ultimately threaten the Union itself."[16] The House again passed Wilmot's amendment by a sectional vote. But the South's greater power in the Senate (15 slave states and 14 free states composed the Union in 1847) enabled it to block the proviso there. Arm-twisting by the administration eventually compelled enough northern Democrats in the House to change their votes to pass the appropriations bill without the proviso. But the crisis had not been resolved—only postponed.

Free-soil sentiment in 1847 can be visualized in three concentric circles. At the center was a core of abolitionists who considered slavery a sinful violation of human rights that should be immediately expiated. Surrounding and drawing ideological nourishment from them was a larger circle of antislavery people who looked upon bondage as an evil—by which they meant that it was socially repressive, economically backward, and politically harmful to the interests of free states.[17] This circle comprised mainly Whigs (and some Democrats) from the Yankee belt of states and regions north of the 41st parallel who regarded this issue

15. Aug. 15, 1846, quoted in Potter, *Impending Crisis*, 23.
16. Quaife, ed., *Diary of Polk*, II, 305.
17. Three-fifths of the slaves were counted as part of the population on which representation in the House was based. This gave southern voters relatively greater influence in national politics than northern voters. Because the average population of the slave states was less than that of free states, the equal representation of each state by two senators gave the South disproportionate power in the Senate as well. And since each state's electoral vote equaled its combined number of senators and representatives, the South also enjoyed disparate power in presidential elections. With 30 percent of the voting population in 1848, the slave states cast 42 percent of the electoral votes.

as more important than any other in American politics. The outer circle contained all those who had voted for the Wilmot Proviso but did not necessarily consider it the most crucial matter facing the country and were open to compromise. This outer circle included such Whigs as Abraham Lincoln, who believed slavery "an unqualified evil to the negro, the white man, and the State" which "deprives our republican example of its just influence in the world—enables the enemies of free institutions, with plausibility, to taunt us as hypocrites," but who also believed that "the promulgation of abolition doctrines tends rather to increase than to abate its evils" by uniting the South in defense of the institution.[18] The outer circle also included Democrats, like Martin Van Buren, who cared little about the consequences of slavery for the slaves and had been allied with the "slave power" until it had blocked Van Buren's nomination in 1844.

All free soilers—except perhaps some of the Van Burenites—concurred with the following set of propositions: free labor was more efficient than slave labor because it was motivated by the inducement of wages and the ambition for upward mobility rather than by the coercion of the lash; slavery undermined the dignity of manual work by associating it with servility and thereby degraded white labor wherever bondage existed; slavery inhibited education and social improvements and kept poor whites as well as slaves in ignorance; the institution therefore mired all southerners except the slaveowning gentry in poverty and repressed the development of a diversified economy; slavery must be kept out of all new territories so that free labor could flourish there.

For some members of the two outer circles these propositions did not spring from a "squeamish sensitiveness . . . nor morbid sympathy for the slave," as David Wilmot put it. "The negro race already occupy enough of this fair continent. . . . I would preserve for free white labor a fair country . . . where the sons of toil, of my own race and own color, can live without the disgrace which association with negro slavery brings upon free labor." If slavery goes into the new territories, wrote free-soil editor and poet William Cullen Bryant, "the free labor of all the states will not." But if slavery is kept out, "the free labor of the states [will go] there . . . and in a few years the country will teem with an active and energetic population."[19]

18. *CWL*, I, 74–75; II, 255; III, 92.
19. *CG*, 29 Cong., 2 Sess., Appendix, 314–17; *New York Evening Post*, Nov. 10, 1847.

Southerners bristled at these attacks on their social system. At one time a good many of them had shared the conviction that slavery was an evil—albeit a "necessary" one for the time being because of the explosive racial consequences of emancipation. But the sense of evil had faded by 1830 as the growing world demand for cotton fastened the tentacles of a booming plantation economy on the South. Abolitionist attacks on slavery placed southerners on the defensive and goaded them into angry counterattacks. By 1840 slavery was no longer a necessary evil; it was "a great moral, social, and political blessing—a blessing to the slave, and a blessing to the master." It had civilized African savages and provided them with cradle-to-grave security that contrasted favorably with the miserable poverty of "free" labor in Britain and the North. By releasing whites from menial tasks it elevated white labor and protected it from degrading competition with free Negroes. Slavery eliminated the specter of class conflict that would eventually destroy free-labor societies, for it "promotes equality among the free by dispensing with grades and castes among them, and thereby preserves republican institutions."[20] It also established the foundation for an upper class of gentlemen to cultivate the arts, literature, hospitality, and public service. It created a far superior society to that of the "vulgar, contemptible, counter-jumping" Yankees. Indeed, said Senator Robert M. T. Hunter of Virginia, "there is not a respectable system of civilization known to history whose foundations were not laid in the institution of domestic slavery." "Instead of an evil," said John C. Calhoun in summing up the southern position, slavery was "a positive good . . . the most safe and stable basis for free institutions in the world."[21]

Proponents of slavery naturally wished to offer the blessings of this institution to the new territories. Even those who did not expect bondage to flourish there resented the northern effort to exclude it as an insult to southern honor. The Wilmot Proviso pronounced "a degrading inequality" on the South, declared a Virginian. It "says in effect to the Southern man, Avaunt! you are not my equal, and hence are to be

20. Senator Albert Gallatin Brown of Mississippi quoted in David Donald, *Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War* (New York, 1960), 348; resolution of a Southern Rights convention in Montgomery, March 1852, quoted in J. Mills Thornton III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800–1860* (Baton Rouge, 1978), 206–7.

21. Hunter quoted in Donald, *Sumner and the Coming of the Civil War*, 349; Calhoun in CG, 25 Cong., 2 Sess., Appendix, 61–62.

excluded as carrying a moral taint." Having furnished most of the soldiers who conquered Mexican territory, the South was particularly outraged by the proposal to shut them out of its benefits. "When the war-worn soldier returns to his home," asked an Alabamian, "is he to be told that he cannot carry his property to the country won by his blood?"[22] "No true Southron," said scores of them, would submit to such "social and sectional degradation. . . . Death is preferable to acknowledged inferiority."[23]

In addition to their sacred honor, slaveholders had "the lives and fortunes of ourselves and families" at stake. Enactment of the Wilmot Proviso would yield ten new free states, warned James Hammond of South Carolina. The North would then "ride over us rough shod" in Congress, "proclaim freedom or something equivalent to it to our slaves and reduce us to the condition of Hayti. . . . Our only safety is in *equality* of POWER. If we do not act now, we deliberately consign our children, not our posterity, but our *children* to the flames."[24]

Southerners challenged the constitutionality of the Wilmot Proviso. Admittedly, precedent seemed to sanction congressional exclusion of slavery from territories. The first Congress under the Constitution had reaffirmed the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 banning the institution from the Northwest Territory. Subsequent Congresses re-enacted the ordinance for each territory carved out of the region. The Compromise of 1820 prohibited slavery north of 36° 30′ in the Louisiana Purchase. Southern congressmen had voted for these laws. But in February 1847 Senator John C. Calhoun introduced resolutions denying the right of Congress to exclude slave property from the territories. "Tall, careworn, with fevered brow, haggard cheek and eye, intensely gazing," as Henry Clay described him, Calhoun insisted that territories were the "common property" of sovereign states. Acting as the "joint agents" of these states, Congress could no more prevent a slaveowner from taking his human property to the territories than it could prevent him from taking his horses or hogs there. If the North insisted on ramming through the

22. Both quotations from Chaplain W. Morrison, *Democratic Politics and Sectionalism: The Wilmot Proviso Controversy* (Chapel Hill, 1967), 65.

23. *Ibid.*; Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The South and Three Sectional Crises* (Baton Rouge, 1980), 26; William J. Cooper, Jr., *The South and the Politics of Slavery 1828–1856* (Baton Rouge, 1978), 239.

24. William L. Barney, *The Road to Secession: A New Perspective on the Old South* (New York, 1972), 105–6.

Wilmot Proviso, warned Calhoun in sepulchral tones, the result would be "political revolution, anarchy, civil war."[25]

The Senate did not pass the Calhoun resolutions. As the presidential election of 1848 neared, both major parties sought to heal the sectional rifts within their ranks. One possible solution, hallowed by tradition, was to extend the Missouri Compromise line through the middle of the new territories to the Pacific. Polk and his cabinet endorsed this policy. Ailing and prematurely aged, the president did not seek renomination. Secretary of State James Buchanan made 36° 30′ the centerpiece of his drive for the nomination. Several times in 1847–48 the Senate passed a version of this proposal, with the backing of most southern senators, who yielded the principle of slavery in all the territories for the sake of securing its legality in some. But the northern majority in the House voted it down.

Another idea emerged from the maelstrom of presidential politics. This one came to be known as popular sovereignty It was identified in 1848 mainly with Michigan's Senator Lewis Cass, Buchanan's main rival for the Democratic presidential nomination. Maintaining that settlers in territories were as capable of self-government as citizens of states, Cass proposed that they should decide for themselves whether to have slavery. This idea had the political charm of ambiguity, for Cass did not specify *when* voters might choose for or against slavery—during the territorial stage or only when adopting a state constitution. Most contemporaries presumed the former—including Calhoun, who therefore opposed popular sovereignty because it could violate the property rights of southern settlers. But enough southerners saw merit in the approach to enable Cass to win the nomination—though significantly the platform did not endorse popular sovereignty. It did reject the Wilmot Proviso and the Calhoun resolutions, however. The Democratic party continued the tradition of trying to preserve intersectional unity by avoiding a firm position on slavery.

So did the Whigs. Indeed they adopted no platform at all, and nominated the hero of a war that most of them had opposed. Nothing illustrated better the strange-bedfellow nature of American politics than Zachary Taylor's candidacy. A thick-set man with stubby legs and heavy brows contracted into a perpetual frown, careless in dress, a career army officer (but not a West Pointer) with no discernible political opinions,

25. *CG*, 29 Cong., 2 Sess., 453–55. Clay's description of Calhoun is quoted in Nevins, *Ordeal*, I, 24.

Taylor seemed unlikely presidential timber. The handsome, imposing General-in-Chief Winfield Scott, a dedicated professional with a fondness for dress uniforms, and an articulate Whig, looked like a better choice if the anti-war party felt compelled to mend its image by nominating a military candidate. But Scott had the defects of his virtues. His critics considered him pompous. He had a penchant for writing foot-in-mouth public letters which made him vulnerable to ridicule. His nickname—Old Fuss and Feathers—conveys the nature of his political liabilities. And Taylor had the virtues of his defects, as the image conveyed by *his* sobriquet of Rough and Ready illustrates. Many voters in this new age of (white) manhood suffrage seemed to prefer their candidates rough-hewn. As a war hero Taylor claimed first priority on public affection. Although Scott had planned and led the campaign of 1847 that captured Mexico City, Taylor's victories of 1846 along the Rio Grande and his extraordinary triumph against odds of three to one at Buena Vista in February 1847 had made his reputation before Scott got started.

Buena Vista launched a Taylor bandwagon that proved unstoppable. Rough and Ready's main rival for the nomination (besides Scott) was Henry Clay. Urbane, witty, popular, the seventy-year-old Clay was Mr. Whig—a founder of the party and architect of its "American System" to promote economic growth by a protective tariff, a national bank, and federal aid to internal improvements. As a three-time loser in presidential contests, however, Clay carried the liabilities as well as assets of a long political career. Like a majority of his party he had opposed the annexation of Texas and the Mexican War.[26] But the Whigs could not hope to win the election without carrying some states where annexation and the war had been popular. Taylor seemed to be the answer.

The general was also a godsend to southern Whigs, who faced an erosion of strength at home because of the persistent support of northern Whigs for the Wilmot Proviso. (Most northern Democrats had abandoned Wilmot's Proviso for Cass's formula of popular sovereignty.) Southern Whig leaders, especially Senator John J. Crittenden of Kentucky and Congressman Alexander Stephens of Georgia, maneuvered the Taylor boom into a southern movement. Taylor's ownership of Louisiana and Mississippi plantations with more than a hundred slaves seemed to assure his safety on the issue of most importance to southern-

26. In a sad irony, one of Clay's sons was killed at Buena Vista. Another prominent Whig and opponent of the Mexican adventure, Daniel Webster, also lost a son in the war.

ers. "The truth is," declared Robert Toombs of Georgia, Clay "has sold himself body and soul to the Northern Anti-Slavery Whigs." Taylor, on the other hand, was a "Southern man, a slaveholder, a cotton planter" identified "from birth, association, and conviction . . . with the South."[27] Southern delegates to the Whig convention provided the votes to deny Clay the nomination on the first ballot and then to award it to Taylor on the fourth.

Taylor's candidacy brought to a head a long-festering schism in northern Whiggery. "Of course, we cannot & will not under any circumstances support General Taylor," wrote Charles Sumner of Massachusetts. "We cannot support any body who is not known to be against the extension of Slavery." Sumner spoke for a faction of the party known as "Conscience Whigs." They challenged a more conservative group labeled "Cotton Whigs" because of the prominence of textile magnates in their ranks. The Cotton faction had opposed the Mexican War and favored the Wilmot Proviso. But their position on these issues seemed lukewarm, and in 1848 they wished to join hands with southern Whigs in behalf of Taylor and victory. Unable to sanction this alliance of "lords of the loom" with "lords of the lash," Conscience Whigs bolted the party. Their purpose, in Sumner's words, was no less than "a new crystallization of parties, in which there shall be one grand Northern party of Freedom."[28]

The time appeared ripe for such a movement. In New York the Van Buren faction of Democrats was ready for revolt. Dubbed "Barnburners" (after the legendary Dutch farmer who burned his barn to rid it of rats), this faction sent a separate delegation to the national Democratic convention. When the convention voted to seat both New York delegations, the Barnburners stomped out and held their own conclave to nominate Van Buren on a Wilmot Proviso platform. Antislavery Democrats and Whigs from other northern states cheered. The Barnburner

27. Toombs to James Thomas, April 16, 1848, in Ulrich B. Phillips, ed., *The Correspondence of Robert Toombs, Alexander H. Stephens, and Howell Cobb*, Annual Report of the American Historical Association, 1911, vol. 2 (Washington, 1913), 103–4; *New Orleans Bee* and *Charleston Mercury* quoted in Joseph G. Rayback, *Free Soil: The Election of 1848* (Lexington, Ky., 1970), 42, 43.

28. Sumner to Salmon P. Chase, Feb. 7, 1848, Dec. 12, 1846, Chase Papers, Library of Congress. For the development of this split within the Whig party of Massachusetts, see Kinley J. Brauer, *Cotton versus Conscience: Massachusetts Whig Politics and Southwestern Expansion, 1843–1848* (Lexington, Ky., 1967).

convention provided the spark for an antislavery political blaze; the Liberty party offered itself as kindling.

Founded in 1839 by simon-pure abolitionists, the Liberty party had thus far managed to win only 3 percent of the northern votes for its presidential candidate, in 1844. Since that election, party leaders had been debating future strategy. A radical faction wanted to proclaim a new doctrine that the Constitution empowered the government to abolish slavery *in the states*. But a more pragmatic majority under the leadership of Salmon P. Chase wanted to move in the other direction—toward a coalition with antislavery Whigs and Democrats. An astute lawyer who had defended fugitive slaves, Chase combined religious conviction and humorlessness with unquenchable ambition and shrewd political insight. Although Liberty men must continue to proclaim the goal of ending slavery everywhere, said Chase, they could best take the first step toward that goal by joining with those who believed in keeping it out of the territories—whatever else they believed. If such a coalition gained enough leverage in Ohio to elect Chase to the U. S. Senate, so much the better. Chase planted feelers with Conscience Whigs and Barnburner Democrats in the spring of 1848. These ripened into a Free Soil convention in August, after the major-party nominations of Cass and Taylor had propelled antislavery men out of their old allegiances.

The Free Soil convention at Buffalo resembled nothing so much as a camp meeting. Fifteen thousand fervent "delegates" thronged into the sweltering city. Gathered under a huge canopy erected in the park, they cheered endless oratory damning the slave power while an executive committee of 465 met in the church to do the real work. This committee accomplished something of a miracle by fusing factions from three parties that held clashing opinions on banking, tariffs, and other economic issues. These questions, the staples of American politics for two decades, must give way to a more important one, said veteran Whig Congressman Joshua Giddings of Ohio: "Our political conflicts must be in future between slavery and freedom."[29] The committee created its new fusion party by nominating a Barnburner for president and a Conscience Whig for vice president on a Liberty platform drafted mainly by Chase. The "mass convention" in the park roared its approval of the committee's work.

Acceptance of Martin Van Buren as presidential nominee was not

29. Maizlish, *Triumph of Sectionalism*, 89.

easy for Liberty men and Conscience Whigs. As a proslavery Jacksonian, the Little Magician had earned the apparent undying enmity of abolitionists and Whigs in the 1830s. But a new age dawned in 1848. Van Buren now endorsed exclusion of slavery from the territories and abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. His Barnburner backers proclaimed bondage "a great moral, social, and political evil—a relic of barbarism which must necessarily be swept away in the progress of Christian civilization." Speaking to fellow Whigs, Sumner said that "it is not for the Van Buren of 1838 that we are to vote, but the Van Buren of *to-day*."[30] With Charles Francis Adams as vice-presidential nominee, the ticket strengthened its Conscience image. Charles Francis inherited the antislavery mantle from his father John Quincy, who had died earlier in the year. Joshua Leavitt, a founder of the Liberty party and a co-worker with John Quincy Adams against the congressional gag rule on antislavery petitions, brought tears to many eyes at the Buffalo convention with an emotional speech recounting the courage of pioneer abolitionists. Leavitt then offered his blessing to the new Free Soil coalition. "The Liberty Party is not dead," he declaimed, "but *translated*." Vowing to "fight on, and fight ever" for "Free Soil, Free Speech, Free Labor, and Free Men," the delegates returned home to battle for the Lord.[31]

Free Soilers made slavery the campaign's central issue. Both major parties had to abandon their strategy of ignoring the question. Instead, they tried to win support in each section by obfuscating it. Democrats circulated different campaign biographies of Cass in North and South. In the North they emphasized popular sovereignty as the best way to keep slavery out of the territories. In the South Democrats cited Cass's pledge to veto the Wilmot Proviso and pointed with pride to the party's success (over Whig opposition) in acquiring territory into which slavery *might* expand.

Having no platform to explain and a candidate with no political record to defend, Whigs had an easier time appearing to be all things to

30. Both quotations from Rayback, *Free Soil*, 211, 247.

31. This account of the Free Soil convention is drawn from Rayback, 201–30; Morrison, *Democratic Politics and Sectionalism*, 145–55; Frederick J. Blue, *The Free Soilers: Third Party Politics 1848–1854* (Urbana, 1973); Brauer, *Cotton vs. Conscience*, 229–45; Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom*, 142–58; and John Mayfield, *Rehearsal for Republicanism: Free Soil and the Politics of Antislavery* (Port Washington, N.Y., 1980), 111–19.

all men. In the North they pointed to Taylor's pledge *not* to veto whatever Congress decided to do about slavery in the territories. Those antislavery Whigs who supported Taylor in the belief that he would take their side—William H. Seward and Abraham Lincoln, for example—turned out to be right. Southerners should have paid more attention to a speech by Seward at Cleveland. Affable, artful, sagacious, an instinctive politician but also a principled opponent of slavery, Seward would soon emerge as one of Taylor's main advisers. "Freedom and slavery are two antagonistic elements of society," he told a Cleveland audience. "Slavery can be limited to its present bounds"; eventually "it *can* and *must* be abolished."[32] But in the South, Taylor's repute as the hero of Buena Vista and his status as a large slaveholder dazzled many eyes. "We prefer Old Zack with his sugar and cotton plantations and four hundred negroes," proclaimed the *Richmond Whig*. "Will the people of [the South] vote for a Southern President or a Northern one?" asked a Georgia newspaper.[33]

Most of them voted for a southern one. Taylor carried eight of the fifteen slave states with a majority of 52 percent. He also carried seven of fifteen free states, though the Whig popular vote in the North dropped to 46 percent because of Free-Soil inroads. But while they won 14 percent of the northern vote and supplanted Democrats as the second party in Vermont, Massachusetts, and New York, the Free Soilers did not carry a single state. Nor did they affect the election's outcome: though Van Buren carried enough Democratic votes in New York to give the state to Taylor, Free Soilers neutralized this effect by attracting enough Whig voters in Ohio to put that state in Cass's column. Despite stresses produced by the slavery issue, the centripetal forces of party overcame the centrifugal forces of section.[34]

Nevertheless, those stresses had wrenched the system almost to the breaking point. Free Soilers hoping to realign American politics into a struggle between freedom and slavery professed satisfaction with the election. "The public mind has been stirred on the subject of slavery to depths never reached before," wrote Sumner. "The late election," agreed one of his confreres, "is only the Bunker Hill of the moral & political

32. Nevins, *Ordeal*, I, 212; James Ford Rhodes, *History of the United States from the Compromise of 1850* . . . 7 vols. (New York, 1893–1906), I, 162.

33. Quoted in Cooper, *The South and the Politics of Slavery*, 265, 262.

34. For detailed election data and an analysis, see Rayback, *Free Soil*, 279–302.

revolution which can terminate only in success to the side of freedom."[35]

II

Almost unnoticed in the East during the presidential campaign, another dramatic event of 1848 presaged further strains on the two-party system. Workers constructing a sawmill for John Sutter near Sacramento in January discovered flecks of gold in the river bed. Despite Sutter's attempt to keep the news quiet, word spread to San Francisco. Gold fever turned the port into a ghost town by June as the population headed for the Sierra foothills. In August the news reached the Atlantic coast, where it encountered skepticism from a public surfeited with fabulous tales from the West. But in December the whole country took notice when Polk's last annual message to Congress included a reference to the "extraordinary" finds in California. As if on cue, a special agent from the gold fields arrived in Washington two days later with a tea caddy containing 320 ounces of pure gold. Doubt disappeared; everyone became a true believer; many dreamed of striking it rich; and a hundred thousand of them headed West. The trickle of migrants to California during the previous decade became a flood in the great gold rush of '49, soon chronicled in song and story and ultimately transmuted into miles of Hollywood celluloid. Some eighty thousand of these Forty-niners actually reached California during that first year. Thousands of others died on the way, many from a cholera epidemic. A few of the Forty-niners struck it rich; but toil, hardship, and disappointment became the lot of most. Yet still they came, until by the census year of 1850 California had a larger population than Delaware or Florida. The territory's quest to become the thirty-first state sparked a renewed sectional crisis back East.

What the hell-roaring mining camps needed most was law and order. At first each camp elected its own officials and enforced a rough justice. But this was scarcely adequate for a large region with a mostly male population "from every hole and corner of the world" quick to violate or defend personal rights with revolver or hangman's rope. A few companies of the army provided the only semblance of national authority in

35. Sumner to Salmon P. Chase, Nov. 16, 1848, Chase Papers, Library of Congress; Preston King to Sumner, Dec. 25, 1848, Sumner Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

California. But the soldiers proved to be a weak reed, for the lure of gold caused many of them to desert. California needed a territorial government. So did New Mexico with its substantial Hispanic and Indian population and its growing Mormon settlement next to the Great Salt Lake. In December 1848, President Polk urged the lame-duck Congress to create territorial governments for California and New Mexico. To resolve the vexing slavery question, Polk recommended extension of the 36° 30′ line to the Pacific.[36]

But Congress would have none of that. During the short session that expired on March 4 fistfights flared in both Houses, southern members shouted threats of secession, and no territorial legislation could command a majority. In the House, northern congressmen reaffirmed the Wilmot Proviso, drafted a territorial bill for California that excluded slavery, passed a resolution calling for abolition of the slave trade within the District of Columbia, and even considered a bill to abolish slavery itself in the capital. These actions enraged southerners, who used their power in the Senate to quash them all.

A southern caucus asked Calhoun to draft an "Address" setting forth the section's position on these iniquities. The South Carolinian readily complied, sensing a renewed opportunity to create the Southern Rights party he had long hoped for. Rehearsing a long list of northern "aggressions"—including the Northwest Ordinance, the Missouri Compromise, state personal liberty laws that blocked recovery of fugitive slaves, and the Wilmot Proviso—the Address reiterated Calhoun's doctrine of the constitutional right to take slaves into all territories, reminded southerners that their "property, prosperity, equality, liberty, and safety" were at stake, and warned that the South might secede if her rights were not protected.[37]

But Calhoun's heavy artillery misfired. Although forty-six of the seventy-three southern Democrats in Congress signed his Address, only two of forty-eight Whigs did so. Having just won the presidency, southern Whigs did not want to undercut their party before Taylor even took office. "We do not expect an administration which we have brought into power [to]

36. The quotation is from Ray Allen Billington, *The Far Western Frontier 1830–1860* (New York, 1956). This book contains a fine account of the California gold rush and related matters.

37. Richard Cralle, ed., *The Works of John C. Calhoun*, 6 vols. (New York, 1854–55), VI, 285–313.

do any act or permit any act to be done [against] our safety," explained Robert Toombs. "We feel *secure* under General Taylor," added Alexander Stephens.[38]

So much greater the shock, then, when they discovered Taylor to be a free-soil wolf in the clothing of a state's rights sheep. Like a good military commander, Taylor planned to break the slavery stalemate by a flank attack to bypass the territorial stage and admit California and New Mexico directly as states. But this would produce two more free states. Under Mexican law, slavery had been illegal in these regions. Southern newspapers reprinted an editorial from the *San Francisco Star* which stated that 99 of 100 settlers considered slavery "an unnecessary moral, social, and political curse upon themselves and posterity." California and New Mexico would tip the Senate balance against the South, perhaps irrevocably. "For the first time," said Senator Jefferson Davis of Missisippi, "we are about permanently to destroy the balance of power between the sections." This was nothing less than a "plan of concealing the Wilmot Proviso under a so-called state constitution."[39] It raised "a point of honor," according to other southern Democrats, who vowed never to "consent to be thus degraded and enslaved" by such a "monstrous trick and injustice."[40]

But Taylor went right ahead. He sent agents to Monterey and Santa Fe to urge settlers to adopt state constitutions and apply for admission. Californians had begun this process even before Taylor's emissary arrived. In October 1849 they approved a free-state constitution and in November elected a governor and legislature that petitioned Congress for statehood. New Mexico was slower to act. Few English-speaking citizens lived in this huge region except the Latter-day Saints at Salt Lake—and their relations with the government were tense. Moreover, Texas claimed half of the present-day state of New Mexico and part of Colorado. This border dispute would have to be settled before statehood for New Mexico could be considered.

A free California might not have raised southern hackles so much

38. Toombs to John J. Crittenden, Jan. 22, 1849, Stephens to Crittenden, Jan. 17, 1849, quoted in Cooper, *The South and the Politics of Slavery*, 271.

39. Nevins, *Ordeal*, I, 22; *CG*, 31 Cong., 1 Sess., Appendix, 1533; Davis to W. R. Cannon, Jan. 8, 1850, Civil War Collection, Henry E. Huntington Library.

40. Quotations from Robert W. Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas* (New York, 1973), 245; Fehrenbacher, *The South and Three Sectional Crises*, 40; Cooper, *The South and the Politics of Slavery*, 278.

had not other developments caused southerners to view Taylor as a traitor to his class. Forty years in the army had given old Rough and Ready a national rather than sectional perspective. He hoped to strengthen the Whig party by winning Free Soilers back into its ranks. In August 1849 the president told a Pennsylvania audience that "the people of the North need have no apprehension of the further extension of slavery."[41] Having pledged not to veto legislation on this subject, Taylor informed an appalled Robert Toombs that he meant what he said even if Congress saw fit to pass the Wilmot Proviso. Worst of all, Senator Seward became a presidential friend and adviser. Publicity about all of this buffeted southern Whigs, who took a beating in off-year state elections during 1849. "The slavery question," wrote a Georgian, "is the only question which in the least affects the results of the elections." Having "utterly abandoned the South" and "estranged the whole Whig party" there, Taylor's actions dangerously shortened southern tempers.[42]

Tension thickened when Congress met in December 1849. Taylor's coattails had not been long enough to carry Whigs into control of either House.[43] Twelve Free Soilers held the balance between 112 Democrats and 105 Whigs in the lower House. The Democratic candidate for speaker was Howell Cobb, a genial moderate from Georgia. The Whig candidate was Robert Winthrop of Massachusetts, a Cotton Whig who had served as speaker in the previous Congress. Several Democrats refused to support Cobb, while Free Soilers of Whig background would not vote for Winthrop despite his earlier support of the Wilmot Proviso. More ominously, a half-dozen southern Whigs led by Stephens and Toombs opposed Winthrop *because* of that action and also because the Whig caucus refused to reject the Proviso. "I [shall] hold no connection with a party that did not disconnect itself from those aggressive abolition movements," declared Stephens. To resist "the dictation of Northern

41. Potter, *Impending Crisis*, 87.

42. Nevins, *Ordeal*, I, 241–42; Cooper, *The South and the Politics of Slavery*, 280, 286.

43. Democrats retained a majority of eight in the Senate, where Salmon P. Chase joined John P. Hale of New Hampshire as the second Free Soil senator. Chase had been elected by a coalition of Democrats and Free Soilers in the Ohio legislature as part of a bargain by which Free Soilers enabled Democrats to control the legislature in return for Democratic support of Chase for senator and for repeal of Ohio's "black laws" which had restricted black access to schools, courts, and other public agencies.

hordes of Goths and Vandals," the South must make "the necessary preparations of men and money, arms and munitions, etc., to meet the emergency."[44]

Through three weeks and sixty-two ballots the House failed to elect a speaker. Threats of disunion became a byword during this crisis. "If, by your legislation, you seek to drive us from the territories of California and New Mexico," thundered Toombs, "*I am for disunion.*" "We have calculated the value of the Union," warned Albert Gallatin Brown of Mississippi. "We ask you to give us our rights" in California; "if you refuse, I am for taking them by armed occupation." The South's liberty was at stake as much now as in 1776, for "it is clear," according to an Alabama congressman, "that the power to dictate what sort of property the State may allow a citizen to own and work—whether oxen, horses, or negroes . . . is alike despotic and tyrannical."[45] Several fistfights broke out between southerners and northerners in the House. The Senate caught the same fever. Jefferson Davis reportedly challenged an Illinois congressman to a duel, and Senator Henry S. Foote (also of Mississippi) drew a loaded revolver during a heated debate. Finally, in desperation the House adopted a special rule allowing election of a speaker by a plurality and named Cobb to the post on the sixty-third ballot. It was an inauspicious start for the 1850s.

Was the Union in serious danger? Did southerners really intend to secede, or were they bluffing to force concessions? Free Soilers believed they were bluffing. Chase shrugged off "the stale cry of disunion." Joshua Giddings dismissed it as "gasconade" to "frighten dough-faces into a compliance with their measures." Seward observed that "the malcontents of the South . . . expect to compel compromise. I think the President is willing to try conclusions with them as General Jackson was with the nullifiers."[46]

Taylor did indeed intend to call the southern bluff, if bluff it was. His message to Congress in January 1850 urged admission of California as a state immediately and of New Mexico when it was ready. Taylor never receded from this position. When Toombs and Stephens appealed

44. Cooper, *The South and the Politics of Slavery*, 282; Fehrenbacher, *The South and Three Sectional Crises*, 40.

45. *CG*, 31 Cong., 1 Sess., 27–28, 257–61; Thornton, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society*, 213.

46. Rhodes, *History of the U.S.*, I, 131–33. In the political lexicon of the time a doughface was "a northern man with southern principles."

to him as a southerner, warning him that the South would not "submit" to these insults, Taylor lost his temper. In unpresidential language he told them that he would personally lead an army to enforce the laws and hang any traitors he caught—including Toombs and Stephens—with as little compunction as he had hanged spies and deserters in Mexico. Taylor afterward commented to an associate that he had previously regarded Yankees as the aggressors in sectional disputes, but his experience since taking office had convinced him that southerners were "intolerant and revolutionary" and that his former son-in-law Jefferson Davis was their "chief conspirator."[47]

Presidential threats did nothing to pacify the South. "There is a bad state of things here," reported an Illinois congressman. "I fear this Union is in danger."[48] Calhoun himself found southern congressmen "more determined and bold than I ever saw them. Many avow themselves disunionists, and a still greater number admit, that there is little hope of any remedy short of it." Calhoun may have overstated the case. Those who avowed themselves disunionists per se—who scorned Yankees, believed that irreconcilable differences existed between North and South, and earned the label "fire-eaters" because of their passionate avowal of southern nationalism—were still a minority, even in South Carolina. A larger number, including Calhoun himself, preserved at least a "little hope" of a remedy short of secession. In Calhoun's case it was mighty little, to be sure. "As things now stand," he wrote privately on February 16, 1850, the South "cannot with safety remain in the Union . . . and there is little or no prospect of any change for the better." Nevertheless, Calhoun and other southerners continued to press for "some timely and effective measure" of concession by the North to avert secession.[49]

Hanging over the head of Congress like a sword of Damocles was a scheduled convention of slave-state delegates "to devise and adopt some mode of resistance to northern aggression." Thus had Calhoun's long-ripening project for southern unity come to fruition. Suffering the onset of consumption that would send him to his grave within five months, the South Carolinian remained in the background and let Mississippi

47. *Ibid.*, 134; Thelma Jennings, *The Nashville Convention: Southern Movement for Unity, 1848–1851* (Memphis, 1980), 49.

48. Potter, *Impending Crisis*, 89.

49. J. Franklin Jameson, ed., *Correspondence of John C. Calhoun*, in Annual Report of the American Historical Association, 1899, vol. II (Washington, 1900), 780–82; Jennings, *Nashville Convention*, 50.

take the lead. A bipartisan meeting at Jackson in October 1849 issued a call for a convention at Nashville the following June. Few could doubt the purpose of this enterprise: it would form an "unbroken front" of southern states "to present . . . to the North the alternative of dissolving the partnership" if Yankees did not cease violating southern rights. The lower-South cotton states plus Virginia elected delegations during the winter. While Whigs in the upper South held back, the movement generated enough momentum to alarm many Americans.[50]

In this crisis Henry Clay strode once more on stage and offered a plan to buy off southern threats, as he had done twice before in 1820 and 1833. The ensuing debates of 1850 became the most famous in the history of Congress. Sharing the footlights with Clay were Calhoun and Daniel Webster, the other two members of the great Senate triumvirate that had dominated American statesmanship for decades. All three had been born during the Revolution. They had devoted their careers to preserving the heritage of the Fathers—Clay and Webster as nationalists, and Calhoun as a sectionalist who warned that Union could survive only if the North and South shared equal power within it. All three had known repeated frustration in their quest for the presidency. All were playing in their final show, Clay and Webster as composers of compromise, Calhoun as a brooding presence warning of disaster even after his death at the end of the first act. Some of the rising stars of the next generation also played prominent roles in this great drama: Senators Stephen A. Douglas, William H. Seward, Jefferson Davis, and Salmon P. Chase.

On January 29, 1850, Clay presented eight resolutions to the Senate. He grouped the first six in pairs, each offering a concession to both sections. The first pair would admit California as a state and organize the remainder of the Mexican cession without "any restriction or condition on the subject of slavery." The second pair of resolutions settled the boundary dispute between Texas and New Mexico in favor of the latter and compensated Texas by federal assumption of debts contracted during its existence as an independent republic. This would reduce the potential for carving an additional slave state out of Texas but would put the state's finances on sound footing.[51] Many holders of Texas bonds

50. Jennings, *Nashville Convention*, 3–79; quotations from 7, 24–25.

51. The terms of Texas's annexation had authorized its division into as many as four additional states. This authority was never exercised, but in 1850 some southerners

were southerners; the head of a powerful lobby for this part of the Compromise of 1850 was a South Carolinian. Clay's third pair of resolutions called for abolition of the slave trade in the District of Columbia but a guarantee of slavery itself in the District. If these six proposals yielded slightly more to the North than to the South, Clay's final pair of resolutions tipped the balance southward by denying congressional power over the interstate slave trade and calling for a stronger law to enable slaveholders to recover their property when it fled to free states.[52]

The eventual Compromise of 1850 closely resembled Clay's proposals. But seven months of oratory, debate, and exhausting cloakroom bargaining lay ahead. And the "Compromise" that finally emerged was not really a compromise in which all parties conceded part of what they wanted, but a series of separately enacted measures each of which became law with a majority of congressmen from one section voting against a majority of those from the other. The Compromise of 1850 undoubtedly averted a grave crisis. But hindsight makes clear that it only postponed the trauma.

Generations of schoolchildren recited the famous Senate speeches of the Compromise debate. "I wish to speak to-day, not as a Massachusetts man, nor as a Northern man, but as an American," said Daniel Webster as he began his Seventh of March Address that would cause former antislavery admirers to repudiate him. "I speak to-day for the preservation of the Union. Hear me for my cause." Having opposed the Mexican War and supported the Wilmot Proviso, Webster now urged northerners to bury the passions of the past. Do not "taunt or reproach" the South with the Proviso. Nature would exclude slavery from New Mexico. "I would not take pains uselessly to reaffirm an ordinance of nature, nor to re-enact the will of God." As for disunion, Webster warned fire-eaters that it could no more take place "without convulsion" than "the heavenly bodies [could] rush from their spheres, and jostle each other in the realms of space, without causing the wreck of the universe!"[53]

Webster's speech appealed to a broad range of Americans who by March 1850 were rallying in support of compromise. But it contrasted

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hoped for at least one additional state to be cloned from Texas, especially if its claims to part of New Mexico were upheld.

52. Southerners had already introduced a stringent fugitive slave bill at this session. For more on the fugitive slave issue see the chapter following.

53. CG, 31 Cong., 1 Sess., Appendix, 269–76.

sharply with addresses by senators speaking for citizens outside that middle range. Three days before Webster's speech, the dying Calhoun gave his valedictory to the nation. Too weak to speak for himself, the gaunt Carolinian sat wrapped in flannels while James Mason of Virginia read his speech to the Senate. Calhoun's prophecies of doom were reflected in the piercing eyes that stared from deep sockets within the shroud. "The great and primary cause" of danger "is that the equilibrium between the two sections has been destroyed." The North had grown faster than the South in population, wealth, and power. This had happened because of discriminatory legislation favoring the North: the Northwest Ordinance and the Compromise of 1820 which excluded southern property from a vast domain; tariffs and federal aid to internal improvements (Calhoun neglected to mention that he had once supported these measures) to foster northern enterprises at southern expense. Yankees had wantonly attacked southern institutions until one by one the bonds of Union had snapped: the Methodist and Baptist denominations had separated into northern and southern churches; voluntary associations were dividing over slavery; political parties themselves were splitting in the same way; soon "nothing will be left to hold the States together except force." What could be done to forestall this fate? Because the North had always been the aggressor, it must cease criticizing slavery, return fugitive slaves, give the South equal rights in the territories, and consent to a constitutional amendment "which will restore to the South, in substance, the power she possessed of protecting herself before the equilibrium between the two sections was destroyed."[54] California was the test case. Admission of this free state would serve notice of a purpose to "destroy irretrievably the equilibrium between the two sections." In such circumstances southern states could not "remain in the Union consistently with their honor and safety."[55]

William H. Seward spoke for Americans at the opposite pole from Calhoun. In a speech on March 11, Seward condemned "any such compromise" as Clay had proposed. Slavery was an unjust, backward, dying institution, said the New York senator. Its days were numbered.

54. Calhoun probably had in mind his posthumously published proposal, in *Disquisition on Government*, for a "concurrent majority" in which the country would have a northern and a southern president each with a veto power over congressional legislation.

55. CG, 31 Cong., 1 Sess., Appendix, 451–55.

"You cannot roll back the tide of social progress." Not only did the Constitution sanction the power of Congress to exclude slavery from the territories, but also "there is a higher law than the Constitution," the law of God in whose sight all persons are equal. The present crisis "embraces the fearful issue whether the Union shall stand, and slavery, under the steady, peaceful action of moral, social, and political causes, be removed by gradual voluntary effort, and with compensation; or whether the Union shall be dissolved and civil war ensue, bringing on violent but complete and immediate emancipation."[56]

Seward's Higher Law speech caused a sensation. Southerners branded it "monstrous and diabolical"; Clay pronounced it "wild, reckless, and abominable." Even Taylor condemned it. "This is a nice mess Governor Seward has got us into," the president observed to a pro-administration editor. "The speech must be disclaimed at once."[57] Disclaimed or not, Seward's sentiments represented opinion in the upper North as accurately as Calhoun's expressed that of the lower South. Nevertheless, men from the upper South and lower North continued to work feverishly for a settlement between the two extremes. While oratory continued before crowded galleries, committees sought a compromise that could command a majority.

A special Senate committee of thirteen with Clay as chairman reported a bill that combined several measures in one package: admission of California; organization of two territories (New Mexico and Utah) without restrictions on slavery; and settlement of the Texas boundary dispute in favor of New Mexico with compensation to Texas of $10 million to fund her pre-statehood debt. Derisively labeled an "Omnibus Bill" by President Taylor, this package was designed to attract a majority from both sections by inducing each to accept the parts it did not like in order to get the parts it wanted. The approach seemed promising enough to defuse the fire-eaters at the Nashville Convention which met on June 3. Disunion fever had abated since late winter. No delegates came from six slave states and only a few unofficial delegates from two others. Whigs in particular were conspicuous by their absence. Recognizing that it had no mandate for radical action, the convention adopted a wait-and-see attitude. Delegates passed a resolution favoring extension

56. *Ibid.*, 260–69.

57. Nevins, *Ordeal*, I, 301–2. Seward carried the title "Governor" because he had served as governor of New York.

of the 36° 30′ line to the Pacific and adjourned to reconvene again after Congress acted.[58]

But as the legislators labored through the heat of a Washington summer it became obvious that the omnibus strategy was backfiring. A pro-compromise bloc of upper-South Whigs and lower-North Democrats emerged in support of the strategy. But they numbered fewer than one-third of each house. Most other congressmen signified their intention to vote against the package in order to defeat the parts they opposed. A three-way split among the Whigs grew increasingly bitter. Taylor and most northern Whigs insisted on their California-only policy, believing that acquiescence in (potential) slavery in New Mexico and Utah would wreck the party in the North. Lower-South Whigs adamantly opposed a free California. Clay's pro-compromise Whigs endured the slings and arrows of both sides. The hostility of Taylor toward Clay and Webster became especially caustic.

Into this volatile atmosphere came a new crisis in late June. A handful of civilians and soldiers had convened a convention in Santa Fe to write a free-state constitution. It was ratified by an electorate casting fewer than eight thousand votes. Taylor urged the admission of New Mexico along with that of California, thereby doubling the insult to southern honor. Meanwhile the governor of Texas threatened to uphold with force his state's claim to Santa Fe and all the rest of New Mexico east of the Rio Grande. A clash between Texans and the U. S. army seemed imminent. As July 4 approached, southerners bristled with threats to fight for Texas. "Freemen from the Delaware to the Rio Grande [will] rally to the rescue," squeaked Alexander Stephens with all the bellicosity his ninety pounds could muster. And "when the 'Rubicon' is passed, the days of this Republic will be numbered."[59] Taylor did not flinch. After preparing orders for the Santa Fe garrison to stand firm, he spent a hot Fourth of July listening to speeches at the unfinished Washington Monument. Assuaging his hunger and thirst with large quantities of raw vegetables, cherries, and iced milk, the president fell ill next day and died on July 9 of acute gastroenteritis.

Whether for weal or woe, Taylor's death marked a turning point in the crisis. The new president, Millard Fillmore, was a New York Whig hostile to the Seward faction in his own state. Sympathetic to the Com-

58. Jennings, *Nashville Convention*, 135–66.

59. Holman Hamilton, *Prologue to Conflict: The Crisis and Compromise of 1850* (Lexington, Ky., 1964), 105.