

The Southern Defense of American Slavery

In response to the increasing criticism of slavery as an evil in America, defenders of the institution first argued it was a "necessary evil," justified on the grounds that it was an economic necessity. In an apologetic tone, the defenders argued that slavery as an evil would eventually die out under the beneficent influences of time and progress. But as a "necessary evil," slavery could not be abolished precipitously, for if it were the South would be plunged into chaos. (McPherson, p. 49-50) This justification was also predicated on the beliefs that:

The opportunities that the American society had to offer encouraged free men to pursue their own interests—to strike out on their own. Consequently, free men were not willing to work for others. Without forced labor progress would not have been possible.

The defenders of slavery further contended that:

- a. Free men could not have pushed back the southern wilderness single handedly.
- b. Blacks were much more suited for the work that had to done.
- c. They could endure the blazing sun and were immune to malaria. They were physically stronger than whites and therefore could endure the grinding toil necessary in the production of tobacco, rice, cotton and sugar—something which

whites could not endure.

America was a Great Blessing, rich in natural resources and opportunity and if free men were to enjoy what America had to offer, they had to acquire slaves. "The opportunity to receive Christian instruction was compensation enough to the slave for his temporary loss of freedom."

In the years prior to the 19th century, during the post revolutionary period, many civic leaders began to condemn slavery as inconsistent with civil policy—as an insult to justice and Christian religion.

Thomas Jefferson thought the "abolition of slavery was the greatest object of desire" and Thomas Paine argued that the "government should in justice free the slaves and punish those who held them in slavery." (Craven)

The southern response to these criticism consisted of references to Biblical times, when Abraham and other worthies held slaves and to the realistic fact of the actual inequalities in nature. In response to the request to take immediate action on the matter of the slave trade, Southern congressmen argued that "Slavery, was a matter entirely reserved for state action; it was not a subject for congressional discussion . . ." Defending the existence of slavery, Congressman Jackson of Georgia argued:

"If my opponent is guided by that evidence upon which the Christian

system is founded, he will find that religion is not against it. He will see from Genesis to Revelation, the current setting strong that way.

There never was a government on the face of the earth, but what permitted slavery. The purest sons of freedom in the Grecian Republics, and the citizens of Athens held slaves. On this principle the nations of Europe are associated; it is the basis of the feudal system.

“All great societies in history , the argument went, rested on slavery or serfdom-- ancient Egypt, biblical Israel, Greece, Rome, the France of Charlemagne, the England of the Magna Charta. There was not a respectable system of civilization whose foundations were not laid in the institution of domestic slavery.”
(McPherson, p. 50)

In 1813, John Taylor of Caroline began a series of essays on slavery. He differed from his friend Thomas Jefferson and asserted that the case for emancipation did not rest upon fact. Blacks, Taylor argued

“were members of a vicious, degraded and morally inferior race, and their state was capable only of amelioration, not of progress toward freedom. Liberation would be of no value to the Negroes and disaster for the whites. Diffused through the territories, the

burden of slavery on the older states of the South might be lightened, but attack on the institution could result in nothing but insurrections, murders, and oppression.

To bolster their argument, Southern pamphleteers looked for historical and biblical precedence for slavery and began to advocate a caste society as the only basis for higher civilization. One advocate wrote:

“Slavery has ever been the stepping ladder by which countries have passed from barbarism to civilization. . . . the division of mankind into grades, and the mutual dependence and relations which result from them, constitutes the very soul of civilization; and the more numerous those grades are, in a country, the more highly civilized may we expect to find it.”

Southerners dismissed the Declaration of Independence as an overindulgence in French philosophy by a young and enthusiastic Thomas Jefferson, arguing the Declaration of Independence had no connection with social realities. To the charge that holding humans in bondage was a crime the defenders flatly denied it and vehemently insisted that slavery was nothing more than a political evil.

The defense of slavery continued to be half apologetic as long as the attack against it was not aggressive. However as the decades of the 1820s

and 1830s unfolded, the tone of the pro-slavery advocates changed. The Compromise of 1820, the Denmark Vesey Revolt in 1824, the publication of the David Walker's Appeal in 1829, the Nat Turner revolt in 1830, and the publication and dissemination of the anti-slavery newspaper, "The Liberator" in 1831, brought to the attention of the Southerners the dangers of unrestricted criticism. To them the call for action against slavery was seen as an attack against the Southern civilization.

In 1822, a group of southern intellectuals, plantation holders and writers issued "A Refutation of Calumnies against the Southern and Western States Respecting the Institution and Existence of Slavery."

This document lashed out at the Northern and Eastern regions of the country, which, it was argued had grown rich from the slave trade and who now denounced the existence of slavery by misrepresenting the condition of the slave and the South, thus jeopardizing the southern way of life. The document denounced what it perceived as an attack on Southern constitutional rights.

The document further argued that the North and the East were ignorant of Southern realities. They knew nothing about the actual state and character of the "Negro."

Slavery had been sanctioned by God.

Slavery was an old institution and had played a role in the building of world civilization.

There was no possible way white men could survive the hot climate and swamps of the South where rice and cotton were grown. "The African's constitution made it possible for him to survive under such condition." In fact, "The African thrived under these conditions and his immunity to malarial diseases made possible the production of the useful articles of food and commerce."

Southerners were both Christian and humane. The slave was fully protected from abuse both, by law and by public sentiment. He was far better off than many of the poor in the free society. He was well fed, clothed and sheltered and was not over worked and was not abused..

In 1823, Richard Furman, the president of the Baptist State Convention in South Carolina responded to the charge that there was injustice in depriving Blacks their freedom by pointing out that many slaves had been brought from Africa. Hence, they were ignorant and unfit in their present state to enjoy liberty. As slaves in America they could be and were being Christianized. Their social economic status was equal if not superior to that of the poor—Yes, some masters were cruel- and so were some magistrates, husbands and fathers. But this did not mean that they were wicked—

And so the argument continued.

In 1832, the position of the pro-slavery advocates defense was presented in a cohesive and comprehensive summary by Professor Thomas Dew of William and Mary College in Virginia. He turned to history to find not a race of free men but of slaves. He argued:

1. From the earliest times through misfortune, crime and economic necessity men were in bondage–
2. The progress of mankind from primitiveness to civilization began when captives of war were put to work instead of death . . . Where slavery was there civilization flowered.

Dew continued:

Modern slavery had benefitted Blacks even as they had benefitted civilization. They had been taken from the horrors of Africa, brought to a civilization that had made them economically valuable and assured them kind treatment and excellent care. Unfit by nature for freedom, Blacks found in slavery that sense of security that alluded the half-starved and exploited free white labor. It would be impractical to free the slave. Not only would

such an action bankrupt the Southern economic, but freedom would be detrimental to Blacks because they would be subject to societal hostility and poverty.

Dew also argued that the evils charged against slavery had been exaggerated. The Scriptures did not condemn slavery. Slave holding did not debase whites. But rather those who owned slaves had human and virtuous feelings.

Slavery, Dew maintained, did not interfere with the republican spirit and form of government. Instead it made democracy possible by bringing all white men "to one common level. . . .The menial and low offices of society being all performed by Blacks, there is at once taken away the greatest cause of distinction (among white men) and separation of ranks of society."

In 1837, John C. Calhoun described the nature of Southern slavery:

"It has compelled us to the South to look into the nature and character of this great institution and to correct many false impressions. . . . Many in the South once believed that it was a moral and political evil. . . .we now see it in its true light and regard it as the most safe and stable basis for free institutions in the world."

Then, Calhoun pronounced slavery as a "positive good!"

Two decades later Senator James H. Hammond, also from South Carolina, recalled the days when misguided Southerners “. . . believed slavery to be an evil–weakness–disgrace–nay a sin . . . and in fear and trembling they awaited a doom that seemed inevitable. But a few bold spirits took the question up–they compelled the South to investigate it anew and thoroughly, and what is the result?” Hammond concluded: “Why it would be difficult to find a Southern man who feels the system to be the slightest burthen on his conscience.” (McPherson, p. 50)

As the pro-slavery advocates launched their counter attack against the abolitionists, they employed various tactics. They took steps to spurn outside criticism and suppress internal dissent. After the Nat Turner revolt in 1831, Southern states imposed new restrictions on both blacks and whites, in the name of preserving order. Almost every state passed laws limiting freedom of speech and of the press. Louisiana, legislated penalties ranging from twenty-one years to hard labor to death–for speeches or writings “having a tendency to promote discontent among free colored people, or insubordination among slaves.” In several states the justices of the peace or other official were empowered to confiscate objectionable material sent through the mails. In other communities vigilance or public safety committees were created to employ “all energetic means in ferreting out and detecting any person or persons that may attempt to circulate among the

community, any pamphlet, tract or other seditious publication of any kind whatever, or tampering with slaves, with a view to excite insurrection.” Strangers, especially “Yankees,” were objects of suspicions and scrutiny. Hotel guest’s luggage was subject to search. Pamphlets and books, novels, essays, poems sermons and scientific treatises, all explaining the value of slavery published and disseminated. Organizations sponsored essay contest and gave prizes for the best essay written on the defense of slavery. And when ***Uncle Tom’s Cabin*** appeared, 15 novels were written in response.

In 1855, a Richmond newspaper warned Southerner that they must keep their young men at home instead of sending them away to college in the North, where unwary youth would be exposed to the danger of imbibing doctrines subversive of all old institutions and of all the established tents respecting religion, law, morality, property and government. “Young Southern men should be educated at home where their training would be moral, religious and conservative—where they would never learn or read a word in school or out. . . . inconsistent with orthodox Christianity, pure morality, the right of property, the sacredness of marriage. (Craven, pp. 301-302)

When the abolitionist charged that the church should become active in the crusade against slavery, Southern ministers countered with

1. It was the purpose of the church to promote universal good.
2. God had permitted such evils as poverty, sickness and

slavery.

3. The business of Christian people was to ease the harshness of their lives and wring a blessing from each curse.

4. Slavery should be made patriarchal and humane.

5. Black should be Christianized and trained for greater

usefulness.

The Southern clergy also pointed to the apostle Paul urging slaves to obey their masters and advising runaway slaves to returning to their masters. In 1850, a clergyman's pamphlet, entitled *A Defense of the South Against the Reproaches and Encroachments of the North: In Which Slavery Is Shown to Be an Institution of God Intended to Form the Basis of the Best Social State and the Safeguard to the Permanence of a Republican Government* summed the position of the Southern Church on slavery.

In response to the charge that slavery was un-American, Southerners argued that

"It was nearer to the truth to assert that no man was ever born free and no two men were ever born equal. . . it was the order of nature that men should enslave each other as . . . other animals prey upon each other."

Black were only fit to be slaves. This idea was based on the belief that Blacks had heat resisting skin, was immune to tropical diseases and lacked

nervous irritability. They were a total lost to mankind as freeman.

Science offered a defense for slavery. Scientists commented on:

1. The size and shape of the Black man's head, concluding that Blacks had smaller brains and a greater sexual appetite than whites.
2. Blacks had a peculiar backbone and nervous system.
3. Dr. Josiah Notts argued that Blacks and whites evolved from different species. He concluded:

"Physical forced did not change one species into another. They could not turn a white man into [a Black man]. The two races had existed, without change in physical character for thousands of years and nowhere could relationship between the two be shown. Since man in body is an animal it was logical to suppose there might be different species in the human race."

George Fitzhugh, a member of Virginia's tidewater gentry, wrote a number of articles about the "failure of free society." In 1857 he published some of those essays in the book *Cannibals All*. Fitzhugh charged that "Capitalism was a war of each against all, a form of social cannibalism. Slavery on the other hand, was an ancient institution that guaranteed the employer's paternal interest in his workers. "What a glorious thing to man is

slavery, when want, misfortune, old age, debility and sickness over take him." All the problems of the North stemmed from its belief in the false doctrine that all men are created equal. "Men are not born entitled to equal rights," he writes. "It would be far nearer the truth to say that some were born with saddles on their backs, and other booted and spurred to ride them; and the riding does them good. . . . Slavery is the natural and normal condition of the laboring man, whether white or black. . . . We slaveholders say you must recur to domestic slavery, the oldest, the best, and most common form of Socialism." (McPherson, p. 114) Thus, In his response to the abolitionists, Fitzhugh indicted the system of capitalism charging that it had been a failure, resulting in the exploitation of the weaker elements of society. He argued that the conditions of poor white free laborers had at all times been far worse than that of the slaves. The only practical alternative was to afford the benefits of slavery to all weaker elements of society.

Fitzhugh's indictment of freedom in the North, though it was a bit extreme, was not new to the debate over slavery. In 1856, a New Orleans's newspaper reported that in the Northern states "free society had proved a failure. It was rotten to the core." George McDuffie, the former governor of South Carolina, stated that "the laboring population of no nation on earth are entitled to liberty, or capable of enjoying it." A Georgia newspaper printed "Free Society! We sicken at the name. What is it but a conglomeration of

greasy mechanics, filthy operatives, small-fisted farmers, and moon-struck theorists. . .hardly fit for association with a southern gentleman's body servant." (McPherson, p. 115)

During the financial Panic of 1857, the South underscored Southern success with the institution of slavery and the superiority of their agrarian economic system. While many Northern businesses failed, banks closed and factories shut down during the depression. This of course, caused unemployment and suffering among Northern workers during the winter of 1857 – 1858. In the meantime, cotton prices held steady and cotton crops set new records. In his famous "King Cotton" speech delivered before the United States Senate on March 4, 1858, Senator James Hammond boasted that Southerners were "unquestionably the most prosperous people on earth," It was only the continued exports of cotton that saved the north—saved the country from economic ruin. This was conclusive proof of slavery's virtues. Hammond goes on to say to the North:

. . . your whole hireling class of manual laborers and "operative" as you call them, are essentially slaves. . . . In all social systems there must be a class to do the menial duties, to perform the drudgery of life. . . . It constitutes the very mudsill of society. . . . Fortunately for the South, she found a race adapted to that purpose. . . . We use them for our purpose, and call them slaves. . . . Yours are white.

(McPherson, p. 115)

In carefully assessing the debate over slavery, it is fair to conclude that the pro-slavery advocates in their response to the abolitionists presented a sophisticated as well as practical argument. It was not just a question of morality, a question of principles. For the Southerners, it was a question of survival—the preservation of their civilization and maintenance of what they believed was the natural order of the universe. They argued that civilization had evolved from the existence of slavery—That slavery was the natural order of life. Slavery had served as means for slave holders to fulfill their Christian obligation. It had served as a means to preserve social order, prevented crime and as a means to protect Blacks from themselves.

Pro-slavery advocates saw the abolitionist attack as a threat to the Southern aristocratic way of life as well as a threat to society. The abolitionists had presented no practical solutions to the problems that would occur after the slave had been freed. Every plan for Black freedom was impractical.

Slaveholder spoke in terms of their own personal experience—their own sense of morality and reality. Slavery had proven to be economically and socially worthwhile—It had worked—served its purpose. Therefore, according to the defenders of slavery no change was warranted.

