their fears by appealing to racial solidarity. In his words, “the centripetal force they relied most heavily upon was white supremacy. . . .” Only by stressing the non-slaveholders’ social and psychological stake in slavery as a system of racial control could they hope to maintain a united front against a Republican-dominated government that was thought to be bent on the “ultimate extinction” of the institution.

The central role of “dominative racism” as a rationale for secession and a defining feature of southern nationalism was most vividly set forth in Alexander Stephens’ famous “cornerstone speech,” delivered shortly after his election as Vice President of the Confederacy in 1861. “Many governments have been founded on the principles of subordination and servitude of certain classes of the same race,” he explained; “such were, and are, in violation of the laws of nature. Our system commits no such violation of nature’s laws. With us, all the white race, however high or low, rich or poor, are equal in the eyes of the law. Not so with the Negro. Subordination is his place. He, by nature, or by the curse against Canaan, is fitted for that condition which he occupies in our system.” The basis of the new Confederate government was precisely this great truth: “Its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests upon the great truth that the Negro is not equal to the white man, that slavery—subordination to the superior race—is his natural or normal condition.”

An uncompromising commitment to white supremacy was thus a central and unifying component of the separate southern identity that crystallized on the eve of the Civil War. The North was also a prejudiced society in the sense that its white population was generally hostile to blacks and accepted the prevailing belief that they were inferior to whites. But the legalized racial discrimination that existed in the North created an ideological anomaly because it failed to jibe with a growing commitment to middle-class democracy and an open competitive society. Hence it was peripheral or even contradictory to the larger social and political aims of a reformist leadership and could be jettisoned in good conscience or even with self-righteousness. But without its commitment to hierarchical bi-racialism the South was not the South. Only by drawing on the region’s deep and salient sources of racial anxiety could the architects of the Confederacy muster the conviction and solidarity necessary for a sustained struggle for independence.

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The Secession Crisis

Steven A. Channing

SECESSION IN SOUTH CAROLINA

Steven A. Channing’s treatment of South Carolina’s secession is noteworthy for its claim that the Carolinians’ decision was based not so much on the need to protect slavery as on a deep concern about an imminent loss of control over blacks. That is, fear of racial unrest drove them into secession.

If fear, amounting to hysteria, propelled them, then they undertook secession in an atmosphere of frenzy wherein rational calculation was virtually impossible. By stressing irrationality, Channing suggests that so drastic a move as secession could not occur without some degree of passion and excitement. Indeed, it is inconceivable that a war could break out or a revolt begin in an atmosphere of calm. But that does not necessarily mean that secession itself was an irrational, perhaps paranoid, course of action. It could, as Channing implies, flow logically from the fears already aroused.

Steven A. Channing (born 1940) is the author of Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina (1970), from the conclusion of which this selection is taken.

The secession of South Carolina was an affair of passion. The revolution could not have succeeded, and it certainly would not have instilled the astounding degree of unanimity in all classes and all sections that it did, were this not so. The emotional momentum was a function of the intensity of the fear which drove the revolution forward. Divisions, doubts about the wisdom or efficacy of secession were met, or overturned. The ostensible leaders of the movement could not agree on whether they had created this tempest, or had themselves been picked up and carried along by it. Barnwell politician Alfred Aldrich described events in terms which Rhett [Robert Barnwell Rhett was probably the leading secessionist in South Carolina], and many others could appreciate.

I do not believe the common people understand it, in fact, I know that they do not understand it; but whoever waited for the common people when a great move was to be made. We must make the move & force them to follow. This is the way of all revolutions & all great achievements, & he who waits until the mind of every body is made up will wait forever & never do any thing.

But there were many of Aldrich's associates who strongly disagreed with this description. Poet William Gilmore Simms drew endless pictures of the "landsturm," his romantic image of the essentially popular nature of the movement for secession. Alfred Huger, with his accustomed anxiety warned his friend Joseph Holt that "this revolution is beyond the reach of human power. . . . We have no leaders of any prominence," Huger lamented, "the masses are in the front-ranking and cannot be restrained." Such a state of affairs did not frighten everyone. Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, then president of South Carolina College in Columbia, wrote to the editor of the Richmond Enquirer on December 6 to refute charges that the secession movement in Carolina had been "gotten up" by the politicians for their own selfish purposes.

Never was there a greater mistake. It is the result of one universal outburst of indignation on the part of the people at Lincoln's election—the unanimous and almost spontaneous resolve, from the mountains to the sea-board, that they never should come under Black Republican rule. . . . You might as well attempt to control a tornado as to attempt to stop them from secession. They drive politicians before them like sheep.

Where was the truth in the kaleidoscope of power? Which way did the lines of action-reaction go, and who ruled whom? Textbook truths usually lie "somewhere in the middle." The answer to this riddle of authority and response probably rested in a like balance. Much has been written to show the deep division of the Southern people, including South Carolinians, on the question of secession. It nearly failed, it is said. More to the point is the fact that it was at last consummated. Against the twin forces of Unionism and fear of secession the revolution carried the day. Analyzing political feeling in the state, all who supported the movement were, of course, pro-secessionists, and many of those who opposed immediate action were disunionists as well. Of those who resisted separate secession many may certainly be described as either timid men, men who wanted security, saw it in Southern nationalism, but also feared the unknowable changes that a revolution might bring; men who wanted secession to come, but only as a cooperative venture by a sizable portion of the slave states; or men who believed disunion to be inevitable, if not desirable, but craved some "overt act" of aggression by Lincoln to cite for their consciences and the eye of history. That immediate secession triumphed over these sentiments is the remarkable phenomenon, not the fact that there was still a voice of conservatism in the lower South. Secession has been castigated as a usurpation because a majority allegedly did not support it wholeheartedly; yet these same historians applaud the glories of the American Revolution when all agree that barely one-third favored independence.

The Secession Convention which came together in Columbia on December 17, and in Charleston three days later signed the declaration creating the independent republic of South Carolina, was as representative as it was distinguished. The wealthy, the powerful, the famous were there, as were many unassuming figures from every district across the state. Some had been elected as the traditional leaders in their home districts and parishes. Others perhaps gained the vote of their neighbors at the election on December 6 because of their ardent work for the revolution; one of the representatives from Williamsburg District had gained fame in his association with the Kingstreet Star during its campaign against abolitionist influences in the region. The people had indeed responded to Lincoln's election with a ferocious roar; but that in part had been planned and hoped for by men such as Aldrich. Still, once those potent fears of secession which so damaged the plans of disunionists elsewhere were mollified or quelled in South Carolina, the movement for secession was a popular revolution. Simms's "landsturm." Shortly after the consummation of secession, Isaac Hayne wrote Charles Cotsworth Pinckney, Jr., to tell him the good news. The feeling in favor of the step throughout the state was so strong, Hayne wrote, that no one, not even the old gadflies [Benjamin F.] Perry and [James L.] Orr, had dared to oppose the onward current. When the signed ordinance was read in Institute Hall a thunderous shout filled the large chamber, and Hayne, "who put but little faith in the shout of the mob, felt at last that in this, the people were in earnest." Affairs had been put into such shape by the leaders as to compel a decision for secession. The people did not hesitate to
endorse the compulsion. Plebiscitory democracy triumphed in South Carolina.

Secession was the product of logical reasoning within a framework of irrational perception. The party of Abraham Lincoln was inextricably identified with the spirit represented by John Brown, William Lloyd Garrison, and the fugitive incendiary conceived to be lurking even then in the midst of the slaves. The election of Lincoln was at once the expression of the will of the Northern people to destroy slavery, and the key to that destruction. The constitutional election of a president seemed to many, North and South, an unjustifiable basis for secession. But it was believed that that election had signalled an acceptance of the antislavery dogmas by a clear majority of Northerners, and their intention to create the means to abolish slavery in America. Lincoln was elected, according to South Carolinians, on the platform of an "irrepressible conflict." This, as James Hammond believed, was "no mere political or ethical conflict, but a social conflict in which there is to be a war of races, to be waged at midnight with the torch, the knife & poison." Submission to the rule of the Republicans would be more than a dishonor. It would be an invitation to self-destruction. Implementing the power of the Presidency, and in the time the rest of the Federal machinery, slavery would be legally abolished in time. What would that bring? Baptist minister James Furman thought he knew.

Then every negro in South Carolina and every other Southern State will be his own master; nay, more than that, will be the equal of every one of you. If you are tamed enough to submit, Abolition preachers will be at hand to consummate the marriage of your daughters to black husbands.

South Carolinians were repeatedly called on to explain the reasons for secession to their uncomprehending Northern friends and relatives. The description these Northerners received of the dominant new party—and of themselves—must have shocked them. "Who are these Black Republicans?" Sue Keitt, wife of the congressman [Lawrence M. Keitt], wrote to a woman in Philadelphia. "A motley throng of Sans culottes and Dames des Halles, Infidels and freebooters, interspersed by Bloomer women, fugitive slaves, and," worst of all, "amalgamationists." The Republican party was

the incarnation of all the strange and frightening social and philosophical doctrines which were flourishing in free Northern society, doctrines which were not only alien but potentially disruptive to the allegedly more harmonious and conservative culture of the slave South. It has been suggested that slavery was merely a handle seized upon by extremists in both sections to wage a battle founded in far deeper antagonism. The election of 1860 proclaimed to the South that it must accept a new order of consolidation, industrialization, and democratization. According to this interpretation, secession spelled the rejection of these terms for the preservation of the Union by the old ruling classes.

There is no doubt that those who dominated political life in South Carolina feared the nature of the new social order rising in the North, and feared the party that stood for this order. "The concentration of absolute power in the hands of the North," Lawrence Keitt predicted, "will develop the wildest democracy ever seen on this earth—unless it shall have been matched in Paris in 1789—What of conservatism?—What of order?—What of social security or financial prosperity?" Many Carolinians believed that two separate and distinct civilizations existed in America in 1860, one marked by "the calculating coolness and narrow minded prejudices of the Puritans of New England in conflict with the high and generous impulses of the cavalier of Virginia and the Carolinas." By pecuniary choice and racial compulsion the South had "opted" for slavery and out of that decision had arisen a superstructure of social attitudes and institutions which marked the uniqueness of the slaveholding South.

Moreover, just as Northerners failed to comprehend the Southern view of the world, many Carolinians refused to admit that there was, or could be, any moral or idealistic quality in the anti-slavery pillar of the Republican party. Hammond affirmed that if the Republicans could have been defeated at the polls in 1860 and 1864, abolitionism would have been abandoned, for "no great party question can retain its vitality in this country that cannot make a President." A number of his fellow citizens declared that they too rejected the "mock humanity" of the Republicans. The issue was one of political power, they said, of controlling the national government, of party spoils. There was an almost pathetic element in this refusal to admit, and inability to see, the sincerity of the moral quality of abolitionism. Nevertheless, particularly in the private
correspondence of unassuming soldiers and farmers, one can see frequent references to resistance to the threat of Northern despotism, to the need to protect certain vaguely understood "rights and privileges," often guaranteed by the Constitution. "I care nothing for the 'Peculiar institution'" claimed one former Unionist, "but I can't stand the idea of being domineered over by a set of hypocritical scoundrels such as Summer, Seward, Wilson, Hale, etc. etc."

Still, the conclusion is inescapable that the multiplicity of fears revolving around the maintenance of race controls for the Negro was not simply the prime concern of the people of South Carolina in their revolution, but was so very vast and frightening that it literally consumed the mass of lesser "causes" of secession which have inspired historians. James Hammond recognized the question of economic exploitation, and the fact that Southerners believed in Northern financial and commercial domination is clear. Nonetheless, the issue went virtually unnoticed in private exchanges throughout the year. Some leaders denounced what they thought was the injustice of the colonial status of the economic South, but this did not touch the hearts of the people, great and low. Attempts to organize such devices as direct steamship trade with Europe, use of homespun cloth, and conventions to promote Southern economic self-sufficiency were, like the more transparent plans for commercial non-intercourse, aimed at wielding the economic power of the region to gain political ends, specifically an end to agitation of the slavery question.

The glorious potential of an independent Southern nation held great emotional appeal for many, but no one was prepared to enter into the perilous business of nation building without some more basic incentive. South Carolina's spokesmen revelled in the contemplation of the political, economic, and social power of the South. They were eager to prove to the North and to the entire world that the South could establish a great nation in her own right. Yet who could fail to see that this was in part a rationalization for the strong desire to escape the moral obloquy heaped upon slaveholders by the North for so many years past; in part an element in the pro-slavery argument, which held a civilization based upon the peculiar institution to be the highest possible culture; and in part a function of the secession persuasion designed to attract and calm adherents to the cause.

As for the "dry prattle" about the constitution, the rights of minorities, and the like, there never was any confusion in the minds of most contemporaries that such arguments were masks for more fundamental emotional issues. [William Henry] Trescot welcomed the speeches of William Seward because they eschewed textual interpretations of the Constitution, and frankly posed the only true and relevant question: "Do the wants of this great Anglo Saxon race, the need of our glorious and progressing free white civilization require the abolition of negro slavery?" Charles Hutson, son of William F. Hutson, a Beaufort rice planter and a signer of the secession ordinance, phrased the matter more directly. Writing from an army camp near Mt. Vernon, Virginia, in September 1861, Hutson commented on a sermon which described the cause of secession as the defense of the noble right of self-government. "It is insulting to the English common sense of the race which governs here," the young soldier retorted, "to tell them they are battling for an abstract right common to all humanity. Every reflecting child will glance at the darkey who waits on him & laugh at the idea of such an abstract right." And when the family of planter John Berkeley Grimball was torn apart by the secession crisis, his son Louis bitterly denounced his sister for charging that South Carolina had willfully destroyed the Union. "What are you writing?" he gasped. "You speak as if we are the aggressors, and would dissolve the union in Blood shed upon a mere abstract principle, when the fact is we are oppressed and are contending for all that we hold most dear-our Property-our institutions-our Honor-Aye and our very lives!"

To understand what the revolution was all about, he advised his sister to return home from the North, and become a slaveholder herself. So, writing on a broader canvas, Arthur Perroneau Hayne assured President Buchanan that his acquiescence in secession was a noble act of humanity to the white people of the South.

Slavery with us is no abstraction—but a great and vital fact. Without it our every comfort would be taken from us. Our wives, our children, made unhappy—education, the light of knowledge—all lost and our people ruined for ever. Nothing short of separation from the Union can save us.

The people of 1860 were usually frank in their language and clear in their thinking about the reasons for disunion. After the war,
for many reasons men came forward to clothe the traumatic failure of the movement in the misty garments of high constitutional rights and sacred honor. Nevertheless, there were two “abstract rights” which were integral to secession, state sovereignty and property rights. No historian could surpass the discussion of these questions by wartime governor Andrew Gordon Magrath. From the fastness of his imprisonment in Fort Pulaski in 1865 Magrath looked back upon the cause of secession with a detachment which had not yet been colored by the sterilization and obfuscation of the post-war remembrance. There were tangential reasons for the revolution, Magrath allowed, but the central “motive power” was the belief that the ascendancy of the Republican party threatened to disturb their “right of property in slaves.” To his credit, Magrath did see the rich variety of implications enmeshed in this property right. For those who did not own a slave, Lincoln’s election implied that they might never be able to purchase that essential key to social and economic elevation. In addition, the former jurist understood that the people of the antebellum South conceived slavery to be the basis of stability for their social order, the foundation of their economy, and the source of their moral and cultural superiority. State sovereignty was an issue only because the retreat to the inviolability of state’s rights had always been a refuge for those fearful of a challenge to their property. Certainly, the “right of property in slaves” is closer to the heart of the problem than “fear of the antislavery movement,” or similar propositions which raise more questions than they answer.

Mid-nineteenth century Americans lived in an age of romanticism. Men had fought for lesser glories than independence and Southern nationalism; and once the terrible momentum was begun, who could say for certain what myths, compulsions, and desires drove men on into revolution and civil war. But somewhere in the intellectual hiatus of the war the clear and concrete understanding of the cause of it all, an understanding shared by those who joined to tear away from the Union, was lost. For the people of South Carolina perpetuation of the Union beyond 1860 meant the steady and irresistible destruction of slavery, which was the first and last principle of life in that society, the only conceivable pattern of essential race control. Perpetuation of the Union, according to Senator Hammond, meant servile insurrection, and ultimately abolition. “We dissolve the Union to prevent it,” he told a Northerner in 1861, “and [we] believe, I believe it will do it.” Secession was a revolution of passion, and the passion was fear.

Here we have in charge the solution of the greatest problem of the ages. We are here two races—white and black—now both equally American, holding each other in the closest embrace and utterly unable to extricate ourselves from it. A problem so difficult, so complicated, and so momentous never was placed in charge of any portion of Mankind. And on its solution rests our all.

The nation was led into war in 1861 by the secession of the lower South, not by the desire of the Northern people either to end slavery or bring equality to the Negro. Subsequent generations of Americans came to condemn the racist fears and logic which had motivated that secession, yet the experience of our own time painfully suggests that it was easy to censure racism, but more difficult to obliterate it...