into the most national beings in the world”; they spoke of the danger of “the trammels of party,” of the “demoralizing influence of party spirit,” of “the hot party agitations which has [sic] for years past stirred up and floated into Congress some of the very drugs [sic] of society, too light and too filthy to comprehend any duty save that of obedience to party leaders.”

In Georgia speakers warned citizens of “old and effete political parties,” of “basely corrupt” leaders. They explained: “We have but little virtue, heroic virtue or patriotism now amongst our public men.” If Lincoln were elected he would use “patronage for the purpose of organizing in the South a band of apologists.” The governor guessed: “So soon as the Government shall have passed into Black Republican hands, a portion of our citizens, must, if possible, be bribed into treachery to their own section by the allurements of office.” Georgians hoped that secession would “sweep away the past corruptions of the Government.”

Perhaps at no other time in American history have so many people expressed disillusionment with political leaders and parties as in the South on the eve of secession. They feared the corruption emanating from the federal government and the North, but they also saw it eating away at the integrity of their own political structures. Secession became the vehicle of purification.

George M. Fredrickson

WHITE SUPREMACY AND THE AMERICAN SECTIONAL CONFLICT

In recent years, historians as well as Americans in general have become aware of the pervasiveness of racial prejudice and discrimination in the history of the United States. George M. Fredrickson has been one of the most penetrating analysts of the nature and role of racial thought and behavior in the nation’s past. In this selection from his magisterial comparison of race relations and slavery in the United States and South Africa, he discusses the impact of race on the coming of the Civil War.

After first claiming that racism was a central feature of the sectional conflict, Fredrickson then offers a complex and intriguing explanation of how racism actually shaped the contest that led to war. On the one hand, he acknowledges that the dominant white populations of both sections were racist, and therefore there was, on this score at least, little difference between them. On the other hand, the racial feelings of the South possessed a far greater intensity, he contends, than did their equivalents in the North. Indeed, so powerful and obsessive was southern concern to maintain white supremacy that it was fundamental to the region’s social and political existence.


In a provocative effort to reinterpret the causes of the American Civil War, the historian Allan Nevins wrote in 1950 that “the main root of the conflict (and there were minor roots) was the problem of slavery with its complementary problem of race-adjustment. . . . Had it not been for the difference in race, the slavery issue would have presented no great difficulties.” Subsequent scholarship has cast some doubt on this formulation, primarily by plumbing the depths of northern prejudice and discrimination. David Potter, writing in 1968, summed up this work as showing “that the dominant forces in both sections spurned and oppressed the Negro.” It was therefore “difficult to understand why the particular form which this oppression took in the South should have caused acute tension, as it did, between the sections.” The most compelling recent work bearing on the causes of the sectional struggle has tended to relegate racial attitudes to a subordinate position and has stressed irreconcilable differences in the hegemonic interests and ideologies of the dominant classes of the two sections.

But one does not have to deny importance to these broader configurations to recognize that racial considerations played a significant role in shaping and intensifying the conflict. The North as a whole may have had little use for blacks, and the dominant planter class of the South may have had a greater stake in slavery than simply racial control. But the question persists as to why the white South as a whole, and not just the slaveholding minority, reacted
with such intensity to the prospect of any tampering with slavery or limitation of its expansion. It also remains unclear how the North, with all its Negrophobia, could eventually consent to the sudden liberation of four million slaves on American soil, and, shortly thereafter, to their enfranchisement. Although very few white Americans actually endorsed the principle of racial equality on the eve of the Civil War, significant differences of opinion did in fact exist on the question of what racial differences meant for the future of American society.

Our prime source of confusion has been a failure to distinguish between what the psycho-historian Joel Kovel has described as the “dominative” and “aversive” varieties of “racism.” “In general,” he writes, “the dominative type has been marked by heat and the aversive type by coldness. The former is closely associated with the American South, where, of course, domination of blacks became the cornerstone of society; and the latter with the North, where blacks have so consistently come and found themselves out of place. The dominative racist, when threatened by the black, resorts to direct violence; the aversive racist, in the same situation, turns away and walls himself off.” Whatever its validity for other historical periods, this typology can be readily applied to antebellum sectional differences. It was the South that believed it needed blacks as a servile labor force and social “mudsill” (permanent menial class) and developed elaborate rationalizations for keeping them in that position. The North, on the other hand, revealed its basic attitudes in laws that excluded black migrants from entering individual states and in a spate of theorizing, especially in the 1850s, that advocated or prophesied the total elimination of the black population of the United States through expatriation or natural extinction. Some historians have even argued that a principal motive for the northern crusade to prevent the extension of slavery to the federal territories was an aversion to blacks.

But this contrast is misleading, and makes subsequent events incomprehensible, unless another distinction is introduced—namely a crucial difference in the salience of the racial attitudes that predominated. “Dominative racism” was a much more significant component of the southern world-view than “aversive racism” was of the northern. Hence it would be an easier matter for Northerners to subordinate their racial sensibilities to other considerations, such as the imperatives of nationalism or the desire for a consistent application of democratic-egalitarian principles. In the South it was necessary to translate all social and political values into racial terms; for it was not just slavery, but black slavery, that was the keystone of the social and economic order.

The specific developments leading to the sectional confrontation of 1861 take on an added dimension when viewed in the perspective of comparative racial attitudes. In the 1830s, a northern minority, for whom William Lloyd Garrison was the most prominent spokesman, caused a nation-wide furor by calling for the immediate abolition of slavery and eventual incorporation of freed blacks into American society as full citizens. Spawned by the evangelicalism of the “Second Great Awakening” and its millenarian or perfectionist offshoots, the abolition movement was a logical outcome of the spirit of radical reform that constituted one kind of response to the unsettling political, social, and economic changes of the Jacksonian era. As their own relations with blacks sometimes revealed, the abolitionists were not entirely free of the aversive prejudice that was widespread in the North. Where they differed from the majority was in their principled adherence to nonracial principles in the realm of public policy and social organization. The most effective sanction for their position was a literal interpretation of the Declaration of Independence. If “all men are created equal” and “endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights,” it was sheer hypocrisy for Americans to hold blacks as slaves and deny them the essential rights of citizenship. Many abolitionists, perhaps a majority, were not in fact convinced that blacks as a race were intellectually equal to whites. But to them this consideration was basically irrelevant. Like Jefferson, they grounded their belief in equality on the doctrine of an innate moral sense shared by all human beings rather than on an identity of rational capabilities. Furthermore, Christianity taught them that the strong had no right to oppress the weak; and the economic and political liberalism that they shared with most other Americans made no provision for competency tests as a basis for legal equality and participation in a free labor market. Although they condoned such “natural” inequalities as were based on achievement and cultivation, the abolitionists stood firmly against artificial barriers to the advancement of any individual or group. In a real sense, therefore, they represented the
egalitarian conscience of the competitive liberal-democratic society that was emerging in the North.

As is often the reaction of those condemned for not living up to their own principles, a northern majority responded to the abolitionist movement of the 1830s with bitter hostility. Antislavery meetings were broken up by mobs, and individual abolitionists were manhandled or even lynched. State legislatures all over the North passed resolutions condemning this new and militant agitation of the slavery issue. The common complaint against the abolitionists, and the one that was most likely to inspire violence, was that they threatened the supremacy and purity of the white race. Charges that the abolitionists promoted interracial marriage or "amalgamation" set off two of the most savage riots of the tumultuous 1830s—in New York in 1834 and Philadelphia in 1838. The participation of lower-class whites in these disorders was induced to a great extent by the status anxieties generated by a competitive society. For those who had little chance to realize the American dream of upward mobility, it was comforting to think there was a clearly defined outgroup that was even lower in the social hierarchy.

Among the better situated and more thoughtful critics of the abolitionists, another concern was the effect of this new crusade on the preservation of the Union and the success of the republican experiment. Conservative Northerners believed, with considerable justification, that sustained antislavery agitation in their own section would be viewed by the South as a threat to the constitutional "compromise" on slavery and an occasion for "calculating the value of the Union." But there was usually a more profound basis for objecting to the abolitionist program than a purely patriotic devotion to sectional peace and harmony. Since 1817, northern elites had given substantial support to the colonization movement with its unshakable conviction that a combination of white prejudice and black incapacity precluded full citizenship for freed slaves. Hence they endorsed the view that the abolitionist program of "immediate emancipation" would open the doors to the kind of heterogeneity and disorder that was deemed incompatible with the preservation of a stable republican government and a social order dominated by men of property. So long as the blacks remained in the United States in large numbers, they reasoned, it was better that they be firmly enslaved rather than becoming a discontented underclass with just enough freedom to provoke violence and chaos by agitating for their rights.

Despite the widespread northern revulsion to abolitionism in the 1830s and 40s, much of the slaveholding South was thrown into a panic by the very existence of such a movement. Although they clearly exaggerated the extent of northern support for Garrison and his immediate followers, the proslavery polemicists who emerged to do verbal battle with the abolitionists correctly sensed that northern opinion had a potential affinity for antislavery doctrines. Where the abolitionist position seemed most vulnerable was in its prescription of racial egalitarianism as the norm for American society. Partly for strategic reasons, therefore, the earliest defenders of slavery as a "positive good" chose to stress the argument that blacks were a distinct and inferior variety or species of humanity whose innate deficiencies—moral as well as intellectual—made them natural slaves permanently unsuited for freedom or citizenship. It followed that race was a necessary and proper criterion for determining social and legal status in any society that contained a large proportion of such natural "inferiors." This justification of Afro-American servitude as a legitimate application of the quasi-scientific doctrine that there were vast and irremediable differences in the character and capabilities of whites and blacks quickly became the dominant mode of proslavery apologetics in the United States. In his celebrated speech of 1837 defending the South against abolitionist assaults, John C. Calhoun gave central importance to racial distinctions: "where two races of different origin, and distinguished by color, and other physical differences, as well as intellectual, are brought together," he contended, "the relation now existing in the slaveholding states between the two is, instead of an evil, a good—a positive good."

Much of the popularity of the racial defense of slavery stemmed from the fact that its appeal extended far beyond the one-quarter of the southern white population that was actually involved in the ownership of slaves. It is sometimes forgotten that the South turned to a more militant defense of servitude at precisely the time when it was succumbing to Jacksonian pressures to extend the franchise and otherwise increase the democratic rights of the white population. One implication of an appeal to racism by slaveholders was to project an ideal of "Herrenvolk equality" by justifying equal
citizenship for all whites and a servile status for all blacks on the
grounds that there were innate differences in group capacities for
self-government. An ideological marriage between egalitarian de-
mocracy and biological racism pandered at once to the democratic
sensibilities and the racial prejudices of the "plain folk" and was thus
well suited to the maintenance of inter-class solidarity between plant-
ers and non-slaveholders with the South. It could also create a bond
between the southern planter elite and the insecure and often Ne-
grophobic lower-class whites who helped make up the rank-and-file of
the Democratic Party in the North. The Alabama "fire-eater" William Yancey summed up the Herrenvolk ideology before a northern
audience in 1860: "Your fathers and my fathers built this government
on two ideas; the first is that the white race is the citizen
and the master race, and the white man is the equal of every other
white man. The second idea is that the Negro is the inferior race."
In such a fashion, the contradiction between the principles of the
Declaration of Independence and the practices of slavery and racial
subordination—a prime source of the antislavery appeal—could be
overcome. Only whites were deemed to be "men" in the sense that
they qualified for natural rights. By placing a heavy stress on bio-
logical differences whites could conceive of themselves as democratic
while also being racially exclusive.

But not all white Southerners were entirely satisfied with such
a formulation. There was a tendency among an elite of slaveholding
intellectuals to deny the idea of equality more comprehensively. Yet
even these unabashed proponents of "aristocracy" as a universally
valid basis for social order found an important use for the concept
of biological inequality among races. It became a particularly con-
venient device for sorting out the "mud sill" from the more privileged
members of a hierarchical society. If all blacks were naturally "child-
like" creatures incapable of taking responsibility for themselves—
the standard image of the plantation myth—then it was justifiable
to subject them to a form of patriarchal rule inappropriate for adult
white males. All white men thereby became potential "aristocrats,"
and the conservative conception of a rank-ordered society could be
preserved without confronting the horrendous task of reducing
lower-class but enfranchised members of the dominant race to an
inferior civil status. In one fashion or another, therefore, the concept
of natural racial inferiority could serve to mitigate the conflict be-
tween the paternalistic and pre-modern aspects of the plantation
community and the individualistic, formally democratic social and
political order prevailing outside its gates. Depending on its context
or the audience to which it was addressed, the doctrine that there
were innate moral and intellectual differences between whites and
blacks could make the latter into perpetual children requiring pa-
ternal supervision or into a class of sub-humans who had to be
excluded from the community of enfranchised equals prescribed by
the liberal-democratic tradition.

If the slavocratic South and its northern sympathizers had
remained content with defending slavery where it was already es-
ablished as a necessary means of disciplining an allegedly inferior
race, it is unlikely that such a drastic sectional polarization would
have occurred in the 1850s. Abolitionism in its pure form remained
unpopular in the North, aversion to blacks continued to be the
dominant racial attitude, and it was generally acknowledged that
the price of union was a continued respect for the barriers against
antislavery action that had been entrenched in the Constitution. But
by this time a large number of Northerners had been so antagonized
by a southern defense of the principle of slavery that contravened
their conception of a democratic society, and so alarmed by what
they regarded as the deleterious social and economic consequences
of the institution, that they were prepared to resist strenuously any
efforts to extend its influence. The abolitionists had failed to arouse
much sympathy for blacks as human beings, but their secondary
contention that slavery degraded free white labor and retarded capi-
talistic economic development because it gave slaveholders an unfair
advantage in the competition for land, labor, and capital had struck
a more responsive chord. Consequently, the issue of the status of
slavery in the federal territories, which arose first in connection with
the vast areas acquired as a result of the Mexican War and then
resurfaced when efforts were made to organize the territories of
Kansas and Nebraska in 1854, became the direct source of sectional
controversy and conflict.

A northern conviction that Congress had the right and the
responsibility to ensure that the territories were "free soil" had first
emerged as the platform of a third party in 1848; after the Kansas-
Nebraska Act of 1854 opened up the area west of the states of Iowa
and Missouri to the possible extension of slavery, this idea became
the fundamental tenet of a new sectional party that had already won the support of a majority of northern voters by 1856. The early successes of the Republican Party stemmed in large part from a belief that there was a southern conspiracy to extend slavery, with all its blighting effects on the prospects for a free-labor economy, to frontier areas where it had no constitutional right to go. What was more, slavery had been expressly prohibited in the Kansas-Nebraska region by the Missouri Compromise of 1820. Consequently, the fury of Northerners who supported the new party was aroused by a sense that they were no longer dealing with a minority section that was simply exercising its constitutional rights by defending its “peculiar institution” as a local exception to a national pattern of free labor. They now saw themselves engaged in a struggle with an aggressive “slave power” that was seeking to make its labor system the national norm. Such expansionism, Republicans believed, would directly threaten the capacity of the North—and ultimately the nation as a whole—to realize its potential as a progressive, middle-class democracy based on a free-market economy.

Historians have cast doubt on the proposition that a coordinated and self-conscious “slave-power conspiracy” was actually behind the Kansas-Nebraska Act, but they are generally agreed that the territorial issue, once it was raised, provoked a militant response in the South that drove its leaders to contest every acre of the federal domain, whatever the actual prospects of slavery being permanently established there, and even in some cases to call for annexation of new territory south of the continental United States in the hope of establishing a “Caribbean slave empire.” The logic of the “positive-good” defense of slavery clearly justified its expansion, and long-standing fears of northern political dominance dictated efforts to prevent the admission of additional free states to the Union.

Direct concerns about black-white relations and the destiny of the black population in the United States affected this sectional quarrel in ways that may at first glance seem secondary or peripheral. Opponents of the Republicans, in both the North and South, attempted to discredit the new party by charging that it advocated the equality and even the amalgamation of the races. But Republican spokesmen, including Abraham Lincoln, generally responded to such demagogic accusations by professing their own commitment to white supremacy and then blaming slavery and the South for race mixing and the growth and spread of a black population within the United States. Many Republicans, again including Lincoln, advocated colonization or deportation of blacks as the only solution to the race problem. In the meantime, they sometimes condoned or even endorsed the discriminatory laws and exclusion from the suffrage that made blacks non-citizens in most of the northern states.

Despite the Republicans’ apparent acquiescence in white supremacy and their repeated disavowal of any attempt to interfere with slavery where it was already established, southern spokesmen and their northern sympathizers continued to invoke the prospect of a collapse of white control, followed by some type of racial cataclysm, as the worst disaster to be anticipated from the Republicans’ gaining national power. There is a strong temptation to dismiss such prophecies as either cynical propaganda aimed at a Negrophobic electorate or as the expression of some form of collective paranoia. But there was a strain of realism in the charge that Republicans were covert enemies of the kind of white dominance that the South believed essential to its survival. First of all, it was assumed—with some justification—that the Republican program for containing slavery to its present limits would mean its further demise. Indeed, Republican leaders occasionally admitted that their long-range goal was, in Lincoln’s words, to put slavery “on the path to ultimate extinction.” The notion that slavery had to expand or die was based partly on the economic imperatives of the institution; it had always required fresh lands to maintain its profitability, and the expectation of further growth of the plantation economy was essential to maintaining the value of the South’s enormous investment in human chattel. Any threat to the future of slavery as an institution was ipso facto an assault on white supremacy, or so it seemed at the time.

Historians, knowing how the South succeeded in re-establishing black subordination after the Civil War, may be tempted to disassociate racial concerns for the defense of slavery. If the South needed a model for subjugating blacks without owning them, it has been suggested, they needed only to look at the North, with its “black codes,” social segregation, and disfranchisement. But this point of view fails to take account of the antebellum perception of the crucial significance of racial demography. The orthodox position on the relationship of slavery and racial control, a view that
predominated in the South until it was disproved by the inventiveness of post-war segregationists, was set forth in 1844 by John C. Calhoun when he differentiated between the effects of abolition “where the numbers are few,” as in the North, and where blacks were numerous, as in the South. In the former case, the freedmen would rapidly sink to a degraded and “inferior condition.” “But where the number is great, and bears a large proportion to the whole population, it would be still worse. It would substitute for the existing relation a deadly strife between the two races, to end in the subjection, expulsion, or extirpation of one or the other. . . .”

The fear that any restriction on the ability of slavery to expand or any weakening of the power or authority of the master class would lead to an inter-racial struggle for survival was close to the heart of southern opposition to Republicanism. As the historian William Barney has pointed out, expansion was viewed not only as an economic necessity but also as “a racial safety valve.” To pen up the rapidly growing black population within the existing limits of the South would allegedly fuse a “Malthusian time bomb” and increase the danger of social chaos or even massive slave insurrection. Failure to allow the South to carry its surplus slaves into new territories, Jefferson Davis warned, would “crowd upon our soil an overgrown black population, until there will not be room in the country for whites and blacks to subsist in; and in this way destroy the institution and reduce the whites to the degraded position of the African race.

The lack of Republican sympathy for the white South’s racial plight might easily be attributed to a variety of ulterior motives. But, despite the “aversive racism” that Republicans often manifested, their fundamental ideology had no real place for racial domination of a legalized kind, and Southerners were correct in perceiving it as a potential threat to any kind of formalized and rigid racial hierarchy that they might devise. The northern middle-class conception of the good society, as reflected in Republican rhetoric, harbored no justification whatever for the existence of a permanent “mud-sill” class; the dominant social and political ideal was “equality of opportunity,” or, as Lincoln put it, “equal privileges in the race of life.” A competitive society would, of course, result in differences in wealth, power, and social status, but such inequalities would be “natural” and not the “artificial” result of caste distinctions. In the language of modern sociologists, Republicans stood for a social hierarchy based on achievement rather than ascription. This clashed sharply with the southern defense of a social order based on “hereditary privilege.”

To the extent that Northerners repudiated the principle of ascription and defined their own society in opposition to it, they were in fact denying legitimacy to their own practice of legalized discrimination against blacks. Since Republicans had no desire for a subordinated menial class, the only alternatives—at least in theory—were exclusion of blacks and the maintenance of racial homogeneity, or the establishment of a color-blind legal and political system. Clearly the preference in the 1850s was for exclusion or deportation; but when that proved impracticable, and when the North found a need for emancipation and a use for freed blacks during the Civil War, a dominant group was able to sublimate its racial prejudices and make an effort to live up to its egalitarian principles. The final fruit of Republican idealism, and a logical extension of its original principles, was Radical Reconstruction.

The Confederate cause, on the other hand, was not simply the defense of slavery as an institution, but also—and inseparably—a struggle to preserve a social order based squarely on “dominative racism.” Slaveholders had many reasons for valuing the peculiar institution; for them it was an obvious source of personal wealth, privilege, and prestige. James L. Roark is probably correct in his assertion that their “commitment to slavery was far more profound than the mere fear of black equality.” Nevertheless, the most plausible rationale that they could devise for their practice of enslaving other human beings was that blacks were moral and intellectual inferiors who would lead orderly and productive lives only if under the direct control of white masters. Not only did slaveholders believe this, but the urgent need to ensure the loyalty of the non-slaveholding white majority caused them to emphasize it increasingly as they mobilized the southern states for secession and civil war. As Roark has also pointed out, one of the greatest anxieties of secessionist planters was that class conflict would divide the whites, but they assured

*Moore’s formulation fails to make it clear, however, that the only form of ascription or hereditary privilege that could in fact achieve firm legitimacy in the South was derived from racial criteria.
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 serfdom 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.

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.