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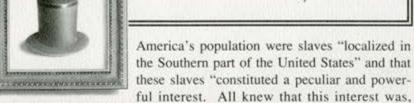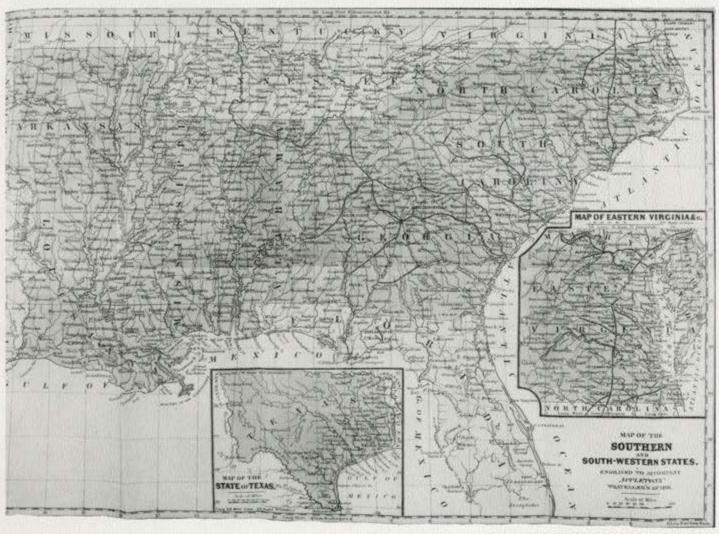
DEMOCRACY AND DESPOTISM WILLIAM W. FREEHLING'S *ROAD TO DISUNION: SECESSIONISTS AT BAY*

by Matthew Noah Vosmeier

In his Second Inaugural Address, Abraham Lincoln recalled the events leading to war and mentioned that one-eighth of America's population were slaves "localized in the Southern part of the United States" and that these slaves "constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war." Lincoln, from his Northern Whig and Republican perspective, believed he understood what part slavery had played in bringing war. He had witnessed sectional crises periodically throughout his life and had reentered politics in 1854 after being "thunder-

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The South as it appeared in *Appleton's Southern and Western Traveller's Guide* (1852). Given the difficulties of travel, such a guide would have been handy because it "contained a full and accurate description of the principal cities, towns, and villages, with Distances, Fares, etc," for journeys by rail, steamboat, canal, and stage. Note the few railroads outside of the southeastern states.

struck" by the news of the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Slavery had enabled the growth of an aggressive Southern minority that sought, in Lincoln's words, "to strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest" into the territories, and perhaps into the free states as well, thereby spreading the evil and closing off opportunity for capitalist expansion and free labor.

Although Northerners had come increasingly to distrust the "Slave Power," in his work *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis* (1942), David Potter explains how, to students of antebellum history, it often seems that "basic sectional differences preceding the war are like signposts pointing to the impending conflict. With hindsight to reinforce this viewpoint, it is difficult to remember that the Republican leaders during the secession crisis were quite habituated to chronic antagonism which had not produced war." Because they believed that a loyal majority of Southerners would not unite behind the slaveocracy's move toward secession and war, "there was no time throughout that period, when the Republican leaders did not look to Southern Unionism as the factor by which they would save the Union without either 'appeasing' or coercing the secessionists." [David Potter, *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942; New York: AMS reprint, 1979), pp. viii-ix]

Members of Lincoln's administration soon discovered their prediction about the citizens of the South was wrong, but they were not the only ones busily weighing secession's chances. William W. Freehling, in his recent work *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854*, writes that, in the South during the secession crisis, even the most extreme disunionists doubted southern loyalty to their cause and feared that there might not "ever, ever, ever, be *a* South" (p. 7).

America's sectional crises have often been viewed from a national perspective, that is, by focusing on political debates at the national level. Particularly in the past twenty-five years, however, historians have studied sectionalism and the move toward disunion in terms of the South's internal dynamic: how southern society developed a distinctive sense of identity and how its social and intellectual developments influenced the style of nineteenth-century national politics. Such research has yielded insights into the complexities of southern society. It has noted social diversity and political discord within state and local regions, yet has also recognized southern distinctiveness and a common unifying purpose.

Similarly, in his earlier work, *Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1816-1836* (1965), William Freehling focused his attention on the development of South Carolinians' political extremism as

they became increasingly anxious about slavery and tariffs. Now, in the first volume of a projected two-volume work, *The Road to Disunion*, published in 1990 by Oxford University Press, he combines these historical approaches: he takes a broader view of the South, but still relies heavily on South Carolina's extremists to propel his story. Journeying through seventy-eight years of southern history, he follows the road that leads ultimately to Jefferson Davis' inauguration at the Confederacy's provisional capital at Montgomery, Alabama. Along the way, he describes a complex and richly diverse society whose course is not predetermined. In fact, Professor Freehling finds reasons to object to previous

> portraits [that have tended] to flatten out the rich varieties of southern types.... whatever the interpretation, the image is usually of a [frozen] monolith .... The Southern world supposedly thawed only once, in the so-called Great Reaction of the 1830s. Then Thomas Jefferson's South, which considered slavery a terminable curse, supposedly turned into John C. Calhoun's South, which considered enslavement a perpetual blessing. Thereafter, little supposedly changed, little varied, little remained undecided...

> The truth — the fresh understanding that makes a new epic of the antebellum South possible — is that before and after the mid-1830s in the South, as well as the North, change was omnipresent, varieties abounded, visions multiplied (pp. vii-viii).

Thus, in this large work (565 pages of text), Freehling has accepted the daunting challenge of recounting the story of slave society as it shaped southern politics from 1776 to 1854. The latter year saw the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, a turning point in antebellum history. Until then, to southern disunionists, sectional crises along the "road to disunion" appeared not as signposts to secession, but as "little bumps on a trail wandering heaven knows where." After that point, however, "most of the South's greatest proslavery writers, ... uncomfortably close to the time of southern rebellion," attempted a "last-minute effort to forge a world, a world view, and a nation" that was distinctively southern. These secessionists, Freehling's main characters, are "the desperadoes in the Old South's story," for after being kept "at bay" for most of the antebellum period, "in 1861, to extremists' amazement, disunion triumphed." Volume Two, subtitled *Secessionists Triumphant*, will discuss the disunionists' efforts from 1854 to 1861 (pp. 453, ix, viii, ix).

Calling upon scholarly interpretations of the past quarter century with primary sources, and writing in a colorful, if sometimes sensational, narrative style, he emphasizes that southern society and political culture were shaped by the

paradoxical presence of both nineteenth-century "egalitarian republicanism," as he calls it, and slavery. Southern leaders, who were both statesmen and slaveholders, reflected these democratic and despotic traits in national politics as they defended the "peculiar institution."

Freehling lays the foundation for his story of a diverse South by looking at its society as it appeared nearing mid-century. Adopting the viewpoint of a traveler — and in part, using the travel diaries of such well-known mid-century observers as Frederick Law Olmsted, Frances Trollope, and Harriet Martineau — Professor Freehling early on describes the various Souths that one would see journeying from St. Louis to New Orleans, Charleston, Baltimore, and back. This was an extremely local world, where, particularly in the southwest, few and noninterchangeable railroads made a journey from New Orleans to Charleston into a "long, unforgettable week — if one made connections" (pp. 13-36).

Too, there was great variety in the South's population of planters, slaves, yeoman farmers, and town and city folk: the rising western "parochial lords of Gulf rivers," elitist South Carolinians "contemptuous of the go-getting nineteenth century," Virginia squires who looked to the ultimate termination of slavery and "occasionally speculated that their blacks might someday be diffused to Africa or drained to the south," and yeoman farmers, who "sometimes threatened to attack slavery, if slaveholders perpetuated white men's inequality in state governments" (pp. 26-34). Yet, in the midst of this diversity:

> Even where bondage was waning, slaveholders endured. Masters still lashed servants in barely-enslave Delaware and in half-free Maryland. Beyond this manumitting corner of the South, slavery's termination was called conditional on blacks' removal. Few hustled to hasten removal. African colonization was a dribble. Slave sales southward still left many enslaved northward. Decrees of future emancipation floundered in state legislatures. When outside agitators proposed speedier terminations, borderites objected. The South was *a* South in the most crucial consensus, an agreement that Southerners must unhurriedly decide the South's fate for themselves (pp. 35-36).

For Freehling, that last point is rather important because it indicates a southern characteristic that proslavery advocates would seek to exploit. They would use a "politics of loyalty" to slavery to coerce less-committed Southerners into supporting them in their defense of slavery.

Freehling explains the origins of this political behavior by describing how, in the South, "democracy and despotism, when forced to rub against each other in close quarters, intriguingly intermeshed to shape not just a politics but a world" (p. ix). Planter patriarchs, particularly South Carolinian elitists who rejected Jacksonian Democracy entirely, found it difficult to reconcile the newer nineteenth-century brand of "egalitarian republicanism" with slavery. In the former, governors relied more heavily on the support of common folk, while in the latter, they were clear masters. Suffering from these paradoxical roles — of patriarchal master and American democrat — slaveowning elites behaved in inconsistent ways toward other free and enslaved Southerners, and vice-versa.

In the chapters concerning these relationships, Professor Freehling takes a middle road through antebellum historiography. Focusing on the slaveowner's view of the slave, Freehling explains that this confusion of democracy and despotism resulted in an act in which masters, unsure of what their slaves really thought, almost convinced themselves that their potentially rebellious and dangerous slaves were really loyal servants. As part of this harsh and despotic institution, these masters preferred to see themselves as directors of a benevolent and paternal system of reciprocal obligations. Although they likened their slaves to dependent and "consenting children," the brutal realities of slavery exposed the illusion that it was a "domestic institution" under which slaves were members of an extended family. Thus, Freehling explains that, "The essence of their 'parenting' could only be inconsistency: disobedience only sometimes met with brutal lashing, patrols only sometimes sent out, a paternalism, in short, based on erratic employment of coercion" (pp. 60, 66).

For their part, slaves employed the charade to test the limits of the master's control, finding and exploiting "the inconsistent paternalist's weaknesses," usually through "day to day resistance" and by the creation of an African-American counterculture. Yet, Freehling reminds, posterity should remember both "the new truth that blacks partially controlled their own as well as whites' history and the old truth that whites controlled blacks in debasing ways." For in this "hybrid world where the democratic infiltrated the dictatorial, masters could rarely make mastering come out just right," leaving them worried about the fate of their slave society (pp. 81, 85, 96, 97).

Particularly after the appearance of southern studies such as those by Eugene Genovese and George Frederickson, historians have looked to discover how slavery shaped relations between the planter aristocracy and their poorer white nonslaveholding neighbors. Did the slaveowner see himself as ordained to govern both slaves and white nonslaveholders in a "paternal" and ordered society, and did this result in yeoman resentment and class tension? Or was the South influenced by the idea of a *Herrenvolk* egalitarianism, as

historians have termed it, in which all slaveholding and nonslaveholding whites were bound together as mutual governors of southern society, a notion that implies social unity and a common southern vision? Hoping that scholars will come to recognize that each of these interpretations "holds a critical truth," Freehling does not take sides, but rather settles in the middle of "these two historical camps," for "southern antebellum sources richly illuminate both phenomena" that are present in this "ruling-class schizophrenia" (pp. 572-573, note 1).

Freehling uses a novel, yet effective, narrative approach to try to capture the feeling of the relationship between planter and yeoman farmer. Adapting a conversation found in Olmsted's *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States*, published in 1856, he shows how racism and class tension were simultaneously present. The yeoman depends on the generous planter to gin his cotton and buy his corn, the latter explaining, *"Glad to help.... No way all folks can buy Yankees' durn gins. Folks gotta share. Otherwise Yanks gonna bust us all."* Uncomfortable about his dependence on the planter, the yeoman attempts to carry on a conversation as an equal, asking him about his plans for the day. When the planter tells of his leisurely day, *"Way nature meant it. Whites readin' and conversin' and directin' and blacks laborin' and sweatin' and servin'. Couldn't pay a white man to tolerate that blazin' sun,"* the yeoman "choked back rage," for, though he may hope to become a planter one day, for now, he himself labors daily in his fields. Upon parting, the planter thinks, *"Wonder why he gave me that dark look.... Thank heavens these fellas are usually friendly. With the whole world invading, white folk can't be fussing. Gotta move mountains to be brothers"* (pp. 46-47).

For those committed to the perpetuation of slavery, such conversations caused worry that "when the going got roughest, would nonslaveholders' loyalty to slavery measure up to slaveholders'?" Too, if slaveholders' ability to coerce their neighboring citizens was limited, writes Freehling: "The big question was whether authoritarians' modes of social control, half-democratic, half-despotic, could consolidate an ill-connected and sprawling realm, in some spots passionately for slavery — and in some spots content, in a passionless way, to watch slaves dribble away" (pp. 49, 36).

If southern opinion about slavery was not homogeneous regionally, neither was it changeless over time, as Freehling emphasizes in his discussion of the idea he calls the "Conditional Termination" of slavery. This notion had its origins in the early decades of the republic, when Enlightenment thought and white prejudice had induced republican

slaveholders such as Thomas Jefferson, uneasy about the institution, tentatively to seek abolition and colonization, but only after they believed white public opinion was prepared. Of course, neither private manumissions nor early plans for abolition ended the institution, but they did weaken it and hinder its expansion. For example, slavery was prohibited from the northern and mid-Atlantic states and the Northwest Territory, and in 1807, Congress instituted a national prohibition against the slave trade (pp. 123-127, 132-33, 138-139, 136).

By the 1830s, then, "slaveholder republicans' wary acquiescence in containment [of slavery] helped transform the Slavepower, in one generation, into the national republic's most apologetic and cornered power structure" (p. 142). Feeling "crimped and contained," "slaveholding perpetualists" concluded that Southern support for the "peculiar institution" must be strengthened:

> If the South was ever to be *a* South, actively warring against antislavery, Jeffersonians' passive failure to man the barricades had to be contested as aggressively as apologists' tame attempts to chip away at the institution. Thomas Jefferson epitomized why the fireeaters had to rally the irresolute. Such necessity profoundly shaped southern extremist politics (p. 122).

To be continued.

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