Did the Tug Have to Come?
A Critique of the New Revisionism of the Secession Winter

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Over the last quarter-century, several historians have reassessed the actors and political proposals that resulted in the firing on Fort Sumter and the genesis of war in 1861, and their interpretations lead principally in one direction: the foremost blundering politician was Abraham Lincoln, who killed compromise efforts out of fear that revising the Republican stand on no slavery in the territories would lead to the party’s demise; he shattered the possibilities of a peaceful reconstruction of the Union when he determined to resupply Fort Sumter instead of abandoning it. War, in short, was the fault of the leaders of the Republican Party, and the destructive fury of the war—some seven hundred to eight hundred thousand dead and a cost of upward of $9 billion—could have been avoided if the Republicans had been less partisan and more national in their outlook.1 This interpretation,

1. The original revisionists of the 1930s thought slavery was on its last legs; the limits of slavery’s expansion had been reached and therefore the slavery extension issue was dead; the politicians used the slavery issue for partisan advantage instead of leading the public to realize that its potency had ended; and irrationalism, New England imperialism, and evangelism (the ‘forces’ at work in the revisionist critique) ruined the creation of intelligent compromises, such as the ones offered by Stephen A. Douglas and John J. Crittenden. James G. Randall, “The Blundering Generation,” Mississippi Valley Historical Review 27 (June 1940): 3–28; Charles W. Ramsdell, “The Natural Limits of Slavery Expansion,” Mississippi Valley Historical Review 16 (Sept. 1929): 151–71; George Fort Milton, The Eve of Conflict: Stephen A. Douglas and the Needless War (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934). For a revisionist stressing the forces of evangelism and irrationality, see Avery O. Craven, The Coming of the Civil War (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1942). For calculations of the cost of the war, Claudia Dale Goldin and Frank D. Lewis,
similar to but different from those of the revisionists of the 1930s, may be faulted for numerous reasons. It tends to be too narrow in its understanding of the Republicans, it elides the role of southerners and especially their constitutionalism, it employs restricted counterfactuals instead of exploring the full range of possible actions, and it ignores the role of forces in producing secession and adamantine—therefore noncompromisable—positions.

The creators of the new revisionism, sometimes referred to as neorevisionists, has for its core authors Daniel W. Crofts, Nelson D. Lankford, Russell W. McClintock, David Goldfield, and William J. Cooper Jr. These authors have presented remarkable works of scholarship, and it may be safely asserted that there no longer remains any primary source in existence that has the capability of invalidating any interpretation of the genesis of the Civil War. Rather, the conflict of scholars over this subject now has to rely on logic, viewpoint, and comprehensiveness—it will not be decided by any known recitation of quotes, dating, or other evidence.2

Daniel Crofts can be credited with the current questioning of Lincoln’s role in the march toward war when he recounted the movements of Virginia’s conditional unionists trying to avoid a direct confrontation over Forts Sumter and Pickens. While he does not discount the activities of radical secessionists and the irreconcilable positions between Republicans and southerners over


the territories, he does insist that William H. Seward had a viable plan of non-coercion. In particular, he underscored the ideas of North Carolinian John A. Gilmer and Secretary of State Seward: the Confederacy as it existed up to April 12, 1861, was too weak to endure. It then had about 754,000 white males aged fifteen to sixty-nine and a total slave population of 2,300,000, but the Border South had 1,560,000 white males aged fifteen to sixty-nine and a total slave population of 1,638,000. The Confederacy extended for 565,000 square miles (including Texas; excluding that state, the CSA had 291,000 square miles), making it nearly impossible for the fledging nation to protect its borders, given its shrunken white male population.3 As a counterfactual, it takes little imagination to think that Mexico, with some aid from France or Britain, might have attempted a reconquest of Texas—and that the Confederacy would have been unable to prevent it. Thus Gilmer and Seward, and possibly others, foresaw the states of the Confederacy ultimately crawling back to the Union for defense. This counterfactual has merit. Beyond the possibility of an impotent Confederacy unable to maintain its independence, the neorevisionists have focused on the inadequacies of Abraham Lincoln. His tactic of “masterly inactivity” and public silence before he traveled to Washington has been highly criticized because all southerners needed some soothing words of reassurance about the sanctity of slave property within the slave states. Both Cooper and McClintock stress Lincoln’s overestimation of unionist sentiment throughout the South, his failure to understand the depth of southerners’ commitment to slavery, and his isolation from events. McClintock goes so far as to imply that in terms of understanding national trends, Lincoln really was a hayseed from the outlands.4 Moreover, the responsibility for the failure to compromise the issue of the extension of slavery (the Crittenden Compromise proposals) was due to Lincoln and his


party. The Republican Party was a momentary coalition of bickering factions held together only by the stand that Congress would prohibit the spread of slavery to any territory. While McClintock does accord the Republicans some honest antislavery sentiment, Cooper sees in them a more decided partisanship, motivated by the need to hold the Republican coalition together; that is, the welfare of party was more important than that of the nation. Cooper furthermore asserts that the Republicans knew slavery was not destined to advance any farther because southern staples would not grow in the remaining territories, that Republican fears of the nationalization of slavery were figments of the imagination, and that Republicans should have realized the immense economic power of their own section and not have worried about the influence of the slave South. Finally, Lincoln’s decision to resupply but not reinforce Fort Sumter may have been ingenious, but it was the affront that forced the CSA to assert its independence and to attack the fortress. In the end, Lincoln probably foresaw that his actions would lead to war, but he would rather risk war than bear the onus of retreat. However, his decision greatly enlarged the power of the Confederacy by leading to the secession of four more states.

This, plus many details about Lincoln’s blundering as an administrator, constitutes the neorevisionist narrative. There are some major elements lacking, many of which stem from an inability to appreciate Lincoln’s first inaugural and the dilemma that separate state secession created. In the neorevisionist treatment of Lincoln’s first inaugural, the attention seizes on the questions of whether Lincoln advocated recapture of federal property, continued possession of the property the federal government still controlled, or withdrawal from the seceded states in an effort to negotiate a peaceful reunion—in short, whether he assumed a belligerent or pacific stand. The first inaugural was


6. On Fort Sumter, see Lankford, Cry Havoc, 41–89; McClintock, Lincoln and the Decision for War, 239–53, 261–62, 279; Cooper, We Have the War upon Us, 255–68.

7. The neorevisionists have been far more interested in the changes Seward advised Lincoln make in his address than the address itself, which is usually dismissed in two pages or fewer; Lankford, Cry Havoc, 20–21; Cooper, We Have the War upon Us, 213–15; McClintock, Lincoln and the Decision for War, 198–99; Goldfield, America Aflame, 199. This has also been true of the admirers of Lincoln; Douglas Wilson spent most of his analysis of the first inaugural looking at how Lincoln handled Seward’s revisions of his draft: Douglas L. Wilson, Lincoln’s Sword:
far more incisive about the problem of secession than neorevisionist writing would have readers believe.

The Aggression of Secession

By the procedure of state conventions, seven individual states announced their departure from the Union. The essence of their actions, as well as their words, was that a state for any reason could exit the Union at will. It was the act of individual state secession that threw down the gauntlet that led to civil war.8 In his first inaugural, Lincoln emphatically dismissed the right of secession but his reasoning needs scrutiny to understand why secession threatened the Union and all representative government. After a considerable effort to demonstrate the Union was perpetual (which most historians have emphasized), Lincoln actually admitted it was not. His preeminent complaint was the states’ rights formulation that any state “upon its own mere motion can lawfully get out of the Union.” No such power was vested in the Constitution; and even if the Constitution were considered merely a compact, in the standard Calhoun version, a type of association, “can it, as a contract be peaceably unmade by less than all the parties who made it? One party to a contract may violate it—break it, so to speak—but does it not require all to lawfully rescind it?” After a further discussion of constitutional rights and stressing the importance of majority rule, the new president declared, “Plainly the central idea of secession is the essence of anarchy.”9

The potential of separate state secession confronting Lincoln needs to be made explicit. If the states could announce departure from the Union whenever they felt aggrieved, then a process of fracturing would occur


until the Union was reduced to a horde of small, weak entities. Once the precedent had been set, other states could claim it and act upon it. And the action would be propelled by state self-interest. Because acknowledgment of separate state secession meant fragmentation of the Union without end, it simply had to be repudiated. Lincoln’s charge of “anarchy” became part of his depiction of secession because state secession amounted to each state setting its own rules and ignoring general rules that all had agreed to obey; it was an individualism that knew no higher authority than itself. This was anarchy because each individual (state) was a law unto itself. If republican government, or self-government, generally became associated with the right of separate state secession, then indeed self-government was destined to disappear from the earth.10

Lincoln’s view of the potential dismemberment process that separate state secession could inspire was hardly original with him. Southerners had expressed it in the secession crisis of 1850–1851 when southern Unionism soundly defeated the states’ rights parties in Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia. At one Union Southern Rights Meeting in Georgia in 1851, a resolution said that if the Union were lost, “separation will follow separation, until the whole country is divided into little petty States and factions.” In Alabama, an editor argued that if “the false pride or unreasonable whims of a State are deemed sufficient reasons for its [secession] exercise, no year would pass without some one of the States throwing the whole machinery of govern-

ment into confusion, and, eventually, the Union would be shattered into a score of weak but hostile communities.”11 These thoughts were not lost in 1860–61. A North Carolinian wrote to Stephen A. Douglas in April 1861 that “a peaceable division of this Union is not admissible for if these States are Suffered to Secede and set up a government for themselves, other States may do so without any fear of Consequences[..] In that event our Government would be only a Government of form but destitute of the power[..]” Others warned peaceable secession was nonsense and that war loomed; secession meant the loss of the rule of law.12

More important for the question of war is that separate state secession had almost no supporters in the northern states. Republicans obviously rejected it, but so did the bulk of the Democrats, who, in the winter of secession, were a conflicted group. They blamed the antislavery sentiments of the abolitionists and Republicans for the upheaval in the Cotton South, and they insisted that coercion not be applied to states; the solution to secession could only be found in a compromise that welded back together the Union. Yet Democrats overwhelmingly found separate state secession an inadmissible doctrine.13

December 1860 Douglas anticipated the phrasing of Lincoln when he wrote August Belmont, “I must say however that I can never recognize or acquiesce in the Doctrine that any State can secede & separate from us without our consent.”

Southerners knew northerners did not countenance separate state secession and that conflict was in the offing if they ever put the theory into practice. The famous moment of the election of 1860 came when Douglas was in Norfolk, Virginia, in late August 1860. While reiterating his justification of popular sovereignty, he was handed two questions by William Lamb, a states’ rights editor: one, if Lincoln were elected, would the South be justified in leaving the Union even if Lincoln had not committed an overt act of aggression? and, two, would Douglas advise the administration to resist secession by the use of federal power? To the first, he responded, “I emphatically answer no.” To the second, the Little Giant said it was the constitutional duty of the president to enforce the laws and protect federal property. He argued against secession for the rest of the campaign, raising the ire of southern states’ rights secessionists. He also gave northern Democrats the chance to vent their anti-secession views, though the bulk of their commentary regarding the consent

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329–30, 335. Although James Buchanan has been condemned by many historians for his position on secession—it was illegal, but the federal government could not resort to coercion—he actually faithfully mirrored the ideas of Democrats and many other northerners; see William G. Shade, “‘In the Midst of a Great Revolution’: The Northern Response to the Secession Crisis,” and Daniel W. Crofts, “Joseph Holt, James Buchanan, and the Secession Crisis,” both in James Buchanan and the Coming of the Civil War, ed. John W. Quist and Michael J. Birkner (Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 2013), 183–207, 208–36.

None of this northern opinion budged the states’ rights mentality of Cotton South leaders. They proceeded on the theory that states had the original sovereignty in the Union, that the Union was a compact made among the states, that the federal government was to be restricted dramatically to certain duties, that the benefits of congressional legislation were to be equal to all the states, and that whenever a state believed any of its “rights” were being violated, the people of the state could hold a secession convention and take themselves peaceably out of the Union.  


There are two overwhelming problems with what the original seven seceding states did. First, a strict reading of the Constitution does not find in it any right of secession. In fact, it was the lack of any such provision that produced the stumbling block that produced war.17 The second major flaw in the theory of separate state secession was who agreed to it. Various states’ rights theorists insisted it was a right, but within the Cotton South, not to mention the Border South, people amended and even rejected it. The key, of course, is that northerners did not agree to it.18 Without an explicit agreement that separate state secession was permissible, it was simply illegitimate. There was no such agreement. Southern secessionists never asked for one.

The unreality of separate state secession as a doctrine for any government was inherent in the “Declaration of Causes which Induced the Secession of South Carolina”—not only for government but for normal economic functioning, because it was an explicit rejection of the sanctity of contract. The


18. One question that should be addressed is why the idea of separate state secession never developed in the North the way it did in the South. One answer could be the highly conditional allegiance slaveholders gave to the Union; basically, slaveholder allegiance was first given to the plantation where the slavemaster could play the role of complete despot—not monarch, for slavemasters had more power over their slaves than European kings had over their subjects. A slaveholder’s allegiance to anything else—country government, state government, even the Confederacy—was always conditional to his or her supremacy over the plantation. This is implied in Stephanie McCurry’s treatment of the sanctity of the household from intrusion from the outside; although she applies sanctity of household to yeomen as well as planters, it has even more weight for the great slaveholders: McCurry, Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), 5–16.
Constitution fell under “the law of compact.” The South Carolina authors then defined how they viewed compact: “We maintain that in every compact between two or more parties, the obligation is mutual; that the failure of one of the contracting parties to perform a material part of the agreement, entirely releases the obligation of the other; . . . and that, when no arbiter is provided, each party is remitted to his own judgment to determine the fact of failure, with all its consequences.” The implication of that statement is that each party is the sole judge of whether the compact is being followed is death to compacts and to contracts, because with the assumption that the parties act on their own self-interest, it is the self-interest of each party to declare that it has not received all the benefits due from the compact and they therefore have the right to abridge it. Under the assumption of behavior being driven by self-interest, why would anyone obey a contract when they are the sole judge of the fairness of the outcomes of the contract? Given the assumption of self-interest, each member would never accept any outcomes from an agreement that were negative or accept outcomes even when they were positive but less than expected. Thus, signers to a contract would never abide by its terms when they could so easily get out it by announcing “secession.” Under this condition that a signer of a contract was also the judge of the fairness of the contract’s outcomes, no contract or compact could ever endure; they would all be unilaterally broken when one party found out that he/she/it was getting the short end of the stick.

If Cotton South southerners had read the northern mind and cared to respect northern sentiments, they would have understood that separate state secession carried the high probability of war because northerners had not agreed to the procedure; southerners were risking their independence on northerners being either too cowardly or too internally conflicted to fight the South on the principle that separate state secession constituted criminal behavior. So how could the seceded states have obtained that consent? The first method would have been to have authored a constitutional amendment (another potential thirteenth amendment) that would have explicitly allowed the seven seceded states to depart. The major problem with doing so

19. South Carolina Declaration of Causes in The Rebellion Record: A Diary of American Events, ed. Frank Moore, 11 vols., (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1861–6), vol. 1, documents section, pg. 3. It is interesting that this point of southern secession being a repudiation of the sanctity of contract has not been picked up by those neoconfederates who hail from the economics profession, such as Thomas DiLorenzo, Walter Williams, and Jeffrey R. Hummel.
was the amount of time it required, and in the immediacy of the winter of 1860–61 it had little potential.20 The second way to obtain consent was a path not taken nor even considered: seek congressional approval of separation by giving Congress a deadline of, say, March 3, 1861 for a decision. Lincoln probably would have accepted secession by either constitutional amendment or congressional law. When Lincoln argued for a perpetual Union, he meant an entity called the Union would be perpetual but not necessarily containing the same states over time, but with separate state secession as the operative mechanism for secession, the Union itself was imperiled.21

But did the Cotton South leaders even conceive of another way to proceed? The idea of obtaining “consent” from northerners did not at all factor in their movement to separate from the Union.22 Just mentioning the idea of secessionists seeking congressional approval of secession would bring a loud guffaw from every historian of the antebellum South as well as historians of the antebellum North; the culture of the South (honor, mastery, individualist, or whatever) precluded the possibility.23 The self-righteous indignation that suffused the secession conventions hardly boded well for the substitution of a process that required a measure of consideration for others; for too many secessionists, the idea of requiring consent from the North would have been too much like going hat-in-hand to beg for a favor.

The consistent assertion of the singular truth of southern constitutional doctrines, with the concomitant denigration of alternative understandings,
played a role in biasing Republicans and northern Democrats against conceding legitimacy to southern claims in 1860–61. The way states’ rights southerners dreamt up their doctrines was worrisome. First, southerners weighed the consequences of some congressional proposal, and if the consequences were negative for the South and the peculiar institution, then the Constitution was consulted and some argument was framed so that the proposed action was deemed unconstitutional; and if no explicit reference was found, an implicit one was “deduced” from the document.24 Starting as an argument, it then moved to become scripture. Once it was scripture, it was the obvious truth of the situation, and any who denied it was irrational, unintelligent, or driven by corrupt motives.25 By this application of states’ rights doctrines, southerners could control the entire agenda of the federal government. Southern states’ rights interpretation of the Constitution was always invoked to secure a positive outcome for the South and slavery; it was always used to show that a negative consequence was illegitimate; it was never used to show a negative consequence for the South had to be endured because an action had constitutional legitimacy.

Lincoln picked this theme up in his first inaugural. The complaint of Republicans was that every issue became a constitutional one already settled by southern theorists instead of being a problem to be resolved by Congress and majority voting. Lincoln said, “But no organic law can ever be framed with a provision specifically applicable to every question which may occur

24. For example, see the speech of Senator Robert Toombs, Mar. 18, 1858, Cong. Globe, 35th Cong., 1st Sess. (1858), appendix, 124–25.

25. The mental hoops one had to go through to find some northern proposal unconstitutional—in this case, prohibition of slavery in the territories—can be gleaned in the torturous mental gymnastics of Judge John A. Campbell, who originally agreed that the power to prohibit slavery was obviously lodged in Congress by the Constitution, until he was tutored in proper thinking by Alabama chief justice Henry W. Collier. See Robert Saunders Jr., John Archibald Campbell: Southern Moderate, 1811–1889 (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1997), 76–79, 87–89. On southern constitutionalism, see Bowman, At the Precipice, 69–79; Don E. Fehrenbacher, Sectional Crisis and Southern Constitutionalism (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1995).
in practical administration. No foresight can anticipate nor any document of reasonable length contain express provisions for all possible questions. Shall fugitives from labor be surrendered by national or by State authority? The Constitution does not expressly say. May Congress prohibit slavery in the Territories? The Constitution does not expressly say. Must Congress protect slavery in the Territories? The Constitution does not expressly say. Southern constitutional doctrines preempted all discussion and proposals in favor of southerners’ preferred outcome. But southern constitutional doctrines did not even allow Congress and the President to legislate on the areas the Constitution gave to the national government. It is only the excessive demands of states’ rights theorists that make Lincoln look like a consolidationist.

Many contemporaries offered analyses of southern secession and the northern reaction to it, but one of the most perceptive views was given by the sojourning Englishman and novelist, Anthony Trollope, son of the reprobated Frances Trollope, author of the caustic *Domestic Manners of the Americans*. The son, visiting in 1861, believed Lincoln erred in not seeing that slavery had made the slave states and free states into two separate nations, but he understood the emotional reasons that made the North reject secession. The southern demands for separation were made “with an arrogance and instant pressure which exasperates the North.” And though rational calculation saw the wisdom of separation, he wrote, “I do not see how the North, treated as it was and had been, could have submitted to secession without resistance.” He then depicted how the slave states should have acted: “Had the Southern States sought to obtain secession by constitutional means, they might or might not have been successful.” But the southern leaders demanded secession in violation of the Constitution; they broke up a nationality “without the consent of the other part,” and so “opposition from the North and war was an inevitable consequence.”

Southern Mastery

The interpretation being offered here is that one of the circumstances leading to the war was the refusal of southern states’ rights leaders to negotiate with northerners or to think creatively about paths to southern independence other than separate state secession. To northern concepts, southern radicals projected a profound contempt, which may have had a source: the master-slave relationship. Southern political leaders were generally slaveholders, and as such they were accustomed to a certain style of human relations. They commanded others, and the others obeyed—unquestionably obeyed. When the slaves questioned masters, the masters punished them physically. The manner in which slavery functioned did not enhance the capability of slaveholders to bargain with others without coercion and find acceptable a less than optimal outcome. It is possible that such attitudes of domination over others escaped the boundaries of the plantation and affected the way southerners dealt with northerners.29

The Territorial Question

An essential component of the neorevisionist claim that Lincoln and his party started the war was the collapse of compromise efforts in the winter of secession, the Crittenden Compromise, congressional proposals, and the Washington Peace Conference. Lincoln let it be known in no uncertain terms that the Republican Party plank of congressional prohibition of slavery’s expansion into the territories was not to be abandoned under any circumstance. He would not accept a new 36°30’ latitude line across the territories (slavery prohibited above, permitted below) although he would accept a thirteenth amendment declaring slavery a state institution over which Congress could never interfere, a change in the fugitive slave law, and the admission of New Mexico as a slave state; but on the nonextension of slavery into the territories he was intransigent. So were the antislavery radicals of his party. The neorevisionists claim that if the Crittenden Compromise had passed before January 1, 1861, perhaps secession might have stopped with South Carolina, putting that state in a perilous position, and the Border South would have been satisfied and have never acted on proposals for secession. Moreover, by late 1860 it was widely conceded that the remaining territories in the United States were undoubtedly unfavorable to slave labor (save maybe for New Mexico), and so a congressional prohibition against slavery’s extension was unnecessary; northern free labor was destined to win. Therefore, the interpretation neorevisionists offer is that Lincoln and the Republicans acted to preserve their party, as nonextension of slavery was the only linchpin holding together its disparate factions. Rather than sacrifice party unity, the Republicans and Lincoln sacrificed the nation and brought on war.30

Certain aspects of this narrative are certainly true, especially the adamantine position of Lincoln and the antislavery stalwarts of the party, but the entire case needs to be leavened with other considerations usually not explicitly laid out. First, the neorevisionists offer a counterfactual which may or may not have come to pass. Momentarily the Border South would probably have remained in the Union if the Crittenden Compromise had passed, but whether the passage of the compromise would have stopped the

Deep South states from leaving remains unclear. Second, the neorevisionists seem to accept the assertion that the Confederacy of seven cotton states was too weak to survive; this may have been true but perhaps not. Regardless, in any version, the problem of separate state secession remained, and as long as that remained a viable doctrine, the Union was unlikely to survive. The Border South, especially North Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, and Arkansas, had a strong interest in slavery and were interested in all the protections that proslavery advocates demanded for it; given the ability to employ separate state secession at their own discretion, it is no stretch of the imagination to believe that the protection of slavery offered by the Confederacy might have led those states in the near future to leave the Union and join the Confederacy. The Crittenden Compromise had no solution to the existence of separate state secession, and the solution was needed; by not confronting the principle, the Crittenden Compromise was actually lending it legitimacy, thereby opening Pandora’s box to future slave state secessions or even free state secessions.

Second, this version of events cheapens the antislavery impulse of the Republican Party. The party was born out of the conviction that the slave power existed, that it was extending its grasp, and, for some, that it threatened the expansion of slavery into the free states. Antislavery, in both its free labor and slave power manifestations, was the core ideology of the party’s adherents. A quote usually missing in neorevisionist works is that of William H. Herndon, Lincoln’s law partner, a Kentuckian by birth, and an abolitionist: “I helped to make the Republican party, and if it forsakes its distinctive ideas, I can help to tear it down, and help to erect a new party that shall never cower to any slave driver.” I believe this quote is representative of a host of Republican operatives and many of its leaders. Its implication deserves scrutiny. If the neorevisionist argument were true, then it assumes no backlash among Republican leaders and the northern populace if extension of slavery were permitted by the Crittenden Compromise or some other agreement. But the likelihood is that the antislavery activists would have forsaken the Republican Party and built a new one, call it the Freedom National Party, and sucked dry the electoral power of the Republicans. If any filibustering or expansionist program emerged after 1861, it takes little imagination to think that the

new northern party would be an even more obnoxious antislavery party to southerners and have the potential—again—of claiming the presidency. And if that had come to pass, the cotton states would have repeated their secession conventions, and the country would have returned to a secession winter but this time with a much more implacable northern antislavery party. The reality might have been that the Crittenden Compromise or any of those offered during the winter of secession would have been only momentarily effectual; they contained no lasting solution to the problems besetting the nation—to wit, slavery and separate state secession.

The territorial question invites all sorts of commentary, most of which may be omitted here. In terms of the debate over the compromise that might have ended sectional bickering, however, one point needs to be added that neorevisionists fail to take into account. Southerners knew as well as northern Republicans that the western territories were unlikely to house slavery, that they were almost certain to become free labor states. In essence, the extension controversy made as little difference to the South as it did to the North. If the future of the western territories were already known, then why would southerners demand a concession about slavery’s expansion? Southerners were deaf to the advice of Douglas and Buchanan and other northerners on the question of slavery’s expansion. Both men believed slavery only existed

33. The question of the constitutionality of the Republican program of prohibiting slavery in the territories involves a large literature, but just a few points need to be made. First, as Lincoln said, the Constitution did not establish a specific rule about it, so it was a fair question for congressional determination. Second, the prohibition against slavery in the territories did not deny any white southern man, woman, or child access to the public lands; it did discriminate against a form of property, that is, slaves. By insisting that prohibiting slavery in the territories was anti-southern, southern leaders were virtually affirming that the sole quality giving identity to southerners was slaveholding. See James L. Huston, *Calculating the Value of Union: Slavery, Property Rights, and the Economic Origins of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2003), chap. 5; and Huston, *Stephen A. Douglas and the Dilemmas of Democratic Equality* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 137, 152–53, 173–74; Huston, “The 1860 Southern Sojourns of Stephen A. Douglas and the Irrepressible Separation,” in *The Election of 1860 Reconsidered*, ed. A. James Fuller (Kent, OH: Kent State Univ. Press, 2013), 29–67.

34. David Potter pointed out that unionists North and South should have been able to compromise the territorial question because the issue was “meaningless”; slavery was not going to go further west. Potter, *Lincoln and His Party in the Secession Crisis* 2d ed. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1962), 217–18. Just to point this out, an outcome of the Civil War that has to be considered in its burdens and benefits is that American pressure on the Caribbean was delayed for about forty years. If indeed southern expansionism led to war on the nations in the Caribbean, then a peaceful settlement to internal U.S. problems meant possible war and its ravages on Central America.
where the tropical plants called for slave labor. In such environments, prohibitions against slavery meant little. If slave labor were indeed profitable, then the inhabitants of such a region could enter the Union as a free state, shortly thereafter change their constitution to allow slavery, and thereby become a slave state.35 During the Lincoln-Douglas debates in 1858, Lincoln admitted that he would have to accept such a circumstance.36

Finally, any prohibition against slavery’s expansion was merely going to be typical legislation; it could be undone by a new administration and congress. All southerners had to do was unite with northern Democrats, wait for the moment of electoral victory, and all the antislavery legislation of the Republicans could be repealed. This meant, of course, that southerners had to believe Republicans would eventually lose northern elections—that southerners could have faith in the democratic political process of the country to reverse any policies Republicans implemented. Why did they not have such a faith? One answer is simply that southern political leaders could not trust a political system they did not control, which is an essential part of the slave power argument.37


The Slave Power: A Question of Paranoia or Reality

Part of the neorevisionist critique of the Republicans is the severe discounting the idea of the slave power and the northern fear of the nationalization of slavery, which William J. Cooper Jr. calls “a palpable absurdity.” Most historians as well cite southerners’ apprehensions about their “liberty” and recount southern demands that the “aggressions” on their constitutional rights be halted, that the South needed to have an end to the northern assault on its right to self-government. In his March 1850 speech about the compromise measures, Calhoun spoke of the weakness of the slaveholding states and stated that only the action of the North could allay sectional tensions because the South was “the weaker party, for it can of itself do nothing—not even protect itself.” During the election of 1860, the traveling William L. Yancey said in Cincinnati, “I defy a man to point to any case of the South injuring the North. What property of yours—what institution of yours have we ever assailed?” Representative Frederick P. Stanton, back from the wars in Kansas, said all the South wanted was to “be left alone, be protected against any unjust or unconstitutional action of the federal government.” That southerners believed their own assertions is granted, but if one constructs a scorecard to determine which section, the free labor North or the slave labor South, had to alter its practices and institutions at the demand of the other, a different result occurs, one that supports Republican apprehensions of the nation being guided by a power to ensure the welfare of slavery. By 1860, outside of the territorial question—which in no manner affected self-government and individual liberty within the states—what changes in the southern states occurred because of northern actions? What liberties were sacrificed, what elements of self-government were overthrown, what states’ rights were violated?

38. Cooper, Jefferson Davis, 313; Cooper, We Have the War upon Us, 74.
As Michael Lind has observed, there were no instances of southern liberties being curtailed by northern actions.40

But such was not the case for the North. The northern insistence on the right to trial by jury had been overthrown by the Fugitive Slave Law (in the case of accused blacks), northern males were subject to enlistment into posses to capture runaway slaves, and northern communities endured the intrusion of federal armed forces to ensure court decisions were carried out. States writing personal liberty laws were told they had to repeal them. In the case of Negro Seamen, South Carolina, and presumably other southern states, flouted Section 2 of Article IV of the Constitution, which stipulated, “The citizens of each State shall be entitled to all privileges and immunities of citizens in the several states.” In Congress, southerners told northerners they would never accept a northern state’s granting citizenship to black people. Moreover, the right of a male citizen to have absolute dominance over his domicile, according to Stephanie McCurry, was the bond that connected planter with yeoman and made secession possible, yet southerners chasing runaways, according to Stanley Harrold, showed no reluctance to break into the homes of white northerners suspected of harboring runaway slaves.41

And then there is the matter of civil liberties generally. While William Lowndes Yancey during the election of 1860 encountered no violence in exhorting extreme proslavery views to northern audiences, everyone in the nation knew that any Republican who tried to vent his ideas about slavery in the South faced near-certain death.42 There was the 1850 Calhoun solution to sectional tensions. Besides granting the South a share in the territories and giving the section an equal voice in the government, the North must “cease

40. Lind, What Lincoln Believed, 266.
41. On the fugitive slave law, for a basic reference see McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, 119–21; Bowman, At the Precipice, 51–54; on Negro seamen, see William W. Freehling, Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1816–1836 (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 111–16; McCurry, Masters of Small Worlds, 5–16; Stanley Harrold, Border War: Fighting over Slavery before the Civil War (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2010), 28, 58, 60, 63, 101, 105. It might also be noted that no southerner raised the issue of states’ rights when Franklin Pierce sent several companies of federal troops into Boston to ensure the Fugitive Slave Law was enforced in the 1854 Anthony Burns case; but in 1861 secessionists said sending federal troops to enforce federal property ownership was aggression and a violation of states’ rights.
42. Walther, William Lowndes Yancey, 263–64. Indeed, when Yancey raised the question of what instance there was of the South infringing on the rights of the North, someone in the audience shouted “freedom of speech” and another said the beating of Charles Sumner. New York Times, Oct. 25, 1860, 2.
the agitation of the slave question.” The implication was northern states
needed to suppress the northern individual liberties of speech, press, pulpit,
and association. During the discussion of abolitionist incendiary letters sent
South in the 1830s, Calhoun indicated that ‘liberty’ on these subjects had
already been taken care of in the South and a federal law was unnecessary:
“We do not pass a law to abridge the freedom of the press, or to prohibit the
publication and circulation of any paper whatever—this has been done by
the States already.” What manner of individual liberty was this? This was a
stand for state censorship of individuals, not for individual liberty.43

This attitude that northern states needed to use their governmental pow-
ers to suppress antislavery groups confronted Lincoln directly when he first
arrived in Washington, DC. In a meeting with members of the Washington
Peace Conference, Virginia’s James Seddon charged, “It is not of your profes-
sions we complain. It is of your sins of omission—of your failure to enforce
the laws—to suppress your John Browns and your . . . Garrisons, who preach
insurrection and make war upon our property!” Lincoln dismissed him by
saying that Garrison had once been imprisoned, Brown had been hung, and
the northern states had indeed enforced the law. But the implications of
Seddon’s outburst went far beyond those two abolitionists; Seddon wanted
suppression of all northern antislavery activity. In fact, in the Declaration of
Causes that the South Carolinians issued to the other southern states to justify
its secession, the authors flatly stated that one of the North’s “aggressions”
against slavery was the failure of northern state governments to suppress totally
the antislavery movement: “The non-slaveholding States . . . have permitted
the open establishment among them of societies, whose avowed object is to
disturb the peace and to endanger the property of the citizens of other States.”
When James Silk Buckingham visited the slave states in 1840, he reported that
the editor of the Charleston Courier argued that the North legally had to turn
over northern abolitionist agitators to southerners for punishment. This was
a proslavery demand for northern state governments to suppress the rights
of speech, press, pulpit, and association, a mighty alteration in the northern
fabric of social and political life. Given the violence and intimidation perpe-
trated by proslavery partisans in Kansas 1855–58, it is hardly any wonder that

43. Quotes form Calhoun’s Mar. 4, 1850, speech in Stampp, Causes of the Civil War, 44;
Calhoun quoted by William Lee Miller, Arguing about Slavery: The Great Battle in the United
northerners believed that a slave power existed and was demanding northern institutional change. That radical southerners made such demands due to a heightened sense of insecurity and defensiveness does not alter the fact that they were insisting on northern institutional change. The scorecard of which section had to alter its state laws or to do so in the future at the command of the other section almost reads southern states zero, northern states infinity.44

Southerners complained of northern aggression and violation of southern rights for basically one reason: some northerners criticized slavery and, among the abolitionists, demanded its demise. The northern critique of slavery until 1859, however, was a written and verbal denunciation that affected no institutional structure of the southern states; the essential decision about slavery’s fate was left to individuals in the southern states. John Brown’s invasion represented a real threat to southern domestic tranquility, but no northerner argued that such invasions were legitimate (save the most radical of the radical abolitionists), and no northerner denied that it was the duty of the federal government to suppress such revolts or that the states had to be limited in their capacity for self-defense.

All the other eruptions between northerners and southerners were beyond the borders of southern states—tariffs, internal improvements, and the territories. In their defense of the socioeconomic status of slavery, southerners projected the requirements for slavery’s safety far beyond southern state borders. Northerners could not agitate against slavery; Congress had to adjust the tariff to enhance the welfare of the peculiar institution; Congress had to have a minimal budget so slavery might not be deprived of an equal amount of federal largesse; the federal government had to defend slavery in international affairs; the federal government had to conquer new lands to feed plantation slavery. Radical southerners claimed that all these areas were necessary for the health of slavery, but they all were beyond slavery’s state boundaries. Of course northerners fretted over the slave power, because southerners expanded slavery’s predominance over all elements of national life because all elements of national life could affect slavery. In all the compromise efforts in the winter of secession,

there was never any acknowledgment by southerners that their demands for slavery’s predominance were excessive, that they asked for conditions favorable to slavery that wandered far beyond the borders of the slave states.45

Indeed, amid the radical southern cries of northern oppression, intrusion on southern states’ rights, and suppression of southern liberties, a paradox of massive proportions that suggests such terms as “oppression,” “states’ rights,” and “liberty” were words used to disguise the radical southern demand for domination. No historian has any trouble finding all kinds of written evidence that southerners called for the suppression of antislavery societies and their activities. Yet, I have never seen in all my research, nor have I ever seen any other historian point out, from 1831 to 1861 even one speech, one pamphlet, one tract, one book, or one sermon by an abolitionist; Republican, Whig, Liberty Party member; Free Soiler, or any other type of northerner advocating the suppression of any part of the proslavery argument. It is hardly any wonder that some northerners saw cries of southern “liberty” as a mask for tyranny: the liberty southerners sought was the liberty to dictate to northerners on all matters pertaining to slavery.46


The neorevisionist interpretation that Lincoln maneuvered the country into Civil War, besides his voiding compromise efforts on slavery’s territorial expansion, centers much on the incidents leading to the Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter. Usually these authors paint a confused, uncertain Lincoln seeking a policy for Forts Pickens and Sumter, trying to decide whether one should be evacuated while the other (Pickens) be held on to in order to demonstrate symbolically the continued Union sovereignty over the old states of the Union. An array of important people urged him to evacuate Sumter: Seward, many other cabinet members, Winfield Scott, important Republican congressmen, Horace Greeley, Stephen A. Douglas, and, most importantly, Virginia and Border State unionists. Lincoln bumbled administratively with plans for naval squadrons and left several cabinet ministers in the dark about some of his plans, leading to conflicting orders being issued to naval commanders. However, by early April Lincoln had come to believe that Border State unionism was not truly unionism because it would not reject separate state secession, and, by his own ingenuity, he determined the best solution to the dilemma of Fort Sumter was to resupply the troops there with food but not arms or manpower; inform the governor of South Carolina of his plans; and maintain a Union presence in the heart of the Confederacy, thereby contradicting its claims to independence. His main concern was to avoid firing the first shot. Neorevisionist historians tend to believe Lincoln thought it would be likely that the Confederates would fire on Fort Sumter and earn obloquy for starting war, as the Union would look innocent of engaging in hostile actions first. President Jefferson Davis and his cabinet could not let the independence of the Confederacy be so traduced, and additionally they feared the actions of the hot-headed South Carolinians who might take matters into their own hands if they learned of a federal relief expedition to the fort. So Davis ordered Gen. P. G. T. Beauregard to level Fort Sumter. Three days later, Lincoln issued his call for seventy-five thousand state militia to suppress the insurrection, and the states of Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas then promptly left the Union and

joined the Confederacy—but not the slave states of Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri.47

The neorevisionist counterfactual here is that had Lincoln withdrawn the troops from Fort Sumter, the Border South would have stayed in the Union, and the Deep South (the Confederacy) would have been too weak to have long survived. Thus war would have been avoided. Again, this scenario does nothing about the problem of separate state secession, and it assumes an immediate collapse of the Confederacy and an adamantine conviction on the part of the Border South to stay in the Union. Both assumptions are suspect. But the worst part of the narrative is that it relieves Jefferson Davis and his cabinet from any kind of creative response to Lincoln’s plan except to respond with physical force.

47. This summation of the neorevisionist interpretation relies on Cooper, Jefferson Davis, 362–65; Cooper, We Have the War upon Us, 235, 257, 264–67; McClintock, Lincoln and the Decision for War, chaps. 9, 10; Lankford, Cry Havoc, chaps. 5, 6, 7. The revisionist argument about Lincoln and Fort Sumter was given by Charles Ramsdell, "Lincoln and Fort Sumter," Journal of Southern History 3 (Aug. 1937): 259–88. Besides these sources on the political movements in the Confederacy troubling Davis, see Current, Lincoln and the First Shot, 133–34, 150. A good description of Lincoln’s administrative bungling is provided in Miller, President Lincoln, chap. 4.
There were decided pressures on Abraham Lincoln in April 1861. His confidantes were telling him to abandon Fort Sumter for an uncertain hope that the Union would be restored, while some members of his party were raging at him to enforce the law and punish treason. Most important of all, however, was the political condition of the North. The Republicans had about 54 percent of the northern popular vote; the rest was basically Democrat. Moreover, not all Republicans were desirous of using force. The problem Lincoln confronted was the use of force—coercion—to protect the two Union forts still existing in the Confederacy. Lincoln knew that if he tried to enforce the law by using armed force he would instantly lose the northern Democrats, probably a significant minority of his own party, and the entire Border South, not merely Virginia and one or two others. If he employed coercion, the Union was ruined, separate state secession still loomed for further problems, and the Confederacy would make good its bid to become an independent nation. So he had to avoid coercion at any cost. Yet as time advanced, it was apparent that more and more northerners were entertaining the possibility that the country could split into a United States of America and a Confederate States of America.

But Lincoln could do nothing to stop the northern drift to acceptance of the independence of the Confederacy. In terms of an active policy, he was frozen in place. To perform his duty, he had to enforce the law, but to enforce the law he had to employ physical force, and if he did so, he guaranteed the loss of the Border South and the creation of a divided North that could never act in unity on the question of secession. Thus his imaginative plan to escape his entrapped position: a resupply of Fort Sumter without sending munitions or extra troops. But the point here is that time was working against Lincoln. The longer the stalemate over the use of force continued, the more northerners—especially Democrats but undoubtedly others as well—were coming to accept the division of the country into two nations.

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Jefferson Davis did not have the same troubles. True, there were rumblings about inactivity on the forts and the lack of agreement by the Union that the seceded states were a new and legitimate nation, but the furor in the North over appropriate actions was not duplicated in the South. Davis’s real dilemma was whether time was on his side. If Lincoln’s stalemate continued, would important elements of southern society rethink secession and vote to rejoin the Union? The latter was unlikely but not impossible.

Neorevisionists produce a narrative that argues Lincoln trapped Jefferson Davis and his cabinet by trying to resupply Fort Sumter and thereby enticed them to fire on the fortress. They almost write as if the Confederate officials had no choice—Lincoln was forcing them to fire the first shot. More refreshing is the interpretation given by William C. Davis, who has more aptly described the choices facing the Jefferson Davis and his cabinet: in his resupply strategy Lincoln had put “control of events” in Davis’s hands—and “the issue of peace or war was his to decide.”

Jefferson Davis expected certain results by firing on Fort Sumter, and he took a calculated risk—it is just that he calculated poorly. By firing on the fort, the Confederate President evidently accepted the possibility that the North would rally around the flag and become more united, but he also believed the Border South would be emboldened by a Confederate show of strength: those states would secede, join the Confederacy, and be more than a match for the manpower preponderance of the North. On the latter prediction, Davis and his cabinet fell short. Yet this

53. See Davis, Look Away, 52–53, 75.
54. Ibid., 112. Neorevisionists also cite Lincoln’s words and letters to others after the firing on Fort Sumter that they should be content because the object he wanted was obtained. Neorevisionists argue that such words show Lincoln hoped for a Confederate firing on the fort so war could commence. Those statements can be read a different way: Lincoln was celebrating that it was they, and not he, who fired the first shots, and thereby he was spared the agony of destroying a unified North.
55. Cooper, Davis, 364–66; Cooper, We Have the War upon Us, 266–67. Richard Current, William Lee Miller, and Michael Burlingame (and probably most Lincoln biographers) fault Jefferson Davis for creating the war by inappropriate and ill-considered actions; they either say or imply that no northerner twisted Davis’s arm to fire on Fort Sumter. See Current, Lincoln and the First Shot, 129, 133–35, 150–52; Burlingame, Abraham Lincoln, 2: 126–29; Miller, President Lincoln, 63–65. Cooper discounts the idea that Robert Toombs argued against firing on Fort Sumter because it would unify the North; Cooper found no original source to confirm Toombs made such an argument. Cooper, We Have the War upon Us, 314n59.
was only part of the miscalculation: the major deficiency of the decision was it enabled Lincoln to escape his entrapped position.

There is no indication that Davis and his cabinet even considered other alternatives—especially ones that kept Lincoln in a stalemate that enabled the peace advocates in the North to grow stronger and win public acceptance of southern secession. Rather, Davis and his cabinet acted like typical slave masters: when confronted with disobedience and unruly behavior, they resorted to violence. Lincoln was in a losing position, likely destined to defeat, while the Confederacy probably was going to triumph in its bid for independence. Davis and his cabinet snatched Lincoln’s defeat from the jaws of their victory.

There were ways Davis could have tried to continue the stalemate, keep Lincoln frozen in place, and allow the peace faction of the North to overwhelm public sentiment. Davis could have issued a national proclamation that he was going to permit the resupply of foodstuffs to the Union troops as a humanitarian gesture and in an effort to avoid open hostilities with the Union. But at the same time, he would demand that the Union acknowledge Confederate sovereignty over its territory within, say, three months. He could have set a deadline of July 15, 1861, for the Union troops to evacuate Fort Sumter. If they did not, the Confederacy would land troops on the island, march to the Fort, demand surrender, and if surrender were not forthcoming starve the garrison out—and not fire their weapons unless fired upon.

If Davis and his cabinet had concocted some response similar to the one above—a few historians have postulated other scenarios—they would have bought three months more time for the Confederacy to establish foreign relations, perhaps to sell cotton to get some specie, and to finish their political takeover of the seceded states.56 It might have given the Border States enough time to reconsider their allegiances to the Union. Most important, it put Lincoln right back in the situation he abhorred in March and early April. If he tried to enforce the law, he was the one guilty of employing armed force against a state, and he would have lost the Border South as well as northern supporters. Three more months and the Democrats, as well as some business leaders and conservative Republicans, might have begun to acclimate themselves to a southern confederacy and make impossible the use of coercion.

56. These possibilities were also conjectured by Adam Goodheart in 1861: The Civil War Awakening (New York: Knopf, 2011), 182; Richard N. Current discussed other ways to meet the resupply efforts of the Union: blockading the island and putting military on the island without firing; see Lincoln and the First Shot, 149–50.
Nearly all historians of the Fort Sumter situation put some emphasis on the possibility that the state of South Carolina might take independent action and initiate hostilities with the Union, and thereby Davis and his cabinet had to preempt the hotheads of South Carolina. Controlling South Carolinians was a test of leadership that Davis should have owned up to, not to have caved in to. But it does show the infirmity of the entire idea of separate state secession, of allowing so much independence to individual states. On March 11, 1861, the seven seceded states adopted a provisional constitution for the Confederacy. In it, they copied much of the U.S. Constitution. They gave the president of the CSA two of the same powers that the president of the USA had: commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and the ability to conduct foreign affairs and make treaties.57 So barely five weeks after South Carolina pledged to obey the constitution of the Confederacy, it was ready to discard its provisions and inaugurate war with the United States all on its own, disregarding the powers that it had agreed belonged to the president of the Confederacy. Could anything else be more illustrative of the dilemma of creating unity and intelligent policies in the face of such unbridled individualism and disrespect for law?

Forces versus Agency and Contingency

Connected with the question of responsibility for the American Civil War and the ways that had been available to avoid it has been a change in the overall view of the paths societies take over time. For decades, historians had talked about forces propelling individuals and societies to behave the way they did: forces, for example, such as capitalism, sectionalism, patriarchalism, evangelism, individualism—the host of “isms” that usually represented undefined forces acting on people. For example, after detailing the actions of individuals in the winter of secession, Kenneth M. Stampp still ended his book by saying, “It would obviously be a gross distortion of history to attribute

57. Confederate Constitution, Article II, section 2, paragraph 2; found at Avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/csa_csa.asp, accessed May 25, 2014. On South Carolina, see Current, Lincoln and the First Shot, 150–51; a strong case for the violence-prone South Carolinians taking independent action is in Davis, Look Away, 75, 88, 125–26. Overall, Davis thinks, given the southern situation, war was inevitable (125). Lawrence Anderson holds that the dilemma of federal control and Fort Sumter was part of a South Carolina strategy to force a confrontation with the North; Anderson, Federalism, Secession, and the American State, 4.
the Civil War to Lincoln’s Sumter maneuver. To do so would be to overlook the real causes that grew out of a generation of sectionalism.” However, since 1990, a movement among historians has stressed the ability of human actors to decide on policies and not be the pawns of gigantic and ill-defined forces. Moreover, in the case of American sectionalism, the ascendant idea, which Edward Ayers posited, has been that various decisions can determine the path societies ultimately take, and those decisions are marked by agency, happenstance, and accident—by contingency. The end result does not necessarily reflect how universal forces pushed humans into certain actions, but rather how along the path of decision-making small deviations could have made massive differences in outcomes. In short, the American Civil War was not a predetermined event but one made by human decision.

One can accept certain features of the idea of human agency and contingency, but the attempt to discard forces needs to be rejected. Part of the problem is that individuals who have employed the idea of “forces” have never explicitly defined what constitutes a “force” propelling people to certain behaviors and ideas. Rather, throughout most of the twentieth century there seems to have been a nebulous idea among historians about what forces were, an intuition rather than an explication. In an effort to explicate the idea of forces, we can theorize that some forces may be visceral and intrinsic to the human condition: population growth, environmental conditions, climate, tribalism, familial connections, age and various demographics, ambition, procreative drives, the instinct for survival. For most historians, however, forces represent behaviors, ideas, arguments, or antagonisms that are repeated over time. It is the constant repetition of a feature of socioeconomic life that

58. Stampp, And the War Came, 244, 286.
59. See Edward L. Ayers, What Caused the Civil War? Reflections on the South and Southern History (New York: Norton, 2005), 117–43; William W. Freehling, The Road to Disunion, vol. 2, The Secessionists Triumphant (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), 423–26, 531–34. James McPherson used the idea of contingency to call into question the idea that forces determined which side won the war. Contingency probably has more interpretive power in military outcomes because of the centralization of power and the ability of odd circumstances to affect a person having such centralized power. It is more doubtful whether contingency can be so powerful in decentralized situations, such as conventions, voting, and popular attitudes; see McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, 857–58. Freehling has explained and modified his position somewhat by arguing that historians in the 1960s and 1970s overdetermined outcomes by references to forces and thereby squeezed out human agency and contingency altogether; he has been trying to adjust the balance: “A Conversation with William W. Freehling and Michael F. Holt, September 19, 2008,” in Quist and Birkner, James Buchanan and the Coming of the Civil War, 237–40.
constitutes a force in which an individual finds him/herself. The strength of
the force derives from two conditions. First, to be powerful the pattern of
behavior or speech has to be broadly adopted within a society or a subset of a
society. Second, the force is stronger if the pattern of repetition has persisted
over decades, perhaps even over centuries. The force becomes weaker the
more it is restricted to only a small part of society, if it lacks an ancestry, or
if it has to contend with other forces that erode allegiance to it.60

Given the breadth of this definition, some elementary sorting has to be done
to determine what forces were in play in any particular situation. In the case of
the winter of secession, some candidates are more obvious than others. The first
would be Americans’ obsession with property rights and their presumed near
inviolability. The derivative of that force was property rights in slaves, which
for southerners was a cornerstone to their entire argument about the sanctity
of the institution; this was an argument they had been repeating for decades.
Reinforcing the primacy of property rights in slaves was the prosperity the
peculiar institution generated for slavemasters.61 A second force operating on
southerners was the conviction that social supremacy had to be preserved for
those of European descent; southern whites deemed African peoples inferior
and at all costs had to keep them in their position of inferiority. The origin
of the racism may be debatable, but its existence for decades prior to 1860 is
not.62 These were the twin forces certainly driving the Deep South; the Border
South had other forces to deal with, including economic diversity and the
smaller proportion of their population that was enslaved. To protect both the
race separation in the South as well as the economic power of the institution,
southerners required political power: hence their states’ rights oratory and
constitutionalism, matters I would consider secondary forces to the primary
ones of property rights in slaves and white supremacy.63

60. Another way to put this is that if there are a cluster of behaviors or ideas concerning
a certain sector of the society, then the mean would be the force regarding that sector; its
strength would depend on the standard deviation about it, indicating that other behaviors or
ideas were competitors. The more peaked the statistical distribution—that is, the smaller the
standard deviation—the more powerful the force. Then, if the behavior/idea that constitutes
the force can be plotted over time and the shape of the distribution persists, time is multiplying
the power of the force, making it that much more difficult to change.


62. On race, see Steven Channing, Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina (New Y ork:
Norton, 1970); Charles B. Dew, Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and

63. The other candidates would be southern honor; see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Yankee Saints
and Southern Sinners (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1985), chap. 7. On the economic
These forces produced secession in 1860 and 1861. It was not a matter of contingency, nor a matter of the fate of the territories. When the first operation of these two forces on southern allegiance to the Union appeared in 1850–51, Calhoun summarized the problem: the discontent in the South “is not of recent origin. It commenced with the agitation of the slavery question, and has been increasing ever since.” Then between 1851 and 1861, a torrent of events magnified the original fears that the North was becoming more antislavery, not the least of which was the appearance of the Republican Party, a party wholly northern, wholly antislavery, and in control—at least in 1860—of the northern electorate. Regardless of the timing of railroad meetings between Georgia and South Carolina or any other strange concatenation of events, the Deep South, as well as large portions of the Border South, could only have noted how the political antislavery sentiment of the North kept on growing. The southern unionists in 1860 could hardly salvage the same hopes they had in 1850 for either the suffocation of northern antislavery or the ultimate triumph of northern conservatism.

Those favoring southern secession did not know exactly how the Republicans would over time weaken and destroy slavery—pen it in, destroy it with tariffs, get enough free states to write an emancipation amendment to the constitution, encourage the growth of antislavery parties in the South by patronage to nonslaveholders—they simply knew some attack would be forthcoming. The editor of the Augusta, Georgia, Daily Constitutionalist explained it well: the problem was not free soil in the western territories, “It is the northern heart which we complain of, and no marriage bond can be sacred enough to make us cling to a termagant that don’t love us.” To secessionists the future was politically bleak. J. F. H. Claiborne in his biography of John A. Quitman saw the antislavery sentiment mowing down northern conservatives: “One by one the

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64. Calhoun, Mar. 4, 1850, speech in Stampp, Causes of the Civil War, 41.
staunchest of them must give way, or be trampled down by the overwhelming masses of Black Republicans, whose ranks are rapidly swelled by immigration and the popular clamor for gratuitous distribution of the public lands.” Senator Alfred Iverson laid out the problem. Only the northern Democratic party could be relied on for southern constitutional rights, and by 1859 it kept losing elections: “I know that there are sound men in the Democratic party of the North, and that there are none to be found in any other party, but we cannot close our eyes to the fact, according to our notions of soundness, at least upon this Territorial question, the Northern Democrats who may be relied on, ‘like angel’s visits, are few and far between.’” What was the use of staying in the Union, asked South Carolina’s Christopher Memminger, when the North reverberated with antislavery slogans: “To these teachings the pulpit adds its religious sanction. The utterance of anathemas from the minister clothes the sentiment with the solemnity of religious truth. Slavery is denounced as a sin.” And Memminger drew forth the proposition that underlay all southerners’ attitudes about secession in 1860: given this state of mind in the North, “what protection has the Union afforded to the most valuable property of the South?” Over time, actions and words would have to be harmonized, and thus one would eventually obtain a northern war on slavery, regardless of what northerners said in the present. In 1850, perhaps contingency and human agency could play a role in stopping secession because some hope existed in stopping the northern antislavery juggernaut, but by 1860 the realization that the juggernaut had taken distinct political form and seized political power meant the economic prosperity brought by property rights in slaves, the race separation slavery created, and the necessity of having the political muscle to ensure the first two were in serious jeopardy. Recognition of the pervasiveness of antislavery sentiment in the North was simply too great to be deflected by unanticipated accidents; those who resisted secession in 1850 caved in to the secessionist argument in 1860.65

The forces operating on the North were more diverse and actually weaker. Chief among the economic forces was the sanctity of property rights, slaves excluded. The North had its expansion as well, but the one that caused friction with the South was the westward movement of the family-farm-village system; the family farm migrants clashed with the plantation desires of southern migrants over land disposition. Industrialization was really not that much of a force prior to 1880. The expansion of the family-farm-village system took verbal shape in the free labor rhetoric of the North, which portrayed the type of society northerners preferred. Beyond the rise of cities and immigration, another social force present in the North by its continued repetition behaviorally as well as verbally was racism to African Americans, making the North and South highly similar. But in terms of sectionalism, three decades of sectional quarreling in Congress had produced three political forces: one was the sense that in their maniac defense of slavery southerners were pushing the laws of slavery into northern states; a second was the fear that slavery warred on the small farm and workshop so prevalent in the North; and the third was that federal legislation was directed by southern senators and representatives, who nearly always were slaveholders. Together these three forces became embodied in the free labor and the slave power rhetoric that filled the North in the 1850s.

But the North was hardly united behind the forces of free labor and slave power suspicions; rather northerners divided politically. Republicans, of course, embodied the fears that the slave power intended to nationalize slavery and convert Congress into an engine promoting slavery’s expansion; they were the ones who saw an “irrepressible conflict” between free and slave labor. Northern Democrats after 1856 did not. They saw no necessary conflict between free and slave labor, believing each system confined to different geographic spheres due to climate, and they perceived no unusual threat to northern society from southern congressional voting. Northern Republicans and northern Democrats

did agree, however, on the unique quality of the American experiment, the importance of a land without a ruling aristocracy, equal rights of all citizens before the law, and the supremacy of politics by representative government. In the secession winter, the political division in the North over free labor versus slave labor and the existence or nonexistence of a slave power gave southerners a chance to keep the North weak and divided over secession; that weakness was their opportunity to achieve separation. They ruined their chance when the Confederacy fired on Fort Sumter and invoked the powerful force of northern unity on the sanctity of representative government.66

In the winter of secession, southerners evinced no consideration whatsoever of the attitudes, emotions, or sensibilities of northerners. Secessionists were moved entirely by their own ideas, values, and goals; they gave no consideration to northerners at all, not to Democrats, not to conservatives, not even to their own kinfolk living in the North. That inconsideration of the thoughts and emotions of others would lead secessionists into creating the Civil War by ignoring the possible ways they could show northerners that secession was appropriate. One of the haunting reminiscences about the failure of secessionists to gain approval from the North came from New York Democrat John A. Dix, formerly a Free-Soiler, but by 1860 a mainstream party man and Buchanan’s last secretary of the treasury. He recalled that it was “by no means improbable that if a separation had been sought by the slave-holding States persistently, and through peaceful means alone, it might have been ultimately conceded by the Northern States in preference to a bloody civil war.” That possibility was foreclosed by “the forcible seizure of arsenals, mints, revenue-cutters, and other property of the common government,” culminating in the firing on Fort Sumter.67 The mastery syndrome that arose from the master-slave relationship, in short, deadened the southern political sensibility that the thoughts and


wishes of others ought to be considered as well as one's own; slavery taught masters to command others, not to bargain with them.

There may have been multiple ways to have avoided civil war, but they all need to be weighed against the forces pushing for separation of the nation into two parts and the way the separation was being conducted. The problems for the nation and its future, however, would have remained intact and have continued to be nearly unsolvable by peaceful means even if the Civil War had been avoided. As many historians have mentioned in criticism of neorevisionism, and as Kenneth Stampp pointed out three decades ago in his dissection of original revisionism, avoidance of civil war meant slavery's continued existence—probably until the Great Depression. The question of war or no war involved a tradeoff with the existence of slavery. The tradeoff for a scenario without war was by 1930 an unruined white South that housed perhaps 12 million African Americans enduring the degradation of chattel slavery. There might have been other possibilities, but the tradeoff seemed to boil down to either an unruined white South containing 12 million African American slaves, or a ruined white South with no slaves. The only means of escaping this dilemma was to attack the problem of slavery and create a solution that ended the peculiar institution—and that the slaveholding South absolutely refused to do. The forces behind southern maintenance of slavery were too monumental to be overcome by any political or ideological process. In the winter of secession, the single truth may have been that all possible political paths were destined to end in tragedy.

68. For examples of those recognizing the commonalities between the free labor North and the slave labor South, see Bruce Collins, *The Origins of the American Civil War* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1981), 28–37; Smith, *Death of Slavery*, 9–10. On the unsettling fact that slavery would be left undisturbed if there were no civil war, see Stampp, *Imperiled Union*, 221; Yael A. Sternhell, “Revisionism Reinvented? The Antiwar Turn in Civil War Scholarship,” *Journal of the Civil War Era* 3 (June 2013): 249, 251–52. Stampp devotes chapter 7 of *Imperiled Union* to eviscerating the revisionist argument; it is still a good piece and fully applicable to neorevisionism.