

THE UNITED STATES  
PERIOD OF SLAVERY

A look at how the U.S.  
handled the "peculiar institution."

By  
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The recrudescence of slavery came when the expanding energies of European society, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, dashed against the weak barbarians of Africa and America. The old story was retold,—the stonger man, half-savage still under the veneer of civilization and Chistianity, trampled the weaker man under foot. In Europe there was little need or room for slaves—the labor supply was sufficient, but on the new continent, in the words of Weeden (Economic and Social History of New England): "The seventeenth century organized the new western countries, and created an immense opportunity for labor. *Footnote?*"

The eighteenth century coolly and deliberately set Europe at the task of depopulating whole districts of western Africa, and of transporting the captives, by a necessarily brutal, vicious and horrible traffic, to the new civilization of America." The European was impartial between African and Indian; he was equally ready to enslave either; but the Indian was not made for captivity,—he rebelled or ran away or died; the more docile negro was the chief victim. The stream of slavery moved mainly according to economic conditions. Soil and climate in the Northern States made the labor of the indolent and unthrifty slave unprofitable, but in the warm and fertile South, developing plantations of tobacco, rice, and indigo, the negro toiler supplied the needed element for great profits. The church's part in the business was mainly to find excuse; through slavery the heathens were being made Christians. But when they had become Christians the church forgot to bid that they be made brothers and freemen. Some real mitigation of their lot no doubt there was, through teaching of religion and from other conditions.

Professor Du Bois says that slavery brought the African three advantages: it taught him how to labor, gave him the English language and—after a sort--the Christian religion. But it ruined such family life as had existed under a kind of regulated poligamy. Probably the negro was in better condition in America than he had been in Africa, as he certainly was in far worse condition than he was entitled to be--and was in future to be.<sup>1</sup>

In August 1619, a Dutch vessel, accompanied by a British warship, landed and sold "20 negers" in Jamestown. Slavery grew slowly at first; by 1650 there were still only 300 Negroes in Virginia, and not all of these were slaves. But by 1671, Virginia had 2000 slaves, and in 1715 almost one-third of the total population of 95,500 was in a state of lifelong bondage. Maryland's figures were not far behind. By 1760 Negroes had come to outnumber the whites in South Carolina.<sup>2</sup>

Slaves in the U.S. were given the same "care" as any other beast of burden. When one was disobedient or lazy, he was punished—usually with a whip. What further degraded them was the fact that they were bred as if they were common livestock. Of course, slaves did not consent to their bondage: some, like Nat Turner, lead revolts which usually ended in their unfortunate execution.

It was mere accident that the line drawn by Mason and Dixon between Pennsylvania and Maryland became known in later years as the dividing line between slavery and freedom.<sup>3</sup> The northern states could not profit from slavery; their industrious region of America was unsuited for an ignorant labor force. Those seven states, therefore, determined that if

they could not use them, they might as well abolish slavery thereby being moral and righteous. Meanwhile, the six states south of the Mason-Dixon line ultimately neglected or refused to abolish slavery because they were not going to give up a profitable commodity (many laborers needed on the plantation to do the tedious jobs such as picking cotton) even if it was the righteous thing to do. So now the U.S. was divided into two regions, and sooner or later a conflict would have to occur.

The strong anti-slavery trends that had developed during the Revolution of 1776 exerted powerful influence against the infamous African slave trade. The extreme barbarities of this trade were a rank offense to even the most elementary civilization. Many people who refused to take a stand against slavery as such, or even condoned slavery, were outspoken in their opposition to the international slave trade. Besides the North, sentiment against the slave trade was also widespread in the South during this period. There were two reasons for this. First, before the advent of <sup>the</sup> cotton gin, the plantation system was somewhat languishing. Second, and more specifically, some of the southern states had a surplus of slaves and to protect slave prices, favored cutting off African competition from the American slave market. The slaveholders, however, had built into the Constitution a strong barrier against federal anti-slave trade legislation making it impossible to abolish slave trade before 1808. When the constitutional barrier expired, President Jefferson hailed the expiration date in a message to Congress and proposed that appropriate anti-slave trade legislation be enacted. The law was finally passed after a long discussion and in the face of considerable southern opposition.

on January 1, 1808.<sup>4</sup>

While the U.S. was fighting over the slave trade issue, it was also busy carving out new states. Vermont became a state in 1791 and Kentucky in 1792. The third state to be added to the original thirteen was Tennessee in 1796. Because of their positions, Vermont became a free state while Kentucky and Tennessee became slave states. At this point the division of free states to slave states was even: eight free to eight slave. Now, without any special plan, states were admitted in pairs; one free and the other slave. This method of admission would maintain a sectional balance in Congress.

Sectional tensions were openly revealed in 1819, when Missouri was ready for admission as a slave state. The House of Representatives tried to foul up a slave-state admission by passing the Tallmadge amendment which would control the slave population in Missouri. Though defeated in the Senate, it was seen as a threat to sectional balance by the Southerners. The South was very concerned about Missouri because it was the first state entirely west of the Mississippi to be carved out of the Louisiana Purchase; if Congress could abolish slavery in Missouri, they might abolish slavery entirely from the western territory, or worse yet, they might then attempt to eliminate slavery from present slave states.<sup>5</sup> The following year Congress passed a law providing for the admission of Missouri, but, to restore the balance, Maine was separated from Massachusetts and was admitted to the Union as a state. It was further enacted that slavery should be forever prohibited from all territory of the United States north of the parallel  $36^{\circ}30'$ , that

is, north of the southern boundary of Missouri. It is this part of the act which is known as the Missouri Compromise. It was accepted as a permanent limitation of the institution of slavery. By this act Mason and Dixon's Line was extended through the Louisiana Purchase.<sup>6</sup>

There was also a minor conflict over the admission of free-soil California in 1850. For a while a compromise seemed unlikely due to stubbornness on both sides, but Senators Clay, Webster, and Douglas sorted out the problem. The result was the Compromise of 1850: California would be admitted as a free state; ~~—~~ slave trade would be abolished in the District of Columbia; the remainder of the Mexican Cession would be formed into New Mexico and Utah with slavery decided by popular sovereignty; and there would be a more stringent Fugitive Slave Law.

Just when everything had seemed to have settled down between the North and South, Senator Stephen A. Douglas invented a scheme to break the North-South deadlock over western expansion and stretch a line of settlements across the continent. He proposed that the territory of Nebraska be carved into two territories Kansas and Nebraska and that their status regarding slavery be settled by popular sovereignty. This proposal would mean the repeal of the Missouri Compromise boundary of  $36^{\circ}30'$ . Southerners backed the scheme totally because it would give them a chance to gain one more slave state. Free-soil members of Congress struck back furiously, but Douglas rammed the bill through Congress, with the strong support of the southern members of Congress. The Kansas-Nebraska Act, as it was called, paved the way for the Civil War.

Douglas' forcing of the act lead to the crippling of the Democratic party and the formation of the sectional Republican party.<sup>7</sup>

The Kansas-Nebraska scheme of Douglas had given the South the informal understanding that Kansas would become slave and Nebraska free. However, the North was attempting to abolitionize both. Anti-slavery organizations such as the New England Emigrant Aid Company were financing the movement of groups of free-soilers to Kansas. The South was extremely irritated by this action, and when it was time to elect members of the first territorial legislature in 1855, pro-slavery men poured in from Missouri to vote early and often. They triumphed and set up their own government at Shawnee Mission. Appalled free-soilers stubbornly established their own government in Topeka. The climax of the mounting friction between the two sides came with the pro-slavery attack on the city of Lawrence answered by John Brown's attack at Pottawatomie Creek, starting a civil war in Kansas.<sup>8</sup>

In 1857 Kansas applied for statehood on a popular sovereignty basis. The pro-slaveryites devised the Lecompton Constitution. The people were not allowed to vote on the constitution as a whole but only to have the constitution with or without slavery. However, a tricky clause in the document would protect slave owners already in Kansas should slavery be voted down. Free-soilers, aggravated by the catch, boycotted the polls; consequently, the slaveryites approved the constitution with slavery. Unfortunately, Kansas did not get to become a state until 1861 because Douglas, who championed true popular sovereignty, fought to get the entire constitution voted upon. Consequently, the numerous free-

soilers managed to vote it down.<sup>9</sup>

"Bleeding Kansas", as this conflict is known as, caused bleeding in the Senate: Charles Sumner, a leading abolitionist and one of the most disliked men in the Senate, delivered a caustic speech entitled "The Crime Against Kansas." This speech condemning pro-slavery men insulted Congressman Brooks to such an extent as to cause him to beat Sumner nearly to death with his cane. Brooks was reprimanded so leniently that the North was quite disgusted with the incident.

Sectional tensions were further aggravated by the Supreme Court's Dred Scott decision. Dred Scott, a black slave, sued for freedom on the basis of his long residence on free soil. The Supreme Court could have thrown out the case because Scott, being a black slave and not a citizen, did not have the right to sue, but they decided to continue under the leadership of Chief Justice Taney to attempt to make a federal law from the issue. The Supreme Court ruled that because a slave is private property, he could be taken to any territory and held there according to the 5th Amendment. Southerners were delighted and surprised by the decision; it meant that the banning of slavery was unconstitutional. Abolitionists refused to accept and abide by such a decision, and Southerners in turn were mad at the North for its defiance.<sup>10</sup>

John Brown, who had lead the attack against slaveryites in Kansas, now had a plan to sneak into the South with some of his followers and incite the slaves to rise up and rebel. Funded by Northern abolitionists, Brown entered Virginia and seized the federal arsenal in Harpers Ferry. But the slaves refused to revolt, and Brown and his group were captured.

Destined for the noose, Brown made himself the portrait of a martyr, because he reasoned that his death would do more to rally the North against the South than his living. Sure enough his execution infuriated practically every abolitionist and free-soiler and no doubt increased the already growing turmoil between the North and South.

The Presidential Election of 1860 was the final deciding factor of whether peace would remain or war begin. The Democratic party, the only remaining national party, was hopelessly divided between Douglas, Breckinridge, and Bell. Meanwhile the sectional Republican party was strongly united under Abraham Lincoln. Due to this situation, Lincoln was elected President.

When President-elect Lincoln arrived in Washington late in February 1861, the nation he was to administer during the next four years was rapidly falling apart. Already seven <sup>states</sup> in the lower South had seceded, and there was talk of the same momentous step being taken in each of the other slave states. Even before his Inauguration Lincoln perceived his most important and difficult task was stemming the tide of national disintegration. Action was needed, in the opinion of the abolitionists, to bring an end to an institution against which the Republican party had taken a stand during the election campaign. But Lincoln moved cautiously. No amount of caution, however, could maintain peace indefinitely without surrendering the authority of the federal government in the South. When the time came to defend Fort Sumter, Lincoln acted promptly; but the defense of the fort cost him four more slave states and plunged the country into the Civil War.<sup>11</sup>

What caused the Southern states to secede were the following facts: political balance was tipping against them, and they were weary of criticism and interference by the North. These withdrawn states later met at Montgomery, Alabama, and established themselves as the Confederate States of America and elected Jefferson Davis to be their president.

Lincoln, to keep the undecided border states from leaving the Union, had to be careful of what he said or did. Should he had declared the North's aims to be for the abolishment of slavery, he would have driven the Border States to side with the South. Instead, he declared that his primary purpose was to preserve the Union at all costs. So, initially the war was not to end slavery in America but rather to round up those states which had gone astray.

The North had many advantages. They had about three-fourths of the nation's wealth, superiority in manufacturing, shipping and banking, and three-fourths of the railroad. They also controlled the sea and had over double the manpower. The South prided mainly in its great leaders such as Robert E. Lee and "Stonewall" Jackson. They also had the advantage of only having to fight a defensive war; a draw would be a victory. Lastly, there was the possibility of their receiving foreign aid; unfortunately, the South could not prove to the Europeans that they were not a bad risk.<sup>12</sup>

Slaves were naturally more inclined to help the North rather than the South because up to the Civil War--besides lacking freedom--the usual treatment of a slave was quite poor. The working period of slaves was normally from sunup to sundown, six days a week. In midsummer this meant

up at four A.M. and out in the fields until nine P.M. Not usually, the last one out of the slaves' quarters in the morning felt the driver's lash. There were no laws to prevent the planters from working slaves as long or as hard as they pleased, and God help the slave who protested. Sundays were usually holidays, but at harvest time the masters could cancel these days as they saw fit.

Apologists for slavery claim that the slaves were at least amply fed. But the record does not bear this out. Frederick Douglass, who worked for many years as a slave on a big plantation in Maryland, states that the monthly ration for a field hand was eight pounds of pickled pork (very poor quality), or its equivalent in fish, (also of bad quality), one bushel of Indian corn meal, and one pint of salt--with less for children, women, and the aged. The house servants and the artisans got somewhat better food. On some Plantations the slaves were allowed to eke out their meager rations by means of tiny gardens, with maybe a pig or chicken. Innumerable records of the plantation regimes bear out Douglass' account of the slaves' diet. A U.S. Treasury report, published in 1846, estimated at \$30 the yearly cost of the upkeep of a slave. Such figures tell their own tragic story. In cases where they were hired out by their masters by the day--a widespread practice in or near the cities--the slaves usually got a small share of their wages. This enabled some, by many years of rigid economy, eventually to buy themselves free.

The slaves were clothed no better than they were fed. Douglass reports that the slaves he worked with were allowed two tow-linen shirts and one pair of trousers for summer wear; and for winter, one pair of

woolen trousers, a woolen jacket, and a pair of the coarsest shoes. A Federal Writers' Project essay, written in 1936 on the basis of interviewing several hundred ex-slaves in Virginia, paints this picture of the slaves' garb: "The usual dress for a man was canvas trousers and a cotton shirt with half elbow sleeves. Women wore a cotton 'shift' and a heavier dress over it. Children wore a simple 'tow' shirt, the discarded apparel of grown-ups, or a guano bag with arm-holes cut in the corners." All observers agree that the slaves who labored on the cotton and sugar plantations presented a ragged, unkempt, and dirty appearance.

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The slaves lived in more or less tumbled-down huts. They had no beds, except those they could contrive for themselves. Like work animals, they were entitled to "medical treatment," but what this amounted to may be imagined. When the slaves grew old, they were generally allowed to remain as unwelcome guests on the plantations, but often they were "freed" and thrown upon the country authorities for sustenance.

The above description, however, represents only the "rosy" side of the slaves' conditions, during the "prosperous" periods when the price of cotton, tobacco, and sugar were high and times were good. But periodically, like the industrial system of the North, the Southern plantation system went through crisis of overproduction, especially in cotton. Often, too, whole regions were stricken by drought. Unlike the Northern employers, the slaveholders could not throw their workers out on the streets, as they represented capital; so they allowed them to starve on the plantations. The stories of the "good care" given to the slaves during their periods of nonproductivity are just so many fairy tales, concocted by the

professional defenders of slavery.<sup>13</sup>

The Civil War gave slaves the hope that they might be removed from their horrible surroundings, and it gave the northern Negroes the chance to help free their brothers in the South from the shackles of slavery. Thus, the Negro, besides being at the political center of the Civil War, also took a decisive part in winning that great struggle. They served on all fronts. At the outbreak of the war Negro slaves carried out many insurrections on the plantations and mass flights to the Union lines. During the war about 500,000 slaves fled the plantations. This disrupted food production in the Confederate states and it compelled the rebel leaders to divert many of their troops to guard duty at home in order to tighten the intimidation of the slaves throughout the South. But the greatest war services of the Negro people were in and in connection with the armed forces. Here they became an indispensable factor to victory. The Federal law of July 17, 1862, authorized the enlistment of Negroes, but it was not until the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect on January 1, 1863, that recruiting of Negroes into the armed forces really became a national policy.<sup>14</sup>

Lincoln decided to launch his Emancipation Proclamation following the North's victory at the Battle of Antietam, the turning point of the war. The battle had been General Lee's best opportunity to win a victory that would have encouraged foreign intervention and seduced the Border states to the Confederate side. If Lee had won this battle, the South might have won the war. But because he did not, Lincoln felt secure enough to make his Proclamation.

After the Emancipation Proclamation, Negro enlistments followed rapidly. Where slaves in the Border States were recompensed, ~~The~~ Negro people responded enthusiastically to strike a real blow for their freedom. Besides bravely helping out on the fronts, Negroes also did a major service to the North by acting as spies behind Confederate lines. The heroic Harriet Tubman, of Underground Railroad fame, was very active in this superlatively dangerous work. With their sharp knowledge of local conditions, slaves were of invaluable assistance in this respect; they were the main source of information to the Union armies on what was going on behind the rebel lines. They were the eyes and ears of the Northern forces.<sup>15</sup>

The Confederacy was never able to use Negroes as soldiers, although its need for manpower was urgent and the project was frequently discussed among the military leaders. Unlike their modern apologists, the slaveholders had no illusions that the Negroes liked slavery and would defend it. Under heavy guard, slaves were, however, used for the digging of trenches and the like. On March 13, 1865, in its great extremity,<sup>?</sup> the Confederacy finally decided in desperation that Negroes should be tried as soldiers; but nothing came of it.<sup>16</sup>

In the Summer of 1863 Lee made a final attempt to win the war by invading the North again. A decisive victory here would have strengthened a growing peace movement in the North (peace now would be a victory for the South), and would encouraged foreign intervention. But he failed to win, and this meant the eventual defeat of the South.

The end of the Civil War marked the close of one stage in the revolution and the beginning of another. The revolution as a whole had three stages. In the first, during the pre-war decades, the second was the military phase, the four years of war, and the third phase, just beginning, was that of Reconstruction after the war's end.

The post-war task of reconstruction was huge and unique. No country had ever faced a comparable problem. It was fundamentally necessary to reconstruct the broken and shattered state governments of the Confederacy and realign them within the Union; to take care of the urgent needs and to start the great mass of liberated slaves on a new economic and political life; to break up the plantation system and to reorganize the economy of the South upon a new, more modern capitalist basis. The accomplishment of these revolutionary tasks depended upon the second one: to what degree the elementary problem of the freedmen was solved. The future of the nation, especially of the South, was at stake in the Reconstruction problem.<sup>17</sup>

Immediately following the war, Blacks were still not very well off. They were still poor, powerless, and illiterate. Emancipation had made free men and women of former slaves, but it could not lift the burden of centuries of oppression and resentment. Once a slave to the white man, the blacks were now slaves to hunger and disease to which thousands perished.

To cope with the problem of uneducated ex-slaves, Congress erected the Freedmen's Bureau. Though it did not do all of the things it promised (distribute up to 40 acres of abandoned or confiscated land to every

adult male), it did teach about 200,000 blacks the elements of reading.

Meanwhile the South enacted legislature to the opposite effect. The Black Codes were meant to put the black back into a position similar to that of pre-Civil War days and to insure a stable labor supply. The codes imposed the following: severe penalties for blacks who "jumped" their labor contracts, no permission to serve on a jury, and punishment for "idleness." Because of the codes, many blacks were forced to turn to sharecropping and, consequently, ended up deep in debt.

Johnson, thrust into office after Lincoln's assassination, adopted a plan to re-bond the South with the North which was similar to Lincoln's 10-percent scheme. It required the Southern states to repeal their ordinances of secession, repudiate all Confederate debts, and ratify the slave-freeing 13th Amendment, and in return they would be permitted to reorganize their governments and allowed ~~ex-rebels~~ to have influence in Congress. Congress, however, was happily passing legislation without problems and, therefore, did not like the latter section of the plan; consequently, the scheme was disapproved. Congress realized that something was needed to insure that once the South was given back its power, it would attempt to reinstate slavery. To remedy this, they passed the Civil Rights Bill which gave blacks American citizenship and thereby striking at the Black Codes. Johnson vetoed it, but Congress rammed it through anyway (and would continue to override <sup>Johnson</sup> Jackson). Next Congress put these principles in the 14th Amendment: it gave blacks their civil rights; reduced the representation of a state in Congress and the Electoral College if it denied the black the vote; disqualified ex-Confederates from federal or

state office; and guaranteed the federal debt but without acknowledging any Confederate debts.

The South was not ready to accept the decree of Congress, so Congress imposed on them the Military Reconstruction Act of March 2, 1867. By this act the South's governments were replaced by five military districts, each commanded by a Union general and policed by a Union soldier. For readmission the states were required to ratify the 14th Amendment and guarantee black suffrage in their state constitutions. Congress then became worried that when admitted, the states might amend their constitutions so as to take away the blacks' voting privileges. To remedy this they passed the 15th Amendment and forced the South to ratify it, too. Finally, in 1877, ten years after the long ordeal of military Reconstruction had begun, the last federal troops were removed from the South. Blacks were now free, American citizens with the right to vote, and the United States was a whole nation once again.

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HAVE BEEN.

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NOTES

- 1 George Merriam, The Negro and the Nation (New York: Negro Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 4-5.
- 2 William Foster, The Negro People in American History (New York: International Publishers, 1954), p. 35.
- 3 Jesse Macy, The Anti-Slavery Crusade (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1919), p. 14.
- 4 Foster, pp. 67-69.
- 5 Thomas Bailey, The American Pageant, 6th ed. (Lexington: D.C. Heath, 1979), pp. 206-207.
- 6 Macy, p. 16.
- 7 Bailey, p. 359.
- 8 Bailey, pp. 365-366.
- 9 Bailey, p. 367.
- 10 Bailey, p. 371.
- 11 John Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom, 4th ed. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1974), p. 214.
- 12 Bailey, pp. 390-391.
- 13 Foster, pp. 155-157.
- 14 Foster, p. 271.
- 15 Foster, p. 274.
- 16 Foster, p. 273.
- 17 Foster, p. 284.

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