At the close of the revolutionary war, the political relations of the independent colonies were much perplexed. Having not yet arrived at a conviction of their common interest nor being freed from the influence of their common position, they found themselves, to use a fanciful illustration, like the immense masses of ice that sometimes congregate in northern seas, floating in such immediate contact that they must close into one compact body or be tossed by the restless motions of the waters in rude and ruinous collision. But in the nature of things it was impossible that a nation could be made in one generation.

Before the action of national sympathy had given to our union the sacredness of national existence, at the very moment we assumed the responsibility of independence, there came the necessity for a national government. And here is the great anomaly in the political history of the country – the existence of a national government before we were a nation.

William Henry Trescot, *Oration Delivered Before the Washington Light Infantry*, 1847

We became a nation by the Constitution; whatever is national springs from the Constitution; and national and constitutional are convertible terms.

Jefferson Davis, “Speech at Faneuil Hall, Boston,” October 11, 1858
Slaveholders’ Stake in American Empire

Southern masters would not have worked so hard to shape American nationhood had they not done so well within a growing federal Union. The economic prosperity enjoyed by American slaveholders in 1860 set them apart from their counterparts in the rest of the hemisphere, as did the enormous authority they wielded within the U.S. government. Most proslavery Southerners appreciated how the Union’s combination of security and opportunity had created a slave system that the Charleston editor Richard Yeadon described in 1857 as “imperial in extent.” Despite slaveholders’ growing disagreement about their collective future, few could effectively rebut Yeadon’s claim that the Union had proved “the great bulwark of the institution of Southern slavery” and that the federal government had “nursed and fostered” the institution from “a feeble and rickety infancy, into a giant manhood and maturity and a self-sustaining power.”

A few figures and some basic geography dramatize slavery’s growth within the United States between American independence and the Civil War. In 1770, fewer than half a million slaves – or one out of every five enslaved workers in the New World – lived in those mainland colonies that would win their independence from Great Britain. American slaves were concentrated along the Atlantic coast, at the fringes of a plantation complex centered in Caribbean sugar islands that were the oldest and most dynamic parts of the Atlantic economy. By the time of the secession crisis of 1860–61, the number

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of slaves within the United States had increased by nearly 1,000 percent to more than 4 million. This represented fully two-thirds of all bound laborers across the Western Hemisphere. Emancipations in the Caribbean and in South America reshaped the geography of New World slavery, as did that global demand for short-staple cotton grown most profitably on mainland plantations. By the 1830s, slavery’s center of gravity had shifted to the Mississippi River Valley, where masters concentrated slaves in what became the wealthiest counties in the entire United States. This area’s cotton boom revitalized slavery in Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia; helped ensure that bondage would flourish in the postrevolutionary Gulf coast states of Florida and Alabama; and soon spilled over into the frontier societies of Missouri, Arkansas, and Louisiana’s Red River watershed. By the 1850s, ambitious planters were looking toward Texas and beyond, imagining the sweep of an even more spectacular Cotton Kingdom.²

Economic forces – especially the global demand for short-staple cotton – worked in tandem with a federal state that equipped slaveholders to exploit virgin land and to continue what seemed to be a never-ending series of profit-maximizing migrations. Southern representatives secured their interests by backing a newly powerful government late in the 1780s, thus achieving a more stable Union by 1790, just as viability in the international realm became the most important factor in the preservation of chattel bondage. Over the following tumultuous decade, the military and diplomatic apparatus of nationhood insulated U.S. plantations from the radicalized Caribbean rocked by black revolution. Having secured the mainland from the threat of “contagion,” this same government ensured internal order by relocating native inhabitants from the interior South, which in turn cleared the way for an expansionist war during the 1840s. The constitutional structure of Americans’ “compound republic” unleashed these full federal powers in “external” affairs while it checked most federal involvement in “internal” matters of slavery and racial hierarchy, where the jurisdiction of the separate states would be supreme.

Despite the suspicions of later critics, no coordinated “slave power conspiracy” designed this imperial republic to project bondage across North America. Those who established the basis of the Cotton Kingdom in the early decades of American nationhood were neither as grasping nor as confident as those who, during the 1850s, sought to extend their sway to the Pacific coast, ²

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across the Caribbean, and perhaps even to Brazil’s Amazon Valley. Prior to 1820, slaveholding men and women could scarcely have imagined a future defined by the wealth and power accumulated by their children and grandchildren. Still suffering from British military disruption of coastal plantations, masters in the early American republic tended to be more anxious than ambitious and were less intent on gaining an empire than on preventing catastrophe. Their preference for stronger federal government in the late 1780s stemmed from their perceived vulnerability. As the South Carolina Congressman William Smith put it, “when we entered this confederacy we did so from political, not moral motives,” and chief among these was a desire to make American nationhood a mechanism of self-preservation.3

Slaveholders’ effective use of federal power both secured their mastery and established their credentials as guardians of the national interest. Accomplishments that stabilized plantations simultaneously bolstered the pride of white Americans across the Union. The distinctive quality of this first stage of proslavery imperialism was its ability to entwine the interests of masters and the rest of white America and to make national heroes out of leaders like Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson. Masters’ association of their own interests with larger national purposes continued through the 1850s, even if these began to seem hollow to many erstwhile northern allies. In moments of candor and at times of crisis, slaveholders tended to admit that their American patriotism had always been backed up by an element of calculation. Late in 1861, the crusty James Chesnut, Sr., summed up a perspective he had developed over a long life, which made him skeptical of those intent on making war against the Union. “Without the aid and countenance of the whole United States, we could not have kept slavery,” he insisted, adding, with some sense of vindication, that he “always knew that the world was against us.” There was nothing mysterious or sentimental about Chesnut having been a “Union man.” He simply “wanted all the power the United States gave me – to hold my own.”4

**FEDERAL UNION AND JEFFERSONIAN EMPIRE**

In his public campaign for the new federal Constitution, James Madison argued, “if we are to be one nation in any respect, it clearly ought to be in respect to other nations.” By framing American nationhood in avowedly

international terms, Madison drew attention to the primary challenges that Americans faced in 1788 and accurately foresaw the Union’s chief preoccupation for the thirty years that followed. Unifying control of the interior and asserting a presence along the Atlantic coast were the main achievements of these years, though close behind was the quite unexpected extension of the national domain across the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains. Fears rather than hopes prevailed for these Jeffersonian architects of American empire, who worried about how the Union might become a European client state or fall victim to intrigues between Native peoples, slaves, and hostile imperial powers. Such scenarios would be all the more likely if the North American Union splintered into several partial confederacies or, worse still, if dozens of separate republics reintroduced the uncertainties of the European state system to North America. The “peace pact” adopted by 1790 thus helped not only to preserve a Union but also to create a federal state capable of setting American boundaries, policing who might and might not cross these frontiers, and accommodating competing sectional interests during a necessarily destabilizing process of territorial growth.5

Madison’s fellow slaveholders had a particular interest in supporting an American nation that could be a viable presence “in respect to other nations.” The occupying armies of the Revolutionary War liberated tens of thousands of slaves and thus suggested how another incursion might end the institution altogether.6 Most realized how the vulnerabilities of plantation zones precluded an exclusively “Southern” Union. Charles Pinckney was prescient in warning his state’s ratifying convention that “without Union with the other states, South Carolina must soon fall.” He added that only a “Quixote” would assume that a state with such a dense slave population “could long maintain her independence if she stood alone, or was only connected with the southern states.” Edmund Randolph similarly


warned his fellow Virginians against allying with only Carolina and Georgia, two states that were “diminished in their real force, by the mixture of an unhappy species of population.” A “southern confederacy” would simply not be viable, Randolph continued. “As soon would a navy move from the forest, and an army spring from the earth, as such a confederacy, indebted, impoverished, in its commerce, and destitute of men, could, for some years at least, provide a simple defense for itself.”

The federal government that was inaugurated in 1789 quickly proved its ability to shore up this weak southern flank. George Washington’s administration signed treaties to open the Georgia backcountry to white settlement and began a process that brought free trade to the Spanish-controlled Mississippi River, which had been the most divisive sectional issue of the 1780s. Then, between 1791 and 1803, the federal government successfully insulated the mainland from a series of crises that rocked the French colony of Saint Domingue, formerly the most stable and prosperous of all New World slave regimes. U.S. policymakers initially formed a unified response to the massive slave rebellion there, as rivals Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton cooperated to provide three-quarters of a million dollars in American aid to the island’s planters. Shifting struggles on Saint Domingue and in France soon resulted in a partisan split that divided the American master class against itself. Federalists, who were especially strong in the Carolina Low Country, strove to increase British ties; the Jeffersonian Republicans, whose chief base of support lay in the Chesapeake, actively sympathized with the French Republic, even after the National Assembly issued an emancipation decree in 1794. By the late 1790s, as war raged in both Europe and the Caribbean, the staunchly proslavery Federalists of the Deep South began to consider how accepting the island’s black governors might calm and contain the island’s revolutionary turmoil. Jefferson

7 Pinckney in Debates Which Arose in the House of Representatives of South Carolina (Charleston: A.E. Miller, 1831), 28; Randolph in Jonathan Elliot, ed. The Debates in the Several State Conventions, on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution (Washington, 1836), 1: 487.


The Caribbean crisis remained unresolved as the Jeffersonians concluded a successful political campaign for the presidency in 1800. During the fall of that year, a plot by the Richmond slave Gabriel to kidnap Virginia governor James Monroe suggested that slaves were being “taught to regard the French as patrons to their cause.” Governor Monroe and President Jefferson responded to this jarring event by coordinating state and federal efforts to deport rebels beyond American borders, a measure that both men hoped might lay the basis for a broader program of relocating all free blacks as far away as possible from the United States. To their alarm, the Jeffersonians discovered not long after taking office that Napoleon Bonaparte hoped to accomplish very near the opposite in his initiative to restore French authority. His plans would purge Saint Domingue and Guadeloupe of its most dangerous black rebels by sending them northward to a proposed French penal colony near New Orleans. While France’s strategic interest in the trans-Appalachian region would have created friction under any circumstance, the geopolitics of black revolution and forced relocation injected a new urgency in the Jeffersonian quest for control of the Mississippi Valley. While Jefferson at first asserted his willingness to cooperate with Napoleon to isolate Saint Domingue and “starve” the black leadership there, he changed course once the issue was entangled with white American control over the Mississippi Valley backcountry. If reintroducing slavery to the French colonies might eliminate a powerful example to southern slaves, doing so seemed likely to unleash massive violence, spur furious black resistance, and, worst of all for slaveholders, bring a flow of black Jacobins into Louisiana, a locale dangerously near U.S. territory. President Jefferson and Secretary of State Madison witnessed how volatile slavery’s restoration in Guadeloupe could be when the French navy carried a relatively small group of black rebels disturbingly close to the U.S. coastline. The panic that resulted caused Deep South planters to seek federal aid and led the South
Carolina governor to order the immediate execution of any “french Negro incendiary prisoners” who might be brought ashore.10

Bonaparte’s proposals, and the accompanying specter of relocating black rebels along the Atlantic and within the Mississippi Valley, were resolved as unexpectedly as this episode had begun. Heavy losses in an attempted military campaign against Saint Domingue caused France to abandon the island and to offer the country’s entire interest in the Louisiana territories to the United States. In the long term, this doubling of the national territory would be a critical moment in the formation of the American Cotton Kingdom. Yet its announcement initially caused a great many masters to fear how such a sudden extension of frontiers might embroil the country in international difficulties, give rise to a separate Mississippi Valley Confederacy, and undermine the economic viability of their own plantations (this last concern persisted among those planters who would remain wary of southwestern migration through the 1840s).11 In 1802, the American diplomat Robert Livingston of New York systematized these geopolitical anxieties when he noted how “the unproductive labor of clearing the immense forests” seemed to be “ill calculated for slaves, since it requires long habit in the use of an ax, and a strength and activity seldom found in slaves.” Dim economic prospects seemed hardly worth the risk, he continued, since collaboration between Indians and slaves would follow any introduction of slavery into what was widely considered to be a tropical frontier. “The establishment of new colonies in a marshy country and warm climate” required black as well as white labor, but this necessity held the seeds of its undoing. In all probability, expansion would produce little more than “the inroads of savages, the
insurrection of slaves, the insubordination of troops, and the abuses of officers when far removed from the superintending eye of the Sovereign.”

Disaster remained a possibility well after a treaty transferred Louisiana to the United States; only at the end of the six successive presidential administrations of the Virginia planters Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe would American control of the Mississippi River Valley be firmly established and the sectional tensions accompanying this expansion be defused. The job of cultivating the loyalty of white Louisianans was entrusted to the Virginia native William Claiborne, who served as territorial governor after James Monroe twice declined the position. Claiborne’s duties included enforcing the ban on slave imports into Louisiana and helping to suppress the largest attempted slave revolt in American history, which South Carolina planter Wade Hampton, one of the country’s largest slaveholders, crushed while serving as a U.S. general in 1811. A foreign invasion of the region remained a threat until the Tennessee planter Andrew Jackson defeated the British at New Orleans four years later. Then, in 1821, Monroe brought a perspective honed as Paris negotiator and as secretary of state to the presidency, where he authorized a treaty with the considerably weaker power of Spain that brought all of the Florida territories under U.S. control, thus securing the last in a series of American acquisitions around the eastern Gulf of Mexico. The leverage of statesmen and military leaders was greatly enhanced by a major population influx and by the arrival of masters and slaves who replaced sugar with cotton as the region's most lucrative staple. While the loyalty to the United States of these southwestern planters owed something to their earlier residence in the Atlantic republic, what mattered most was the American government’s ability to secure plantation property far more effectively than the weak Spanish, the destabilized French, or the seemingly untrustworthy British. Options beyond these alternatives were sparse, since any white settlement on such a dangerous frontier needed the protection of a more powerful guardian state.

12 Robert Livingston memoir presented August 10, 1802 in *State Papers and Correspondence Bearing on ... Louisiana*, 36–50. Similar concerns had hindered French development of Louisiana slavery in the early 18th century, as Ira Berlin explains in *Generations of Captivity*, 88–96. For broader American anxieties about the purchase, see Peter Kastor, *The Nation's Crucible: The Louisiana Purchase and the Creation of America* (Yale University Press, 2004).

Slaveholders valued these early southwestern additions primarily because of the security they provided. Compared to later periods of territorial expansion, masters in this formative period of American empire were relatively unconcerned with the need for more plantation land and put little emphasis on the need for greater representation in the federal government. What mattered was blocking European incursions with the creation of new forts along American borders and the securing of white domination over potentially disruptive free people of color on the margins of plantation zones. Andrew Jackson’s military campaigns in Creek territory and in Florida in the late 1810s effectively neutralized the threat of those Indians and free blacks who had troubled planters by harboring fugitive slaves and presenting the British with a potential alliance. Jackson’s attempt to assert American control over these areas set the stage for his more controversial Indian removal policies of the 1830s, whose total cost of $68 million was more than twice the amount the federal government paid for the Louisiana territories and the Mexican Cession combined. The first stage of this process further insulated the United States from the influence of free people of color, a matter that had become a federal responsibility in 1803, when Congress passed legislation that enforced state restrictions against the entry of free blacks from the Caribbean.14

In a string of territorial accomplishments, the “Virginia dynasty” thus simultaneously strengthened the plantation order and protected all white Americans from potential enemies. In some respects, the Jeffersonians’ emphasis on collective security was quite similar to that of earlier imperial administrators who had monitored the growth of slavery primarily in terms of better governance of distant territories.15 The diverse consequences

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