INTRODUCTION

The American Civil War occupies a privileged position in history. It was the greatest event in the life of the most powerful country the world has ever seen. Not surprisingly, therefore, it has attracted considerable scholarly interest, mainly from historians within the United States but also from many outside. This book is not intended to be merely another account of the years leading up to that seismic conflict, although the extraordinarily dramatic story is indeed told here. Instead it reinterprets the conflict, arguing that it was the almost inevitable product not of chance or "contingency", but of the profound differences between North and South.[1]

In the first century or so after the outbreak of the war, historians sought to explain what had gone wrong in 1861. They offered many interpretations, interpretations which are still sometimes endorsed today. At that time, however, many scholars made an assumption about the slaves of the South that no reputable historian would now endorse. The assumption was that the slaves were suited to slavery; African-American slaves, it was said, were naturally inclined to accept their enslavement.[2]

At that time, prior to the 1950s and 1960s, little effort had been made to study the social history of the slaves, and racist stereotyping still prevailed. Since the 1960s, however, both these deficiencies have been

[1] This interpretation is at odds with some recent writing. See Edward Ayers, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America, 1859–1863* (New York, 2003); Nelson Lankford, *Cry Havoc: The Crooked Road to Civil War* (New York, 2007); Russell McClintock, *Lincoln and the Decision for War: The Northern Response to Secession* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2008).

[2] Thus Ulrich B. Phillips, for example, in *American Slavery, Negro Slavery* (Baton Rouge, 1918), p. 291, referred to the slaves' "courteous acceptance of subordination" and their "readiness for loyalty of a feudal sort".

rectified. We now know that the slaves in their hundreds of thousands yearned for freedom and, accordingly, resisted slavery, occasionally violently, more often in a far quieter, less dramatic but still vitally important manner. What the general public and even many specialists in the period have not yet grasped are the processes by which this resistance played itself out politically. In fact, as we shall see, slave resistance was a fundamental, perhaps the most fundamental, cause of the Civil War. There have been many valuable histories of the 1850s and of the sectional conflict. But in failing to incorporate this factor into their causal schemas, these works are severely defective.[3] Moreover their failure to explain the Civil War adequately entails a failure to assess the role of the slaves not only in creating the conflict but also in bringing about the abolition of slavery and thus their own liberation. We are dealing, then, with a major distortion of the historical process at what is a vital moment in the history of a great nation.

Slave resistance was not, of course, the only cause of the sectional conflict. Nor is it the only one that standard histories have overlooked. In the North the years of intensifying sectional antagonism were also years in which wage labour was becoming increasingly widespread. This was no coincidence. Although almost entirely ignored by Civil War historians, the spread of wage labour, as we shall see, in fact underwrote both the economic and the moral critiques of slavery. And these were the critiques that allowed the North to mobilise opposition to slavery in the South and ultimately, on the battle field, to bring about its destruction. This book will argue that the growth of wage labour must therefore take its rightful place as another principal, though almost entirely unrecognised, cause of the Civil War.

One problem that confronts historians is to integrate these causal processes with a narrative of the events of the 1850s. In the political arena slave resistance was not immediately apparent in the events of the late 1840s and 1850s. Slaves were not, after all, participants in the political process. They did not vote, had no representatives in

[3] Two works to which this generalisation applies are David Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848–1861* (New York, 1976) and James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (New York, 1988). These are two of the most widely used – and widely admired – single volumes on the politics of the 1850s. But it is interesting to note that a recent volume on the origins of the Civil War also completely ignores the question of slave resistance – as did almost all of its academic reviewers. See Marc Egnal, *The Clash of Extremes: The Economic Origins of the Civil War* (New York, 2009).

Congress and were not consulted when white Americans made the key decisions. Although wage workers were, in general, able to vote and had representatives in Congress, they too were not directly involved in the key decisions. Those decisions were made by members of the white elite, northern and southern. None of this means, however, that these apparently rather powerless groups can be ignored in an account of the coming of the Civil War, and the pages that follow, without losing their focus on the role of the elites who did make the decisions, will seek to illustrate in all their complexity the processes by which the influence of these other groups was felt.

The discerning reader will quickly see that this interpretation of the sectional conflict places great emphasis not only upon these relatively disadvantaged groups but also (and relatedly) upon the economic changes that were taking places in these years. This is not a new emphasis, though it will be seen that my understanding of the impact of these economic changes differs from that of most scholars.

Another characteristic of this account is that it also places heavy emphasis upon *ideology*, which I treat essentially as world view.[4] Ideology is a set of ideas, attitudes and beliefs which together make up a view of society, of government and of human nature – in short a view of the world. We can expect an ideology to be comprised of ideas which are relatively consistent with one another. But we should also recognise that there may be tensions, sometimes even outright contradictions within these belief systems. Even more important we should recognise that ideologies sometimes illuminate reality but sometimes serve to obscure it. For example, as we shall see, in the decades before the Civil War, the ideology of the Democratic party illuminated some of the inequalities that existed within American society, and simultaneously obscured others. As a result it offered protection to the elite group (the slaveholders of the South) whose privileges it covertly furthered.

It will also become apparent to the reader that, again and again, when I identify what seem to be the errors of what some historians have termed a "blundering generation" of Americans,[5] I seek to explain how

[4] Some scholars employ the German term "Weltanschauung" as a synonym for world view.

[5] Here I am referring, as students of the period will know, to the Civil War "revisionist" historians who argued that the war was brought about by blunders on the part of statesmen who simply lacked the abilities necessary to lead the nation in challenging times. Implicit

those errors flowed directly from more basic perceptions, perceptions that were integral to the ideology or world view of the group in question. I then often seek to identify the economic interests served, whether consciously or not, by these ideologies. This is an approach, going from "blunders" (though in fact denying that they should be seen as blunders) to ideology to economic interest, that will be unfamiliar to many readers and students, and it results in there being some passages of the book that non-specialists may find difficult.[6] I have of course tried to be as clear and lucid as possible in the exposition of these ideas; this is the minimum that the reader can expect of any author.

Finally I should like to offer thanks to some friends, relations, colleagues and editors, who have, in one way or another, facilitated the completion of this volume. My father, Eric Ashworth, read the entire manuscript and offered many valuable suggestions, as did my good friend (and former teacher) Michael Heale. Heather Forland also read the book and gave me an enormous amount of help and encouragement to complete it. Eric Foner and James Oakes were among those who initially suggested that I should write the volume and it has benefited greatly from the comments of Frank Towers and Bruce Levine. I have learnt a great deal from each of these scholars. Frank Smith of Cambridge University Press gave me every encouragement to embark upon the project; at CUP responsibility for the volume subsequently fell to Emily Spangler, Abigail Zorbaugh and Eric Crahan to each of whom I am very much indebted. A special thanks must go to Luane Hutchinson for her superb and highly efficient copy editing. Although I would dearly like to blame all these people for the errors that remain in the book, unfortunately I cannot quite bring myself to do so.

John Ashworth
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(or even explicit) in this view was the claim that better statesmen would have avoided war. This volume rejects this claim entirely.

[6] It is probably the case that the discussion of the relationship of the Democratic party to slavery in Chapter 2 is the most difficult section of the book.

1

THE UNITED STATES IN 1848

A Nation Imperilled

1

Eighteen forty eight was the year of revolutions in Europe. In the United States it seemed like business as usual, at least insofar as the stability of the nation was concerned. There was no revolution expected here. And none came. Nevertheless within little more than a dozen years, there would indeed be a revolution, a cataclysm which would set in train some devastating social, political and economic changes and, at the same time, claim the lives of far more men and women than had been casualties in Europe in its year of revolutions. Few Americans glimpsed this possibility in 1848.

Many instead, and understandably, congratulated themselves on not merely the stability but also the overall success of their nation. Contrary to the expectations of some European observers at the time and subsequently, the "experiment" that had been the American Republic in 1776 had been a triumphant success. This success had been political, economic and military.[1]

Its political manifestation was obvious. The United States, as of March 1848 following the recent war and peace treaty with Mexico, comprised a huge nation covering not 890,000 square miles, as in 1776, but instead almost three million. There were now not thirteen but, by mid-1848, thirty states. Equally important the nation's political institutions had advanced at what seemed an equally breathtaking pace. The Federal Constitution, drawn up and put into operation in the late 1780s, had survived not only unscathed but as an object of veneration

[1] The success was also, it could be argued, cultural. This question is beyond the scope of the present volume.

to all but a small minority of Americans, or at least of white Americans. Presidents had come and gone, Congresses had been elected and then turned out as the Constitution stipulated, and a federal judiciary had operated sometimes controversially but never so as to bring large numbers of Americans to question the viability of their Republic. It was all much as the more optimistic of the nation's founding fathers might have hoped.

As far as the economy was concerned, it was a similar success story. Since 1800 gross national product had increased approximately sevenfold, with a doubling of per capita income. The population was growing by approximately a third every decade. Internal trade, extremely difficult in the eighteenth century, had been transformed by the digging of canals and the building of turnpikes, steamboats and now railroads. Meanwhile the value of goods exported had soared from a little over twenty million dollars in 1790 to more than 138 million in 1848. Similarly the value of the nation's manufactured goods had in the forty years before 1850 increased almost sixfold. This expansionary process had not been uninterrupted; indeed the most recent significant interruption had come recently, in the late 1830s and early 1840s, but from the mid-to-late 1840s growth had resumed, and at an accelerating pace. There seemed little reason to doubt that it would continue for the foreseeable future. This seemed further reason for celebration. Time would show that it was not.[2]

Were Americans united? A superficial glance would suggest that they were. While many of Europe's ethnic minorities were questioning their allegiances to the nations of which they were a part, and others were challenging established hierarchies and seeking to replace them with more liberal or radical alternatives, in the United States a shared loyalty to the nation encompassed all but a small minority, or at any rate a small minority of the white Anglo-Saxon males who wielded all the power. The most exploited groups of all, the slaves of the South and the Native Americans, comprised only a small part of the total population and, for the most part, lacked all political rights or the strength to

[2] Douglass C. North, *The Economic Growth of the United States 1790—1860* (New York, 1966), pp. 221, 233; Susan Lee and Peter Passell, *A New Economic View of American History* (New York, 1979), pp. 52–62; John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism and Politics in the Antebellum Republic* vol 1, *Commerce and Compromise, 1820–1850* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 91.

obtain them by force. Women also lacked the vote but only a handful of men or women believed this to be wrong; they would in 1848 form the first women's rights convention the world had seen, to the derision of most commentators. An observer might thus have concluded that, in contradistinction to Europe, the United States of 1848 was indeed a united nation.

II

Appearances were deceptive. Beneath this unity lay the seeds of the revolution that would burst forth in 1861. It was scarcely surprising that a nation spread over so large an area as the United States now occupied should exhibit marked regional diversity. A sharp and obvious contrast existed between the comparatively long-established states of the East and those of the West (what would now be the Midwest), some of which had been settled only a few years. As all observers noted and expected, the processes of economic development were more advanced in the older states of the East. Contrast, however, did not necessitate conflict, and if the only sectional difference had been between East and West there would in 1848 have been little cause for concern. Far more ominous, even in 1848, were the differences between North and South, with the institution of slavery at their heart.

Slavery had existed throughout the Union in 1776, but in part because of the idealism of 1776, enshrined in the American Revolution's rhetoric of liberty and equality, it had been very gradually abolished in the North, a process not completed until the 1820s. The disruption to the northern economy had been very limited. In 1776 many southerners had assumed that in their region too slavery would disappear. But its role here was too great. In the eighteenth century its strongholds were the tobacco-growing areas of Virginia and Maryland and the parts of South Carolina and Georgia where rice and indigo could be cultivated. In the 1790s a technological breakthrough occurred with the invention by Eli Whitney of a new cotton engine, or "gin", which removed the seeds from cotton, previously a highly labour-intensive process, and thus made its cultivation profitable across much of the Lower South (and even a few areas in the Upper South). The acquisition of new land in the South West, together with the often forcible expulsion of the Native Americans from it, now combined with an almost insatiable demand

from Europe for raw cotton. The result was the spectacular growth of the cotton kingdom. In 1791 the United States exported fewer than two hundred thousand pounds of cotton; by 1815 the figure was in excess of eighty million. The process continued. By 1850 the value of cotton exported would be four times the 1815 figure.[3]

American slavery was by now explicitly racial; its victims were African Americans, though a few had skins so white that they could not be distinguished from Caucasians. As of 1848 there were fifteen slave states, forming in effect three tiers. These were the states of the Border South (Delaware, Maryland, Missouri and Kentucky), the Middle South (Virginia, North Carolina, Arkansas and Tennessee), and the Deep South (South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas). Although Virginia had more slaves than any other state, the proportion of slaves in the total population was greater in the Lower than in the Middle South, and lowest in the Border South. South Carolina and Mississippi were exceptional in having a majority of their populations enslaved. In Delaware meanwhile the slave population was less than three per cent of the total, while in Missouri, a state destined to play a key role in the politics of the 1850s, the figure (as of 1850) was approximately thirteen per cent. It is a striking though not perhaps surprising fact that, across the South as a whole, proslavery sentiment (among the whites) was directly proportional to the percentage of the population enslaved. South Carolina was in the vanguard of the movement for southern rights and for southern independence; Delaware scarcely counted as a southern state at all.[4]

The growth in the total slave population had itself been startling. In 1808 the African slave trade had been closed and many contemporaries had expected the institution to wither away as a result. But alone among new world slave regimes, the slaveholders of the South had seen their human chattels increase in number decade on decade through natural reproduction combined with, as some masters saw it, the paternal regard lavished upon them. We need not accept these claims to recognise

[3] Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago, 1969); North, *Economic Growth*, pp. 231, 233. For a different view of the technological impact of the cotton gin, see Angela Lakwete, *Inventing the Cotton Gin: Machine and Myth in Antebellum America* (Baltimore, 2003).

[4] Useful data on slaveholding can be found at http://www.sonofthesouth.net/slavery/slave-maps/slave-census.htm.

that slavery in the United States by the mid-nineteenth century was less savage than it had been in previous times and somewhat less malign than in most other slaveholding countries. By 1850 there were approximately three million slaves in the South; at the time of the Revolution there had been half a million.

These slaves were owned by a comparatively small number of southerners. Only one in three families possessed slaves, though once again the proportion was highest in the Deep South, lowest in the border areas. The loyalty of the non-slaveholders to their states and thus to slavery was real, but not uniform and certainly not unlimited, especially in the most lightly enslaved areas.[5] This potential for conflict would play a key role in the politics of the 1850s and in precipitating a Civil War in 1861. It was not, however, as important as the attitude of the slaves themselves to their own enslavement.[6]

III

Although the experiences of the millions of black Americans who lived in slavery in the United States were extraordinarily varied, one generalisation can be offered. In their millions they bitterly resented being slaves. With few exceptions, they wanted to be free. Slavery is an exploitative system, but the exploitation on which it rests is naked and highly visible to its victims. The slave works, the master appropriates the fruits of this labour and without the consent of the slave. Whatever is returned to the slave in the form of food, clothing or "luxuries" is at the discretion of the master. One does not need to be educated or literate or well-informed to perceive the exploitative nature of this relationship. As we shall see, this is one of the key weaknesses of the system.

Abundant evidence exists to show that slaves of all ages, of both sexes, from all parts of the Old South perceived it and yearned for freedom. As one of them put it, "my heart ached within me to feel the life of liberty". Another later and poignantly recalled that he "used to wonder why it was that our people were kept in slavery". He "would look

[5] A recent work that emphasises the opposition of the non-slaveholders to the slaveholders' rule is David Williams, *Bitterly Divided: The South's Inner Civil War* (New York, 2008).

[6] Lawrence Shore, *Southern Capitalists: The Ideological Leadership of an Elite* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1986); Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism and Politics in the Antebellum Republic* vol 2, *The Coming of the Civil War 1850–1861* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 82–96.

at the birds as they flew over my head or sung their free songs upon the trees, and think it strange, that, of all God's creatures, the poor negro only was held in bondage". He insisted that "no slaves think they were made to be slaves".[7] Even if this were an exaggeration, and some slaves were instead content with their situation, the slaveholders had to respond to the dangers posed by those who were not. As a result slave resistance, taken in conjunction with the southern response to that resistance, would be a fundamental, perhaps the most fundamental, cause of sectional conflict and thus of civil war. Until recently it has been entirely ignored by historians.[8]

Slave resistance took many forms. First and most dramatic was the deliberately undertaken act of violence. This might be directed against an individual slaveholder and take the form of arson, poisoning or an act of physical aggression. In the most extreme cases of all, there were attempted insurrections. In the United States these were few and far between, reflecting the slaves' extremely limited prospect of success. In 1831 Nat Turner had led the most famous slave revolt in American history, which had resulted in the deaths of more than seventy whites and caused widespread panic, together with ferocious reprisals, in Southampton County, Virginia and throughout the South. There would be no comparable uprisings in later years. But this must not be taken

[7] John Blassingame, *Slave Testimony* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1977), pp. 688, 135.

[8] No historian did more than Kenneth M. Stampp to alert scholars to slave resistance – in his writings on slavery. In his writings on the origins of the Civil War, he ignored the subject entirely. See Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South* (New York, 1956), pp. 9, 92, 140. As historian John W. Blassingame put it, "there is overwhelming evidence in the primary sources, of the Negro's resistance to his bondage and of his undying love for freedom"; "the slave's constant prayer, his all-consuming hope, was for liberty"; *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (rev. ed., New York, 1979), pp. 192, 193. For examples of works stressing black resistance, see Raymond A. Bauer and Alice H. Bauer, "Day to Day Resistance to Slavery", *Journal of Negro History* XXVII (1942), 388–419; Gabor Boritt and Scott Hancock, eds. *Slavery, Resistance, Freedom* (New York, 2007); Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge, MA, 2003), *The Political Worlds of Slavery and Freedom* (Boston, 2009); James Oakes, *Slavery and Freedom: An Interpretation of the Old South* (New York, 1990); Leslie Howard Owens, *This Species of Property: Slave Life and Culture in the Old South* (New York, 1976); Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA, 1999); Deborah Gray White, *Arn't I A Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation* (New York, 1985); William A. Link, *Roots of Secession: Slavery and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003). This is also a main theme of both volumes of my *Slavery, Capitalism and Politics*. For a balanced assessment of the extent of slave resistance, see Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery, 1619–1861* (New York, 2003).