

FROM REFORM TO REVOLUTION

The Transformation of Confederate Ideology and its Legacy

Between 1859 and 1863, Confederate ideology in the American South underwent a dramatic transformation. Over the course of the Civil War, the reactionary ideology of the secessionists gave way to the Confederate attempt to create a revolutionary racial state unparalleled in its scope and destructiveness before the mid-twentieth century. In the span of just four years, a movement to preserve the antebellum sociopolitical order had become the most radical nation-building project of the nineteenth century, only to quickly disappear at the end of the war. Using speeches, pamphlets, newspapers, and cultural texts, this study examines the rhetoric behind the rise and fall of the ideology at the core of the failed southern republic.

By Zachary S. Brown
Stanford University



First inauguration of Jefferson Davis as President of the Confederate States of America at Montgomery, Alabama, (February 18, 1861)

Source: *Digital Collection, Boston Athenaeum*

The ultimate failure of the Confederate States of America has led many scholars to discount it as a legitimate nation. As a result, Confederate ideology, and particularly its effect on southern nationalism, remains understudied. Despite its short and violent existence, however, the Confederacy was not merely an alliance of elite planters, but also a dynamic and evolving project in nation-building that sought to establish an entirely new kind of republic.

As the fledgling nation established itself in the midst of the Civil War, the ideology at the center of the Confederate experiment transformed in scope and scale between 1859 and 1863. Confederate ideology, with its origins in the rhetoric of secession, would undergo considerable change and emerge in mature form by 1863, persisting until the end of the war. The secessionists of 1859-1861 saw their attempt to establish a new nation as a conservative movement to protect slavery against growing northern political influences. While they would often appeal to the idea of ‘revolution,’ they did so only to promote a reactionary cause – to preserve the antebellum southern socio-political order against northern interference. Rather than radicals, they saw themselves as counter-revolutionaries protecting the original American republic, with state sovereignty intact as they contended the founders would have wanted, from the threat of dangerous Republican ‘revolutionaries’ like ‘Black Republicans’ John Brown and Abraham Lincoln. Thus, early secessionists were often revolutionaries in their actions and means but not in their self-articulated ideology and motive. However, from 1861 to 1863, as the secessionist ideology took institutional form in the shape of Confederate States of America, the Confederate project, due to the practicalities and challenges of war and state formation, had to organize, and rationalize that organization, in novel ways. Practical demands, unimagined by the secession advocates of 1859-1861, required the Confederates to embrace the rhetoric of radical revolution they had long denounced. Rather than simply existing to ensure the preservation of American constitutional integrity based on property rights and state sovereignty, the Confederacy envisioned itself as an entirely new kind of state based on ‘white republicanism’ that, in their view, would serve as a model for the world, a revolutionary project in building a race-based slaveholder’s republic.

THE CONSERVATIVE FOUNDATIONS OF CONFEDERATE IDEOLOGY: THE SECESSIONISTS, 1859-1861

Historians have generally viewed the Confederacy as a reactionary rather than revolutionary experience. Most have

argued that the Confederate project is best understood “as part of a broad reactionary movement among regional agrarian and slaveholding elites that formed a steady counterpoint to the age of revolution and emancipation.”¹ From this perspective the southern republic is framed as a necessity of the pro-slavery secessionist impulse rather than the product of a coherent nationalist ideology. While this view proves ultimately superficial and thereby unable to fully explain the Confederate project as a whole, it nonetheless is reflective of the project’s initial inspiration from the work of the secessionists of 1859-1861. Importantly, the rhetoric of secession, which inspired the leaders of the Confederacy, was profoundly reactionary. Fundamentally, when the “the Palmetto State, long hotbed of aristocratic values and secessionist thinking had taken a decisive step to break up the Union... the purpose of this radical action was conservative.”²

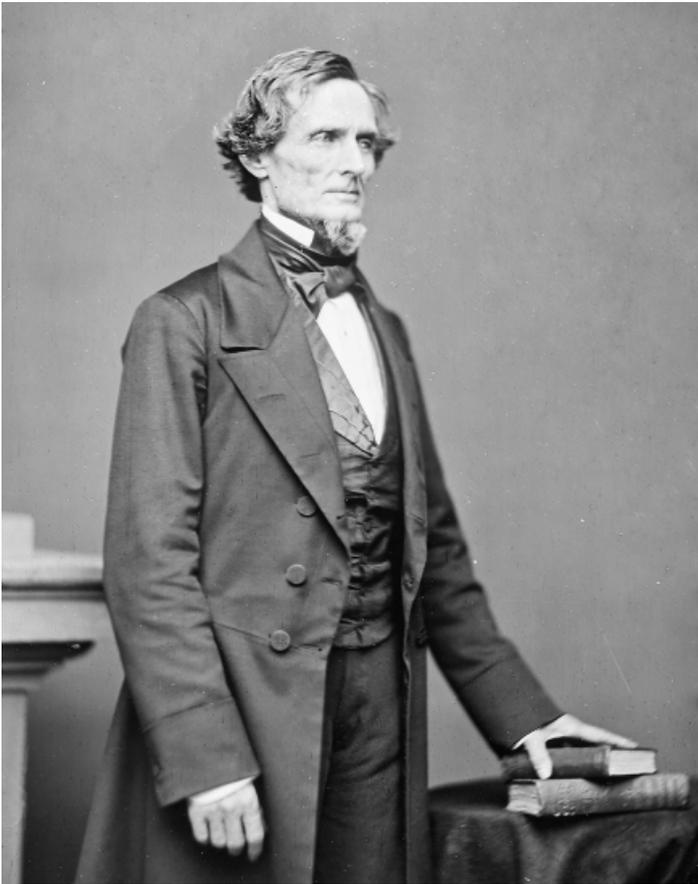
This conservative purpose can be seen in South Carolina’s *Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina*. South Carolina had long been the home of the reactionary pro-slavery fire-eaters who had progressively advocated disunion since the nullification crisis of 1832. By December of 1860, the secession convention presented their project as a conservative measure to protect slavery and the integrity of the Constitution, claiming, “the people of South Carolina...declared that the frequent violations of the Constitution of the United States [by the North], fully justified...withdrawing from the Federal Union.”³ This appeal to tradition echoed the *Declaration of Independence*, as South Carolina secessionists justified their actions as compatible with “the two great principles asserted by the Colonies...the right of a state to government itself, and the right of a people to abolish a government when it becomes destructive.”⁴ While the South Carolinian secessionists purposefully avoided the rhetoric of natural equality that Jefferson used to justify his claims, the appeal to tradition of the *Declaration* is important. The secessionists saw themselves, albeit from a highly sanitized southern perspective, as rescuers of the history and tradition of the founders.

Through this rationalization of secession as a conservative movement, the fire-eaters of South Carolina, unknowingly, set an important precedent that would form the core of the initial basis of Confederate ideology. Secessionists, in their view of themselves, were attempting to restore the Constitution, protecting state sovereignty from northern aggression. Georgian, and future Confederate Secretary of State, Robert Toombs expressed this perspective most clearly in his speech advocating secession in November of 1860, “The [Republicans and the North] are not satisfied with this [Constitution] and began a war upon our political rights and social institutions, marked by every act of perfidy and treachery.”⁵ For Toombs, like the South Carolina fire-eaters, secession was, if anything, an attempt to reclaim the Constitution under threat of a northern revolution. This understanding of secession became increasingly pervasive in the South. However,

the legacy of the American Revolution of 1776 and 1787, its meaning underlying the political rhetoric of the crisis, complicated understandings of secession immensely. On the one hand secessionists advocated revolutionary measures, prominently the dissolution of the Union, for a reactionary purpose, to preserve the revolution of 1776. For example, in June 1858 the radical pro-slavery advocate William Yancey wrote a letter to his friend James S. Slaughter in favor of the Virginian planter Edmund Ruffin’s secession plan:

If the democracy were overthrown it would result in giving place to a greater and hungrier swarm of flies. The remedy of the South is not in such a process. It is in... prompt resistance to the next aggression...no National Party can save us; no Sectional Party can do it...but if we could do as our fathers did, organize Committees of Safety all over the cotton states [as Ruffin suggests]...we shall fire the Southern heart...give courage to each other...we can precipitate the cotton states into a revolution.⁶

Critically, the revolution Yancey had in mind was counter-revolutionary in ideology, meant to preserve and emulate the legacy of the founding fathers. However, on the other hand, secessionists similarly denounced the North and the Republican Party as the agents of a Black Republican ideology labeled ‘revolutionary’ and criticized as such. For example, the very same Edmund Ruffin, who Yancey cited as the model for a southern revolution, advocated secession in his diary by calling the Republican Party, the ‘revolutionary party’ of northern abolitionists and demagogues that sought to destroy the South. Fire-eater newspapers like Robert Rhett’s *Charleston Mercury* and the *New Orleans Delta* were even more impassioned declaring that “no one could any longer be deluded...that the Black Republican party is a moderate party...it is, in fact, essentially a revolutionary party.”⁷ Fundamentally, “Americans in the North and the South remained profoundly influenced by the legacy of [1776 and 1787] [as] both sides claimed to be striving to preserve the government conceived by the founding fathers...Mid-nineteenth-century Americans believed they lived in an age of revolutions.”⁸ Yet the so-called agitators of sectional conflict in the North and South understood this “age of revolutions” in very different ways. Horace White, an editor for the *Chicago Tribune*, celebrated the election of Abraham Lincoln in the winter of 1861 writing, “We live in revolutionary times & I say God bless the revolution.”⁹ In contrast, the South saw this revolutionary world as a threat, designing the rhetoric of secession such that it “fit the model of pre-emptive counterrevolution...rather than trying to restore the old order, [it struck] first to protect the status quo [of antebellum slavery] before the revolutionary threat [could] materialize.”¹⁰ By 1861 many of the same forces, particularly increasing cultural and economic divisions between North and South, appeared to be creating a Confederacy based on a conservative and counter-revolutionary ideology. These forces would eventually frame the Unionist war effort as a nationalist and revolutionary project to preserve the Union and abolish slavery.



Jefferson Davis, President of the Confederate States of America

Source: *National Archives and Records Administration*

THE COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY CONFEDERACY OF 1861

As the Confederacy began to take shape in 1861, it was deliberately constructed to reflect the counter-revolutionary motivations of its secessionist origins. The Confederate Constitution itself, published on March 11th 1861, clearly exemplifies this conservative impulse. By far the most remarkable aspect of the text is its similarity to the U.S. Constitution. However, it featured two central differences; unlike its predecessor, its preamble directly proclaimed the independent sovereignty of the states stating that “each State [is] acting in its sovereign and independent character,” and, most strikingly, it explicitly mentioned and unambiguously protected the institution of slavery.¹¹ Importantly, these changes, more than anything, were designed to produce a “new Confederate Constitution [that] left no doubt that slavery was the foundation of the new republic; it was a proslavery Constitution for a pro slavery state.”¹² However, the tremendous degree of similarity between the Confederate Constitution and its 1787 predecessor suggests that its authors were trying to perfect, rather than destroy, the initial vision of the founders by protecting slavery and justifying the primacy of states rights.

Thus, this new constitution was not an attempt to revolu-

tionize American governance. Instead, it was a deliberate, targeted, and proactive counter-revolutionary measure to eliminate the vulnerabilities of the founders’ vision, caused primarily by the compromises at the Constitution’s heart, that Confederates believed had allowed for the Black Republican revolution to corrupt the founding document in the first place. Many of the most influential advocates of secession, as well as proponents and founders of the Confederacy, helped to promote this view. For example, in 1861 Southern polemicist and social theorist George Fitzhugh promoted the idea that the counter-revolution of 1861 was a perfection of the spirit of 1776 by declaring that “the general outlines of the American Constitution and the Union worked well...the only evil we have suffered under our institutions has arisen from our connexion [sic] with the north...let us preserve our [Confederate] government in its present form until some great and pressing evil suggests and necessitates a change.”¹³ Fitzhugh’s rhetoric was convincing, and it was also supported at even the highest levels of the Confederate administration. The most prominent source of this perspective of the Confederacy as a conservative project comes from President Jefferson Davis’s first inaugural address, given on February 18th 1861. As the Confederacy’s newly minted first head-of-state, Davis justified his government by declaring that:

It is by abuse of language that [secession and the formation of our new government] has been denominated a revolution. They formed a new alliance, but within each state its government has remained, the rights of person and property have not been disturbed...with a Constitution differing only from that of our fathers in so far as it is explanatory of their well known intent, freed from the sectional conflicts which have interfered with the pursuit of the general welfare.¹⁴

While, in hindsight, this rhetoric may seem to contradict the eventual scale and violence that would define the Confederate project, the Confederacy’s status as a conservative counter-revolution was nonetheless a central contention of the Davis administration and its supporters during the early years of the war. Davis would revisit the theme in his speech to the Confederate Congress in April of 1861, echoing John Dickinson’s 1775 *Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms* by telling the Congress that through the North’s aggression had “the principles of the Constitution been corrupted.” According to Davis, President Lincoln and the North believed, unlike the founders, “that in all cases the majority should govern...[consequently] we feel that *our cause* is just and holy...we will continue to struggle for our inherent right to freedom, independence, and self government.”¹⁵ It is clear from Davis’s attachment to this argument, which framed the Confederacy as a counter-revolutionary project to preserve what had been established in the Revolution of 1776 and 1787, that he believed it an effective basis for legitimizing and understanding secession and the new Confederate nation. Even as late as 1862 a speech by James Henley Thornwell, a Presbyterian preacher in South Carolina, reminded his audience, “We are not revolutionists – we

are resisting revolution [against the founders]. We are upholding the true doctrines of the Federal Constitution. We are conservative.”¹⁶ This argument forwarded by Fitzhugh, Davis, and Thornwell, was not only an attempt to justify the Confederacy to its opponents, but also an effort to promote the Confederate nation’s legitimacy among the many citizens who had once been, or still were, ardent unionists. “By labeling the North as the enemy of the original Constitution,” as Davis did in his inaugural address, “[the Confederate President] appealed to the upper-south and to all who had loved the Union...he kept non-slaveholders (and foreign nations) in mind when he said little about slavery. In Davis’s ideology for 1861, defense of constitutional liberty—not defense of slavery—became the reason for being a nation.”¹⁷ By 1862 it appeared that the successes of the Confederacy, on the battlefield and in statecraft, were the accomplishment of a conservative counter-revolution. However, underneath this façade, as the challenges and practicalities of war and state formation set in, a new Confederate revolutionary ideology emerged and would come to redefine the project.

WHITE REPUBLICANISM:

THE REVOLUTIONARY CONFEDERACY, 1861-1863

As Fitzhugh, Davis, and Thornwell promoted a conservative vision of secession and the Confederate project, a much more radical understanding of the Confederacy was also taking shape. By 1863, as Abraham Lincoln’s *Emancipation Proclamation* and *Gettysburg Address* were redefining the Union, the counter-revolutionary ideology once central to the Confederate project gave way to a much more radical revolutionary and ideological understanding of the Confederacy as a new kind of republic based on white republicanism and slaveholding that was fundamentally different from that of the founding fathers. This tension was evident as early as February 13th, 1861 when Leonidas W. Spratt, the editor of the *Charleston Standard*, criticized the conservative nature of the provisional constitution and the very rhetoric that Jefferson Davis would espouse days later:

The South is now in the formation of a Slave Republic... [the idea] that the South...is in a mere assertion of its independence... [and that it is] best for the South to strike out...is an inadequate conception of the controversy. The contest is not between the North and South as geographical sections...[we believe that] equality is...the right of equals only...But the real contest is between two forms of society which have become established...Slavery was within [the North’s] grasp, and forced to the option of extinction in the Union or of independence out, *it dares to strike, and it assents its claim to nationality* and its right to recognition among the leading social systems of the world...[we are creating] a Confederacy...that will stand aloft and serene for ages amid the anarchy of democracies...our [new] Republic will not require the pruning process of another revolution; but, poised upon its institutions, will move on to a career of greatness and of glory unapproached by any other nation in the world...we are

erecting a nationality upon a union of races [with whites as the social aristocracy].¹⁸

This racial and revolutionary view of the purpose of the Confederacy was radically different from the logic of secession, particularly in its commitment to revolution on the basis of rigid racial inequality that the founders failed to make implicit. At the time Spratt voiced his criticisms in early 1861, this rhetoric gained little traction as, compared to the proponents of the Confederate project as counter-revolutionary, Spratt was little more than a radical and marginal intellect. However, by March, Alexander Stephens, none other than the Vice-President of the Confederacy, would embrace a similar view and produce its most famous articulation in his well known *Cornerstone Address*. In his infamous speech, providing his own interpretation of the new Confederate Constitution, Stephens mocked Davis’s contention that the Confederacy’s legitimacy was tied to the founders understanding of republicanism stating:

The prevailing ideas [among the founders was that slavery]...was wrong...it was an evil...those ideas were fundamentally wrong. Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its corner-stone rests upon the great truth, that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery -- subordination to the superior race -- is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.¹⁹

The *Cornerstone Address*, thereby, articulated a radically different understanding of the purpose of the Confederacy from that which the earlier secessionists and Davis had proposed. Rejecting the idea that secession was the result of northern violations of the Constitution, Stephens instead advanced the very same argument which President Abraham Lincoln had long promoted, that the founders did believe what they wrote in the Declaration, that all men were created equal and that, fundamentally, “the driving force behind secession, [and that] the assumption...upon which Davis...relied... [that the Confederates were following the republican vision of the founders]...was absolutely false.”²⁰ For Stephens, the Confederacy was a revolutionary opportunity to overturn, rather than preserve, the founders’ experiment in favor of a new kind of explicitly white republican ideology that would firmly establish the Confederacy as a slaveholder’s republic.

While Stephens’ articulation of the Confederacy’s founding ethos was powerful, in 1861 even most members of the Davis administration considered this revolutionary perspective radical. Yet, overtime this rhetoric would serve as the basis for growing Confederate nationalism as the nation’s administration needed to manage the resulting civil war through new institutions and policies that proved much more coercive than the advocates for secession could have imagined in 1859-1860; “following victory at Manassas...the Confederacy [was transformed] in unexpected directions...by [1862] a different nation with different policies had emerged...the

Davis administration discarded tradition in favor of innovative, demanding policies...[allowing] a redefined sense of [revolutionary] nationalism...[to take] shape.”²¹ The requirements of Confederate military success meant that the pressures of creating a nation, and a nation capable of waging

new nationalism would manifest in many domains including high politics, understandings of the Confederacy’s role in global affairs, religion, and education. Evidently, Confederates understood that a white slaveholders republic would require the creation of white republican culture.

“[A]s the challenges and practicalities of war and state formation set in, a new Confederate revolutionary ideology emerged and would come to redefine the project.”

war at that, replaced the need to simply justify the fledgling Confederate state’s existence, in rhetoric and policy, to its citizenry. Increasingly, replacing its founding rhetoric, the necessities of waging war became the dominant force shaping the Confederate government and its nationalism, contributing to the movement away from the conservative rhetoric of the country’s founding. Ironically, it was the conservative Davis that made this revolution of the state possible. However, Davis was often bitterly opposed by an anti-administration faction, led by Alexander Stephens, who believed that a centralized state was a threat to the authority of the states, which the Confederate constitution gave primacy, initially, in response to the corruption of black republicanism.²² But between 1861-1863 the Confederate state expanded rapidly, commencing military conscription, giving the President the power to suspend habeas corpus, instituting price-fixing measures in Richmond, temporarily placing an embargo on cotton exports, and even beginning to use a ‘war tax’ to finance the war effort among numerous other measures. The transformation of a states rights confederation into a coercive and heavy-handed state terrified ideological revolutionaries like Stephens. While its reach was actively undermined by opponents like Stephens, this new state served to promote their revolutionary ideological goals as they helped to foster the “greater strength of Confederate nationalism...[as] this change in Confederate polity [towards centralization]... came...in response to wartime emergencies...[which] no one originally willed or planned.”²³

Ironically, the need to justify the increasingly powerful Confederate state provided the opportunity for the revolutionary ideology advanced by many of its most prominent opponents to serve as the basis of a new white republican socio-political order. Even the Confederates who were most vociferously opposed ideologically to a centralized state realized, especially as the initial zeal of secession faded in the face of immense bloodshed, that cultivating a strong sense of nationalism was essential for the Confederacy’s continued morale and legitimacy. Thus, the demands of the Civil War, and the advantages of a centralized state to promote a national ideology, allowed for revolutionary white republicanism to emerge as the core of Confederate nationalism. This

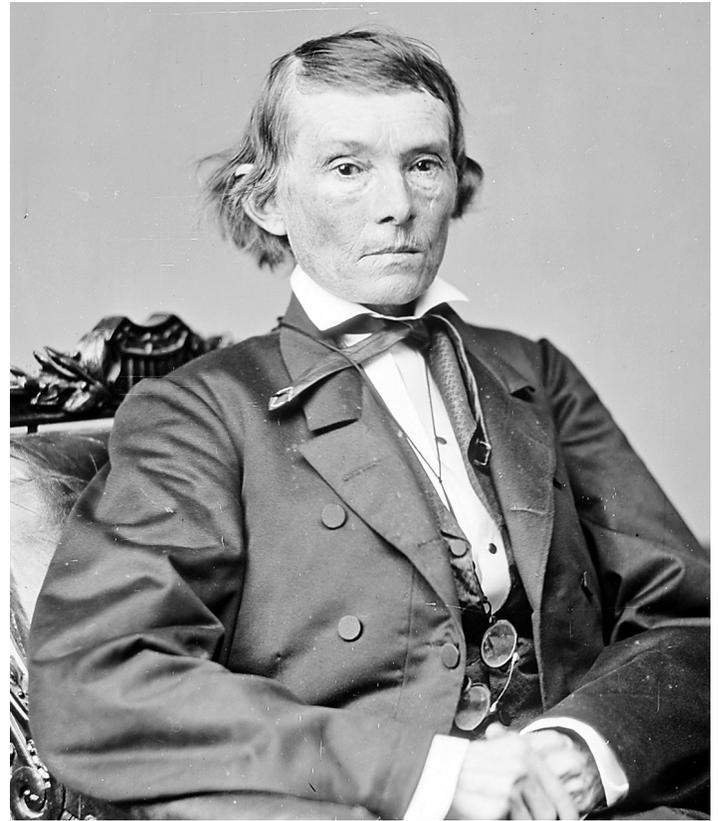
What made this white republican ideology so different from the rhetoric of constitutional integrity and state sovereignty, which was central to the conservative counter-revolution, was that it was, as Stephens had articulated, explicitly racial. In his view, slavery did not have to be protected to preserve the constitution but rather because it was the natural basis of a republican government. Radical Confederates, building off Stephens, began to contend that the founders had failed to understand this and the Confederacy was an opportunity to build a white republic that would act as an ideal the world over. Subsequently, as they went about constructing their nation, “Confederates...[sought] to [discredit] the new black and red varieties [of republicanism]...one Confederate supporter coined the term white republicanism to describe the South’s [revolutionary] project.”²⁴ In a March 1862 article in *De Bow’s Review*, Dr. Cartwright, a prominent advocate of the moral good of slavery in the antebellum period, argued that this new form of republic would “demonstrate the strength, stability and permanency of a government founded on natural instead of artificial distinctions in society.”²⁵ Similarly, in May of 1861 the editors of Rhett’s *Charleston Mercury* had begun to promote the superiority of the white republican revolution of the Confederacy declaring that, unlike Lincoln’s black republican revolution, “[t]he statesmen of [the Confederate] Revolution are no vain social theorists... intoxicated with wild utopian dreams [like the abolitionists and socialists]...no Kossuth, no Mazzini, no Louis Blanc among them.”²⁶ Increasingly, Confederates began to imagine themselves as embodying the best goals of the democratic and nationalist European revolutions of 1848, rather than 1776, viewing the black and red republicans of the North as the embodiment of the radicals who encouraged the degeneration of society in 1848 into “riot and confusion...anarchy with torch, stake, and scaffold – blood barricade and guillotine...[driving] her blood stained chariot wheels over the ruins of the [nations].”²⁷ To the Confederates, the New York draft riots of 1863 and Lincoln’s suspension of habeas corpus in Maryland acted as a confirmation for this view of northerners and their federal government as violent and dangerous revolutionaries. Aligning themselves ideologically with the progressive but moderate republicans of 1848, rather than radicals like the architects of the French Second Republic

who established universal male suffrage as a central feature of their constitution, the leaders of the Confederate project argued that they were leading a white republican revolution against “black republicans [like the radical revolutionaries of Haiti, Germany and France] [who] had perverted the true meaning of republican government by insisting upon racial equality...[asserting that they] are also Red Republicans.”²⁸ While initially rebuked by Davis, this explicitly racial, and pro-slavery understanding of the Confederacy as a revolutionary white-republican project was highly appealing to those who would design the new state and promote southern nationalism.

WHITE REPUBLICAN CULTURE: ABROAD AND AT HOME

One interesting consequence of white republican ideology’s role as the principal source of Confederate nationalism can be seen in how Southerners imagined themselves as increasingly important in world affairs. In a March 1862 article in *De Bow’s*, George Fitzhugh, once a champion of the conservative counter-revolutionary vision, highlighted the Confederacy’s importance as a bulwark against the emerging global threat of black and red republicanism. He connects the Confederate cause to Russian Emperor Alexander II’s 1861 emancipation of the serfs arguing that “the Russian nobility must have represented admirably their serfs...But the emperor has caught the Jeffersonian-French fever, and is determined to liberate and outlaw the serfs...[like in the North] there will arise... trade unions, red republican hymns, riots, barricades and blood-revolutions.”²⁹ Fitzhugh now argued that only the success of the Confederacy, as a model for the world of a revolutionary white republican nation, could prevent the spread of black and red republicanism. However, at the same time, the *Daily Richmond Enquirer* praised Poland’s January Uprising of 1863-1864 against the Russian Empire, arguing that “there is nothing in this movement of a...radical or Red Republican character...[the revolutionary] cause of Poland is the same cause for which the Confederates are now fighting.”³⁰

While the Confederates were now using the ideology of white republicanism to understand foreign affairs, its most prominent applications occurred internally as the basis of a broad cultural program. One of the most interesting examples of white republicanism’s expression can be seen within religious writings of the time. In the antebellum period, slavery advocates used paternalistic readings of the Christian bible to justify the contention, as articulated by John C. Calhoun, that slavery was “instead of an evil, a good—a positive good.”³¹ Consequently, for most religious leaders in the Confederacy, as seen in Thornwell’s essay “Our Danger and Our Duty,” secession was justified as a reactionary attempt to preserve the moral institution of slavery from the corruption of free labor and the race war associated with black republicanism. Nonetheless, the realities and ideological pressures of the Civil War forced religious leaders to expand their defense of slavery by embracing revolutionary rhetoric and ide-



Alexander Hamilton Stephens, Vice President of the Confederate States of America

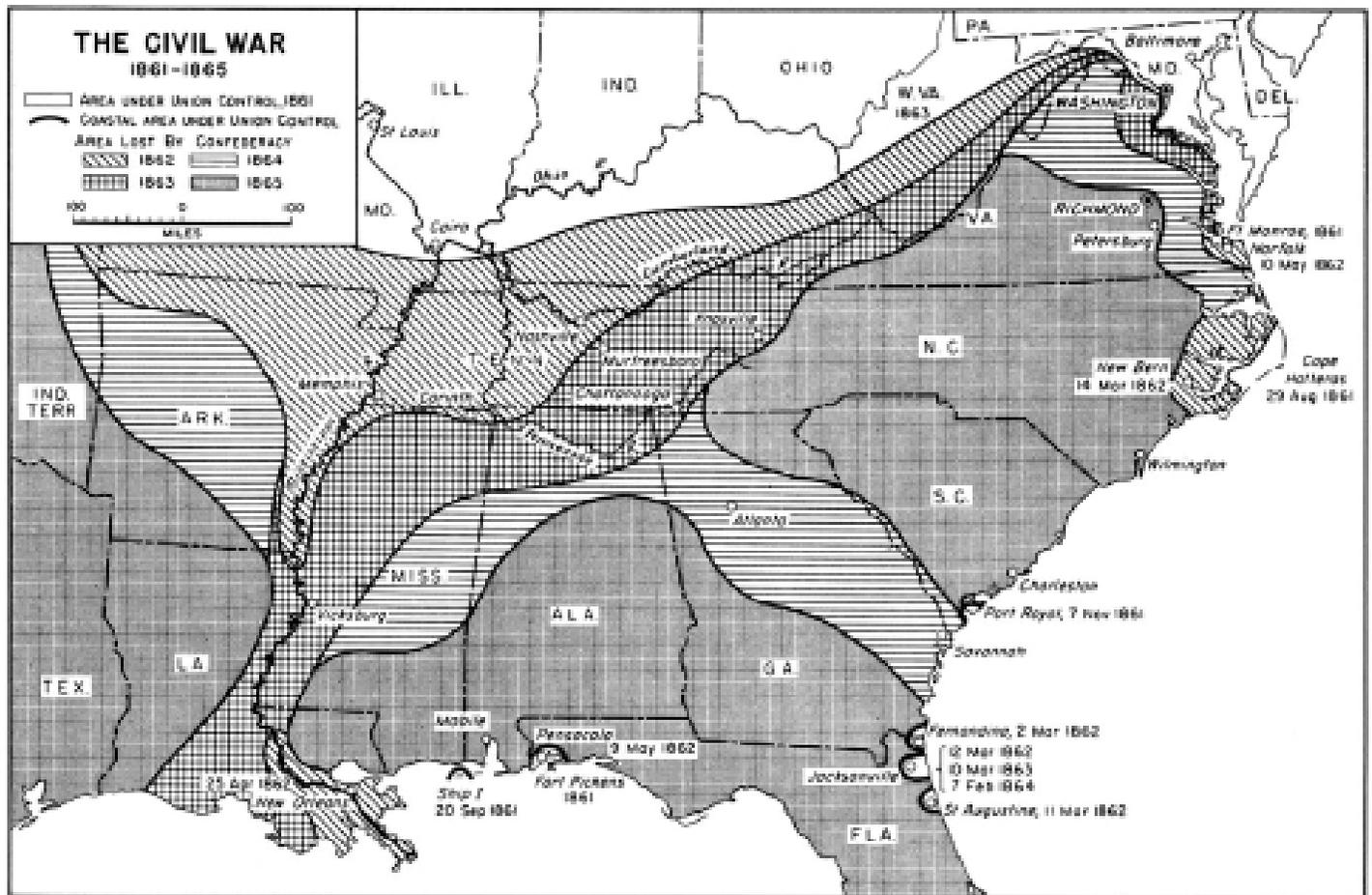
Source: *National Archives and Records Administration*

ology. Consequently, this older religious argument for slavery was transformed, emerging as a new justification for the righteousness of the Confederate’s revolutionary cause. For example, following the Second Battle of Bull Run in August of 1862, the influential reverend Stephen Elliot, the presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in the South, justified the Confederate project as godly on the basis of a revolutionary white republican ideology in his sermon, “Our Cause In Harmony With The Purposes of God in Christ Jesus:

The great revolution through which we are passing certainly turns upon this point of slavery, and our future destiny [and Republic] is bound up with it...when the deeply-laid conspiracy of Black Republicanism threatened to undermine this divinely guarded institution, God produced for its defense within the more Southern States an unanimity of sentiment and a devoted spirit...to risk a revolution in its defense.”³²

This fusion of white republicanism and Christianity was meant to justify the Confederacy, but was also important in fostering a Confederate identity as “Confederate nationalists sought to strengthen their cause before the world and their own people...the authority of the clergy at least rivaled that of the new Confederate state...[so] patriotism, [on the basis of white republicanism], was to be wedded to piety.”³³

Similarly, the architects of the Confederate project were



Map of Confederate losses during the Civil War (1861-1865)
 Source: Office of the Chief of Military History, United States Army

also acutely aware of the need to re-invent education along white republican lines. The Confederates believed that a white republican education was essential to creating white republican citizens. D.S Richardson, a Confederate teacher expressed this sentiment clearly declaring, “As for buying Northern books, I cannot consent, I will quit my profession first.”³⁴ Consequently, Confederates “addressed the issue of an appropriate national language...restoring a purity of diction that would lead white southerners toward their English linguistic roots and away from both Yankee degeneracies and what the [educational] texts called ‘Africanisms.’”³⁵ The racial basis of white republicanism was immediately evident in these books. For example, the Confederate textbook *A grammar of the Latin language for the use of schools, with exercises and vocabularies* was filled with stories of ancient Roman masters and their loyal slaves and, for no clear educational purpose, instructed students that “in Africa men eat human flesh.”³⁶ In many texts, like the *Confederate States Speller & Reader*, pejorative descriptions of the natural condition of Africans was contrasted with passages that romanticized the brutality of slavery:

Hark! How mer-ri-ly they sing as they pick the white cotton from the pods...these ne-groes are well fed, and well

clad, and well cared for when they are sick. When their task is done these is noth-ing to trou-ble them. Which of us that lives to any pur-pose, has not his task to do, as well as the ne-gro?³⁷

While this rhetoric pre-dated the Civil War, by 1863 it was being presented to students primarily in the spirit of Confederate and southern nationalism rather than simply a justification for the morality of slavery. The authors of these textbooks had clearly embraced the Confederacy as a revolution to uphold a proper racial ordering of society and believed that it was essential to provide children with a white republican education.

THE COLLAPSE OF WHITE REPUBLICANISM AND THE RISE OF THE LOST CAUSE MYTH

Despite the clear shift ideologically towards labeling the Confederates as revolutionaries later in the Civil War, even in 1864 the politically minded Jefferson Davis, perhaps still hoping for international recognition, still insisted that he was not a radical. In a speech to a crowd in Augusta, Georgia, Davis continued to echo the founders’ principles: “Our [struggle for independence] is no revolution...we are a free and independent people in States that had, [after] the North’s

violations of the Constitution], the right to make a better government.”³⁸ Others like Mary Chestnut, a prominent member of the Confederate planter elite, continued to understand the Confederacy as counter-revolutionary. While her husband embraced the revolutionary rhetoric, she wrote in her diary that “this war was undertaken by us to shake off the yoke of foreign invaders...we consider our cause righteous...[the North] grew rich...we grew poor.”³⁹ However, by 1863 these views had become anachronistic. Even many of the most ardent counter-revolutionaries like Edmund Ruffin now admitted that the Confederacy “was not [validated as]...an act of law-authorized secession, but [instead] as an act of just revolutionary violence.”⁴⁰ The reactionary counter-revolution that had motivated the secessionists of 1859-1861, and was espoused by Davis throughout the war, had been replaced by a fully revolutionary ideology.

When the Confederacy collapsed in 1865, southerners lamented not only the collapse of the slavery, but also that their white republican revolution would be swept away by black republican tyranny. However, in one of the great ironies of post-war America, former Confederates would spend the following decades trying to obscure this revolutionary and racially charged ideology. They would instead produce the beginnings of the Lost Cause movement, advocating for a highly idealized history of the Confederacy by reviving the rhetoric of Jefferson Davis and the other conservative counter-revolutionaries. In his memoir *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* Davis continued to identify the North as the primary cause of secession stating, “How easy it would have been for the northern people, by a simply

honest obedience to the...Constitution to have avoided...all these crimes and horrors...if necessity on their part justified a violation of the Constitution, necessity on our part justified secession from them.”⁴¹ Surprisingly, Alexander Stephens, his Vice President and ideological opponent, now largely agreed in his *A Constitutional View of the Late War Between the States*:

Many writers of this day claim, that the late War was the result of two opposing ideas...upon the subject of African Slavery...those who assume this...are but superficial observers...Secession...[after the Constitution had been violated]...arose from...the nature of the Government of the United States...[in the Constitution]...paramount authority had never been parted with by the states.⁴²

The centrality of race-based slavery and revolutionary ideology that defined the *Cornerstone Address* was conspicuously absent. By the end of the nineteenth century the idea that the Confederacy was a revolution for white republicanism had, by and large, disappeared. In its place re-emerged, albeit in a highly sanitized revisionist form, the rhetoric of the original vision of the Confederate project that the proponents of a reactionary counter-revolution had proposed in 1861. While obscured following the war by the Lost Cause movement, Confederate ideology underwent a profound transformation from 1859-1863.⁴³ It was imagined first as a counter-revolution for the Constitution, before re-emerging as a revolutionary effort to establish the racial hierarchy of white republicanism as the sociopolitical basis of a new slaveholder’s nation. ■■■

Endnotes

[1] Stephanie McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 12.

[2] Paul D. Escott, *The Confederacy: The Slaveholders’ Failed Venture* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), 1.

[3] “Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and

Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union,” *The Avalon Project*, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/csa_scarsec.asp

[4] “Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union.”

[5] Robert Toombs, “Secessionist Speech, Tuesday Evening, No-

From Reform to Revolution

- ember 13,” in *Secession Debated: Georgia’s Showdown in 1860*, ed. William W. Freehling and Craig M. Simpson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 38.
- [6] John Witherspoon Du Bose, *The Life and Times of William Lowndes Yancey: A History of Political Parties in the United States, from 1834-1864; Especially as to the Origin of the Confederate States* (Birmingham: Roberts & Son, 1892), 376.
- [7] James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 232-233
- [8] Andre Fleche, *Revolution of 1861: The American Civil War in the Age of Nationalist Conflict* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 5, 12.
- [9] Fleche, *Revolution of 1861*, 5.
- [10] McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 245.
- [11] “Constitution of the Confederate States; March 11, 1861,” *The Avalon Project*, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/csa_csa.asp
- [12] McCurry, *Confederate Reckoning*, 78.
- [13] Anne Sarah Rubin, *A Shattered Nation: The Rise and Fall of the Confederacy, 1861-1868* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 16.
- [14] Jefferson Davis, “First Inaugural Address – February 18, 1861,” in *The Routledge Sourcebook of Religion and the American Civil War*, ed. Robert Mathisen (London: Routledge, 2014), 21.
- [15] Jefferson Davis, “Our Cause is Just” in *The Civil War and Reconstruction: A Documentary Collection*, ed. William E. Gienapp (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 73-74.
- [16] “Our Danger and Our Duty,” *Documenting the American South*, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/thornwell/thornwel.html>
- [17] Escott, *The Confederacy*, 15.
- [18] “The Philosophy of Secession; A Southern View, Presented in a Letter Addressed to the Hon. Mr. Perkins of Louisiana, in Criticism on the Provisional Constitution Adopted by the Southern Congress at Montgomery, Alabama,” *Documenting the American South*, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/secession/secession.html>
- [19] “Cornerstone Address, March 21, 1861,” *Internet History Sourcebooks*, <http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1861stephens.asp>
- [20] Harry V. Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom: Abraham Lincoln and the Coming of the Civil War* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 316.
- [21] Escott, *The Confederacy*, 21.
- [22] Members of the anti-administration faction often deliberately undermined the Confederate administration’s grand strategy for the good of their respective home states. For example, Stephens spent most of the war at home in Georgia rather than with Jefferson Davis in Richmond. While Stephens tended to affairs in Georgia he frequently criticized Davis as a despot, particularly chastising his suspension of Habeas corpus.
- [23] Emory M. Thomas, *The Confederacy as a Revolutionary Experience* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 76-77.
- [24] Fleche, *Revolution of 1861*, 141.
- [25] Dr. Cartwright, “Abolitionism: A Curse to the North and a Blessing to the South,” *De Bow’s Review* 32, no. 3 and 4 (March and April 1862): 300.
- [26] “The Palmetto Guard—Presentation of Colors,” *Charleston Mercury*, May 7, 1861.
- [27] “The Palmetto Guard—Presentation of Colors.”
- [28] Fleche, *Revolution of 1861*, 144.
- [29] George Fitzhugh, “History of the Origin of Representative Government in Europe,” *De Bow’s Review* 32, no. 3 and 4 (March and April, 1862): 206. Red Republicanism was used as pejorative term to describe radical European revolutionaries particularly socialists and communists.
- [30] Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1990), 13.
- [31] John C. Calhoun, *Speeches of John C. Calhoun: Delivered in the Congress of the United States from 1811 to the Present Time* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1843), 225.
- [32] “Our Cause in Harmony with the Purposes of God in Christ Jesus. A Sermon Preached in Christ Church, Savannah, on Thursday, September 18th, 1862, Being the Day Set Forth by the President of the Confederate States, as a Day of Prayer and Thanksgiving, for Our Manifold Victories, and Especially for the Fields of Manassas and Richmond, Ky,” *Documenting the American South*, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/elliott5/elliott5.html>
- [33] Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism*, 22-23.
- [34] D.S Richardson to Calvin Henderson Wiley, 1864, Calvin Henderson Wiley Papers, *Southern Historical Collection*, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.
- [35] Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism*, 11.
- [36] William Bingham, *A grammar of the Latin language for the use of schools, with exercises and vocabularies* (Greensboro: Sterling, Campbell & Albright, 1863), 204.
- [37] John Neely, *Confederate States Speller and Reader* (Augusta: J.T. Paterson & Co, 1864), 100.
- [38] William J. Cooper and John M. McCardell Jr., *In the Cause of Liberty: How the Civil War Redefined American Ideals* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2009), 84.
- [39] Mary Boykin Chestnut, *A Diary from Dixie* (New York: D. Appleton, 1905), 200-201.
- [40] Edmund Ruffin, *The Diary of Edmund Ruffin* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1972), 294.
- [41] Jefferson Davis, *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* (New York: D. Appleton, 1881), 182
- [42] Alexander Stephens, *A Constitutional View of the Late War Between the States* (Bedford: Applewood Books, 2008), 10, 521.
- [43] Proponents of the Lost Cause Myth portray secession and the Confederacy as a heroic project for states’ rights and the Southern way of life against insurmountable Northern aggression. “Lost Causers” typically minimize or even deny the role of slavery as an impetus for the Civil War.