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The Old Arguments Anew: Proslavery and Antislavery Thought during Reconstruction

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Slavery as an idea died a slow death in the years after Appomattox. During Reconstruction, Americans on both sides of Mason and Dixon's line revived the old proslavery and antislavery arguments. Slavery as symbol, slavery as idea, assumed a whole new role in postemancipation society. Even before war's end, white Southerners contemplated shaping their peculiar institution to the new order of things should the Confederacy fail. Early in 1865 a white Virginian explained:

What the form of slavery, or what name will be given to it by Yankee ingenuity, we cannot foresee, but that the thing itself will continue, and that the negroes will have to work harder and fare worse than slaves have ever worked or fared before in the Southern States, is as certain as the rising of tomorrow's sun.

Union victory and the Reconstruction amendments, of course, outlawed the ownership of chattels personal once and for all. Although slavery as an institution was deemed forever dead, it never was laid fully to rest. No sooner had Lee's men stacked their guns than Southern whites, reinforced by Northern conservatives, began a new offensive on the slavery question. To be sure, few openly advocated reenslavement. But in the opinion of Northern neoabolitionists, the spirit of slavery remained shamelessly alive in the South. Slavery's critics closed ranks to meet the new proslavery onslaught head on. Nevertheless, by the 1890s, white Southerners had garnered in peace what had eluded them in war: the triumph of the old proslavery argument.¹

This ideology surfaced again immediately after the war, and appeared in every corner of the former Confederacy. In May 1865, an army officer stationed in North Carolina expressed concern over the sentiments of whites in Sampson and Duplin Counties.
Residents there, wrote Colonel Elias Wright, much regret the loss of slavery . . . deplore the presence of free negroes and the colored soldiery among them . . . very much fear "servile insurrection" . . . [and] some of them have a lingering hope that something may yet turn up to restore to them the old domestic relations of master and slave.

White Southerners, explained General Benjamin H. Grierson in June 1865, continued to "clutch on to slavery with a lingering hope to save at least a relic of their favorite yet barbarous institution for the future." In August 1865, the Nation charged that white Southerners sought to "retain the slaveholding spirit without keeping the slaves." Two years later one South Carolinian advised another to abandon any hopes of reenslavement. Whites, argued Joseph E. Holmes, must forsake the "hard words and frowning looks" towards blacks that signified the desire to keep them enslaved.

Why did white Southerners focus so keenly on slavery after its abolition? What was there about the peculiar institution that fostered such resistance to social change? Slavery enabled white Southerners to explain, to defend, to justify their lost civilization from on-going Northern attacks. It also provided a vital link to the past at a time when the South was occupied by what residents perceived as an alien invasion force. Many, uncomfortable with the new free labor system, longed for the control mechanisms inherent in slavery. In Baton Rouge, Louisiana, for example, two white women in 1866 complained that their servants refused to act like slaves. "They want to treat the Negroe [sic] as of old," remarked James A. Payne, but the blacks "wont [sic] put up with it." In North Carolina a white overseer discharged two freedmen in 1868 because, he explained, the blacks "have got to work and act slave fashion or they cant [sic] stay with me." Representatives of virtually every segment of the South's white community viewed slavery in a positive light. They extolled its many virtues and bemoaned its all too sudden passing.

By reviving elements of the old proslavery argument, white Southerners vented their innermost frustrations. For Ryland Randolph, race-baiting editor of Alabama's Tuscaloosa Independent Monitor, blacks were suited only for servitude—"to wait on the tables and brush off flies." Those blacks who accepted
white supremacy were to "be rewarded with plenty of work, porridge and kind treatment." In 1869 Randolph eulogized slavery as

a God-send for the negro race. Negroes, as bondsmen, were happier, more sleek and greasy-looking, and better clothed, than they are now. We never hear the ringing horse-laughs, the picking of banjoes, beating of tamborines, and knocking of feet against puncheon-floors, that formerly marked their sans souci existence. Instead thereof, they may be heard to grumble, in squads, collected in fence-corners; and may be seen with ashy faces, grim countenances, and squalid appearance generally.

Whites like Randolph barely could comprehend the meaning of emancipation. A contributor to the Southern Cultivator in 1865 described the freedman as

a monstrosity . . . a hand without muscles, a glass eyeball, and a shin-plaster . . . a tender without any locomotive; fuel, coals . . . without any machinery. A nigger without any master is latent power off the track. Put him off by himself, you can get him along only by pushing so constant and severe, that it costs more than it comes to. Tackle him to an engine, in the shape of a white man, and the long train laden with industrial products goes with a rush.

Or perhaps such blatant racists grasped freedom's message all too well. For them the prospect of blacks as their social and political equals was anathema. Yankees could dictate the new order of race relations, but in the minds of many Southern whites the black man remained a slave-like inferior.

Convinced that emancipation proved gravely harmful to ex-masters and ex-slaves alike, numerous whites fashioned a new proslavery argument during Reconstruction. It encompassed virtually all of the familiar antebellum rationales for slavery plus a bevy of defenses fitted to the peculiar circumstances of the postwar South. With secession and the specter of civil war no longer at issue, whites found themselves free to espouse a new, even more romanticized image of slavery. Yet their writings—unabashedly sympathetic to the peculiar institution—resembled closely
antebellum Southern propaganda. After many years of countering charges that slavery was cruel and exploitative, now white Southerners went on the offensive to set the record straight. They blasted Yankee hypocrisy. Had not New Englanders grown rich from the Atlantic slave trade, only to abandon the Africans when the traffic in human flesh proved no longer profitable? According to a contributor to the *Southern Cultivator*, the Africans arrived as

untrained savages, deficient in personal vigor, size and stature, with no intellectual cultivation whatever, and no just notions of religious truth. Under our supervision and care, the products of negro labor have almost clothed the world. Contact with and direction from the white man has educated him fully to the half-civilized state—a position he has hitherto reached in no other country.

And a North Carolina journalist identified no less than twelve advantages that slavery offered blacks. He described the slavery system as a virtual paradise where the blacks were fed, clothed, sheltered, relieved from cares, nursed, mourned, buried, educated, elevated, disciplined, improved and, most importantly, civilized. A writer in *Scott's Monthly Magazine* summarized virtually all of the new defenses of slavery. Drawing heavily on history to support his proslavery ideas, Russ James lauded slavery's merits, condemned its premature abolition, and grieved over the condition of the freedmen. Through world history, James insisted, slavery had existed as a means for a civilized people to elevate a backward one. Slavery advanced the blacks in ways that the Abolitionists never could comprehend. In Africa the black was

barbarous, idolatrous, and utterly depraved. As a Southern slave, he . . . obtained a knowledge of the true God; was affectionate to his family, and was immeasurably in advance of his ancestors, intellectually and morally. And all this in less than three centuries.

Emancipation, though, represented a disastrous step backward.

In many parts of the South, they are sinking into the most degrading and revolting superstition. . . . They have become
insubordinate and habitual violators of law and order. Our prisons are swarming with them, while many have expiated a short, though bloody, career of crime upon the scaffold. As a race, they are passing rapidly away, nearly one million having perished in the short space of three years.

Idleness, crime, disease, and starvation replaced Christianity, obedience, thrift, and prosperity. "The history of these unfortunate people everywhere," concluded James, "has been that freedom, suddenly bestowed, has been ruinous and destructive."\(^{11}\)

Emancipation obviously overturned the lives of Southern whites. They reeled in shock at what they deemed the altered deportment and poor agricultural performance of their erstwhile bondsmen. Abolition rocked the very basis of Southern white society.\(^{12}\) Writing in 1867 from Rapides Parish, Louisiana, a planter shared his troubled musings with readers of *DeBow's Review*. "I live surrounded by my former slaves," he wrote, "and some times for a little while I look upon the whole change as a dream."\(^ {13}\) Others described their thoughts on slavery more as nightmares. Without slaves, wondered some white elitists, who would perform household chores? The mere idea of having to do menial work shocked some of them.\(^ {14}\) In others it conjured up images of themselves being enslaved by their former bondsmen and the hated Yankees. Both ideas sat poorly with a people who defended their peculiar institution from charges of cruelty with the claim that the whites, not the blacks, had been the only real slaves under the old regime. For these whites, emancipation symbolized more than the simple loss of property. It meant the repudiation of control—of racial order and discipline—dictated by a master class. Whites feared that the new order of things would usher in catastrophic changes, not only black political equality, but social equality as well. Without slavery, charged editor H. Rives Pollard, the South would become "a grand roming [sic] ground for lazaroni, ... freed Africans, imported Africans, mulattos [sic], miscegenates of every hue and degree of mongrelism, and greazers."\(^ {15}\)

The impact of such fears was not lost on conservative Northern Democrats who also unleashed bitter proslavery diatribes during Reconstruction.\(^ {16}\) The Copperheads played upon racial ambivalence among white Northerners to further their own political ends. In July 1865, for example, the Chicago *Times* railed against
emancipation. "The whole country," complained the editor, "priests; newspapers; politicians, white, black, yellow; Fourth of July; Hail Columbia, and everything else—are 'going it' exclusively on account of the negro." White Americans were becoming enslaved, explained the editor.

The negro masters crack their whips over our legislators and our priests, and thus control our laws and our religion. They have established a tyranny over us worse than that of the Pisistratids. . . . The more we do for our sable masters, the more exacting are they in their demands.

According to the editor, whites needed to rise up against "abolitionists, niggers and miscegenationists." Writing in 1868, the editor of New York's ultra-conservative Old Guard openly commended slavery. The black, he wrote, "can only exist in one or the other condition—in his African savagery or under the care and guidance of his white master, and even an Abolition lunatic would call the latter preferable." Slavery, explained another Copperhead, was the blacks' "normal condition, for [as slaves] they multiplied quite as fast as the white people." The bondsmen, "guided and cared for by their masters, were probably the healthiest and happiest four millions of human creatures that ever lived upon the earth."

The Copperheads depended heavily on religion and science to uphold their defenses of the peculiar institution. God's design, explained Dr. J.R. Hayes of the District of Columbia, was for the blacks to remain forever subordinate to the whites. Divine will positioned blacks at the lowest rung in the human family. "The negro's imperfect anatomical construction," wrote Hayes, "fixes him . . . next in gradative series in mammals created just below him." Hayes not only found the blacks deficient in "psychical or mental development," but he criticized their inferior odor, hair, "unctuous skin, . . . prognathous skull, receding forehead, protruding jaw, thick lips, flat nose, expanded nostrils, crooked legs and flat feet." If God had intended the blacks to be free, he asked, "would millions of them have permitted another race to hold them in slavery . . . and when freed, freed only as an incident of war?"

Far from viewing slavery as a sin, Northern racists praised it as one of "the fundamental laws of organic life." By enslaving
blacks, whites only obeyed “natural law and industrial necessity . . . irrevocable as a law of gravitation.” Blacks, wrote Northern conservatives again and again, were as different and inferior to whites as the different subgroups of animals within a species. According to one author, the laws of nature proved that “Wherever the negro occupies the relation of servitude to the white man, all is happiness and prosperity. Where he does not, all is social chaos and blight.” Another remarked that the black man possessed unique racial qualities that kept him depraved and suited to slavery.

The negro race has no history, no learning, no literature, no laws. For six thousand years he has been a savage. . . . He has never invented anything, or advanced a single step in civilization when left to himself. He is sunk in the grossest superstitions, and is guilty of the most revolting practices. The only ones that have ever shown any advancement are those who have been brought to this country and placed under the control of Christian masters.

In the midst of the passage of the Black Codes, a Copperhead looked backward with affection to the old slave codes. He described them not only as essential to regulate the barbarous blacks, but “far more humane than that of the law revealed by Moses.” Writing in 1866, the editor of Wisconsin’s LaCrosse Democrat, maintained that thanks to emancipation, the black man “is worse off to-day under the drippings of this New England mercy than under the care of his former master.” And conservative Northerners, like their fellow racists in Dixie, also predicted that emancipation in the South would breed as cataclysmic results as it had in Haiti and Jamaica. Emancipation, they agreed, was a cruel, unconstitutional trick by “the Mongrel Party.” It let loose “the natural instincts of the negro,” wrote a Northerner in 1869, “and he has already commenced his march backward towards his own native barbarism.”

Copperheads concluded that slavery, not freedom, was the natural condition for the black man. In their opinion, abolition was not only impracticable, but impossible. This theme merged Biblical and ethnological rationales for slavery prevalent in the North and South during these years. According to the North’s most outspoken proslavery ideologue, Dr. John H. Van Evrie, the
very term, "slavery," had meaning only within the context of white Europeans, not Africans. Van Evrie has been described by George Fredrickson as in no sense a scientist, but rather a blatant anti-black propagandist, "perhaps the first professional racist in American history." He and other Negrophobes purported that blacks experienced freedom only while enslaved. The first of six Anti-Abolition Tracts published by Van Evrie, Horton and Company in 1866, argued that "When they live the life that they are designed for, they are free; when they do not, they are slaves." Black slavery was described simply as the set of laws established by God for what He deemed an inferior, servile race. Consequently, the "so-called slavery" or "imaginary slavery" of the South was not slavery at all. In reference to the black man, "slavery" was "a stupid misnomer." Slavery was the implementation of God's will that Caucasians "shall govern them [blacks] by specific rules and regulations, suited to their nature." Reenslavement, or some other form of racial control, loomed as the only solution to the race question, explained another Copperhead in 1869. Blacks would perish, he said, "unless some lucky turn of the tide of fortune places them back again under the direction and control of their old masters, and only true friends." Adopting the proslavery ideas so prevalent in the South, in 1877 a Northern observer judged the conditions—housing, clothing, food, health—under slavery as preferable to those enjoyed by the freedman. According to George R. Stetson, as a slave "the Negro was a better member of society than he is today . . . or perhaps, ever will be." Northern conservatives reported that emancipation had worsened race relations and ushered in social chaos. They predicted that abolition would result in either total racial amalgamation or race war. Such proslavery propaganda only fueled the rebirth of Northern antislavery thought during Reconstruction. Criticisms of slavery and the new forms of quasi-slavery appeared regularly throughout the North in these years. Most white Northerners, no less imbued with anti-black phobias than their Southern brethren, worried little over the human dimensions of neoslavery. They ignored the blatant discrimination of the Black Codes, peonage laws, and later, the legalized degradation so much a part of Southern black life in the age of Jim Crow. Yet some genuinely wished to remove the spirit of slavery from American life once and for all. These neoabolitionists realized just how strong a hold slavery had on
Southern white racial thought after emancipation. They renewed the antislavery crusade to transform the ex-slaves into freedmen in spirit as well as in name.

From June to November 1865, for example, the New York Daily Tribune hammered away at vestiges of slavery in the South. Outraged by Governor William L. Sharkey’s policies in Mississippi, the paper charged that

Sharkey evidently believes, with [Roger B.] Taney’s revolutionary patriots, that negroes have no rights which white men are bound to respect; and it will take a very keen observation, a nice discernment, to discover the difference between Slavery and the condition of the Mississippi negroes under his unchecked sway.

Outraged by white Floridians’ treatment of the freedmen, the paper’s Jacksonville correspondent proclaimed: “They know not how to bring any influence to bear upon the negro but authority and coercion.” Livid at the South’s Black Codes, the editor asserted that Southern whites were bypassing the Thirteenth Amendment and riveting new forms of slavery on the freedmen. In Tennessee, he charged, black children were liable to be apprenticed by “any slave-loving local judge . . . to any slave-hankering friend.” The journalist reminded white Tennesseans “that, when Slavery died, all things pertaining to Slavery died with it. When we proclaimed emancipation, we did not remove one set of shackles that you might replace them with another.” The Tribune found South Carolina’s Codes so repressive, it declared that under them “involuntary servitude will exist for the punishment of no crime except the old crime of having a black skin.”

Slavery’s postwar critics essentially reiterated the old antislavery positions but updated them within the context of postemancipation society. They damned the peculiar institution on moral, religious, humanitarian, and legal grounds. Numerous Northern observers wrote of the deep imprint slavery left on the ways black and white Southerners viewed their worlds. In 1877 a contributor to the Northwestern Christian Advocate condemned the manner in which slavery degraded its victims. They have lost their manhood and self-respect. The bluster and self-assertion, which characterize so
many of them, are but efforts to deny a truth that they do not wish to acknowledge, ... Generations of oppression have poisoned their blood with the virus of inferiority, and nothing but independence and culture will ever antidote the poison.

Earlier that year a missionary remarked that "The worst things abolitionists ever wrote, spoke or thought about slavery are not half the truth." "No one knows the depth of degradation to which slavery has brought men that has never tried to lift up ... one who has been a slave." 

Others marveled at the lengths to which white Southerners would go to retain every last shred of slave-like behavior from their ex-bondsmen. Among the many federal officers stationed in the South during Reconstruction, Major Benjamin C. Truman provided one of the most perceptive and critical analyses of the legacy of slavery. Truman spent thirty-one weeks in eight ex-Confederate states in late 1865 and early 1866. He identified in Texas, as late as April 1866, "the substance of slavery ... in the form of the bondage of custom, of fear, and of inferiority." Throughout the South whites persecuted the freedmen, obstructed their free movement, and demanded slave-like deference. Truman censured slavery for failing to provide for the blacks' mental and moral growth. At best it looked after the slave's present needs and, consequently, the blacks were unprepared for freedom. True, most blacks in 1866 were paid for their work,

but, as a general thing, the freedmen are encouraged to collect about the old mansion in their little quarters, labor for their former master for set terms, receiving, besides their pay, food, quarters, and medical attendance, and thus continuing on in their former state of dependence. The cruelties of slavery, and all of its outward forms, have entirely passed away; but, as might have been expected, glimmerings of its vassalage, its subserviency, and its helplessness, linger.

Truman wrote disparagingly of persistent Southern white attitudes toward slavery. They still believed that the black man belonged somewhere "between the human race and the animal," he said. Consequently, ex-slaveholders "regard it as a real misfortune to him that he should be stripped of a protector." 

Repeatedly neoabolitionists damned the peculiar institution.
"The old slavery ideas" die hard, wrote a clergyman in the New York *Christian Advocate* in 1866. Another contributor to that periodical remarked that a prominent Tennessean "expected ere long to own and work his slaves in East Tennessee as aforetime." Reminiscent of his prewar antislavery statements, in 1866 Senator Charles Sumner wrote:

Slavery has ceased in name; but this is all. The old masters still assert an inhuman power, and now by positive statutes seek to bind the freedman in new chains. Let this conspiracy proceed unchecked, and the freedman will be more unhappy than the early Puritan, who, seeking liberty of conscience, escaped from the "lords bishops" only to fall under the "lords elders." The master will still be the master under another name, ... Serfdom or apprenticeship is slavery in another guise.

Writing in 1870, North Carolinian Cornelia P. Spencer remarked that many of her fellow whites still viewed blacks "as so many dollars torn by violence and with cruel insult from your hands." White Southerners' desperate grasp of slavery confirmed the suspicions of the Radicals that the ex-Confederates were unrepentant; that Andrew Johnson and the Democrats would revive the slaveocracy to reestablish a Southern power base; and that without Congressional intervention, blacks would continue to languish in servitude.

Neobipationists employed slavery as an important comparative model to document the ways in which Southern whites treated the freedmen. Aghast at the level of Ku Klux Klan violence in Georgia, the Reverend H.W. Pierson remarked that he never observed such force against blacks "in any five years of slavery as I heard and saw at Anderson, Georgia" from December 1868 to February 1869. In *False Reconstruction; or, The Slavery That Is Not Abolished* (1870), Thomas Chapman underscored the South's on-going commitment to slavery, what another Northerner maintained was a mere substitution of serfdom for the peculiar institution. Slavery's new critics charged that blacks continued to waste away in virtual slavery. After spending five months in the South in 1880, a neobipationist declared that "slavery is not dead ... nothing is changed but the legal relation; the social and domestic relations are infinitely deeper and more powerful, and
these are still the same. All the forces and materials which went to make slavery are in vehement operation today as they were twenty years ago.” Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan agreed. In his famous dissent in the 1883 Civil Rights Cases, Harlan wrote that blacks consistently confronted “class tyranny.” Whites kept them “in practical subjection” by using arbitrary power “to dole out . . . just such privileges as they may choose to grant.” 41

Slavery indeed played no small part in the tailoring of the Bloody Shirt. It symbolized the inertia, the unwillingness of white Southerners to accept the verdict of defeat in war. For years it kept alive the smoldering coals of Northern sectionalism and hatred of the South. Condemnation of slavery continued as a major Republican rallying cry during and long after Reconstruction. In his Observations on Reconstruction (1866), Henry Flanders challenged the motives of Republican politicians. They cared little for the black man, he insisted, but sought instead to keep slavery’s image before the American voting public. “Although slavery is dead,” wrote Flanders, “political anti-slavery is alive, and the imaginary wrongs of the negro in a state of freedom are as useful in the shifts of party as his real wrongs in a state of slavery.” Republican politicians squeezed every bit of utility out of the slavery question. 42 The new forms of race control that replaced slavery provided Northerners with a constant source of ammunition to attack the Democrats and the South.

In March 1866, for example, Senator Lot M. Morrill of Maine spoke strongly in favor of altering the South’s Congressional representation. How, he asked, could the House of Representatives seat Southerners “requiring no security for the protection of” the freedmen—“remanding them to the custody of their old masters, knowing that their object and their purpose is to hold them as an unprivileged and unprotected class?” In the 1868 Presidential campaign, a Republican pamphlet endorsing Grant’s supporters asked black voters if they believed “the Democrats [would] make slaves of the colored people again if they could?” In response, the Union Republican Congressional Committee answered in the affirmative. “It is fair to presume that they would, for they have opposed their freedom by every means, have always labored to extend slavery, and would now try to deprive them of the right to vote.” 43 Over and again the Republicans alleged that the Democrats would reenslave the blacks. They continued to employ slavery as a metaphor in campaign rhetoric as late as 1889. In
Grant’s 1872 canvass, for example, Frederick Douglass reminded black voters that Grant and his running mate, Henry Wilson, symbolized their emancipators; Horace Greeley and B. Gratz Brown represented their enslavers. Over the last forty years, charged Douglass, the Democratic party “existed almost entirely to make sure our slavery and degradation as a race.”

No one sensed the lingering spirit of slavery in the South more so than the freedmen themselves. Impassioned testimony by blacks in the throes of their liberation underscored the determination of white Southerners to cling to the old racial order. Throughout Reconstruction blacks emphasized the horrors of enslavement and the persecution of neoslavery. Their outrage with slavery and reverence for freedom made a mockery of the new proslavery argument. “We were not born to wear the yoke,” exclaimed the Reverend Henry H. Garnet in 1865. For the black man, he insisted, “death is a thousand times more preferable than slavery.” Ex-slaves and Northern free blacks alike damned slavery’s vile legacy of racial hatred and oppression. In 1882 the Reverend Isaac McCoy Williams took exception to the proslavery arguments of a white clergyman. He criticized slavery because it “kept us in a semi-barbarous condition” and slowed black intellectual growth. A year later black diplomat John M. Langston, himself a former bondsman, denounced slavery’s “barbarous torture.” So heinous was slavery that it denied the black man control over his own body, the right to protect his family, the ability to acquire possessions. Even when emancipated, charged Langston, the black’s “freedom has been . . . a mockery, because he has been deprived of those civil and political powers which render enfranchised manhood valuable and its dignities a blessing.”

Immediately upon emancipation, the freedmen began shedding their slave-like behavior. They sought to carve out an identity apart from the slave experience. Blacks demanded land and assistance from the government—weapons with which to combat whites who sought to keep them helpless and dependent. The blacks moved quickly to reorder their lives. Many searched for long lost relatives. Writing in July 1865, for instance, ex-slave James Smith informed another freedman that now that “the lord has broke the slavery chain I hope you may get to see your wife. . . .” Blacks in Richmond complained loudly that both the civil and military governments there perpetuated the etiquette of
slavery. Reenslavement loomed as a real fear to them as well as blacks throughout the South. Writing soon after attaining her freedom, Charlotte Ann Jackson recalled that:

When i was liveing whith White People i was tide down hand and foot and they tide me to the Post and whip me till i Could not stand up and they tide my Close over my head and whip me much as they want . . . But the light has come the Rebles is put down and Slavry is dead God Bless the union Forever more . . . i hope slavly shall be no more.

Such painful recollections of bondage remained fresh long after emancipation.

Postbellum black writings on slavery provided a vital, first-hand dimension to postwar antislavery thought. Many blacks, in fact, found little difference between chattel slavery and the new conditions of life and labor confronting them after the war. Addressing a group of blacks on St. Helena Island in July 1865, Martin R. Delany, one of the Union Army’s few black commissioned officers, warned the freedmen that whites sought to keep them in chains. “Yankees from the north . . . come down here to drive you as much as ever . . . before the war. Its slavery over again northern, universal U.S. slavery.” Blacks, implored Delany, must resist the snake-like grip of slavery. Whites would seduce them with kind words, then exploit them—“its slavery over again as much as ever it was. . . .”

In October 1865, for example, a black soldier was arrested in Hodgenville, Kentucky, for trying to rescue his family from slavery. Two months later a black Virginian complained that “never was wee any more treated Like slaves then wee are now in our Lives.” A black soldier in Mississippi also informed the Freedmen’s Bureau that his people were subjected to extreme violence—“outraged beyound humanity”—by whites. Robbed, murdered, and driven from their homes, the blacks possessed no rights that whites were bound to respect. “Some are being knocked down for saying they are free, while a great many are being worked just as they ust to be when Slaves, without any compensation. . . .” White Mississippians “are doing all they can to prevent free labor, and reasstablish a kind of secondary slavery[.].” And in May 1866 six black soldiers petitioned President Johnson on behalf of their families back in Kentucky. They
explained that their kinsmen remained in virtual slavery. Blacks willingly joined the army, wrote the soldiers, to liberate themselves and their descendants. While they were away from home, however, their families were abused, "turned out of Doors, . . . they has no Place to lay thire heads and we has no way to healp them." In their opinion, the freedmen stood exposed and vulnerable to the wrath of the whites. "I would like to Know how," asked one of the blacks, they were to "go about takeing eire of thire Selfs and Children. . . . the old Servent has Spent the best of his days in Slavery. then must these Poore Creatchers be Suffered to lye out of Doors Like Beast or sum brute?"53

Despite the intensity of such appeals, by the 1880s proslavery thought ultimately carried the day. Throughout Reconstruction slavery as a subject of inquiry and as an idea continued to play a vital role in American racial thought. Though no longer a legal entity, slavery and forms of neoslavery nevertheless helped determine the politics of Reconstruction. Southern white intransigence on slavery spirited the Radical Republicans forward in fashioning the Constitutional amendments and civil rights legislation of these years. Much can be learned by examining the ways in which whites and blacks perceived slavery after the peculiar institution's demise. As sectional tensions gradually lessened, whites in all parts of the country came to welcome the myth of slavery as a benign institution. The comical portrait of the happy slave became standard fare in late nineteenth century literature, folklore, theatre, and caricature. Although proslavery and antislavery forces continued to battle over the old questions after Reconstruction, the American public generally accepted a new consensus on slavery. The patriarchal, proslavery image of the slave popularized by novelist John Esten Cooke in 1876 appealed to whites North as well as South. Celebrating slavery in colonial Virginia, Cooke wrote that not only was the Virginia slave "well fed, and rarely overtaxed," but his master generally provided him with a garden patch to grow his own crops. The bondsman, wrote Cooke, "was a merry, jovial musical being," who, "when his day's work was over, played his banjo in front of his cabin, and laughed and jested and danced by the light of the moon." House servants, he said, "were looked upon very much as members of the family, whose joys and sorrows were their own too." According to Cooke, the blacks "were slaves in nothing but the word."54
Influenced by white racism—itself a key source of sectional reconciliation—few late nineteenth century Americans assessed blame for slavery. Most described it as a mild, patriarchal institution, more a school than a system of coerced labor. "We make no apology whatsoever for slavery," argued the Reverend John D. Paris in 1877. The North Carolinian followed this remark with twenty-five handwritten pages eulogizing slavery's virtues and damning the horrors of emancipation. Responsibility for the peculiar institution now was placed on Northerners as well as Southerners. "It was not the crime of the South," argued the Reverend C.K. Marshall of Mississippi in 1880, "it was the crime of America; it was the fearful crime of England. It was the terrible and inexcusable transgression of the Achan of a sinister, impious and God-defying civilization." In 1876 the New Orleans Daily Picayune informed white Southerners that they could keep their heads high on all sectional matters, including the slavery question. Yes, "The New South" had abandoned slavery and was loyal to the Union, exclaimed the editor. But, he added, "We forget nothing. We apologize for nothing. We simply take things as we find them, and make the best of them." Five years later the Atlanta Constitution summarized the various strains of proslavery thought that echoed in the post-Reconstruction American mind.

In its humane aspect and in the results that have followed, the system of slavery as it existed in the south never had and can never have its parallel in the history of the world. So far as the negro is concerned, it was the only field in which the seed of civilization could be sown. It was as necessary to his moral, mental and physical disenthralment as the primary school is to the child. It was the prerequisite of freedom and citizenship.

After more than two centuries of the existence of slavery as an institution, then, white Southerners found it virtually impossible to view blacks as anything but slaves. It required a major transformation of thought to alter this assumption. Few made the adjustment smoothly or comfortably. Most never made it at all.
NOTES

The author presented a shortened version of this essay before The Historical Society of North Carolina, Charlotte, North Carolina, April 13, 1984.


2 Report of Wright, 29 May 1865, Governor’s Papers, William W. Holden, North Carolina Division of Archives and History.


5 Holmes to Nickels Holmes, 24 November 1867, Nickels Holmes Papers, Duke University.


12 The literature on emancipation is especially rich. I have benefited most from: Joel Williamson, After Slavery: The Negro in South Carolina During Reconstruction, 1861-1877 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), 67-94, 96-97, 243-57, 275-76, 298; W. McKee Evans, Ballots and Fence Rails: Reconstruction on the Lower Cape Fear...


14Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas Diary, May 1865, p. 70, 29 May 1865; John W. Norwood to Thomas Ruffin, 6 August 1865, in Hamilton, ed., Ruffin Papers, 3:463; Samuel A. Agnew Diary, 5 January 1866, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

15"Are Not Capulet and Montague Dead?" Richmond Southern Opinion, 17 August 1867.


17"Negroes, Dog-Days, and White Slavery," Chicago Times, 7 July 1865.


20Hayes, Negrophobia "On the Brain," in White Men (Washington:
Powell, Ginck, 1869), 12, 14, 16, 17, 25, 31.


24 Free Negroism; or, Results of Emancipation (New York: Van Evrie, Horton, 1866), 27.


29 ‘Religious Inequality of Human Races,” Old Guard 7 (February 1869): 85.


21 SMITH


38 Senate Executive Documents, no. 43, 39th Congress, 1st session, serial 1238 (Washington, 1866), 9, 10, 8.


42 Flanders, Observations on Reconstruction (Philadelphia, 1866), 8n.


44 Douglass, U. S. Grant and the Colored People (Washington, 1872), 8. For examples of slavery as a symbol in Republican campaigns, see The Record of the Democratic Party (Concord, NH, n.p., 1872), 10; Jay A. Hubbell, The Overshadowing Issue! The True “Inwardness” of the “Solid South!” (Washington, n.p., 1880), 6, 8; J. B. Gordon to the editor, New York Commercial Advertiser, 21 November 1884; D. McD. Lindsey, The
Wrongs of the Negro— The Remedy (Boston, 1888), 4-5, 6-7, 9, 12;
Decoration Day Address of William E. Chandler (Concord, NH, 1889), 4.


46 Equal Suffrage. Address From the Colored Citizens of Norfolk, Va.,
to the People of the United States (New Bedford, Mass.: E. Anthony &
Sons, 1865), 2-7; Why the Colored People in Philadelphia are Excluded
From the Street Cars (Philadelphia, 1866), 23; I. H. Putnam, The Review
of the Revolutionary Elements of the Rebellion, and of the Reconstruction
(Brooklyn, n.p., 1868), 8.

47 “Citizenship and the Ballot,” Freedom and Citizenship (Washington:
R. H. Darby, 1883), 99.

48 Claude F. Oubre, Forty Acres and a Mule: The Freedmen's Bureau
and Land Ownership (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press,
1978), 53.

49 Randall M. Miller, ed., “Freedom Time, 1865: An Ex-Slave Writes

50 “An Appeal From the Richmond Negroes For Protection,” New York
Daily Tribune, 7 June 1865; “The Richmond Negro Delegation in
Washington,” Richmond Republic, 17 June 1865.

51 Richard R. Hill testimony, 3 March 1866, Report of the Joint
Committee on Reconstruction at the First Session of the Thirty-Ninth
Congress, serial 1273 (Washington, 1866), part 2, p. 56; Henry L. Swint,
ed., Dear Ones at Home: Letters From Contraband Camps (Nashville:
Vanderbilt University Press, 1966), 252. This is a literal transcription of
Jackson’s letter.

52 Ira Berlin, Joseph P. Reidy, Leslie S. Rowland, eds., Freedom: A
Documentary History of Emancipation, 1861-1867: Series II (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 1982), 739-40. In this and the following
paragraph, I have retained the literal transcription of these documents
followed by the editors.

53 Berlin, Freedom, 725, 754-55, 756, 780-81.

54 Cooke, “Virginia in the Revolution,” Harper's New Monthly
Magazine 53 (June 1876): 2-3. On the development of proslavery images
in the periodical literature of these years, see Arnold H.C. Pennekamp,
“The Treatment of the Negro in the Literary Magazines of the South
During the Reconstruction Period From 1865 to 1880” (M.A. thesis,
University of North Carolina, 1936) and Rayburn S. Moore, “Southern
Writers and Northern Literary Magazines, 1865-1890” (Ph.D. diss., Duke
University, 1956).

55 The Moral and Religious Status of the African Race in the Southern
States, (unpublished manuscript, 1877 [?]), John Paris Papers, Southern
Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

56 Marshall, The Exodus: Its Effect Upon the People of the South
(Washington: Colonization Rooms, 1880), 8.

57 “The New South,” New Orleans Daily Picayune, 12 May 1876; “The
Future of the Negro in the South,” Atlanta Constitution, 2 February 1881.