ANTISLAVERY VIOLENCE AND SECESSION,
OCTOBER 1859 – APRIL 1861

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the collapse of southern Unionism between October 1859 and April 1861. This study argues that a series of events of violent antislavery and southern perceptions of northern support for them caused white southerners to rethink the value of the Union and their place in it. John Brown’s raid at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, and northern expressions of personal support for Brown brought the Union into question in white southern eyes. White southerners were shocked when Republican governors in northern states acted to protect members of John Brown’s organization from prosecution in Virginia. Southern states invested large sums of money in their militia forces, and explored laws to control potentially dangerous populations such as northern travelling salesmen, whites “tampering” with slaves, and free African-Americans. Many Republicans endorsed a book by Hinton Rowan Helper which southerners believed encouraged antislavery violence and a Senate committee investigated whether an antislavery conspiracy had existed before Harpers Ferry. In the summer of 1860, a series of unexplained fires in Texas exacerbated white southern fear. As the presidential election approached in 1860, white southerners hoped for northern voters to repudiate the Republicans. When northern voters did not, white southerners generally rejected the Union. This study relies on primary sources of white southerners where available and devotes considerable attention to southern newspapers, especially as they described the working of county-level government.
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INTRODUCTION

Violence of speech or act on the one side, will unavoidably produce violence of speech and act on the other. Each new grievance is alternatively cause and effect—and if, before resorting to healing counsels, we are determined to run over the dreary catalogue, to see who was earliest or who has been most to blame, we engage in a controversy in which there is no arbiter, and of which there can be no solution.

Edward Everett, December 1859

Alabamian Thomas Watts wrote his friends on November 10, 1860, about Alabama’s relationship with the Union. A few days prior, Watts had been a Constitutional Unionist, supporting John Bell and Edward Everett, “men of great ability, long experience in public affairs, wise in counsel, patriotic in action, loving their whole country,” for the presidency and vice presidency; he had embraced their platform of “the Constitution of the country, the Union of the states, and the enforcement of the laws.” Now, however, Watts had become a committed secessionist. The election results, Watts wrote, showed that “fanaticism rules the hour.” In Massachusetts, John Andrew, “a John Brown-raid man,” had won the state by one hundred thousand votes. “The black flag of abolition dominion and Southern subjugation” had been raised. The Republican triumph meant that “misguided, reckless, bloated hatred of us and of our institutions” held sway in the North. “‘The irrepressible conflict’ doctrine of fanaticism stands to-day, triumphant!” If the South remained in the Union, the lot of the southern people would be


“new attacks, new insults and new injuries.” To those who urged a “wait and see” approach, Watts had little patience. “Why delay longer? … What ‘overt act’ do we wait for? … Why delude ourselves with the futile hope of obtaining new securities – new guards for our safety within the present Union?” No, Watts felt, “the remedy for the past and security for the future lies in a separation of the ties which have bound us together as one people.” In closing, Watts suggested Alabama act. “Without bluster or bravado, let us act, with the deliberation, the calm determination of a brave and Christian people. The time for resolves has passed.” How did a conservative, erstwhile Constitutional Unionist come to endorse the radical solution of secession? This is the question this dissertation seeks to address.

This dissertation examines the fear of antislavery violence as a key but often underestimated factor in the decision for secession, especially in the Deep South states. Antislavery violence consists of unlawful acts that use force or the threat of force to bring about the abolition of slavery or render the institution less secure. In the analysis that follows, the term “conservative” means those, on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line, who wished to maintain the status quo, an Union which consisted of states that allowed slavery and those that did not. Radicals, on both sides, wished to see this change. The radical southern position coalesced around the policy of secession. Events in 1850-1852 demonstrated that conservative sentiment outweighed radical sentiment across the South. Northern radicals, on the other hand, opposed the status quo and sought an end to chattel slavery in the United States. Some were willing to embrace violent means to achieve this end. Antislavery violence, or more commonly the threat of such violence, in the period between Harpers Ferry and secession brought about a crisis of legitimacy in the

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3 To put a finer point on this, conservatives differed on the territorial question, southern conservatives wishing to allow slavery to expand into the territories, northern conservatives wishing to prevent it by law from expanding.
eyes of southern voters and helped secessionists make the case for independence. The emphasis is on how white southerners including politicians, local leaders, and voters in general interpreted various key events as signs of northern (specifically Republican) support for antislavery violence. Many white southerners, in turn, viewed these developments as significant threats to the institution of slavery and to the southern social order more generally. Studying southern reactions to the perceived threat of antislavery violence helps explain why opinion on secession was not divided along class lines. Planters, small slaveholders, and nonslaveholders all responded with alarm to events they saw fitting into a pattern of mounting danger not only to slavery but to the racial hierarchy. Such concerns about security led states and local communities to respond with both legal and extralegal measures. In justifying secession and making appeals to voters at both the state and county level, disunionists readily and repeatedly appealed to fears of antislavery violence with highly charged (and often exaggerated) reports that circulated widely throughout the southern states. In this process, which had escalated since the John Brown raid at Harpers Ferry, newspapers played a key role in publicizing what was described as northern toleration (if not outright encouragement) of slave insurrections and other forms of antislavery violence.

In a political struggle, violence or just the threat of violence changes the dynamics of the contest. It raises the stakes for the participants. It alters the moral calculus between ends and means. Carl von Clausewitz, the great Prussian philosopher of war, noted the relationship between means and ends. The greater the ends sought, the greater the means that can be applied to it. The great moral end of eliminating chattel slavery justified, in some northern minds, the

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adoption of extralegal, and sometimes violent, means.⁵ While most northerners opposed violent antislavery actions, enough appeared to either embrace or at least tolerate such methods so as to cause white southerners to perceive an escalation of means. As Clausewitz noted, an escalation of means on one side frequently brings about an escalation of means on the other, and, barring some moderating influence, political struggle tends to extremes.⁶ Many white southerners who would not have endorsed secession in 1850 came to do so in 1860-61.

A series of events in the 1850s led Americans to fear a growing role for violence in the political sphere. With the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1851, by law northerners could no longer remain passive bystanders of the slave system, but were forced to actively sustain it or resist it by force. The passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act opened those territories for settlement and fighting broke out between those wishing to bring Kansas into the Union as a slave state and those opposed. When faith in non-violent political struggle broke down in the late 1850s, increasing numbers of Americans came to see violence as an acceptable means for settling political differences.

Much of this involves both perception and fear. Mobilizing support for secession in a society deeply committed to slavery depended on trumpeting and responding to fears about the future security of the southern social order.

Across the South, only one quarter of families owned slaves in 1860. Among slaveholding


families, only 12 percent of those families owned twenty or more slaves.\(^7\) Political elites came disproportionately (or even overwhelmingly) from planter households, but pro-secession activists had to convince significant numbers of non-slaveholders and smaller slaveholders to support the policy in order for it to be adopted. A strong Unionist consensus defeated secession in 1850-51, and saved the Union, for a time, through a series of compromise measures, including a new fugitive slave law.\(^8\)

In selling the compromise measures of 1850 in a speech in Capon Springs, Virginia, in 1851, Daniel Webster uttered the fateful words secessionists were fond of quoting ten years later:

> If the Northern States refuse, willfully and deliberately, to carry into effect that part of the Constitution which respects the restoration of fugitive slaves, and Congress provide no remedy, the South would no longer be bound to observe the compact. A bargain cannot be broken on one side and still bind the other side.\(^9\)

This implicit threat made Webster sincerely hope the compromise measures would be honestly adhered to, but the seeds of further mischief were in the compromise.

The Fugitive Slave Act had two glaring flaws. First, it was patently unfair, denying free African-Americans a fair trial to defend themselves and giving federal commissioners a larger fee if they decided in favor of the slave-owner rather than in favor of the accused slave.\(^10\) White

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\(^10\) Potter, The Impending Crisis, 131; Waugh, On the Brink of Civil War, 183.
northerners, even those not energetically opposed to slavery up to this point, found this arrangement unacceptable. Violent opposition followed shortly thereafter.\footnote{11} High profile fugitive slave cases, such as the October 1851 Jerry rescue and the May 1854 Anthony Burns case shocked northern sensibilities.\footnote{12} They also helped radicalize northern abolitionists such as Gerrit Smith and Thomas Wentworth Higginson.\footnote{13} By the summer of 1858, abolitionist Lysander Spooner was publishing a broadside calling on slaves to rebel and on white non-slaveholding southerners to aid them in that endeavor. Spooner’s pamphlet, \textit{A Plan for the Abolition of Slavery}, urged the kidnapping of slaveholders and added that they should be stripped and flogged, and if necessary, killed, “to make war (openly or secretly as circumstances may dictate).”\footnote{14}

The Kansas-Nebraska Act presented those on both sides of the slavery controversy an occasion and an excuse to employ violent means to achieve their objectives. May 1856 saw a pro-slavery sheriff backed by a Missouri mob sacking Lawrence, Kansas,\footnote{15} Charles Sumner’s

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item \footnote{11}{Potter, \textit{Impending Crisis}, 130-132.}
\item \footnote{12}{“Jerry,” also known as William Henry, was an escaped slave who had escaped to Syracuse, New York, and whose owner had attempted to recover. Anthony Burns was an escaped slave in Boston who was recovered by his owner. Burns later ransomed out of slavery and attended Oberlin College. Mayer, \textit{All on Fire}, 412, 440-442.}
\item \footnote{14}{Lysander Spooner, “A Plan for the Abolition of Slavery,” in C. Bradley Thompson (ed.), \textit{Antislavery Political Writings, 1833-1860: A Reader}, (New York: Routledge, 2015), 261-264.}
\item \footnote{15}{Potter, \textit{Impending Crisis}, 208-209; Nevins, \textit{A House Dividing 1852-1857}, 343-437. Potter and Nevin tell substantially different versions of the sack of Lawrence, Potter taking a more balanced view.}
\end{itemize}
“Crime against Kansas” speech before the Senate,\textsuperscript{16} Preston Brooks’ savage beating of Sumner in response,\textsuperscript{17} and John Brown’s murder of Tennessee immigrant James Doyle, and four others in Kansas.\textsuperscript{18} In August 1856, David Atchison and John Reid led a large group of Missourians into Kansas toward John Brown’s headquarters at Osawatomie. On the morning of August 30, 1856, the Missourians killed John Brown’s son, Frederick. After a long gun battle, Reid’s forces put the Free Staters to flight, leaving five dead behind.\textsuperscript{19} Sectional violence abated for two years, until one more spasm of violence erupted.

In December 1858, Brown and a small party crossed from Kansas to western Missouri, liberated eleven slaves, killed one slave owner, and stole some property.\textsuperscript{20} On the national level, the charges were set. All that was lacking for an explosion of a broader, more violent conflict between pro-slavery and antislavery partisans was for someone to put a match to another fuse.

\textsuperscript{16} Sumner mocked South Carolina Senator Andrew Butler’s physical handicaps, brought on by a recent stroke and called Butler a liar. Charles Sumner, \textit{The Works of Charles Sumner}, vol. 4, (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1870-1873), 240.

\textsuperscript{17} Eric H. Walter, \textit{Shattering the Union: America in the 1850s}. (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 2004), 99-101.

\textsuperscript{18} Potter, \textit{The Impending Crisis}, 212-213; Nevins, \textit{A House Dividing}, 1852-1857, 474-476.

\textsuperscript{19} Nevins, \textit{A House Dividing}, 481; Walther, \textit{Shattering the Union}, 102.

CHAPTER 1: THE HARPERS FERRY RAID AND LOCAL REACTIONS

The great evil we suffer is in our false position towards the North. We are, to use strong language, lambs in copartnership with wolves – at their mercy. We must relieve ourselves from this position by treaty or by revolution. ... The only remedy sufficient to effect the purpose is a dissolution of the bonds that hold us in their power, or to frighten them into their senses on that issue. Charleston Mercury, November 23, 1859.

By 1858, John Brown had a plan. He wanted to seize the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, gather liberated slaves and perhaps southern white allies and distribute weapons to them. Reinforced with these recruits, he would spread his revolt across the slave states and overthrow the slave power.¹ Over the course of his abolitionist career, John Brown came to believe that to be effective, antislavery forces had to take the offensive and strike the system at its source in the southern slave states.² The raid on Harpers Ferry was an attempt to implement this strategy.

To accomplish this, Brown needed money and a plan of government. For the former, Brown had developed a network of financial backers. Theodore Parker, Frank Sanborn, Samuel Gridley Howe, George Luther Stearns, Gerrit Smith, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, collectively known as the Secret Six, believed in the necessity of violent means in their struggle to end slavery. Brown had convinced them of the radical nature of his plan and that he would carry it


out. They gave Brown weapons, their own money and served as conduits for the donations of others. 3

Having secured funds, Brown created a plan for a new political system. 4 Brown and his colleagues met in Chatham, Canada West, to draft a new constitution for the United States. Once the campaign started at Harpers Ferry had achieved its long-term objectives, the United States would have a new, antislavery constitution and a new political regime. This new constitution mixed the practical and the idealistic. It abolished slavery and established racial equality. It also made arrangements for the distribution of property captured during any fighting and set up a very strong chief executive. 5

In May 1858, while Brown was presenting his constitution at the Chatham Convention in Canada, Hugh Forbes, a disgruntled John Brown employee, had revealed to Republican Senators William Seward and Henry Wilson some details of Brown’s planned attack. After meeting Forbes, Wilson wrote to Howe urging him to get the weapons out of Brown’s hands, and not to

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3 Parker was a Unitarian minister. Sanborn was a teacher from Concord, Massachusetts. Howe was a Massachusetts doctor. Stearns was a Boston merchant. Smith was a businessman from upstate New York. Higginson, of Worcester, Massachusetts was perhaps the most radical of the Six.

4 Franklin Sanborn, one of the Secret Six, recalled thirty years later that the constitution was intended just for that space liberated by Brown, but the naming of the document indicates otherwise. See Franklin B. Sanborn, The Life and Letters of John Brown, (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1891), 438.

5 Mason Committee Report, published the proceedings of the Chatham Convention and the text of the new constitution in Appendix 2, 45-57. See also Richmond Enquirer, October 25, 1859, p. 2, col. 3.
let them be used for any “illegal or aggressive purpose.”6 When the Secret Six heard the extent of Forbes revelations, they directed Brown to postpone the attack.7

While waiting for the Secret Six’s authorization to proceed, Brown went about the practical business of organizing a revolution. He raised money.8 He rehearsed on a smaller scale by conducting his invasion of Missouri in December 1858, in which he liberated eleven slaves, killed one slaveholder, and stole horses, mules and cash to pay for the expedition.9 He purchased weapons, particularly pikes, with which to arm the slaves he liberated.10 He sent John Cook, one of his men, to Harpers Ferry as a spy to scout the situation there.11 Finally, he set up the Maryland base from which he would launch the raid.12

Brown’s plan was not a well-kept secret. While Brown was waiting, four Iowa men at the periphery of the raid, but familiar with the details of Brown’s intentions, wrote anonymous

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6 Mason Committee Report, 142.

7 Renehan, Secret Six, 150-161; Rossbach, Ambivalent Conspirators, 160-181; The Secret Six also directed Brown to stop telling them any more details of his plans, so they could deny any responsibility for Brown’s actions. Villard takes the Six to task for this moral failing. See Villard, John Brown, 342.

8 Rossbach, Ambivalent Conspirators, 188, 200; Villard, John Brown, 367; Oates, To Purge This Land with Blood, 258.

9 “Kansas,” New York Tribune, January 10, 1859, p. 6, col. 2-3 mentions John Brown by name and his involvement in the Missouri invasion. See also, Renehan, Secret Six, 179-180; Rossbach, Ambivalent Conspirators, 189-190. Oates, To Purge This Land with Blood, 261-262.


11 Villard, John Brown, 344; Oates, To Purge the Land with Blood, 251-252.

12 Villard, John Brown, 403.
letters to Secretary of War John Floyd detailing Brown’s plan.  

The anonymous letters warned of a “secret association” leading a “general insurrection” that would “enter Virginia at Harpers Ferry.” The letter was anonymous and the details so sensational that Floyd did not believe them. He took no action.

The raid itself was a spectacular failure, at least in its immediate results. The ends sought had been far too grandiose, and the means of achieving them too meager. The neighborhood of Harpers Ferry had too few enslaved people, and those that the raiders found were not inclined to join Brown’s insurrection. Perhaps they saw it as not likely to succeed. Perhaps they were not enthused when Brown armed them with pikes, instead of the rifles that Brown’s colleagues had

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13 Moses Varney, a Quaker of Springdale Iowa, told David J. Gue, Benjamin F. Gue, and A. L. Smith that Brown had recruited Springdale Quakers into his army and the people of Springdale were concerned that these young men were going to be captured or killed. The raid was apparently the topic of conversation among Brown’s “most trusted friends” in Springdale. These men wanted to stop Brown from attempting such a foolhardy plan, knowing it would end in a “certain and terrible fate.” Benjamin F. Gue, History of Iowa, (New York, The Century History Company, 1903), 2:26.

14 Gue, History of Iowa, 2:28-30. The men mailed a large envelope from Iowa with letters inside, one via Philadelphia, the other via Cincinnati, stamped and addressed to Floyd. The Philadelphia letter seems to have been lost en route or was destroyed. The Cincinnati letter was widely reprinted. Mason Committee Report, 250-252; Baltimore Daily Exchange, October 18, 1859, pg. 1, col. 6, Richmond Daily Dispatch, October 18, 1859, p. 2, col. 1; and “Clue to the Mystery,” Fayette (Tenn.) Observer, November 3, 1859 p. 2, col. 1. John Floyd, Jr.’s father, while governor of Virginia, in the wake of the 1831 Nat Turner revolt, had received an anonymous letter from “L.N.Q.” in Philadelphia, alerting Floyd that a secret group of “northern conspirators” were allegedly “maturing plans for treason and rebellion and insurrection in Virginia.” Charles Henry Ambler, The Life and Diary of John Floyd: Governor of Virginia, (Richmond: Richmond Press, 1918), 165-166. The 1831 threat never materialized. If the senior Floyd had ever mentioned the episode to his son, it may have influenced his son to disregard a similar threat in 1859.

15 “Outbreak at Harper’s Ferry,” Wilmington (N.C.) Daily Journal, October 21, 1859, p. 2, col. 1, states that “the information was so improbable that no notice was taken of it.” The Charlotte (N.C.) Democrat states that the information was “too indefinite and improbable to be believed,” “Full Particulars of the Insurrection in Virginia,” Charlotte (N.C.) Democrat, October 25, 1859, p. 2, col. 1; New Orleans Picayune, October 23, 1859, p. 8, col. 1. Mason Committee Report, 251.
brought. For their own reasons, the slaves took more of a “wait and see” approach and declined to join Brown’s forces. All of the participants were killed or captured except five: Barclay Coppoc, Francis Merriam, Charles Tidd, Osbourne Anderson and Owen Brown. The raiders had accepted great risks in their fight against slavery, but the plan was foolhardy.

The raid’s complete failure could have demonstrated that there was no actual danger of a slave insurrection. This was the conclusion of Richmond Dispatch editor James A. Cowardin, who pronounced the scheme “the maddest ever conceived,” and was relieved that the number of slaves who had taken part had initially been “greatly exaggerated.” Virginia Governor Henry Wise expressed satisfaction that no Virginia slaves willingly joined the fight. Historian William Freehling argued that “Southerners realized that Brown’s tactics had failed to arouse a single slave, much less a general revolt. Nor did many southerners tremble that a future version of Brown’s strategy would awaken Cuffee to seek mass slaughter.” Quite a few white southerners, however, were deeply concerned about further servile insurrections.


17 Of Brown’s party, ten were killed, six captured and five escaped. Albert Hazlett and John Cook escaped for a few days but were eventually captured, returned to Virginia, tried, convicted and hanged. See supra, chapter 2.

18 Oates, To Purge This Land with Blood, 282-3; Robert E. Lee said “the plan was the attempt of a fanatic or a madman,” Mason Committee Report, 42.

19 “The Doings at Harpers Ferry,” Richmond Dispatch, October 19, 1859, p. 2, col. 1; William Freehling adopted the same conclusion, in Road to Disunion, 2:203.


21 Freehling, Road to Disunion Volume II: Secessionists Triumphant, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 203.
Immediately after the raid, one southern writer, using the *nom de plume* “Henry,” did see danger in the future. He agreed that Harpers Ferry had been “badly planned,” but that did not mean, that “all future schemes of the kind must be badly planned – and all future schemes of the kind, therefore, whether badly planned or not, must fail! It would be wise … to view the subject in a somewhat more serious light … before treating or affecting to treat, the scheme and its planners with contempt.”22 The implication to white southerners across the slave states was clear. Violent abolitionists had planned a slave insurrection at an unpromising location and others might be in the offing. Southerners believed that widespread northern expressions of sympathy with Brown made a repeat of Harpers Ferry likely. In *The Growth of Southern Nationalism*, historian Avery Craven noted that white southerners watched northern reactions and “a wave of indignation, hatred and fear” swept across the South.23 In a letter to her brother in 1859, Elizabeth Grimball Monro, of Charleston, South Carolina, noted that “there was much sympathy felt for [Brown] at the North which was exceedingly aggravating to the South, as his intentions toward her were so deadly.”24 On November 11, 1859, Virginia native Amanda Virginia Edmunds recorded in her diary, “the excitement is very, very great, especially around here and over the Ridge. The Negroes have [been] burning wheat stacks near Charlestown.” Edmunds wrote that at sundown, “a dark foreboding crept over me.” Edmund’s sister was “scared nearly to

22 *Charleston Mercury*, October 25, 1859, p. 1, col. 3.


24 Elizabeth Grimball Monro to her brother, John Grimball, December 28, 1859. John Grimball family Papers, 1804-1893 (bulk 1858-1885). Box 1, (0426) South Carolina Historical Society.
death when we got from church.” On the day of Brown’s execution, Edmunds called him a “villain, murderer, robber and destroyer of our virgin peace.”

If a well-planned slave insurrection did happen, southerners feared the violence unleashed would likely be indiscriminate, involving slaveholders and non-slaveholders alike. Insurrection frequently is, by its nature, indiscriminate. In Nat Turner’s insurrection and in Santo Domingo, two slave rebellions that seemed to haunt white southern memories, the casualties had included non-slaveholders. Once the genie of morally driven violence is unleashed, it is difficult to control. Edmund Ruffin believed that further attempts like Harpers Ferry would produce “a war of races,” a servile insurrection with “all the unspeakable atrocities & horrors which would attend even their partial success.” Hugh Forbes had warned John Brown that a slave insurrection might “leap beyond his control, or any control,” because a slave insurrection was “from the very nature of things deficient in men of education and experience.” When the fighting actually broke out, Brown’s forces would kill one free African-American, one slave, two non-slaveholding whites and one slaveholder.

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26 Texas State Gazette, December 3, 1859, p. 2, col. 4; William W. Freehling, Road to Disunion, 2:79-80, 177-189; Channing, Crisis of Fear, 58-62.

27 Ruffin, Diary, 354.

28 Villard, John Brown, 313. Boerly and Beckham were not slaveholders according to the 1850 Jefferson County Virginia Slaveholder Schedule. Villard writes that George W. Turner was a slaveholder and farmer. Heyward Shepherd was the free African-American. Villard does not name the slave allegedly killed by Cook, but only states that the slave had been “hired by
The belief that antislavery violence would not discriminate between slaveholders and nonslaveholders would help drive those two groups together over the next year as secession became a real possibility. The Alabama legislature, in debating how to respond to the growth of violent antislavery action, declared in February 1860 that

antislavery agitation … evinc[es] … a settled purpose to effect [the southern states’] overthrow even by the subversion of the Constitution, and at the hazard of violence and bloodshed. … [There is] a sectional party calling itself Republican, committed alike by its own acts and antecedents, and the public avowals and secret machinations of its leaders to the execution of these atrocious designs.²⁹

J. W. Clapp in the Mississippi Convention of 1861, in commenting on social changes in the northern states, declared that “their legitimate results [were] first anarchy—then civil commotion and bloodshed.”³⁰ In the Virginia Convention of 1861, delegate Benjamin Wilson noted how “a band of murderers and marauders, headed by John Brown, seized the government armory at Harpers Ferry, … took some of our citizens prisoners and shot others down like dogs.”³¹ What had limited the casualties at Harpers Ferry was the fact that it had been “badly planned.” There was scant reason to believe that the next attempted slave rebellion would be more discriminating. This lack of discrimination in the application of violence raised white southern paranoia and may have embarrassed northern abolitionists squeamish who were about indiscriminate killing.

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³⁰ Mississippi Convention, Proceedings of the Mississippi State Convention, (Jackson: Power & Cadwallader, 1861), 80.

At the Kennedy farm, police discovered a trunk full of Brown’s correspondence and records. These proved particularly embarrassing for the Republican party and the broader cause of abolition. In this correspondence were letters from Brown’s financial supporters, including a letter to Brown from abolitionist Gerrit Smith “promising to do what he could to keep Brown ‘at his Kansas work,’” and a check from Smith, cashed by Brown. In Brown’s trunk, investigators found a letter from “J. R. G.,” the initials of former Republican Representative Joshua R. Giddings. Some white southerners seized upon this as evidence of a broader conspiracy.

32 Richmond Enquirer, October 25, 1859, p. 2 col. 4; Greenville (Ala.) Southern Messenger, November 2, 1859, p. 3, col. 1.


34 The Fayetteville (N.C.) Semi-Weekly Observer printed the text of a letter which “J. R. G.” had taken “stock in the amount of $3,” and explained that “J. R. G.” was believed to be Joshua R. Giddings. “Latest and Important,” Fayetteville (N.C.) Semi-Weekly Observer, October 27, 1859, p. 3, col. 3. The Savannah (Ga.) Daily Morning News summarized and interpreted the same letter and informed readers that “there is evidence to show that Mr. Giddings contributed aid to the proposed treasonable attempt, fully knowing its character.” “Correspondence of the Baltimore Sun,” Savannah (Ga.) Daily Morning News, October 29, 1859, p. 1, col. 4; Giddings, for his part, declined to refute the allegation of prior complicity, saying that they were made anonymously. “It would hardly be supposed that I would reply to such an intimation from an anonymous writer, to an anonymous person.” “Mr. Giddings’ Speech in Philadelphia,” Lynchburg (Va.) Daily Virginian, November 1, 1859, p. 2, col. 3. In a card published elsewhere, Giddings denied ever being consulted by Brown concerning the Harpers Ferry insurrection or upon any other matter whatever.” “Letter from the Hon. J. R. Giddings,” New Orleans Picayune, October 25, 1859, p. 1, col. 7.

Worse, from the point of view of the Republicans, within a week of the attack, Hugh Forbes revealed in the New York Herald that he had divulged Brown’s plans to Republican Senators William Seward and Henry Wilson in 1858. In 1859, Forbes alleged that in his conversation with Seward he “went fully into the whole matter in all its bearings.” Seward had listened to Forbes for a while, but had then cut off the conversation, stating that he “would have no advice on the subject of … Kansas, because it was inconsistent with the relations that I maintained here, where I was to act as a Senator.” Seward, according to Forbes, did not object to the plan, he only “expressed regret that he had been told.” Forbes also wrote that he had revealed Brown’s plans to Massachusetts Republican Senator Henry Wilson on the Senate floor. As with Seward, the exact details of what Forbes revealed to Wilson are unknown. After meeting Forbes, Wilson had written to Howe urging him to get the weapons out of Brown’s hands, and not to let them be used for any “illegal or aggressive purpose.” Republicans were confronted with the awkward revelation that two prominent party members had some foreknowledge of the raid and had taken no action to alert authorities. The Norfolk (Va.) Argus characterized Harpers Ferry as “the recent


37 “Interview with Seward,” New York Herald, October 27, 1859, p. 4, col. 2. Forbes also had a brief encounter with Senator John P. Hale of New Hampshire, but, pressed for time, Forbes only discussed the dire straits of his family in Paris and the need for money to sustain them. “Accidental Meeting with John P. Hale,” New York Herald, October 27, 1859, p. 4, col. 2.

38 Mason Committee Report, 253-254.


40 Mason Committee Report, 142.
commencement of the ‘irrepressible conflict’ of Seward & Co.\textsuperscript{41} The \textit{Charleston (S. C.) Courier} reprinted an article from the \textit{New York Herald} which laid the blame for Harpers Ferry at the feet of William Seward. “This scheme of insurrection and its terrible results may be justly charged to the bloody instructions of W. H. Seward and other antislavery agitators of the North. … Seward, and all such slavery agitating demagogues … are the guilty instigators of these outbreaks of treason and insurrection and their bloody consequences.”\textsuperscript{42} The \textit{Raleigh Democratic Press} compared the guilt of John Brown to that of William Seward and concluded that Seward was worse: “John Brown, with all his sins, is not half as guilty as W[illiam] H. Seward. … the man who planned the ‘irrepressible conflict;’ who said that of slavery, ‘it can and must be abolished and you and I must do it!’”\textsuperscript{43}

For those concerned that Harpers Ferry might be part of a broader antislavery insurrection, more evidence was in John Brown’s trunk at the Kennedy farm. Brown, or someone of his group, had assembled maps of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi with cryptic marks on certain places. A continuous chain of counties from South Carolina through Georgia and Alabama to Mississippi were marked with circles or crosses, indicating potential future fields of Brown’s operations.\textsuperscript{44} The \textit{Edgefield (S.C.) Advertiser} declared that these “small but


\textsuperscript{43} “It Can and Must Be Abolished and You and I Must Do It. Wm. H. Seward,” \textit{Raleigh Democrat Press}, December 3, 1859, p. 3, col. 5.

elaborate maps … bearing peculiar marks, which would seem to indicate that the points of attack, and the course of the insurrectionary movement through the South, had already been fully determined upon by this well organized and confident league of traitors.”

The map of South Carolina will illustrate the breadth and complexity of these maps and their markings. On the margins of the map someone had glued a table from the 1850 census, showing populations of the counties of the state, the white population, the African-American population, the slave population and the female population. The Baltimore Exchange reported that “[b]y referring to the counties marked, it will be perceived that in them the slave population vastly preponderates, and might therefore have been deemed a safer field of operation for the abolition invaders.” The Exchange noted the marks as follows:

Marlborough [South Carolina was] marked with a cross; Darlington, the same; Sumter, a cross, with a circle; Georgetown, with a single dash pointing southward; Charleston, near Monk's Corner a cross and a semi-circle; Colleton, between South creek and the Edisto, a cross within a circle; Saint Luke, near Grahamville, a cross within a double circle; Orangeburg, on the Middlepen Branch, near Orangeburg, a cross within a circle; Barnwell, between Buck Turkey Creeks, on the line of the South Carolina Rail Road, a cross; Edgefield, near Horn's creek, in the neighborhood of Williston, a cross; Abbeville, near Long Cane creek, a cross.

Figure 1 is a reconstructed copy of the map found in John Brown’s trunk. The color of the counties indicates what percentage of the district was enslaved, and thus, possibly the greatest revolutionary potential. The marks inside the districts, whose meaning was never explained, were as described in newspaper accounts from the time, both in what the marks looked like and (where possible) where within the district the mark was originally drawn. The map shows a

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46 Baltimore Exchange, October 21, 1859, p. 1, col. 5.

positive relationship between districts with high percentages of the populations enslaved and districts with the mysterious marks.
Figure 1: Reconstructed Map of South Carolina
Maps of other states had similar marks. The meaning of the locations and the symbols were not clear, but white southerners interpreted them as an indication of a revolutionary infrastructure, including caches of weapons or supplies, already in place by the time of Harpers Ferry, ready for the time when the slave rebellion would reach deeper into the southern states.

Tales of slave conspiracies had long haunted the imaginations of white southerners. Reports of white northerners inciting slaves to insurrection had a long history as well. In John Brown’s correspondence white southerners found evidence of a confirmed violent abolitionist, with a number of northern financial supporters. Worse, from the perspective of white southerners, there were hints of support perhaps from within the southern states themselves. L. R. Marshall, of Natchez, Mississippi, wrote to Henry Wise asking for Brown’s Mississippi map. “Some person very familiar with our neighborhood [must have] furnished the information” on the map, Marshall wrote. It would “be very desirable to ferret out the enemy in our midst.” Brown’s maps did not indicate whether he had accomplices in the locales marked, nor whether, if they actually existed, the accomplices were white or black, northern or southern. This was all a

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49 *Baltimore Exchange*, October 21, 1859, p. 1, col. 5.


52 L. R. Marshall to Wise November 3, 1859, Box 21, Folder 5, Governor Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession # 36710, State Government Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Marshall also asked Wise to send any unsigned letters that might be linked to the area. Marshall proposed to show them to the postmaster and see if he recognized the handwriting, so Marshall could find the writers.
disconcerting mystery. While white southerners were fretting over just how widespread Brown’s support was in the South, white northerners worried how widespread Brown’s network was in the North.

The Democratic press in the north tried to convince readers that the Harpers Ferry conspiracy was large and included Republicans. The Cincinnati Gazette reported that “from the tenor of his (Brown’s) papers, it is now not to be doubted that the conspiracy, of which he was the head and front, had an extensive organization in various States.” In an editorial of October 22, 1859, the Washington Evening Star told readers that Harpers Ferry was the work “not of a few crazy fanatics, but by a powerful well organized party.” The paper went on, “The day is rapidly approaching when the slavery question will be settled one way or the other – either by dissolution of the Union or by a revolution of sentiment at the North, through which a conservative respect for the slavery compromises of the Constitution will again be in the ascendant there.” The editor foresaw three stark choices: rejection by Republicans of antislavery violence, rejection by northern voters of the Republican Party, or dissolution of the Union. The Washington Evening Star wrote that for “the last year and a half, at least, the project of the Harpers Ferry outbreak was known to Senators Seward, Sumner, Hale, Governor Chase of Ohio, and others.” The Democratic press hoped to use Harpers Ferry to discredit the Republican party.


55 Ratner and Teeter, Fanatics and Fire-eaters, 75.

Some northern opinion leaders, however, did attempt to disassociate themselves from Brown’s act. Thurlow Weed’s *Albany Evening Journal*, a Seward organ, rejected southern accusations that northern agitation was to blame: “If a man builds his house over a volcano, it is not those who warn him of his danger that are to blame for its eruptions.” Further, the *Evening Journal* wrote, “Republicans, above all other men, condemn enterprises which menace public safety.” A *New York Tribune* editorial called Harpers Ferry a “deplorable affair.” Henry Raymond told *New York Times* readers that “the great mass of the people of the North … regard every such attempt [as Harpers Ferry] … with horror and execration.” Massachusetts industrialist Amos Lawrence for example, soon wrote to Henry Wise denying foreknowledge of the raid. New York businessman W. R. Stack wrote to southern friends that the Harpers Ferry affair “is looked at here as a great piece of rascality, but of no more general importance than would be the murderous attack of a lunatic on his best friends.”

Most northerners were opposed to slavery, or at least opposed to its extension into the territories. A much smaller number endorsed violent antislavery means. A tiny number knew of

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57 Quoted in the *New York Herald*, October 21, 1859, p. 1, col. 5


59 Channing, *Crisis of Fear*, 84.

60 Lawrence to Wise October 25, 1859, Box 21, Folder 3, Governor Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession # 36710, State Government Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

61 W. R. Stark to “My Friend [Thomas] Clayton,” November 29, 1859, Clayton Family Papers, Collection # 04792, Series 1, Folder 1, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina.
Brown’s plans before the fact. Frank Sanborn, Gerrit Smith and the four Iowa men who wrote to John Floyd, at a minimum, had held damning foreknowledge. White southerners had to decide for themselves how to assess this evidence.

Northern conservatives urged their southern friends to wait and see how the northern people would act in the aftermath of Harpers Ferry. New York conservative Charles August Davis, for example, so advised his South Carolina friend William Porcher Miles to be patient. Look to the fall elections, conservatives said. The northern people would surely reject the Republican Party and the principles which had led to Harpers Ferry. Meetings in Boston, Providence, Troy (New York), Philadelphia, and New York City expressed a deep love for the Union and condemned John Brown’s action. The Columbus (Ga.) Enquirer applauded the holding of a “Union Meeting” in Philadelphia, held to “reaffirm allegiance to the Union and the Constitution and to condemn all fanaticism. Elizabeth Grimball Munro wrote to her brother that “there was a tremendous Union meeting in Boston, where Everett & Cushing stated Brown's intentions & execrated them, & spoke of the symmetry, the beauty of the Union.”

Not all southerners were convinced. A Carolinian living in New York, described the Union meetings as “humbugs,” tactical maneuvers by northerners to mollify their southern customers. “It will take something more than meetings to satisfy me.” The Carolinian predicted that the agitation of the slavery issue would continue until the agitators achieve their object or the

62 Channing, Crisis of Fear, 86.
63 Richmond Dispatch, December 7, 1859, p. 2, col. 1; Channing, Crisis of Fear, 89.
64 “Union Meeting in Philadelphia,” Columbus (Ga.) Enquirer, December 20, 1859, p. 1, col. 4.
65 Elizabeth Grimball Monro to her brother, John Grimball, December 28, 1859. John Grimball family Papers, 1804-1893 (bulk 1858-1885). Box 1, (0426) South Carolina Historical Society.
southern states left the Union. The *Fayetteville North Carolinian* cynically noted that the biggest Union meetings were in cities such as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. All were strongly tied to southern commerce, so reassuring southern customers was good business. These meetings were “not a proof that the North condemns Old John Brown and his crew.” Instead, the *North Carolinian* argued, “the disinterested sentiments of the North” were embodied in one thousand minor cities of the region. “Let them speak, and not only them, but the Republican Party in its primary meetings.” If northern sentiment “without qualification or hesitation” condemns the Harpers Ferry affair, then the South may consider the North to have spoken. The *Richmond Whig* rejoiced to see conservative men of the North bestirring themselves and holding Union meetings. “But what will be the effect?” the *Whig* asked. “Unless such demonstrations are followed by acts at the polls – followed by turning sectionalists out of state and federal offices and put conservative, national, right-minded men in, these demonstrations will have been in vain…. The abolition party at the North must be overthrown, and that quite speedily, or the Union cannot, and ought not to survive much longer. It is with the North to preserve the Union, if it is to be preserved – the South has done all it can, or should do, to that end.”

In the southerners’ attempt to assert connections between Brown and significant numbers of northerners, aid came in the form of correspondence to Governor Wise. Brown was convicted on October 31 of murder, treason, and inciting servile insurrection. Shortly after Brown’s conviction, Governor Wise started receiving petitions from northerners asking for clemency or

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68 Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood*, 326.
pardon for Brown.\textsuperscript{69} The editor of the \emph{Alexandria Gazette} wrote that from some of the most intelligent and respectable sources in the non-slaveholding states come letters “full of respect and courtesy, some of them evidently free from all sinister motive or influence, invoking the Governor to pardon Brown.”\textsuperscript{70} Most northerners who wrote to Wise favored John Brown’s pardon or at least the commutation of his sentence. Of about 500 letters, 70 percent came from northern states, and over half the total were from New York and New England. 55 percent ask Wise to pardon Brown, or commute his sentence, or award him a reprieve. Eight percent of the letters, mostly from the southern states, urged Wise to carry out the sentence.

Wise or his staff leaked the contents of these letters to local newspapers. When receipt of these requests for pardon was made public, many white southerners reacted with dismay. After the \emph{New York Journal of Commerce} suggested Wise pardon Brown, the \emph{Richmond Dispatch} expressed surprise at the “vain expectations of [Brown’s] pardon in the minds of those who sympathize with murderers and pirates, though not with their crimes.” Brown should be executed, the \emph{Dispatch} said, and “the only regret is that Seward and Giddings and his other confederates have not ventured their own necks within reach of the same halter.”\textsuperscript{71} Virginia secessionist Edmund Ruffin was appalled that northerners might suggest Wise pardon Brown “on the ground of policy – that is, that the northern people & opinion may not be more

\textsuperscript{69} These petitioners did not know the Virginia governor had no authority to pardon persons convicted of treason. See Craig Simpson, \emph{A Good Southerner: The Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia}, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 213.


\textsuperscript{71} “The Fate of Brown,” \emph{Richmond Daily Dispatch}, November 1, 1859, p. 2, col. 2.
exasperated but conciliated & soothed!” To Ruffin, the lesson learned from the disclosure of Wise’s correspondence was that “the great mass of the people of the North, even embracing many who have been deemed most our friends, are more or less enemies of the South, as well as of negro slavery, and do not entirely condemn the attempt to excite insurrection of the slaves.” The *Richmond Enquirer* decried the letters, saying they illustrated the “demoniac spirit which prevails among northern men – not all – God forbid, but those whose morbid appetites for blood have been whetted” by abolitionist preaching.

Some of the letters sounded especially ominous notes. The *Raleigh North Carolina Semi-Weekly Standard* declared that “the Governor of Virginia ... is in daily receipt of a large number of letters from abolitionists in various states, threatening his life, threatening an attempt to rescue old Brown and threatening the renewal of like attempts to those of Brown, if Governor Wise does not pardon the miscreant who has just been convicted of his crimes.” Fully one-third of the letters threatened Wise or Virginia with violence if Brown were executed, or warned of a

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72 Ruffin, *Diary*, 356.

73 Ruffin, *Diary*, 354. Ruffin was already a secessionist by this date and this probably colored his views of northern opinion. Many southerners who were not yet secessionists adopted more of a “wait and see” approach. If Republicans unambiguously repudiated violent antislavery action or, failing that, northern voters repudiated the Republicans in the 1860 presidential election, then secessionist sentiment might not have won the day in 1860-1861. The conduct of Republicans over the course of 1860 and the results of the November elections would be decisive.

74 “Demoniac Letters,” *Richmond Enquirer*, December 6, 1859, p1, col. 4. After quoting the resolutions passed at the Natick meeting in Senator Wilson’s presence, and quoting from a few of the more blood-thirsty letters, the *Enquirer* asked breathlessly, “Are these the men with whom we are living in union?”

conspiracy of armed men to rescue John Brown. The *Texas State Gazette* noted the threatening nature of the letters Wise was receiving. With a shrug, the *Gazette* concluded, “We have no comments to make. It is not our purpose to write philippics against northern fanaticism. We are heartily tired of it. We shall keep our people informed of passing events and it must be for them to sound the alarm should the contest demand it.”\(^7^6\) In the midst of what seemed an increasingly dangerous environment, there seemed a degree of resignation on the part of the editor, mingled with a watchful eye toward the next alarming event.

The most threatening letters were anonymous. One, mailed just after Brown’s capture, ominously warned Wise to “be careful what you [do] with ‘Ossawatomie Brown.’ So sure as you harm a hair on his head, … the following day, … you will see every city, town and village south of Mason and Dixon’s Line in flames.”\(^7^7\) A New Yorker cautioned Wise, “The knell of Old Brown shall be Sicilian Vespers—the tocsin of war without quarter!”\(^7^8\) Another wrote that if Brown was hanged, the South would experience “Revenge, revenge, revenge. Every southern city shall pay a penalty – already begun. The torch, the torch, the torch. Pause. Reflect. You only can stop it.” A Michigan writer using the *nom de plume* “Wolverine” advised that “just so sure as

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\(^7^6\) *Texas State Gazette*, November 26, 1859, p. 1, col. 8.


\(^7^8\) Anonymous to Henry A. Wise, November 23, 1859, Box 21, Folder 9, Governor Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession 36710, State Government Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.
Brown is hung [sic], … so sure will a body of men enter Richmond and destroy it root and branch. Hang Brown and the North will have revenge.”  

Wise received letters warning him of attempts to rescue Brown and his accomplices. One anonymous writer from Pittsburgh claimed that “about a hundred and fifty men” were going to seize the arsenal at Harpers Ferry and then proceed to the prison where Old Brown is.” The author warned that men were gathering in Cincinnati, Boston, Indiana, and New York.  

One letter received November 14 declared that “an insurrection is about to take place. … Over twelve hundred men are now drilling and preparing for action in western Pennsylvania. They are well provisioned and every man is sworn to die in the cause if necessary.” These men would attack in “four divisions,” the author wrote. “An outbreak of a very grave nature will soon take place in several of the slave states and the attack is to be made the same day or as near that is possible. … Treat this letter lightly, as did the Secretary of War, and the consequences will be far more disastrous for the people of the slave states.”  

Apologizing for writing anonymously, he added “I am on my way to Canada and shall mail this letter far from home in order that no suspicion …


81 Anonymous to Henry A. Wise, November 14, 1859, Box 21, Folder 7, Governor Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession 36710, State Government Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. Wise’s staff wrote on the back of the letter an assessment of the significance: “I place this among the letters worthy of attention. I do not think this is important, but it may be worthy of attention.”
will rest upon me … I no doubt would be assassinated should I be found out.”

Rumors spread through Virginia. Sally Taliaferro of Gloucester County, wife of Virginia planter and militia general William B. Taliaferro, heard them. On November 19, 1859, while her husband was at Harpers Ferry commanding the militia, she recorded in her diary news of another attack at Charlestown, possibly one of the rumored rescue attempts. Wise and his staff assessed some of these threats as not credible, probably written in the hope of frightening Wise out of executing Brown. Some, though, appeared to contain real threats. Perhaps all of these threats were bluffs, but given John Floyd’s decision not to act on the anonymous letter in August, Wise could not be sure.

Edmund Ruffin was pleased at the possibility of a rescue attempt. A secessionist himself for several years, Ruffin appreciated Harpers Ferry as an opportunity to convince his fellow white southerners of the wisdom of secession. In his diary, he wrote, “It is astonishing to me, & also very gratifying to me, that there should be so general an excitement & avowed sympathy among the people of the North … for the villains engaged therein. If there are not serious and even effective efforts to rescue the condemned criminals, it will be for want of courage, and not want of sympathy.” Later Ruffin wrote, “For my part, I wish that the abolitionists of the North may

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82 White southerners were not the only ones suffering from paranoia. One of John Brown’s former colleagues, James Redpath had threatened northern informers who reported on Brown’s activities. *Dayton Daily Empire*, October 29, 1859, p. 1, col. 5.

83 November 19, 1859, Sally Lyons Taliaferro Diary, Sally Lyons Taliaferro. Diary, 1859–1864. Accession 24311, Library of Virginia.

84 Wise and his staff wrote notes on the backs of the letters indicated how they assessed the seriousness of the threats. Anonymous to Henry A. Wise, November 26, 1859, Box 20, Folder 7, Governor Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession 36710, State Government Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

attempt to rescue. … If an attempt to rescue was made, accompanied by bloodshed, whether successful or not, it will be a certain cause of separation of the southern from the northern states.”\(^86\) In any case, Ruffin believed these reports of possible rescue attempts were part of the general abolitionist plan. The rumors were “probably fabricated by abolitionists, to cause uneasiness & expense, & with the further view of so causing future alarms to be discredited, and then to make a real attempt to rescue the convicts.”\(^87\) In Ruffin’s byzantine view, the rumors were fabrications, and yet, at the same time, true.

Because of the risk of a rescue attempt, Governor Wise took precautions.\(^88\) Wise wrote in great detail to Virginia prosecutor Andrew Hunter and militia general William Taliaferro about how to prepare for the day of Brown’s execution and warned of a possible rescue attempt.\(^89\) Wise wanted Virginians to be on the lookout on the day of Brown’s execution, because “those devils,” Brown’s rescuers, were “trained in all the predatory arts of Indian war.”\(^90\) Taliaferro was told to secure the hanging site and not let anyone near enough to hear any speech Brown might attempt.\(^91\) On November 28, 1859, Taliaferro strongly suggested local men stay home and secure

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\(^86\) Ibid., 362-363.

\(^87\) Ibid., 357.


\(^89\) Ibid.


their property. He further declared that strangers trying to get to Charlestown would be arrested.92

Virginia deployed a considerable military force of 1,000 infantry, cavalry, and artillery to prevent a rescue of Brown.93 Historians Craig Simpson, Oswald Villard, and Allan Keller have claimed that at least two real plots for Brown’s rescue did in fact exist.94 Biographer Stephen Oates added that Mary Partridge, Richard Hinton, and James Redpath all planned rescues of Brown.95 Thomas W. Higginson and Lysander Spooner wrote to John Brown, Jr., trying to assemble in Ohio a group of armed men willing try to rescue John Brown, Sr. by **coup de main**. The size of the Virginia force deployed made any rescue of Old Brown impossible.96 Lysander Spooner then proposed kidnapping Virginia Governor Henry Wise and offering to exchange him for Brown.97 The men volunteering were more motivated by money than antislavery zeal and funding could not be secured, and so the project had to be abandoned. The irony was that, while


94 Simpson, *A Good Southerner*, 212; Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown, 1800-1859: A Biography Fifty Years After*, (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1910), 484, 511-524; Stephen B. Oates, 335-336; Keller, *Thunder at Harpers Ferry*, 190, 226-233, wrote that “In at least two sections of the country [Kansas and Massachusetts], men rallied to the cause of attempting to free John Brown and his men.”. A group of German “Forty-eighters” wrote Higginson, John W. Le Barnes and Stearns that they would be willing to join in a rescue attempt, and they had heard John Brown, Jr. was mustering men in Ohio for one.

95 Oates, *To Purge This Land with Blood*, 317. Partridge was the sister of one of Brown’s deceased colleagues. Hinton and Redpath had fought alongside Brown in Kansas.


some northerners were mocking Governor Wise for deploying such a large force to Charlestown, the deployment actually deterred a real rescue attempt from taking place.98

After Brown’s execution occurred without incident, some northern communities mourned Brown’s death. In cities and towns, according to accounts in southern newspapers, local meetings expressed sympathy for Brown or for his family.99 At a gathering on October 30, 1859, Henry David Thoreau, an acquaintance of Brown’s, called the government of the United States “this most hypocritical and diabolical government. … It is more manifest than ever that tyranny rules. I see this government to be effectually allied with France and Austria in oppressing mankind.”100 In Boston, Ralph Waldo Emerson gave an address entitled “Courage” in which he called Brown “the new saint awaiting his martyrdom, who … will make the gallows more glorious than the cross.”101 Echoing John Brown’s words from 1858, Emerson cited the Golden Rule and the Declaration of Independence. “Better that a whole generation of men, women and children should pass away by a violent death than that one word of these two should be violated in this country.” Emerson concluded by addressing the possibility of friends of Brown being summoned by Virginia courts, and suggested that “habeas corpus may be a nuisance” and that the citizens resist by force any summons.102


101 Renehan, 216.

Friends of Brown held a fund-raising meeting at the Tremont Temple of Boston, Massachusetts, for the benefit of Brown’s family. John Andrew, who had helped fund Brown’s legal defense team and would soon be the Republican party’s nominee for governor, told the crowd that John Brown had “fallen for an idea. Whether his course was wrong or not, Brown himself was right.” Rev. Edwin D. Wheelock of Dover, New Hampshire, declared that “to be hanged in Virginia is like being crucified in Jerusalem—it is the last tribute which [Virginia] pays to Virtue!” At a meeting in Natick, Massachusetts, resolutions were adopted declaring “it is the right and duty of the slaves to resist their masters, and the right and duty of the North to incite them to resistance and to aid them in it.” Events such as the Natick meeting were reported in newspapers across the South within days.

In the mid-Atlantic states, expressions of sympathy occurred in several places. In Albany, New York, one hundred guns were fired in Brown’s honor. On November 1, 1859, abolitionist


105 Carpenter, Logic of History, (Madison: S. D. Carpenter, 1864), 65. Carpenter was a highly partisan Democratic editor of a Wisconsin newspaper. His book The Logic of History is a carefully-selected compilation of article clippings intended to bolster the Democratic party and embarrass the Republican party.


Wendell Phillips told a Brooklyn crowd “the lesson of the hour is insurrection,” and received sensational applause.\textsuperscript{109} Phillips claimed that John Brown had “twice as much right to hang Governor Wise as Governor Wise has to hang him.”\textsuperscript{110} Rev. Sella J. Martin gave an address, “Nat Turner, the Virginia Hero,” in the Shiloh Presbyterian Church in New York. During his lecture, he declared that “if I saw a chance of success, I would do what John Brown has done.” His statement was received with “tremendous applause.” This reaction prompted one Georgia editor to wonder whether it was time for the South “to take measures for her own protection.”\textsuperscript{111}

Similar events took place in the Midwest. At an “indignation meeting” in Milwaukee, local Republican leader Edward D. Holton and others, expressed sympathy for Brown and his cause. The meeting adopted resolutions that stated, in part, “John Brown… but obeyed the divine command, ‘remember those that are in bonds as bound with them,’ [and] acted in the faith of the Declaration [of Independence] that all men are endowed by their Creator with an inalienable right to liberty, and … the glorious motto, ‘give me liberty or give me death.’” The meeting adopted resolutions declaring that “Brown is the John the Baptist of the new dispensation of freedom.”\textsuperscript{112} Editors of Republican newspapers commemorated Brown’s courage, and some praised his actions. An editorial in Milwaukee, the day before the execution, declared that John Brown’s words “will be heard, read and remembered by millions of freemen, whose hatred of oppression, injustice and tyranny, in every form, will be intensified by the events of this black

\textsuperscript{109} November 1, 1859, Henry Ward Beecher’s church in Brooklyn. George Lowell Austin, \textit{The Life and Times of Wendell Phillips}, (Boston: Lea and Shepard, 1893), 186.

\textsuperscript{110} Wendell Phillips, \textit{Speeches Lectures and Letters}, (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1872), 272.

\textsuperscript{111} “When Treason and Insurrection Are Applauded at the North, Is It Not Time for the South to Take Measures for Her Own Protection?” \textit{Savannah (Ga.) Daily Morning News}, November 8, 1859, p. 1, col. 2.

\textsuperscript{112} Carpenter, \textit{The Logic of History}, 67. Emphasis in the original.
Friday.”\textsuperscript{113} The \textit{Lacrosse (Wisc.) Republican} declared that “Virginia will commit a crime in the murder of John Brown today.”\textsuperscript{114} In Cleveland Ohio, 1500 people met to mourn Brown’s passing.\textsuperscript{115} A similar gathering in Rockford, Illinois, extolled John Brown’s “integrity, truthfulness, courage, fidelity and fortitude, [that] stand as conspicuous examples for the veneration of all who love freedom and applaud true courage.”\textsuperscript{116}

Southern newspaper editors wishing to strengthen the Democratic party or lay the groundwork for secession (or both), dutifully reported these proceedings in detail. One Georgia editor asked, “when treason and insurrection are applauded at the North, is it not time for the South to take measures for her own protection?” The editor believed it was. If a Republican won the presidency, the southern states should refuse to send Representatives and Senators to Congress, call a convention of states, declare themselves independent, organize an army and make a treaty with England.\textsuperscript{117}

Northern opinion on John Brown and Harpers Ferry was by no means monolithic, though outraged southerners often ignored the diversity of northern reactions. In Natick, Massachusetts,

\textsuperscript{113} \textit{Daily Milwaukee News}, December 2, 1859, p. 1, col. 1, quoting the \textit{Milwaukee Sentinel} of December 1, 1859.

\textsuperscript{114} Carpenter, \textit{Logic of History}, 65.


\textsuperscript{116} Carpenter, \textit{Logic of History}, 66-67.

\textsuperscript{117} “When Treason and Insurrection Are Applauded at the North, Is It Not Time for the South to Take Measures for Her Own Protection?” \textit{Savannah (Ga.) Daily Morning News}, November 8, 1859, p. 1, col. 2; See also \textit{Savannah (Ga.) Daily Morning News}, November 28, 1859, p. 1, col. 4-5; \textit{Savannah (Ga.) Daily Morning News}, December 1, 1859, p. 1, col. 1; \textit{Richmond Dispatch}, December 3, 1859, p. 1, co. 3; \textit{Jacksonville (Ala.) Republican}, December 15, 1859, p. 2, col. 1;
and Princeton, New Jersey, on the day of Brown’s death, crowds burned him in effigy.\textsuperscript{118} The *Providence (R.I.) Journal*, a Republican paper, questioned whether John Brown should be made “a saint, as well as a hero.” The effect of such speeches as those at the Brown memorial services, was “to make other people follow his example, engage in the same crazy schemes and rush upon the same horrible fate.” The *Journal* complained that “the orators will not follow Brown’s lead themselves, but “weaker men, seduced by their burning words, will rush upon the danger to which they only point the way.”\textsuperscript{119} On December 7, conservative Pennsylvanians held a large Union meeting that adopted resolutions approving the Fugitive Slave Law, condemning attempts to excite servile insurrection and endorsing the conduct of Governor Wise and Pennsylvania Governor William Packer.\textsuperscript{120}

In the slave states, white southerners observed this debate over the legacy and meaning of John Brown with a mixture of hope and disgust. From Virginia to Texas, attention appeared riveted on the raid and its significance. On November 20, 1859, 1,400 miles away from Harpers Ferry, in Bell County, Texas, Henrietta Embree spent the day talking with family about “the Harpers Ferry tragedy.”\textsuperscript{121} For Embree, wife of a slave owning doctor on the Texas frontier, Harpers Ferry hinted at dangers closer than Virginia. Would her husband’s slaves hear of this and themselves rebel? J. J. Milsaps, in Starkville, Mississippi, informed his friend Absalom Dantzler that the cold weather and the “Harpers Ferry affair are about the only topics of


\textsuperscript{119} Quoted in “Good Sense,” *New Orleans Picayune*, December 1, 1859, p. 6, col. 1.

\textsuperscript{120} “Union Meeting at Philadelphia,” *Columbus (Ga.) Enquirer*, December 20, 1859, p. 1, col. 4.

\textsuperscript{121} Henrietta Embree Diary, entry for November 20, 1859, Henrietta B. Embree Diary 1856-1861, Briscoe Center for American History University of Texas.
discussion.”122 William McCue, in the mountains of central Virginia’s Botetourt County, on Christmas Day 1859, described for his brother the “disturbed state of the public mind.”123 For two months after Harpers Ferry, the raid still garnered attention and for these white southerners, it was not just some distant event. It easily could have happened in other communities.

Southern moderates took what comfort they could from northern Union-saving efforts such as the meetings in New York and Philadelphia. The Richmond Enquirer noted with satisfaction the large December gathering in Philadelphia, estimating the number of attendees at 50,000 “tried and true men.” The Enquirer’s correspondent noted with satisfaction that “every allusion to Gov. Wise and the Old Dominion was received with terrific applause.”124

For men of a conservative outlook, the excitement caused by the raid died down more quickly. Midshipman DeHaven Manley of Chester, Pennsylvania, wrote from the Naval Academy, that “[t]he Harpers Ferry excitement is pretty much cooled down now I believe.”125 North Carolinian Thomas Clayton asked his brother Ed at West Point whether the cadets had been called out to settle “the difficulty at Harpers Ferry,” and sarcastically suggested that “the Abolitionists will seize upon [the family farm called] Cold Living next or the great government stronghold West Point.”126 John B. Minor, a University of Virginia student, wrote to his friend

122 J. J. Millsaps to Absalom F. Dantzler December 22, 1859, Absalom F. Dantzler Papers, 1840-1878, Duke University Library.

123 William McCue to James McCue, December 25, 1859, McCue Family Papers, Accession #4406, Special Collections, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Va.


125 H. DeHaven Manley to John B. Hinckson October 30, 1859, John B. Hinckson Papers, #19794117, Folder 1859, Rubenstein Library, Duke University Library.

126 Thomas Clayton to brother Ed, dated October 23, 1859. Folder 1, Clayton Family Papers #4792, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
William Blackford of “the comparatively trivial disturbances in Jefferson County” and condemned Governor Wise for authorizing Virginia militia general Taliaferro to declare martial law.\footnote{127} William M. Blackford of Fredericksburg, Virginia, urged his sons to be patient in responding to Harpers Ferry, since the Republicans in Congress may not truly represent the sentiments of the northern people.\footnote{128} Among conservatives, there was a persistent belief that extremists in both sections were driving the agenda. If the people had a chance to express their natural conservatism, moderation would win out. After Brown’s execution, John Minor of Fredericksburg, wondered whether the Harpers Ferry excitement was a “\textit{feu de paille}” [flash in the pan] or not.\footnote{129}

Southern conservatives looked for signs of a sober response among the northern people. Francis Pickens wrote to South Carolina’s staunchest Unionist, B. F. Perry, that he hoped to “see conservative men of the North do their duty promptly, it may be the means of confirming the confidence of the South in their integrity and ability.” Pickens’ hoped that “northern border states would not again be used as ‘nurseries’ for abolitionist plots.”\footnote{130} Southern conservatives, while encouraged by promising reports from the northern states, remained cautious.

Many southern conservatives hoped northern voters would reject the Republican party and were pleased to see signs of activity on the part of northern Democrats. The \textit{Abbeville (S.C.)}

\footnote{127} John B. Minor to William Blackford, Blackford Family Papers, 1742-1953, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

\footnote{128} Wm. Blackford to his sons Lanty and Eugene, December 16, 1859, in the Blackford Family Papers #1912, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

\footnote{129} J. Minor to L. M. & E. Blackford, December 10, 1859, in the Blackford Family Papers #1912, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

\footnote{130} Channing, \textit{Crisis of Fear}, 86-87.
Banner praised New York Democrats’ attempts to “hold the Black Republicans to just accountability” for Harpers Ferry. The paper commended “the equally prompt and emphatic … denunciations both of the deed and its instigators” and the Banner quoted resolutions passed at a Tammany Hall meeting declaring that the principles of the Republican party, if adopted by the majority of northern voters, would “jeopardize the perpetuity of the Union.”131 Southern conservative Democrats alleged that northern Republicans tolerated antislavery violence, even if they did not support it. Republicans were making it necessary for southerners to leave the Union.132 Thus, in a surprising logical somersault, the Republicans became the disunionists. Only by turning away from the Republican Party could northern voters demonstrate to white southerners their commitment to the Union by making it one in which southerners could remain with safety.

Southern conservatives who had placed their hopes in a resurgence of northern good sense were disappointed with the results of the autumn 1859 elections. The Republicans scored sweeping victories in Iowa, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania.133 In New York, the despised Seward was returned to office.134 On the other hand, not all white southerners saw this as a problem. As historian William A. Link points out, there were some Virginians inclined to assume the best of their northern countrymen, regardless of Republican electoral victories. John Minor Botts, a


133 Allan Nevins, *The Emergence of Lincoln: Prologue to Civil War 1859-1861*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1950), 64.

134 Channing, *Crisis of Fear*, 91.
Virginia Unionist, “doubted whether most Republicans had supported John Brown.”¹³⁵ Such Unionists would find it increasingly difficult to convince their neighbors of this over the next year. Many southern Democrats and secessionists, however, knew exactly how to interpret these Republican electoral victories. Southern Democrats, like their northern counterparts, attempted to link Harpers Ferry with Republican principles. The Charleston Mercury claimed to have a true understanding of “The Ends of Black Republicanism.”

William H. Seward is the undoubted head of that party which now has possession of the northern states. He … constitutes the ruling spirit of that organization. His views, are their views. … As they advance in power, the practice of these will inevitably follow. On the occasion of the recent insurrection in Virginia, we invite attention to [Seward’s] Rochester speech of last spring. It should be understood at the South as exposing the ends sought by Black Republicanism. It indicates the future of trouble we may expect under its auspices.¹³⁶

Rhett believed, and was trying to convince his fellow white southerners, that they were in for continued trouble should Republicans take control of the federal government.

Southern secessionists dismissed northern Union meetings as “humbugs.”¹³⁷ Even Unionists such as South Carolina Congressman John Ashmore noted ominously that the meetings were attended only by Democrats and Whigs, and mostly ignored by the Republicans.¹³⁸ One Georgia editor worried that northern conservatives asking Wise to pardon Brown “proves that the abolition sentiment at the North is overpowering, paralyzing the conservative portion of the northern people, and making tremendous cowards of them all.”¹³⁹ Robert Barnwell Rhett

¹³⁵ Link, The Roots of Secession, 194.
¹³⁷ Channing, Crisis of Fear, 89.
¹³⁸ Channing, Crisis of Fear, 90.
¹³⁹ “The Clamor for Old Brown’s Pardon,” Columbus (Ga.) Enquirer, November 22, 1859, p. 1, col. 5.
concluded that “there were conservatives at the North, but that they constituted a distinct minority. They were men, Rhett wrote, “who were powerless to arrest the growing fanaticism and aggressive predominance of the North.” Men, Rhett acidly concluded, were “worth nothing without power.”\footnote{Channing, Crisis of Fear, 92.}

Southern newspaper editors attempted to make sense of all this. Reporting that northern communities had held meetings to memorialize John Brown, or to raise funds for Brown’s family, the \textit{Edgefield (S.C.) Advertiser} noted that “sympathy for Old Brown and his family was strong” in Syracuse.\footnote{“The North and Old Brown,” \textit{Edgefield (S.C.) Advertiser}, December 14, p. 1, col. 7.} The \textit{Raleigh (N.C.) Democratic Press} reported that Boston sympathizers had held a meeting on November 19, 1859, to raise money for the benefit of John Brown’s family. “It is not enough that innocent blood has been shed upon southern soil. …But right upon the top of this outbreak, the Black Republican papers teem with sympathy for John Brown and his associates.” Proceedings like these Brown meetings made the \textit{Democratic Press} despair for the future of the Union. “When will the fanaticism cease? … What are the hopes for our country, when such meetings as these are countenanced” and meet with “the approbation of the gentler sex?”\footnote{“Meeting for the Aid of Brown’s Family,” \textit{Raleigh (N.C.) Democratic Press}, November 26, 1859, p. 3, col. 2.} Southerners like the \textit{Democratic Press} editor implied that if Republican papers had unreservedly condemned Brown, and Republican officeholders had objected at public meeting when Brown was praised, they might have been less worried about a future under a Republican administration.

The transformation that such revelations wrought on white southern attitudes toward the Union were profound. The correspondent of the \textit{Richmond Dispatch} in Charlestown (where
Brown was executed) declared: “It is astonishing to see what a complete change has been produced in the feelings of all classes of people with regard to the Union. It seems no longer to have any friends in this part of the country. … The defection seems to me to be universal.” While deplooding widespread disunion sentiment, the correspondent still claimed that “all seem agreed that we cannot live under the same government with people who are so hostile to us—who either say nothing at all about the atrocious outrages which we have suffered, or never mention them but to turn them into ridicule.”

Historian Elizabeth Varon correctly noted that the raid and supposed northern approval of it caused a sea change in white southern opinion. “To the delight of fire-eaters, many moderate southern politicians and editors flocked to the secession standard … The raid profoundly shook the faith of white southerners that the North could be trusted.” William Freehling pointed out that “some very prominent Northerners’ enthusiasm for John Brown stretched southerners’ fury. What kind of monsters share our Union, … who thank their Lord for a wild individualist who would demolish our social order and savage us all, helpless women and children included?”

According to historian Paul Quigley, the widespread sympathy the raid attracted in the North galvanized white southerners, persuading them that northern aggressions had reached a crisis point. Quigley cited Virginia politician John C. Rutherfoord, who found “the most alarming aspect of this most alarming event … was the broad northern support it seemed to have enjoyed.”

143 “Affairs at Charlestown,” Richmond Dispatch, December 3, 1859, p. 1, col. 3.

144 Varon, Disunion, 329.

145 Freehling, Road to Disunion, 2:203.

Southern communities reacted to the news of Harpers Ferry by holding meetings of their own. Some simply expressed outrage at the events of Harpers Ferry. ¹⁴⁷ Citizens of Staunton, Virginia, held a town meeting in late November attended by local community leaders, the mayor, the commonwealth’s attorney, and the editors of both newspapers. ¹⁴⁸ Once assembled, the meeting selected a committee to draft resolutions, which were promptly reported. The preamble blamed Harpers Ferry on the teachings of William Seward. The resolutions thanked the governor for his conduct during the Harpers Ferry affair, declared the town’s readiness to defend Virginia, called for the formation of volunteer companies, and solicited $500 to pay for arming and equipping the volunteer companies. ¹⁴⁹ Such meetings recorded the sense of the community and conveyed it to legislators.

In Albemarle County, Virginia, Professor James P. Holcombe addressed a public gathering on the effect of Harpers Ferry. Holcombe noted that the entire south was “bristling with military array and preparation.” ¹⁵⁰ Holcombe found these Union meetings in the North unconvincing. “No demonstrations can satisfy the just demands of public sentiment at the South, so long as a sectional party, whose very bond of organization is a principle of hostility to our institutions,


¹⁴⁸ The mayor, N. K. Trout was elected to chair the meeting. William H, Harman the Commonwealth’s Attorney and general in the militia was on the committee of resolutions, along with John D. Imboden, commander of the town’s artillery battery and soon to be a general in the Confederate army. To avoid the appearance of partisanship, the editors of both the Whig/Opposition paper and the Democratic paper were both named as secretaries.


receive the sympathy and support of great masses of their people.”

The problem was clear: “The Black Republican party cannot attain any of its ends… without feeding the fires of fanaticism with the aliment of perpetual agitation.”

“Between the North and the South there is no real antagonism,” Holcombe assured his audience, “but the Black Republican organization proceeds upon the assumption of one.”

Summing up what was needed to solve the problem, Holcombe demanded “peace,” probably a cessation of the agitation and no more Harpers Ferry raids or “separation” from the North (i.e. secession). Resistance within the Union, for example, through commercial non-intercourse, was acceptable, but only as long there was any likelihood of thus producing the desired result. Holcombe doubted that such a halfway measure would be effective. “To withdraw from the Union peacefully … appears to me … to be at once the path of honor and the path of safety.”

Other white southerners, not yet ready to give up on the Union, placed their hopes in the efficacy of boycotting northern businesses. Citizens of Botetourt County Virginia suggested that southerners “encourage home manufactures and adopt a system of non-intercourse with our enemies.” The Arkansas State Gazette (quoting the Richmond Whig), wondered what would happen if southern customers stopped buying northern manufactures. “This is the string upon

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151 Holcombe, *Election of a Republican President*, 3.

152 Ibid., 4.


which we must play to bring the North to its senses." The South should impose a license tax on northern made goods, to encourage direct trade with Europe, bypassing northern middlemen. This will “keep our money at home. This will avert the crisis.”\(^\text{157}\) 

To continue patronizing northern businesses, southerners were, indirectly at least, aiding abolitionists. A portion of the profits of northern manufacturers and merchants earned in the South were turned around and donated to the abolitionist cause. Cutting off trade and switching to southern-made or imported merchandise would deprive northerners of that income and might cause some northern businessmen to rethink their stance on slavery.\(^\text{158}\)

Virginia was the target of the Harpers Ferry raid, but the raid reverberated in states farther south. Historian Clarence Mohr’s *On the Threshold of Freedom* examined local reactions in Georgia. Georgians initially rejoiced that none of the slaves in the Harpers Ferry area had voluntarily joined the insurrection. As they reconsidered, however, they realized the insecurity of their situation. White Georgians seemed to have implicitly agreed with Republicans that they were living on a volcano and they took steps to ensure their security. They adopted local ordinances to monitor the conduct and speech of northern visitors such as the ubiquitous Yankee peddler. They set up vigilance committees. They undertook local measures to enhance control of free African-Americans, and petitioned the legislature to take action, all of which was covered by newspapers.\(^\text{159}\)

\(^{157}\) “If the Storm Comes – What To Do?” *Arkansas State Gazette*, December 10, 1859, p. 4, col. 1.

\(^{158}\) Non-intercourse, or fostering direct trade with Europe, is related, but not exactly the same as regulating northern itinerant merchants in the South.

Many communities established or revitalized their vigilance committees, sometimes to augment, sometimes to replace slave patrols. Local leaders wary of slave uprisings worried about outsiders “tampering” with slaves. The *Charleston Mercury* urged the necessity for “guarding and protecting of the peace and safety of their homes, and more especially for the purpose of marking all suspicious persons, so as to make a speedy and proper disposal of them.”\textsuperscript{160} The *Savannah Daily News* pressed local vigilance committees to push for “additional laws for our protection against abolition emissaries.”\textsuperscript{161} A meeting in Orangeburg, South Carolina, organized a district vigilance association and advised the South Carolina legislature to adopt additional laws for protection against abolitionists.\textsuperscript{162} Citizens of Fort Valley, Georgia, favored “measures defensive and protective” against the “cunnery [sic] and deception of abolition emissaries.”\textsuperscript{163} In Camden, South Carolina, citizens urged town leaders to watch out for “stragglers from the North [who] continue to visit and tarry in our town as agents for books, medicines, &c., whose real object may be to act as spies and abolition emissaries.”\textsuperscript{164} These local meetings renewed white men’s involvement in the security of the community. They also helped establish agendas for the state legislatures scheduled to meet that winter.

The manner in which vigilance committees actually operated had a certain leveling and unifying function, in that men of different stations participated. White men of all classes could

\textsuperscript{160} *Charleston Mercury*, November 23, 1859, p. 1, col. 6.

\textsuperscript{161} *Savannah Daily News*, November 26, 1859, p. 2, col. 2.

\textsuperscript{162} *Savannah Daily News*, November 26, 1859, p. 2, col. 2.

\textsuperscript{163} *Savannah Daily News*, December 5, 1859, p. 1, col. 1.

play a role. Non-slaveholding whites had for decades been the backbone of slave patrols.\textsuperscript{165} And the same was likely true of vigilance committees.\textsuperscript{166} Certainly some Virginia slaveholders were worried about the loyalty of Virginia’s nonslaveholders.\textsuperscript{167} Participation in vigilance committees was one way to ensure non-slaveholding whites stayed loyal to the slavery system. The committees helped non-slaveholding whites and slaveholders focus on a common outside enemy.

Vigilance committees frequently operated without regard to due process. In Kingstree, South Carolina, “[t]wo straggling printers from the North” were observed in nighttime discussions with African-Americans and were “ridden out of town on a rail” the next morning.\textsuperscript{168} The vigilance committee near Columbia, Louisiana, apprehended two northerners and one North Carolinian, demanding they leave the state.\textsuperscript{169} Southern whites even occasionally pressed African-Americans into service. In Helena, Arkansas, John Burnside of New York, allegedly drank a little too much and spoke too freely, saying, “negro[e]s should be free.” The local vigilance committee apprehended Burnside and, if the newspaper account is to be believed, had a number of African-American men rode Burnside out of town on a rail, take him to the wharf-boat, and ship him north.\textsuperscript{170}


\textsuperscript{166} Clement Eaton, “Mob Violence in the Old South,” \textit{The Mississippi Valley Historical Review}, Vol. 29, no. 3 (December 1942), 354.

\textsuperscript{167} Link, \textit{The Roots of Secession}, 182.


\textsuperscript{169} \textit{Opelousas (La.) Courier}, December 31, 1859, p. 2, col. 3.

\textsuperscript{170} \textit{Charleston Mercury}, November 18, 1859, p. 3, col. 5.
Vigilance committees, unlike the patrols, were not regulated by law and thus more prone to abuse hapless individuals. In Grahamsville, South Carolina, a man named James W. Rivers, “supposed to be an abolitionist,” was tarred and feathered and the right side of his head shaved.¹⁷¹ In Lowndesboro, Alabama, Dr. Mulroe of South Carolina was arrested on suspicion of being a Yankee, which was apparently sufficient cause for a stranger’s apprehension. While the vigilance committee was investigating Mulroe’s background, a local acquaintance came to identify Mulroe and assured the committee that he was neither an abolitionist nor a Yankee, but was in fact from South Carolina.¹⁷² Even the Charleston Mercury warned against vigilance committees acting too hastily against suspicious strangers and recommended that older, presumably soberer members of the community supervise their activities. The Mercury also suggested that the younger men perform the difficult (and possibly dangerous) work of apprehending suspicious persons. Then a Committee of Safety, composed of older men with more experience and supposedly sounder judgment, could examine the strangers.¹⁷³

The Harpers Ferry raid also led southern communities to reexamine their militia systems. They found much room for improvement in organization, manpower, and readiness. The militia across much of the South had been moribund or had become little more than a social club.¹⁷⁴ The Columbus (Georgia) Enquirer tartly observed, “Our militia drills – they are seldom witnessed

¹⁷¹ Charleston Mercury, December 17, 1859, p. 2, col. 2.

¹⁷² Charleston Mercury, January 4, 1860, p. 4, col. 3-4.


¹⁷⁴ See for example, the references to the militia system in Augusta County, Virginia, before Harpers Ferry. The local militia companies would meet for picnics, participate in parades, but seldom actually drill on military matters. Staunton Vindicator, July 8, 1859, p. 2, col. 2, and July 15, 1859, p. 2, col. 4. The only militia muster in the year prior to Harpers Ferry had been three days in April 1859 and that was only for officers, Staunton Vindicator, April 2, 1859, p. 2, col. 3.
now – are standing subjects of ridicule.” \footnote{175} The Camden (S.C.) Weekly Journal dismissed the local militia as “among the veriest humbugs of the day.” \footnote{176}

The militia in reality fell short of its theoretical ideals. All white men between eighteen and forty-five were in theory subject to duty, but the militia was rarely called into actual service. Penalties, sometimes, heavy ones, existed for failing to attend militia drills. \footnote{177} Volunteer companies, composed of younger and more motivated men, augmented the regular militia. \footnote{178} In theory, volunteer companies would drill more often, have better equipment, and operate at a higher state of readiness. The militia in most southern states, however, remained a less than reliable force.

At Harpers Ferry, while some units had responded within a day, militia discipline had proven lax. Many men had gotten drunk. Militia troops had lacked élan. When Colonel Robert E. Lee had asked the Virginia militia commander if he would like the honor of storming John Brown’s fort, the militia commander deferred. “These men of mine have wives and children at home,” he had responded. “You are paid for this kind of work.” \footnote{179}

In the wake of Harpers Ferry, however, white southerners sought improved security from their militias. Typically, citizens would gather, frequently at the county court house, discuss the

\footnote{175} “Our State Military System,” Columbus (Ga.) Enquirer, November 22, 1859, p. 1, col. 3; John Hope Franklin, The Militant South, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970), 180-181. This book provides some comical anecdotes about how ineffective and bumbling the antebellum southern militia was.


\footnote{179} Keller, Thunder at Harper’s Ferry, 147.
need for greater security, resolve to form a new volunteer company, and solicit men of military age to join. Young men would sign up for service in the company, elect officers, select a name for their outfit, and petition the state government for arms. In rapid succession, three new militia units formed in Lynchburg, Virginia alone. \(^{180}\) Charles Blackford noted the “military spirit prevailing here.” \(^{181}\) The people of Augusta County, Virginia, assembled at the Court House on November 26, 1859, to encourage the enlistment of volunteer companies and to raise money for their support. \(^{182}\) In Richmond, new volunteer units sprang up in rapid succession: The Home Guard, Company G, The Chesterfield Troop, and The Grenadiers. \(^{183}\) In late November 1859, the Chappel Hill, Texas community met and adopted resolutions, including one calling for the arming of volunteer companies, “to protect us against the fanatics.” \(^{184}\) By creating these volunteer companies, local communities would not have to rely on federal troops or state militia.

In the autumn of 1859, several southern governors echoed their constituents’ demands for greater security. On December 5, Virginia Governor Henry Wise warned that the federal government was virtually powerless to protect Virginia. \(^{185}\) “The federal government” Wise


\(^{181}\) Charles Blackford to his brother, November 25, 1859 in the Blackford Family Papers #1912, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.


\(^{185}\) *Doc. No. I. Governor's Message and Reports of the Public Officers of the State, of the Boards of Directors, and of the Visitors, Superintendents, and other Agents of Public Institutions*
claimed, “has the power and [the] duty to protect” slaveholders in Kansas, for example. Yet, here, “it is not allowed to intervene” due to Republican prohibition on protection in the territories and northern Democrats preference for non-intervention. As for the armed invasion of a state by the people of another state, President Buchanan viewed Federal powers very narrowly, which meant that, in the absence of actual invasion of one state by another, the president could exercise limited authority. For the federal government to act preventively, Wise said, would be a “usurpation of [the States’] rights” and “a palpable invasion of state sovereignty.”

In Wise’s view, Virginia had to prepare to act in her own self-defense. The legislature needed to appropriate money for expenses already incurred and to create what Wise called an “active militia,” composed of young men volunteers, equipped for quick mobilization and rapid action. Biographer Craig Simpson observed that Wise had doubted the loyalty of people living around Harpers Ferry. Some were of northern origin and they had seemingly not been vigorous enough in defending the town. An “active militia” force might prove more reliable.

Across the Deep South, governors made similar recommendations. South Carolina Governor W. H. Gist believed the military system of the state required re-invigoration. On inspecting the militia system, Gist had “found a great disinclination to do militia duty, and in some instances whole companies refused to muster.” Yet in November 1859, other than to mention the

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186 Ibid., 7.

187 Ibid., 23.

188 Ibid., 27.

continued funding of the Military Academy, Gist made no legislative recommendations. He
merely suggested that “something must be done soon, or a general disorganization will take
place.”\(^{190}\) Gist did draw some rather hyperbolic conclusions from events at Harpers Ferry:

A small party at the North, numbering at first only a few fanatics, has assumed gigantic
proportions; and with very few exceptions, the entire Northern people are arrayed against
us, and pledged to our destruction. … they have actually crossed the Rubicon—attempted
to instigate our slaves to insurrection, and furnished them with arms to murder us on
southern soil. Harpers Ferry is the truthful illustration of the first act in the drama to be
performed on a southern theatre, and if the South does not now unite for her defense, we
will deserve the execration of posterity, and the blood that has been shed will bear a
disgraceful and humiliating record against us. The intention of the North is as clearly
evined by the action of the few, and more especially when that action is ratified and
approved by the press and people of the non-slaveholding states, as if they had sent forth
their multitudes in the reasonable and incendiary attack upon the South.\(^{191}\)

Gist concluded with a stark vision for the future: “The election of a Black Republican President
will settle the question of our safety in the Union.”\(^{192}\) In a trend that would continue over the
next year, pro-slavery spokesmen would emphasize public safety as a way to appeal not only to
the slaveowners with a financial stake in the institution but to their non-slave-owning neighbors.

For the coming Georgia legislative session, on November 2, 1859, Governor Joseph Brown
proposed reforming the militia system.\(^{193}\) Georgia had a military school, the Georgia Military
Institute at Marietta, to train officers for its militia. Unfortunately, Brown explained, the Institute

\(^{190}\) South Carolina. General Assembly, *Journal of the Senate of the State of South Carolina,
Being the Annual Session of 1859*, (Columbia, R. W. Gibbes, 1860), 14, 18.

\(^{191}\) Gist in South Carolina, *Journal of the Senate*, 21.

\(^{192}\) Gist in South Carolina, *Journal of the Senate*, 23.

\(^{193}\) “Governor’s Message,” *Savannah (Ga.) Daily Morning News*, November 4, 1859, p. 1,
col. 1-7 and p. 4, col. 1-3, also reprinted in Joseph E. Brown, *Annual Message of Governor
Joseph E. Brown Message to the Georgia Legislature Assembled November 2nd, 1859*,
there had not prospered. The number of cadets had been “greatly diminished.” \(^{194}\) Brown noted that “our military system … is now almost entirely neglected.” Besides recommending a volunteer corps, he called for suspending the existing militia laws because they were not producing an effective militia. \(^{195}\) The governor noted the threat of more John Browns and more Harpers Ferries, “the more unnatural attacks of those who ought to be our brethren, but whose fanaticism is prompting them to a course which is daily weakening the ties that bind us together as one people.” \(^{196}\) Brown referred to the long ties of history and shared sacrifice that held the states together, but acts like the Harpers Ferry raid loosened those ties. On one hand, Georgians had reason to expect better from their northern countrymen. On the other hand, if current trends continued, Georgians might have to seek security outside the Union. Gov. Brown was entering his second term in office and had a reputation of being a political moderate, but his opinions on the Union were evolving in light of recent events. Before the close of the 1860, Brown would be a firm secessionist. \(^{197}\)

Brown urged the legislature to provide for a volunteer military corps. The first step would have to be securing arms. Each year the United States War Department would distribute a number of muskets to the states for militia use. The federal arms quota was Georgia’s only means for equipping volunteers and it was “wholly inadequate to the demand.” \(^{198}\) Brown recommended establishment of a state foundry to provide arms. Once equipped, the volunteers


\(^{197}\) Parks, *Joseph Brown of Georgia*, 105.

should be required to drill once a month in order to maintain proficiency. To fund this, Brown proposed a commutation tax. Such a tax should raise enough money to provide every volunteer with “the latest and most approved style of arms.” When all these measures had been adopted, Brown promised “[i]n the case of war, we could then bring into the field a large force of a well-trained volunteers, commanded by officers of thorough military education, who would, in almost every case, be natives of our soil.”

Coming just weeks after the Harpers Ferry raid, Brown’s speech emphasized questions of security. The editor of the *Athens (Ga.) Southern Banner* was “pleased to notice that Governor Brown is awake to the vast importance of encouraging our Volunteer Militia, and hope that the Legislature will not adjourn without ‘wiping out’ our present militia laws and commencing the work anew on the basis recommended by the Governor.”

Alabama inaugurated its governor on the day before John Brown’s execution. Governor Andrew B. Moore’s inaugural address meandered over a number of the issues, dwelling particularly on the issue of slavery in the territories. Noting “[t]he bloody tragedy at Harpers Ferry,” Moore observed that “the extent of this conspiracy shows that what the Abolitionists cannot effect through the malfeasance or nonfeasance of Congress, and the Territorial Legislatures, they intend to accomplish by conspiracy, violence and bloodshed.” Governor Moore advised the southern states to “stand firmly upon the Constitution,” but stopped short of making any specific recommendation on the militia. Alabamians had a tendency to be

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200 *Athens (Ga.) Southern Banner*, November 10, 1859, p. 2, col. 4. See chapter 2 for Georgia’s legislative changes.

tightfisted with the taxpayers’ money, even for increasing the security of a slave society, and any argument for increased militia spending might not be universally popular, especially in the northern portion of the state, where slaves and slaveholding were less common.202

Mississippi also held a legislative session that winter, and on November 8, 1859, Governor William McWillie warned that “[t]he dangers to the Union are not to be found at the South, but at the North. The position of the South is entirely defensive. The aggression and sectional agitation exists only in the non-slaveholding states.”203 In 1858, Mississippi had repealed a law requiring company, battalion and regimental musters. The result had been, according to Willie, “an entire disorganization of the militia.” He urged the legislature to re-enact the “law requiring company, battalion and regimental musters,” to adopt a law for arming the volunteer companies, and for establishing a paid position of Adjutant General to oversee the state militia program. The governor recommended providing arms for the militia, “particularly the volunteer companies.” McWillie reminded legislators of “the atrocious abolition outbreak at Harpers Ferry, … which might as readily have occurred in Mississippi as Virginia.”204 The way to prevent a recurrence or deal with one if it happened was to reinvigorate the military force of the state.

Harpers Ferry inspired an unprecedented degree of fear and paranoia among white southerners. The raid and northern reactions to it, according to Elizabeth Varon and David

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203 *Charleston Mercury*, November 22, 1859, p. 4, col. 2-5.

204 *Charleston Mercury*, November 22, 1859, p. 4, col. 2-5.
Potter, had precipitated a revolution in white southern attitudes towards disunion.\textsuperscript{205} White southerners were trying to decide whether continued membership in the Union was advisable, or even safe. Secessionists such as Robert Barnwell Rhett and William Lowndes Yancey had been preaching secession, unsuccessfully, as a remedy for decades.\textsuperscript{206} After Harpers Ferry, increasing numbers of white southerners were re-examining the issue and were coming to see withdrawal as a means of safety, not just for the institution of slavery, but also for the community at large.

Harpers Ferry had been different from earlier acts of antislavery violence. Ominous signs had foreshadowed this act of antislavery violence. There had been warnings that went unheeded because they seemed too outlandish. For example, United States Secretary of War John Floyd had ignored some very specific, albeit anonymous, information that a violent abolition enterprise was aimed at Virginia. After Harpers Ferry, white southerners were less likely to ignore future reports, even if they seemed outlandish.

Second, Harpers Ferry made white southerners more suspicious of outsiders. Before Harpers Ferry, one of Brown’s men had been living and working in the area for months. Once the raid was over, residents of the village discovered that this seemingly inoffensive stranger had actually been a conspirator. After Harpers Ferry, throughout the South white southerners took more notice of strangers, especially those from northern states. This brought about increased distrust and some paranoia.


\textsuperscript{206} Rhett had been urging secession since 1838, William C. Davis, \textit{Rhett: The Turbulent Life and Times of a Fire-eater}, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press), 112; Yancey had been advocating disunion since 1850 Eric H. Walther, \textit{William Lowndes Yancey and the Coming of the Civil War}, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 128-140.
Third and most importantly, white southerners began to equate Republican votes with endorsements of violent antislavery schemes. Fairly or not, white southerners and Democrats nation-wide came to see Republicans as tied to violent abolition activity. Democrats, North and South argued (albeit with little evidence) that Harpers Ferry was a result of Republican political ideology, especially as articulated by Seward. In the months that followed, southern secessionists started making the case that a Republican victory meant (and was intended to mean) an endorsement of offensive, violent antislavery action.

One Georgia editor viewed the political landscape and offered a terrifying assessment. “Every day Northern sentiment manifests itself more and more decidedly in favor of the surviving aggressors in that outrage [Harpers Ferry] and their revolutionary schemes. It is apparent that Brown’s attempt is but the inauguration of a bolder and better organized system of warfare by the northern abolitionists against the peace and property of the southern states.”

The future to him appeared dark indeed.

On the border between the northern and the southern states, the editor of the Cincinnati Enquirer offered a prescient thought on the day after John Brown’s execution. He quoted Sallust: “The generality of mankind dwell on that which happens last, and, in the case of malefactors, forget their guilt, and talk only of their punishment.” Casting his eyes around him, towards the North and the South, the editor perceived the growing divide between the sections after Harpers Ferry. Within the northern states, many people saw only the purity of

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207 Columbus (Ga.) Enquirer, December 6, 1859, p. 2, col. 1.


Brown’s motives and the harshness of his punishment. In the southern states, people tended to see only his crimes and ignored his cause. Southern state governments, over the next few months, would have their opportunities to assess what had happened and adopt responses.
CHAPTER 2: STATE REACTIONS TO ANTISLAVERY VIOLENCE

The Governors of Iowa and Ohio, by their refusal to surrender the marauders … willfully and deliberately violated the federal compact, disregarded the comity which should exist between sovereign states, and made themselves morally, if not legally, accessories to the offences committed by these criminals and fugitives from justice.¹

Harpers Ferry abruptly confronted white southerners with the stark reality that they were not as secure as they had imagined. Southern states faced three security problems over the winter of 1859-1860. The first was apprehending members of John Brown’s army who had escaped and bringing them to trial. The second was reforming the southern states’ security forces: the militia, slave patrols, and vigilance committees. The third security problem was managing potentially hostile populations of free blacks, as well as outsiders within the southern states.

Before the Harpers Ferry escapees could be brought to trial, they had to be apprehended and returned to Virginia. Seven of John Brown’s army escaped and made their way north: John Cook, Charles Tidd, Owen Brown, Francis Merriam, Barclay Coppoc were in one group, Albert Hazlett and Osbourne Anderson were in the other.² Virginia Governor Henry A. Wise offered a reward of $500 each for Coppoc, Merriam, Tidd, and Brown.³

The issue of fugitives from justice had long been a vexing one. As long as political entities have had boundaries, people have been escaping across them to evade prosecution. Moreover,

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² Oates, John Brown, 302; Keller, Thunder at Harpers Ferry, 196-199.
returning a fugitive is a sensitive matter for the surrendering state. It involves acknowledging the force of another state’s law.⁴

The law surrounding returning fugitives has a long history. Legal scholar Cherif Bassiouni has defined extradition as “a process by which a person is surrendered by one state to another based on a treaty, reciprocity, or comity, or on the basis of national legislation.” Extradition is the means by which states cooperate in the prevention, control, and suppression of domestic and international crime.⁵ Rendition, on the other hand, means giving this process a legal sanction within the surrendering state. “Rendition refers to the process of surrendering a person from one state to another or to an international tribunal, provided it is done in accordance with the legal and administrative requirements of the surrendering state.”⁶ Comity, or “the obligation of the laws of one nation within the territories of another,”⁷ means that the surrendering state recognizes the law of the requesting state when surrendering a fugitive.”⁸

The founders of the American republic incorporated earlier traditions when drafting the federal law on extradition.⁹ On February 12, 1793, Congress passed a statute to regulate the

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⁴ The refusal of countries to surrender fugitives from justice was a casus belli in the cases of Gavrilo Princip in 1914 and Osama bin Laden in 1991.


⁶ Bassiouni, International Extradition, 2.


⁹ Both the New England Articles of Confederation of 1643 and the United States’ Articles of Confederation of 1781 contained similar extradition provisions. The provision in the United States Articles of Confederation simply required that the governor of the state where the crime was committed to ask for the arrest and extradition of the accused. Samuel T. Spear, Law of Extradition, International and Inter-state, (Albany, NY: Weed, Parsons & Co., 1884), 284-288.
extradition of fugitives. That law stipulated that whenever a governor sends an authentic copy of an indictment or affidavit to the governor of another state to which a fugitive has escaped, it is the duty of that state’s governor to arrest the fugitive and notify the governor requesting the rendition. The Supreme Court in 1839 upheld the idea of comity between states. States of the Union, the court ruled, owed each other “a greater degree of comity or friendship” than foreign nations owed each other.

So matters stood until the Harpers Ferry raid. The two separate groups (Owen Brown, Cook, Tidd, Merriam and Coppoc in one, Hazlett and Anderson in the other) fled through Maryland and into Pennsylvania. Albert Hazlett and Osbourne Anderson continued north along the mountains to the vicinity of Carlisle, where they separated. Anderson found his way to Canada. Hazlett—under the assumed name William Harrison—went into Carlisle searching for food. On

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10 “An Act Respecting Fugitives from Justice and Persons Escaping from the Service of their Masters,” United States, *The Public Statutes at Large of the United States of America*, vol. 1, (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1845), 302-305. This was in response to a 1790 case, in which the Governor of Pennsylvania requested the Governor of Virginia to arrest and extradite an alleged slave-catcher for trial for the crime of kidnapping. Virginia Attorney General said that this was a breach of the peace, and not “treason or felony.” Spear, *Law of Extradition*, 293.

11 Richard Peters, ed., *The Public Statutes at Large of the United States of America, from the Organization of the Government in 1789, to March 3, 1845*, (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1845), 1:302-305. St. George Tucker, the great American legal scholar, wrote of the “fugitives from justice” clause of the Constitution, that, “the [1793] act of Congress makes it the duty of the executive authority of the state to which he flees, upon a copy of an indictment found, or affidavit made before a magistrate of any state, charging him with any crime, to cause him to be arrested and secured, and notice to be given to the executive authority making the demand, or his agent, and the fugitive to be delivered up.” St. George Tucker, *Blackstone’s Commentaries*, vol. 1, (Philadelphia: Birch and Small, 1803), 328. Note that, according to Tucker, it is the positive duty of the executive of the state to which the fugitive escapes to arrest the fugitive, and then notify the executive of the state where the crime is committed, which strongly implies that the duty to arrest is not contingent upon a prior request for arrest and extradition.

October 22, local men arrested him as a suspected fugitive from Harpers Ferry.\textsuperscript{13} Cook’s group (Brown, Merriam, Coppoc, Tidd and Cook) walked to the vicinity of Chambersburg and split up. Cook sought provisions in Chambersburg and on October 25 was arrested.\textsuperscript{14} Governor Wise requested the extradition of Cook and Hazlett.\textsuperscript{15} Cook had lived in Harpers Ferry for months before the raid and was well-known in the area, so his extradition was simple. Perhaps to gain favor with his captors, John Cook revealed that Barclay Coppoc, Francis Merriam, Owen Brown and Charles Tidd had escaped.\textsuperscript{16}

Hazlett denied his own identity and insisted he was William Harrison. William Packer, Democratic governor of Pennsylvania, declined the extradition request because the detainee did not admit to being Albert Hazlett. At the habeas corpus hearing, the judge did, however, detain Hazlett while eyewitnesses from Harpers Ferry traveled to Carlisle. These three witnesses, W. R. Wernway, William D. Copeland, and George S. Collis, appeared in court and positively identified the detainee as the man they had seen and conversed with in Harpers Ferry.\textsuperscript{17} Copeland testified that he had seen the detainee shooting at citizens.\textsuperscript{18} The Pennsylvania judge decided to

\textsuperscript{13} Keller, \textit{Thunder at Harper’s Ferry}, 198.

\textsuperscript{14} Cook Arrested,” \textit{New York Times}, October 27, 1859, p. 8, col. 2.


\textsuperscript{16} Thomas C. Green affidavit, November 4, 1859, Box 20, Folder 5, Governor Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession # 36710, State Government Records Collection, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. This will become important later.

\textsuperscript{17} Kelly Affidavit, 1 November 4, 1859, Box 20, Folder 5, Governor Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession # 36710, State Government Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

hold Hazlett while a new requisition was dispatched to Carlisle. Virginia corrected the paperwork to reflect Hazlett’s assumed name and sent an officer to receive the prisoner. Packer then granted the request and handed Hazlett over to Virginia officials for transportation to Charlestown. Cook and Hazlett were extradited. Cook was convicted in the Jefferson County court on November 9, and executed December 16, 1859. Hazlett awaited trial at the next circuit court meeting. Hazlett and another conspirator Aaron Stevens were convicted in February 1860 and hanged on March 16, 1860.

In the Pennsylvania cases, the extradition system had worked. One fugitive had been easily apprehended, and the fugitive was surrendered to face justice. Hazlett’s case had been more complicated, but it too had ended with the fugitive being tried in Virginia.

Although some southern conservatives cautiously interpreted Packer’s conduct as a hopeful sign, their views also reflected a decidedly conditional Unionism. The Wilmington (N.C.)


21 Reading (Penn.) Times, October 31, 1859, p. 3, col. 1. Historian Stephen Oates declares that Hazlett was illegally extradited because no one in the courtroom could state that he had been in Harpers Ferry, but this is inaccurate. Wernway, Copeland and Collis appeared in court and positively identified the detainee as the man they had seen and conversed with and seen shooting at citizens of Harpers Ferry. William N. Kelly affidavit, November 1, 1859, Box 20, Folder 5, Governor Henry A. Wise Executive Papers, 1856-1859. Accession # 36710, State Government Records Collection, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia. See also “More about the Harper’s Ferry Difficulty,” Cincinnati Daily Press, October 31, 1859, p. 2, col. 2. No one since has denied that the man executed as Hazlett was indeed Hazlett. Once Hazlett arrived in prison in Charlestown, Brown and his fellow prisoners refused to acknowledge Hazlett as Hazlett in order to maintain the fiction that Virginia authorities had the wrong man, in the hope of getting Virginia to release him. This may be the source of Oates’ confusion.

22 Oates, To Purge This Land with Blood, 328.

23 Ibid., 329.
Journal commended “the promptness with which the Governor of Pennsylvania has ordered the delivery of Cook and Hazlett.” The episode was “highly creditable to him and the Commonwealth of which he is head.” The Journal noted that Packer had merely done his duty in handing the fugitives over, but this was a time during which “fanaticism in the northern states\(^{24}\) systemically tramples upon the Constitution and upon statutes” and “the peculiar rights of the South.” The Journal declared it would be very surprised if a similar requisition for Joshua Giddings, or Gerrit Smith would be honored by the governors of Ohio or New York. “We should as soon expect the sky to fall on us.”\(^{25}\) In a similar fashion, the Richmond Enquirer declared that if a Virginia grand jury should find a true bill against Gerrit Smith, Joshua Giddings or William Lloyd Garrison, and northern governors refused the requisition by the governor of Virginia, “a serious question will be presented not only to the people of Virginia, but of the entire South.” The Enquirer advised its readers that “the evils [that such a refusal] would entail involve the permanency of the Union.”\(^{26}\) Here was conditional Unionism, indeed, and the next two extradition cases would demonstrate the limits of inter-state comity.

In January 1860, Iowans elected Republican Samuel Kirkwood governor. In his inaugural address, Kirkwood condemned the Harpers Ferry outbreak but in a qualified way. Pro-slavery men and the federal government, Kirkwood charged, had treated free state men in Kansas as if they had no rights. Was it strange, Kirkwood asked, that some free state men should have ceased to respect the rights of their “oppressors”? As for Harpers Ferry, Kirkwood told his audience, “While we may wonder at, we must condemn it. It was an act of war … relieved to some extent

\(^{24}\) A reference to northern states “personal liberty laws.”


\(^{26}\) Richmond Enquirer, October 25, 1859, p. 2, col. 1.
of its guilt, in the minds of many, by the fact that the blow was struck for freedom, and not for slavery." Like many Republicans, Kirkwood expressed disapproval of Brown’s actions but sympathy for the man and his cause. This was the governor of the state to which Barclay Coppoc had returned.

After parting company with Brown, Cook, Merriam, and Tidd, Coppoc had made his way to Ohio, then Canada, but by December 17, 1859, was back home in Springdale, Iowa. His arrival was not a well-kept secret. Coppoc later wrote that “several hundred persons” greeted him at the train station. William McCormick of Muscatine, Iowa, informed Governor Wise that Coppoc was back in Iowa.

Andrew Hunter, the Commonwealth’s Attorney, learned that Barclay Coppoc was living openly in Springdale. Hunter swore out a statement before a notary public that he believed Barclay Coppoc had aided and abetted John Brown in “treason against the Commonwealth of Virginia,” inciting slaves “to rebel and make insurrection against their masters,” and murdering “Hayward Sheppard, a free negro, and George W. Turner, and Fontaine Beckham, and Thomas Barclay.” Hunter further attested that Barclay Coppoc was in Iowa. Hunter sent the affidavit to

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30 Galreath, “Barcay Coppoc,” 469.

31 Samuel J. Kirkwood, Special Message of Governor Samuel J. Kirkwood in Reply to a resolution of Inquiry of the House of Representatives March 2d, 1860, in Relation to the Requisition of the Governor of Virginia, for One Barclay Coppoc, (Des Moines, Iowa: John Teesdale, State Printer, 1860), 4.
Governor John Letcher.\textsuperscript{32} Letcher, in turn, sent an agent named Courtland Camp with a formal request for extradition to the Governor of Iowa.\textsuperscript{33}

Camp arrived in Des Moines on January 23, 1860, and presented his credentials to Governor Kirkwood along with the notarized statement from Andrew Hunter. Kirkwood examined the papers but declined to issue an arrest warrant for two reasons. First, Hunter’s sworn statement was not “accompanied by a Notarial Seal.”\textsuperscript{34} Second, a notary public was not a magistrate as defined by the federal statute, so an extradition could not be made based on a notary public’s action.\textsuperscript{35}

When Kirkwood declined to issue a warrant, Camp reportedly objected with great vehemence. At this juncture, Edward Wright and Benjamin F. Gue, two Republican members of the Iowa legislature, entered the room.\textsuperscript{36} Governor Kirkwood indicated that he assumed Camp would not want to continue discussing the matter in their presence. Camp allegedly replied, “I

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item John Letcher had replaced Henry Wise as Virginia’s governor on January 1, 1860.
\item Galreath, “Barclay Coppoc,” 469.
\item Virginia Senate, \textit{Journal of the Senate of the Commonwealth of Virginia}, (Richmond: James E. Goode, 1860), Document 39, Communication from the Governor of Virginia Enclosing Letters from the Governor of Iowa Responsive to a Requisition from This State Relative to Barclay Coppoc, 3. Hereafter referred to as Letcher, \textit{Letters from the Governor of Iowa}.
\item Benjamin F. Gue, \textit{History of Iowa from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century}, (NY: Century History Co., 1903), 2:17. Jeannette Mather Lord lists the two legislators as “Wright and Galbraith.” \textit{West Virginia History}, April 1959, 182; Galreath, “Barclay Coppoc,” 471 says it was it was Gue and Wright. Gue’s story is more reliable than Lord’s, as Gue was in the room and his account contemporary. In August 1859, it had been B. F. Gue’s younger brother, David, who had written to Secretary of War John Floyd warning him of Brown’s raid, in an effort to get Brown to call off the raid. Gue, \textit{History of Iowa}, 2:29.
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don’t care a d__n who knows it now, since you have refused to honor the requisition.” When Camp pointed out that the fugitive might escape while the defect in the document was corrected, Governor Kirkwood looked “significantly” at his fellow Republicans, and proceeded to show Camp an Iowa law under which Coppoc could be arrested and held while the requisition was granted. The two members of the Legislature nodded at Kirkwood to show they understood and excused themselves.38

Governor Kirkwood then wrote out a letter to Governor Letcher stating his reasons for refusing the requisition request, and handed it to Camp. Camp retired to Muscatine to await a corrected requisition from Virginia. The next day, Kirkwood appended an additional objection, that the affidavit did not adequately show that Barclay Coppoc had ever been in Virginia, and thus could not legally be charged with a crime there.39 Kirkwood mailed this objection to Governor Letcher.

Camp’s verbal outburst in Kirkwood’s office undoubtedly proved costly, and the Republican members of the legislature took immediate advantage of it. Withdrawing from the Governor’s office, Wright and Gue assembled a group of Republican legislators, pooled their money, and hired a messenger to alert young Coppoc. Even though Camp was waiting in Muscatine for


38 Gue, History of Iowa 2:17; Lord, “They Had a Concern,” 182. Gue recorded that Governor Kirkwood was “looking significantly at us” as he pointed out a statute by which Coppoc might be arrested, after the corrected requisition had been made received from Virginia. The clearly sent, and received, massage was, “Warn Barclay Coppoc that Virginia is after him and I will be forced to honor the corrected requisition.” This Gue and friends proceeded to do.

39 Kirkwood, Special Message, 15.
corrected extradition papers, Coppoc could not be persuaded to flee from his mother’s home in Springdale.\textsuperscript{40}

Back in Virginia, on February 3, 1860, the Jefferson County, Virginia Grand Jury indicted Barclay Coppoc for “conspir[ing] … to induce certain slaves … to rebel and make insurrection against their said masters, and against the authority of the constitution and laws of the Commonwealth of Virginia.” \textsuperscript{41} On February 10, the corrected requisition, including the indictment and letter from Governor Letcher, arrived in Des Moines. This time, Governor Kirkwood issued the arrest warrant, but Coppoc was gone. Once again, people in Des Moines had sent word to Springdale, and this time Coppoc’s friends spirited him away in a snow storm to Mechanicsville, Iowa, and then on to Chicago, and finally to Canada. Eventually, Coppoc made his way to Ashtabula, Ohio, where he had heard that Owen Brown and Francis Merriam were living.\textsuperscript{42}

Governor Letcher believed that Governor Kirkwood “had sufficient evidence to justify issuing a warrant for the arrest of the fugitive,” but, for “exceedingly frivolous” reasons, failed to do so.\textsuperscript{43} Letcher pointed out that according to federal law a notary public was a magistrate for the purposes of extradition. Kirkwood’s other objections, that the affidavit was not accompanied by a notarial seal, and that the affidavit did not allege that Coppoc had been in Virginia during the Harpers Ferry raid, Letcher dismissed as technicalities. At the very least, Kirkwood should have made an honest effort to arrest Coppoc, while the extradition papers were corrected. Instead,

\textsuperscript{40} Lord, “They Had a Concern,” 182.

\textsuperscript{41} Papers of Governor Kirkwood, Iowa Historical Society, Folder 1, Box 1 contains the original indictment.

\textsuperscript{42} Gue, \textit{History of Iowa}, 2:21-22; Galreath, “Barclay Coppoc,” 474.

\textsuperscript{43} Letcher, \textit{Letters from the Governor of Iowa}, 3.
Kirkwood had allowed a messenger to warn Coppoc of the requested extradition, and even took the liberty of publishing Kirkwood’s correspondence, thus publicly warning Coppoc.\textsuperscript{44}

Letcher drew broad inferences beyond this particular case. He duly noted the portions of Governor Kirkwood’s inaugural address that had expressed sympathy with John Brown and his confederates.\textsuperscript{45} Letcher charged that the denial of this requisition and “other evidence of unfriendly feeling” demonstrated an attitude of hostility by “a large portion of the northern people and their representative men towards the South. This attitude ought to impress upon the people of the South the necessity of adopting “prompt, energetic and decided measures to protect our rights, secure direct trade, establish manufactures and thus to achieve southern independence.” Letcher then turned his attention to his northern countrymen. He was appalled to see men in public office “express admiration” for men whose hands are “stained with the blood of innocent and unoffending citizens.” Under such circumstances, southerners should hardly be surprised to see the Constitution “disregarded, contemned and trampled upon.” Letcher wished his northern countrymen to understand that “the only means of insuring the perpetuity of the Union is to exhibit a proper respect for the rights of the states, to observe the Constitution, execute the laws, and deal justly with their brethren.”\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{44} Letcher, \textit{Letters from the Governor of Iowa}, 5. Burlington (Iowa) Weekly Hawk-Eye, February 4, 1860, p.1, col. 5. Kirkwood, in his communication with the Iowa legislature of March, 3, 1860, does not deny publishing the correspondence, but lays the blame for any warning squarely on Camp’s indiscretion. In fairness to Governor Kirkwood, the allegation that Coppoc had never been in Virginia may have been true. Certainly it appears that Coppoc remained on the north bank of the Potomac throughout the Harpers Ferry raid. This, however, was a valid defense at trial, not a valid reason for declining the requisition.

\textsuperscript{45} Letcher, \textit{Letters from the Governor of Iowa}.

Letcher was far from a rabid fire-eater.\footnote{Henry T. Shanks, \textit{The Secession Movement in Virginia}, 1847-1861, (New York: AMS Press, 1971), 57-58. In a private conversation with Edmund Ruffin, in December 1859, however, Letcher admitted to Ruffin that he believed the Union “must be dissolved, and at no distant time.” Ruffin, \textit{Diary}, 381. F. N. Boney, \textit{John Letcher of Virginia: The Story of Virginia’s Civil War Governor}, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996), 86-87.} At this stage, he wished the Union to be preserved, but Letcher’s was a conditional Unionism. The Union, Letcher felt, could be preserved, but it would require Republicans to comply with the Constitution and “deal justly” or for northern voters to repudiate Republicans at the polls. However, the issue was not yet dead in Iowa.

Democrats in the Iowa legislature asked Governor Kirkwood to explain his position. Once again, he addressed most of Letcher’s objections: The requisition was not notarized, a notary public was not a magistrate as defined by the law, the requisition did not show that Coppoc committed the crimes in Virginia, and, the requisition did not allege that Coppoc had committed any crime at all, only that Hunter believed that Coppoc had committed a crime. Kirkwood did not address publication of the two men’s correspondence, nor his unwillingness to arrest Coppoc while the papers were corrected.\footnote{It will be remembered that Governor Packer had done this in the case of Hazlett.} This entire episode received substantial coverage in newspapers across the South that winter.\footnote{For example, see the \textit{Wilmington (N. C.) Daily Journal}, March 22, 1860, p. 2, col. 6; the \textit{Augusta (Ga.) Chronicle}, February 15, 1860, p. 1, col. 2; the \textit{Montgomery Mail}, February 15 1860, p. 3, col. 2; “Virginia and the South,” \textit{Jacksonville (Ala.) Republican}, March 1, 1860, p. 3, col. 1.}

Weekly Standard condemned the “bad conduct” of Iowa’s governor, agreeing with Letcher that Kirkwood’s “sympathies are warmly enlisted on the side of John Brown and his criminal associates.” The Staunton (Va.) Vindicator condemned Kirkwood’s entire handling of this case. “The conduct of the Governor of Iowa … is remarkable for its duplicity, and shows to us of the South, what we have to expect from northern officials, elevated to power by the sectional party of the day.” Governor John Ellis of North Carolina contrasted the Iowa governor’s conduct with Governor Packer’s and condemned Kirkwood in the strongest possible terms. He viewed the entire episode as “a practical illustration of the difference between a Northern Democrat and a Black Republican. Governor Packer, of Pennsylvania, surrendered one of the Harpers Ferry traitors, promptly … He is a Democrat. Governor Kirkwood, of Iowa, refused to surrender, upon demand, one of the same conspirators, but gave him shelter and protection. He is a black Republican. The one obeyed his oath of office as an honest man, the other perjured himself before his country and his God. This, then, is the wide difference between a Northern Democrat and an abolitionist.” Not only secessionists but more moderate southerners as well concluded that Kirkwood, a Republican officeholder, had used his office to allow a criminal to escape.

Hard upon the heels of the Iowa refusal to extradite fugitives came a second, this one from Ohio. Ashtabula County, Ohio, had an established reputation as a hotbed of antislavery

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55 “Escape of Barclay Coppic [sic],” Staunton (Va.) Spectator, February 21, 1860, p. 2, col. 5. The Spectator was not a secessionist paper.
sentiment. This was one of the reasons why Owen Brown and Francis Merriam had joined John Brown, Jr., there after Harpers Ferry, and why Barclay Coppoc had made his way there after leaving Iowa.

Using Matthew Johnson, the U. S. Marshal in Cleveland, as his messenger, Governor Letcher formally requested that Republican Ohio Governor William Dennison arrest and extradite Owen Brown and Francis Merriam. Governor Dennison sent Letcher’s request to Ohio Attorney General Christopher P. Wolcott whose opinion, based on the federal statute of 1793, held that three conditions were necessary for the Governor to comply: the criminal must have been charged with a crime, he must have fled the state to escape justice, and an indictment or affidavit must accompany the requisition. According to Wolcott, the second condition had not been met. Using the same excuse that Kirkwood had used, Wolcott informed Governor Dennison that “there is nothing to show that he was ever within” the state of Virginia.

Based on the opinion of his Attorney General, Governor Dennison declined to grant the requisition. In a March 8 letter to Governor Letcher, Dennison stated that he agreed with the

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opinion of the Ohio Attorney General. Ohio had no relevant extradition statute. Further, there was no proof that Merriam had ever been in Virginia, so he could not have fled from justice in that state. A second letter, sent via Marshal Johnson in Cleveland, stated that the request for extradition would not be honored. Johnson forwarded Dennison’s letter to Governor Letcher, and enclosed a note reporting that “Owen Brown was yet in Ohio, but that Francis Merriam had fled the State.”

Letcher was furious. He wrote to the Virginia legislature that “if the Governor of Ohio were disposed to carry out the friendly relations” there was an 1834 Ohio statute still in effect that enabled the governor to arrest and extradite fugitives from justice even if there was an “informality or defect” in the warrant. If Ohio had also repealed the 1834 law then that would be “a sad spectacle,” showing that Ohio wanted “to enjoy the benefits of the Union, without complying with the obligations imposed.” It would indicate that Ohio would be “deliberately setting aside that compact” of Union.

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60 Dennison to Letcher, March 8, 1860, Library of Virginia’s Governor Letcher Papers, Series III, Box 31: Correspondence January – March 1860.

61 Ohio had repealed the extradition provision of its habeas corpus law in 1856 and again in 1858, probably in an attempt to thwart the provisions of the Fugitive Slave Act. Virginia Senate, *Journal of the Senate of the Commonwealth of Virginia*, (Richmond: James E. Goode, 1860), Document 59, Communication from the Governor of Virginia Enclosing Letters from the Governor of Ohio Relative to a Requisition for Fugitives from Justice, 4-5. Hereafter referred to as Letcher, *Letters from the Governor of Ohio*.


63 United States Marshal Matthew Johnson letter to Governor John Letcher, March 9, 1860, Virginia Governor (1860-1863: Letcher), Executive Papers, 1859-1863, Accession 36787, Series 2, Box 31, Folder 1, Correspondence January – March 1860, State government records collection, Library of Virginia, Richmond.

64 Letcher, *Letters from the Governor of Ohio*, 4.
Comity between sister states would seem to imply that a friendly governor … should at least not permit a fugitive from justice to escape by reason of informality or defect… [but] should induce him at least to cause the accused to be arrested and be kept … when the accused is a notorious criminal, … who has violated the sanctity of our soil and the most sacred obligations of a citizen.\textsuperscript{65}

Even if there had been a defect in the requisition, Letcher believed Dennison could have acted.

Whatever the nature of the Ohio law, Letcher observed, the act of Congress of 1793 provided that “whenever a demand is made by the executive of one state upon another, ‘it shall be the duty of the executive … of the state to … which such persons shall have fled, to cause him or her to be arrested and secured.’”\textsuperscript{66} Governor Dennison did not have the right to decline the arrest and extradition of Brown and Merriam. As a member of the Union, Ohio had accepted the responsibilities of membership and that included the obligation to arrest and extradite fugitives from other states. “This is the comity between friendly sovereigns” the Founders had envisioned. If their example was followed, it would “render us a united and a happy people.”\textsuperscript{67}

To show how hypocritical Governor Dennison was, Letcher pointed to a recent extradition case in which Ohio had been the beneficiary. In early February, Virginia arrested Silas Taylor, a man suspected of forgery in Ohio. After Taylor’s arrest, Letcher had notified Dennison that Virginia held the man wanted in Ohio. Dennison had requested the man’s extradition, and Letcher had complied because “comity and good fellowship between states … required this of

\textsuperscript{65} Letcher, \textit{Letters from the Governor of Ohio}, 5.

\textsuperscript{66} “An Act Respecting Fugitives from Justice and Persons Escaping from the Service of Their Masters,” approved February 12, 1793. See \textit{Annals of Congress,} 2\textsuperscript{nd} Cong., 2\textsuperscript{nd} Sess., 1414-1415.

\textsuperscript{67} Letcher, \textit{Letters from the Governor of Ohio}, 6. Here Letcher is anticipating by ten months the argument of Jefferson Davis from his farewell to the Senate in January 1861. Membership in the Union brings member states benefits, but it also places on them responsibilities. Secession, according to Davis’ reasoning, would relieve the responsibilities, and would also deprive the seceded state of the benefits. William J. Cooper (ed.), \textit{Jefferson Davis: The Essential Writings}, (New York): The Modern Library, 2003), 192.

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me.” Letcher cited this case to illustrate how Ohio should have acted in the cases of Francis Merriam and Owen Brown. The fact that Denison had not, Letcher reasoned, made him something of a hypocrite.

Letcher left it to others to draw their own conclusions, but the implication was obvious. Dennison had not extradited Merriam and Owen Brown due to sympathy with their cause. Virginia should “adopt retaliatory measures” against northern states, Letcher advised, but left it to the legislature to decide what measures to adopt.69

White southerners who had been shocked by the Harpers Ferry raid were once again disappointed by these refusals to extradite.70 The Nashville Patriot remarked: “The precedent set by Governor Dennison is bad, [and] it may return to plague the inventor.”71 The Savannah (Ga.) Republican observed that “the abolition governor [of Ohio] hates slavery, and is resolved to protect offenders against the institution and [against] the lives of slaveholders.”

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68 Letcher, Letters from the Governor of Ohio, 8.

69 Letcher, Letters from the Governor of Ohio, 9.


71 Nashville Patriot, March 15, 1860, p. 2, col. 2. There was one more Ohio extradition case for which the Merriam-Brown case might have served as a precedent. On October 4, 1859, Willis Largo, an underground railroad operator, led Charlotte, a slave living in Kentucky, to freedom in Ohio. Kentucky governor Beriah Maguffin requested Ohio governor to extradite Largo. Dennison, on April 14, 1860, declined to extradite Lago because enticing a slave to escape was not a crime “under the laws of this state” [sic]. Supreme Court Justice Roger Taney, in Kentucky v. Dennison decision, March 14, 1861, announced that while the governor of a state had the duty to extradite a fugitive from justice, the federal government had no authority to compel a governor to do his duty. See Benjamin C. Howard, United States Reports: Cases Adjudged in the Supreme Court, Volume 24, (Washington: W. H. & O. H. Morrison, 1861), 66-110 and Thomas C. Mackey, Documentary History of the American Civil War Era, volume 3: Judicial Decisions 1857-1866, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2014), 285-6.
wondered whether Virginia was wholly without remedy in this case. “We do not live under so imperfect a system that acknowledged rights exist with no corresponding remedies.” The Republican suggested that the solution was to drive Ohio's delegation from Congress. “This is an important matter and each southern state should make Virginia's cause her own.” The Republican concluded by hinting at secession, thus demonstrating the conditional nature of the editor’s Unionism. “Should Congress refuse or be impotent to interfere, then each state is thrown upon her right of self-preservation, and should take such steps as may be necessary for the preservation of her safety, her self-respect, and the good opinion of others.”

The rival Savannah Daily Morning News immediately dismissed the Savannah Republican’s recommendation. It was “absurd in the extreme” to talk of expelling Ohio’s delegation from Congress. No such resolution would pass in a Republican-controlled House of Representatives. Instead, the Daily Morning News pointed to the propriety of “the states, in their collective capacity” taking the matter in hand at a conference of southern states. Collective action might offer some hope of effecting change within the Union. In the meantime Virginia along with other southern states would pursue internal security reforms.

Virginia conducted its own investigation of the Harpers Ferry raid. On December 7, 1859, the General Assembly created a “Joint Committee on the Harpers Ferry Outrages,” composed of thirteen senators and twenty-six members of the House of Delegates that soon produced a report

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Virginia, *Report of the Joint Committee*, 6. This refers to the rumored attempts to rescue John Brown and his associates. The committee’s report was issued January 26, 1860, before the refusals of Kirkwood or Dennison.
and cities of Virginia, and thus obtain revenge by destroying the property and lives of our citizens.”

The committee painted an ominous picture of the future. Although it would be uncharitable to hold the entire northern people responsible for “all the ravings of fanatical agitators,” the committee proposed “to rely on those authentic manifestations of unfriendly feeling proceeding from the official representatives of the people, and for which the constituent body is justly responsible.” While taking note of the Union meetings that had occurred in northern cities, the committee declared that “abstract resolutions” are of no avail unless followed by action.

As long as the conservative people of the North remain passive, and permit agitators and fanatics and enemies of the South to fill positions of public trust, … they cannot escape the responsibility which attaches to their declarations and acts. Those who have it in their power to prevent … a wrong, and fail to exercise that power, must to a great extent be responsible for the wrong itself.

Unless the Republican party swore off violent antislavery action and followed that with tangible steps, or northern voters rejected the Republican party, southerners would feel free to re-examine their relationship with the Union.

The logical consequences of [the Republican party’s] teachings have been exhibited in the recent raid at Harpers Ferry; … the South can expect nothing less than a succession of such traitorous attempts to subvert its institutions and to incite its slaves to rapine and murder. The crimes of John Brown were … practical illustrations of the doctrines of the leaders of the Republican party.

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78 Virginia, Report of the Joint Committee, 6.
79 Ibid., 22.
80 Ibid., 23.
Whether northern conservative sentiment would change anything remained to be seen. If conservative men did win office in the northern states, Virginia stood ready to bury the past and return to “a spirit of fraternity.”

In case conservative sentiment in the North did not awaken, the committee made four policy recommendations. First, the Virginia assembly should adopt bills “to organize, arm and equip the militia of the state for active and efficient service.” Second, the state should enact laws “encouraging the domestic manufactures …, promoting direct trade with foreign countries, and establishing …our commercial independence.” Third, Virginia should cooperate with the other southern states. Fourth, Virginia must ensure “prompt and effectual punishment of all foreign emissaries … guilty of conspiring against the peace of our community, or seeking to incite our slaves to insurrection.” The committee issued its report early enough in the legislative session for the assembly to address those recommendations.

One of the most urgent security needs facing southern legislatures in the wake of Harpers Ferry was militia reform. Historian William Barney observed that John Brown's raid had caused “incalculable damage to the South's sense of security.” The raid left Southerners “psychically unbalanced as rumors of impending abolitionist invasions became rampant and never ceased.” One way to restore a sense of security was to improve the readiness of the states’ militia organizations. The Virginia militia had already incurred substantial expenses in responding to the Harpers Ferry raid.

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81 Ibid., 23.

82 Ibid., 24.

Before Virginia could even address future security needs, the legislature had to provide for the recent past expenditures. In his December message to the legislature, Wise had asked for $50,000 immediately for expenses related to Harpers Ferry. Over time, the costs continued to rise, eventually totaling $255,000, with Virginia newspapers noting the growth of this appropriation over time. Wise had also recommended several militia reforms. The governor had urged the creation of what he called an “active militia” of men age 18 to 25, “fully armed and equipped and frequently drilled,” and an “enrolled and reserve militia” of men over 25. Wise recommended the creation of a full time Adjutant General with a salary of $2,500, along with “inspectors, adjutants, commissaries and engineers.” The governor should nominate general officers (with the senate’s advice and consent). Wise urged the state to acquire “the best and most approved arms,” integrate the Virginia Military Institute into the “regular system,” and increase the State Guard to one hundred men.

Some of the governor’s more controversial suggestions blurred the distinction between civil and military authority. One example was the idea that field officers and captains of the militia be


87 A full time guard for the state armory. Wise neglected to state what role he wished VMI to play in the “regular system.”
appointed by the governor. Heretofore, captains had been elected by the company members and field officers had been elected by the commissioned officers of the regiment. Neither house of the legislature wanted to anything to do with Wise’s proposal that limited the democratic prerogatives of local communities. As for general officers, the senate, by a vote of twenty-five to twelve, approved Wise’s plan for the selection of general officers (nomination by the governor with the senate’s consent), but the house did not concur.

Another proposed change would authorize “military patrols for police purposes.” Wise did not specify what he meant by this, but other states sought to keep military functions separate from police ones, for example, by exempting militia from patrol duty. Wise had been criticized for declaring martial law in the autumn, so he recommended that the legislature provide the governor greater authority to declare martial law. The General Assembly failed to enact the more contentious proposals. The Alexandria (Va.) Gazette applauded Wise’s general plan “to arm—that is to organize the militia and volunteers of the state, so as to be ready hereafter in case of danger and attack.” In this context, “danger” seemed to be a euphemism for insurrection and “attack” meant a repeat of Harpers Ferry. The Gazette concurred in the necessity of the militia


90 Georgia, for example. See Georgia, Acts of the General Assembly of Georgia Passed in Milledgeville at a Regular Session in November – December 1859, (Milledgeville: Doughton, Nisbet & Barnes, 1860), 73.

91 John B. Minor to Lanty Blackford, in the Blackford Family Papers #1912, Series 1.6, Folder 75, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
being “prepared for any future aggression or invasion. Of this, no one can object.” The

*Richmond Dispatch* joined the chorus. Applauding the news of volunteer units forming across
the state, the editor wrote, “we sincerely hope that the military spirit which has been aroused will
never languish.” The editor hoped that the legislature would adopt prompt measures to encourage
the volunteer movement.93

The legislature examined the Virginia militia force itself, and the results were not promising.
Virginia Adjutant General William H. Richardson reported that earlier neglect had “completely
prostrated the defense of the state.”94 A reform in 1858 had supposedly revitalized the militia but
was still a work in progress. As of November 1859, the state had reorganized thirty-four troops
of cavalry, seven companies of artillery and sixty-five companies of infantry.95 The state had
24,000 infantry firearms on hand, but most were obsolete or unfit for service.96 According to the

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93 “Military Intelligence,” *Richmond Dispatch*, December 13, 1859, p. 1, col. 5; During the
winter term of 1859-1860, the Virginia General Assembly did enact some changes to the militia
system. The legislature appropriated $255,000 to cover expenses for Harpers Ferry. “Legislature
of Virginia,” *Staunton Spectator*, March 20, 1859, p. 2, col. 3, See *Staunton Spectator*, March
27, 1859, p. 2, col. 3, for the supplemental appropriation of $30,000. The Assembly did hire an
Adjutant General, but at a salary of only $2,000, not the $2,500 suggested by Wise. George W.
Munford (comp.), *Code of Virginia, 2nd edition*, (Richmond: Ritchie, Dunnivant & Co., 1860),
142.

94 “Report of Virginia Adjutant General William H. Richardson, September 30, 1859,”
found in Virginia, *Governor’s Message and Reports of the Public Officers of the State*,

95 Virginia, *Governor's Message and Reports of the Public Officers of the State*, (Richmond:

96 Virginia, *Governor's Message and Reports of the Public Officers of the State*, (Richmond:
were obsolete after the introduction of the percussion ignition system in 1842.
report of the state Adjutant General, fifty-two companies were without arms and asking to be armed by the state.97

Yet despite such glaring deficiencies, the General Assembly engaged the militia problem cautiously and slowly. The legislature maintained the reforms already in progress, but opted not to enact Wise’s recommendation for an “active militia.” The law-makers did authorize $500,000 for the purchase of arms and munitions.98 This still left the initiative for building a ready military force to local communities.99

Counties and cities across the state responded by organizing new militia units. The city of Lynchburg formed three new companies in November 1859 alone.100 As of January 1860, Augusta County had eight companies of volunteers with a total of 500 men and “more companies forming.”101 Altogether, in the eleven weeks between Harpers Ferry and the end of the year, fifty-seven volunteer companies were formed in Virginia.102

97 Twenty-six cavalry companies, six artillery batteries, nine light infantry and eleven rifle companies. Adjutant General William H. Richardson to the Speaker of the House of Delegates, December 20, 1859, Folder 9, Box 23, Executive Papers of Henry A. Wise, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.


99 Appropriations for the military after Harpers Ferry were 178 times what they had been in 1858-1859. Virginia General Assembly, Acts of the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia, (Richmond: William F. Ritchie, 1858), 12.


Virginia newspaper editors published signs of a more martial spirit in Virginia after Harpers Ferry. A November 21 meeting in Mecklenburg County declared that “the safety of the South demands promptitude of action.” Further, Virginia could not rely on the federal government but must “look alone to our own resources for the protection of our property and our lives, against the incursions of our enemies.” The citizens tied the formation of volunteer companies directly to the abolitionist threat. “In view of the present troubled condition of the country, this meeting recommends the immediate organization of two or more efficient volunteer military companies in the county of Mecklenburg.” A similar meeting in Amelia County on November 24 which maintained that there are occasions in the history of every people, when “they should rely upon their own acts and energy to protect themselves. …The recent outbreak … at Harpers Ferry, [and] evidences of wide-spread connivance, and followed by manifestations of approval and sympathy, with rare exceptions, throughout the non-slaveholding States, presents one of those occasions to the people of Virginia.” The meeting recommended that the state legislature “adopt a system of military organization, … to protect the state and people from invasion and outrage.” To demonstrate that they were willing to back up resolves with action, the participants in this meeting resolved that it was “proper and prudent for the people in the several counties … to organize themselves into volunteer companies, for local and general defense of themselves and

their institutions.” Then the citizens present at the meeting proceeded to enroll themselves into volunteer companies. In addition to filling the already existing Amelia cavalry troop, “one full company was raised on the spot, and two-thirds of the number required for two other companies was made up.”

Virginia newspapers approved this change in public attitudes. The *Rockingham Register* in the Shenandoah Valley noted that “our people, … may always be relied upon whenever the country require their services.” Further, the editor expressed pride in “the spirit that animates all the people of the Valley counties,” as illustrated by the formation of volunteer militia companies. With regard to the general military enthusiasm prevailing in Virginia, the editor of the *Richmond Dispatch* considered the speed with which new volunteer companies were forming to be “honorable to the patriotism and public spirit of Virginia.” Service in volunteer companies was important to the nation as a whole, but “the volunteer system is an absolute necessity to the people of the South” because “the South is ever in peril of the worst horrors of war.” Indeed, the editor believed, “the only security of the South from war and rapine, from the desolation of its fields and the desecration of its firesides, is the military spirit and organization of its people.” Thus, “every able-bodied man in the South must be a soldier, … every man should have arms, and understand the use of them [and] all who are capable of military duty, should become members of volunteer companies, and be drilled thoroughly.” In conclusion, the editor wrote, “a

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volunteer organization in the South is not a mere association for display and frolic. It is a thing of practical utility, of vital necessity.”

The process of forming a new company involved shared responsibility. The local community would take the initiative in organizing and manning the outfit. The state would arm and equip it. This was the case in Mt. Solon, Virginia. On December 15, 1859, a public meeting at Mt. Solon in Augusta County resolved that the people of Mount Solon viewed “with unfeigned astonishment and the deepest indignation,” the North’s “repeated acts of aggression,” especially “the late unparalleled outrage enacted at Harpers Ferry by a murderous band of their fanatical emissaries.” Therefore it became “the duty of every community to prepare to defend themselves, their families, and their firesides, from similar invasions.” The citizens of Mt. Solon decided to “organize a volunteer company,” and “petition to the Governor … to provide us with the necessary arms and accoutrements.” In other words, these Virginians did not believe Harpers Ferry was a one-time occurrence. The formation of this company was clearly a response to Harpers Ferry and intended to prevent “further aggression” and defend against “similar invasions.” While the resolutions were not a radical document, they were an expression of southern solidarity and preparation.

Virginia had been the scene of the Harpers Ferry raid, but the Old Dominion was hardly the only state to look at enhancing security. The North Carolina legislature did not meet during the winter of 1859-1860, but communities in North Carolina were active on security matters. The

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107 22 percent of Augusta County families owned slaves in 1860. The county was not a center of fire-eating either. In the presidential election the county voted 66 percent for Bell, 28 percent for Douglas.
Newbern (N. C.) Daily Progress probably spoke for many when it wrote, “every community in the South … owes it to itself to be prepared for emergencies.” The editorial continued, “in view of the recent outrages upon the lives and property of our sister state, Virginia,” communities across the South were “arming and organizing themselves into volunteer companies.” In answer to those who might argue that there was nothing in Newbern to fear, the paper responded that “the peaceable citizens of Harpers Ferry apprehended [no] danger twenty-four hours before” John Brown’s attack. “Their wives and children slept tranquilly the night previous.” Newbern was far from northern territory, but, the editor argued, “there is more danger to the peace and quiet of the South … from Yankee preachers, Yankee schoolmasters, Yankee book and tract agents” in the South than from distant “ranters” in Yankee pulpits. These northerners in the South “insidiously sneak into our homes and sow their poisonous seed at our very hearth stones.” These northerners bore “polite watching,” and increasing the size and readiness of the local volunteer company was absolutely necessary.

A Newbern citizen, D. K. McRae, wrote to the Daily Progress assessing the security situation and urging action. His letter pointed out that “our enemies” have “unmasked themselves as armed foes, exhorting to conflict” and, possibly referring to the Chatham Constitution, “revolution and overthrow.” Northern emissaries, “under various disguises,” McRae wrote, were “endeavoring to sow discord and to stimulate insurrection.” Abolitionists


110 See chapter 1, supra.
have perpetrated “treason and murder and committed an act of war” against Virginia. The instigators of Harpers Ferry were northern political leaders, preachers, press, “and, it is to be feared, a large majority of the popular mass at the North,” who “openly applaud the criminals and the crime.” The implications, McRae felt, were obvious. “It is high time to put ourselves in a state of preparation – calmly, quietly, with dignity, but with promptitude and determination.”

The security situation of the South wore an “alarming appearance and we should heed the warning,” McRae believed. “Our volunteer companies … should be enlarged—thoroughly organized—armed, equipped and drilled.” The militia would be the backbone of this army for “in the citizen masses are to be found the strong arm of victory,” should it come to fighting. In the meantime, local communities should “put a watch upon suspicious strangers.” McRae even suggested that the legislature should consider allowing “negro testimony against white negro-inciters.” For those found guilty of tampering with slaves and inciting rebellion, punishment should be sure and swift, for “mercy to such is aid to their offence.” Taking adequate precautions immediately, the South could “afford to and will remain upon the defensive.” If political conciliation should fail, however, those military preparations would prove invaluable in the ensuing conflict.111

A meeting of the citizens of Craven County, North Carolina, on December 15, 1859, urged action to prepare the state to defend itself. A committee of citizens wrote to Governor Ellis condemning the “woeful state of unpreparedness for the emergencies which may at any time be precipitated upon us.” “Danger not only threatens us, but is imminent.” The North Carolina General Assembly was not scheduled to meet during the winter of 1859-1860, but providing the resources necessary to protect North Carolina, “money, arms, munitions of war and a thorough

reorganization of the militia,” required legislative action. The correspondents, therefore, recommended Governor Ellis convene the legislature in special session. Governor Ellis reacted to the security situation with moderation. He declined to call a special session, because doing so would “increase the excitement now existing among our people.” Ellis did write to United States Secretary of War John Floyd, seeking two thousand rifles for the state’s militia. When that request was denied, Ellis asked that the U. S. Arsenal at Fayetteville, North Carolina, modernize fifteen hundred rifles and one thousand muskets North Carolina already had on hand to the new percussion system, and that the arsenal rifle the barrels of one thousand of North Carolina’s muskets to increase their range.

South Carolina had more reason to fear a slave insurrection than North Carolina, yet took surprisingly moderate steps. This was due, perhaps, to their distance from the abolition threat

112 The regular sessions of the North Carolina legislature were in the winter of 1858-59 and 1860-61. See North Carolina, Public Laws of the State of North Carolina passed at its Session of 1858-59, (Raleigh: Holden and Wilson, 1859); North Carolina, Public Laws of the State of North Carolina passed at its Session of 1860-61, (Raleigh: John Spelman, 1861).


116 South Carolina had 412,320 African-Americans and 291,300 white inhabitants, or a ratio of 1.4 African-Americans (free and slave) per white inhabitant. Thus black South Carolinians outnumbered their white neighbors. North Carolina, on the other hand, had 361,522 African-Americans and 629,942 white inhabitants, or a ratio of less than .6 African-Americans per white inhabitant. If the risk of a slave uprising was related to the concentration of African-Americans, South Carolina had more to fear than North Carolina. Joseph C. G. Kennedy, Preliminary Report of the Eighth Census 1860, (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1862), 131.
than Virginia or because South Carolinians felt a greater sense of internal unity with the ranks of white South Carolinians. In November, Governor William H. Gist had recommended general militia reform and the continued funding of the state’s two military academies. Beyond this, the governor had offered no specific proposals.

Yet the Palmetto state was hardly insensible to the issue. Prior to Harpers Ferry, a “Military Commission” had been touring the state, holding hearings on how to reform the militia. South Carolina’s militia system was based on the idea that every citizen was a potential soldier. In December 1859, Colonel Lewis Hatch published a pamphlet extolling the virtues of the volunteer system, in which self-selected (and more motivated) men would sign up to serve in volunteer companies. Hatch recommended a system in which “a company [was] composed of only the willing, where discipline [came] easily, … where the men [were] knit by bonds of closest friendship, and their officers [were] such by their own choice.” With the current system based on the idea that every white man might serve, the militia system had a large number of potential recruits of limited capability. Having volunteer units would allow the state to focus training efforts and money, and would yield a smaller number of more capable companies.

The South Carolina legislature, however, balanced the need to increase security with the state’s tightfistedness in public appropriations. Legislators agreed to fund the state’s military academies, the Citadel and the Arsenal, at the same level as previous years. On the other hand,

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117 The Citadel in Charleston and the Arsenal in Columbia. Statutes at Large of South Carolina, vol.12 Containing the Acts from December 1850 to January 1861, (Columbia: Republican Printing Co., 1874), 640. The appropriation for the Citadel and the Arsenal (the military academy in Columbia) had been steady since 1854 at $30,000 per year.

118 South Carolina Military Commission, Minutes of the Military Commission Meeting in Greenville, South Carolina August 4, 1859, (Charleston: Steam Power Press, 1859).

the legislature appropriated $100,000 for “military contingencies,” twenty times the expenditure in previous years, and accepted the creation of a few new volunteer units.\textsuperscript{120} Despite having an unusually large enslaved population, and a large number of slaveholding families, South Carolina’s legislature opted for a moderate response to Harpers Ferry.

South Carolina editors entered the debate over the militia system. A pseudonymous author, Georgius, condemned those who said the militia system was useless, a humbug, and oppressive. “As for its use, let the event of Harpers Ferry answer. As to its humbuggery, it is because its officers neglect to perform their duty, and as to its oppressiveness, it is so only to those to whom any duty is oppressive.” Georgius urged his neighbors to let the militia “be cherished as the safeguard of our liberties.”\textsuperscript{121} The legislature at the previous session had approved a military commission to examine the state’s militia system and propose changes. On December 2, 1859, the \textit{Charleston Mercury} published the introductory essay to that commission’s majority report. Commission members A. M. Manigault, Lewis M. Hatch, and Jonathan Lucas noted that the existing system was inefficient, burdensome, and expensive. Militia musters were “regarded with ridicule.” To reform this system, they suggested a volunteer militia system, composed of well-equipped men who attended more frequent drills, and were fit for immediate service. Such a body would be ready “to repel foreign invasion, put down domestic trouble or uphold the laws of our state.”\textsuperscript{122} The \textit{Mercury} also printed extracts from the Military Commission’s minority report, which called for a “Select Militia,” but recommended less dramatic changes to the existing

\textsuperscript{120} South Carolina, \textit{Statutes at Large}, 12:641, and 658-659. The units created were company of light infantry and a corps of pioneers, reorganizing a regiment of rifles, and a company of “German Hussars,” (cavalry).


\textsuperscript{122} “Militia Reform,” \textit{Charleston Mercury}, December 2, 1859, p. 1, col. 3.
system. On these questions, the *Mercury* deferred to the legislature but emphatically called for action. “As to the relative force of the suggestions offered in the two reports, it is for our legislature to judge. Reform is unquestionably needed. Let us have it.” The *Charleston Courier* approved of the various reform proposals, without endorsing any particular set of recommendations. The *Courier* did report resolutions adopted by other state legislatures calling on the southern states to “unite for their common defense.”

Immediately after adopting similar resolutions, Delegate John H. Read, Jr., of Georgetown asked whether such measures could be adopted “without having bloodshed?” Read believed that defying the North would result in war, and, in that case, “where is the preparation? I have seen nothing, sir, that looks like the organization of your militia. I have seen nothing like a preparation of going to war.” The appropriation of $100,000 would be wholly inadequate. Equipping one regiment of 600 men, Read calculated, would cost $65,000. To defend the state, Read said, he “was willing to appropriate the whole treasury of South Carolina and credit also.” In the end, the South Carolina legislature opted not to enact militia reform, but stooped at appropriating $100,000 for the purchase or repair of militia weapons.

Governor Joe Brown had laid out a more aggressive security agenda for Georgia than Gist had for South Carolina. He recommended the suspension of the unwieldy and ineffective militia system and creation of a volunteer military corps in its stead. He wanted the volunteers to drill more frequently and more regularly, the establishment of a state foundry to provide arms, and a

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commutation tax to fund it all. The legislature appropriated $75,000 for arms and accoutrements for volunteer companies. Brown had noted that, in the past, volunteer companies had formed and asked the state for firearms. When they had discovered the state had no muskets with which to arm them, they generally ceased organizing. This new appropriation would begin to fill that deficiency.

Like Virginians, Georgians were active in the immediate aftermath of Harpers Ferry. In November and December 1859, new volunteer companies were formed in eleven counties.

Figure 2 depicts those counties in Georgia that formed volunteer units after October 1859. The region of the greatest activity was the piedmont and the northern and western border regions, not the more heavily enslaved coastal counties. The second map shows those Georgia counties which had active volunteer companies as of March 1860, and again the activity is concentrated in the piedmont and the northern and western border regions. Other than in the city of Savannah, volunteer units are absent from southeast Georgia.

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127 Brown, Message to the Georgia Legislature, 16-18.

128 Georgia, Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Georgia, Passed in Milledgeville at an Annual Session in November and December, 1859, (Milledgeville: Doughton, Nisbet and Barnes, 1860), 13.

129 Brown, Message to the Georgia Legislature, 17.

130 The companies formed were the Stewart Volunteers, Clayton Volunteers, Sumter Light Guards, Butler (Taylor Co.) Guards, Jefferson Blues, Franklin Mounted Volunteer Cavalry, Dahlonega (Lumpkin Co.) Blues, Union Invincibles, White Oak Mountain (Catoosa Co.) Rangers, Banks Guards and the Dalton (Whitfield Co.) Guards. Georgia, Acts of the General Assembly November-December 1859, 72-74.
Figure 2: Georgia Volunteer Unit Formation
As of February 1860, Georgia had fifty-seven volunteer companies.\textsuperscript{131} The map above shows the geographical distribution of the existing and newly-formed companies.

Georgia editors joined in the wave of military enthusiasm in that state, encouraging the formation of new units. One editor expressed pride in a new infantry company in Macon.\textsuperscript{132} A pseudonymous author, “Soldat,” pointed to the formation of another new volunteer company in Macon as revealing “the spirit which is abroad in the state.” Artillery companies were much more difficult to equip, but, the author noted, “it is impossible to estimate too highly the importance of such an arm, for protection from without and within, in case of difficulty.”\textsuperscript{133} In Athens, editors of the \textit{Southern Watchman} hoped “there is sufficient military spirit among our people to organize a first-rate company.”\textsuperscript{134} The editor of the \textit{Savannah Daily Morning News} urged men to join volunteer units, “The South, especially, should make soldiers of all her citizens. …The past should encourage us to rely on the future, and the ominous signs of the times should warn the southern states to neglect no means of securing the highest state of military efficiency.”\textsuperscript{135}

Some existing militia units were sources of community pride. Examples included the Washington Legion, the Chatham artillery, the Republican Blues, Savannah Volunteer Guards,

\textsuperscript{131} “Georgia Volunteer Companies,” \textit{Milledgeville Southern Recorder}, February 14, 1860, p. 1, col. 7.


\textsuperscript{135} “Military Gymnasium,” \textit{Savannah Daily Morning News}, April 28, 1860, p. 1, col. 6, quoting the \textit{Richmond Dispatch}. 

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the Oglethorpe Light Infantry, German Volunteers, the Irish Jasper Greens, the DeKalb Riflemen, and the Phoenix Riflemen.\textsuperscript{136} “As the glorious fourth approaches,” the editor of the \textit{Savannah Daily Morning News} wrote, “the military spirit of our community appears to be in the ascendant.” One can hear “the negro bands connected with our various volunteer companies.” The Savannah Volunteer Guards, the Republican Blues and the Oglethorpe Light Infantry drilled in Savannah. These were “three of our best volunteer companies—in fact, three companies of citizen soldiery of which any city in the Union might be justly proud.”\textsuperscript{137}

The movement to hold a statewide militia encampment gained momentum. One editor called for commanders of volunteer companies to meet in Macon. It would “result in great benefit to the military spirit in Georgia.” What is more, “it should be an agreeable duty on the part of our legislators to contribute to the encouragement of volunteer companies. They will form, in time of trouble, the nucleus around which are effective fighting and could rally.”\textsuperscript{138} Several militiamen have suggested a statewide military encampment in May that “would stimulate the military spirit of our citizens and be of great benefit to the companies already formed.”\textsuperscript{139} Fervor for expanding the militia appeared ubiquitous but perhaps public sentiment had not yet been thoroughly aroused. One editor supported holding the encampment in Athens because it “would arouse in

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\textsuperscript{138} “Notice to the Volunteer Companies of Georgia,” \textit{Milledgeville Federal Union}, November 16, 1859, p. 3, col. 1.

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this section of the state the now dormant military spirit of our people.” One Milledgeville editor had to announce with disappointment that “no place desires the encampment” so it was not held.

Like their neighbors to the east, Alabamians wrestled with the security implications of Harpers Ferry. One newspaper, in discussing possible legislation, pointed to the election of a Black Republican and another John Brown-like raid as the greatest dangers. Alabama politician Edward C. Bullock wrote to Clement Clay in late December 1859 that the state assembly was about to approve $300,000 to prepare for a future clash with federal authorities if Republicans won the election in the fall and a Republican president declined to act against future John Browns.

In February 1860, the legislature adopted “An Act to Provide for an Efficient Military Organization,” creating an 8,000-man “Volunteers Corps.” The act allocated a specific number of positions to each county. At least forty-four men were required to form a single volunteer company. The maximum size was eighty men. The members had to be at least eighteen years of age and able-bodied. Members would then be exempt from regular militia duty. Arguably the


141 “Military Encampment a Failure,” Milledgeville Federal Union, April 17, 1860, p. 3, col. 3.


143 Eric H. Walther, William Lowndes Yancey and the Coming of the Civil War, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006, 237. This was a theme to which secessionist Robert Barnwell Rhett and William Lowndes Yancey would return to over the next year. See Rhett’s speech on July 9, 1860 (Charleston Mercury, July 13, 1860, p. 4, col. 1-2) and Yancey’s speech in Washington August 1860 (Richmond Enquirer, September 25, 1860, p. 2, col. 4-6).

most important provision was that “the Governor shall immediately supply all the companies organized under this act, with arms and accoutrements.” The act did not distinguish volunteer military duty from patrol duty, but explicitly required volunteers to take part in patrols “when detailed.” To increase unit readiness, the volunteer companies were required to assemble “at least twelve times a year, for public parade and instruction” and the commander could impose fines for absences. To fund all this, the law imposed a tax and disbursed state money to the units raised. To procure weapons for the volunteers, the legislature authorized the governor to borrow $200,000.

Alabama also adopted two acts with an eye to the longer-term development of military leaders. First, the legislature established a military department at the University of Alabama. Second, the state enacted a law to provide for two cadets from each county to attend one of the two military schools in the state. The state paid each cadet $250 per year and upon graduation, each was obligated to spend a year in his home county training that county’s militia company. With these two provisions, Alabama would build a solid body of officers to lead the militia and volunteers in the future.

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145 The tax was 25¢ per year on every white man eighteen to forty-five (except members of the volunteer company). The money raised was to be disbursed at the rate of $5 per man in each infantry company and $7 per man if the volunteer organization was cavalry or artillery.


148 Alabama, Acts of Alabama, 91-92. The two military academies were at Glennville, in Barbour County and La Grange, in Franklin County. See also “Reorganizations of the Alabama Military,” New Orleans Picayune, March 3, 1860, p. 5, col. 6.

In response to Harpers Ferry, Alabama’s military policy changes outpaced its neighbors to the east. Alabama’s financial commitment exceeded South Carolina’s and Georgia’s. Despite Governor Joe Brown’s recommendations, Georgia military policy changes were less centrally-organized than Alabama’s. Mississippi’s response would be more robust than South Carolina’s, but not as large as Alabama’s.\footnote{J. Mills Thornton III, \textit{Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama 1800-1860}, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978). Thornton does not address the exclusion bill or the military volunteer bill.}

The Mississippi legislature met in November 1859. Governor McWillie had recommended some changes to militia laws and establishing volunteer companies, but the legislature adopted only some of them. First, in December 1859, Mississippi appropriated $150,000 to arm volunteers.\footnote{Mississippi, \textit{Laws of the State of Mississippi, Passed at a Regular Session Held in Jackson, November 1859}, (Jackson: E. Barksdale, 1860), 128-129. Hereafter referred to as “Laws of Mississippi.”} Heretofore, Mississippi’s main source of arms for the militia had been a small quota of firearms the War Department gave to each state annually. Behind the scenes, Louisiana senators John Slidell and Judah Benjamin wrote to Mississippi senators Albert Gallatin Brown and Jefferson Davis, “We consider the establishment of a southern armory at the earliest possible day a matter of high importance. We understand that very complete machinery for that purpose can now be purchased. If the opportunity be lost, it cannot be obtained without much delay.”\footnote{John Slidell and Judah Benjamin to Albert Gallatin Brown and Jefferson Davis, n. d. (probably January 1860), Folder 7, Legislative Petitions Box 14128, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi.}

In February, Governor John Pettus of Mississippi wrote the Ordnance Bureau of the War
Department that Mississippi was seeking a battery of six-pounder cannon and the purchase of four thousand renovated muskets from the federal arsenal at Saint Louis.\footnote{William Maynardier to Jefferson Davis, February 27, 1860, in Dunbar Rowland (ed.), \textit{Jefferson Davis, Constitutionalist: His Letters, Papers and Speeches}, (Jackson: Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1923), 202-203.}

In February 1860, the legislature passed an important measure that distinguished “ununiformed militia” from “volunteers” in several significant ways. Volunteer units, once organized, were not subject to the orders of ununiformed militia organizations. Citizens of Mississippi were required to work on roads and perform jury duty, but serving nine days per year in volunteer companies exempted men from these requirements. The state would pay every company $9 for each of its members who fulfilled the nine-day obligation. To attract the best officers, officers from volunteer units took precedence over militia officers of the same grade.\footnote{Mississippi, \textit{Laws of Mississippi}, 247-254.} Most importantly for the volunteers, these companies were to be armed at state expense during peacetime. In the event of “war, insurrection or invasion,” the governor could call these companies up for six months of service. Unlike in Alabama, the Mississippi act did not cap the number of volunteer companies or the total number of volunteers. Historian William Barney noted that the number of volunteer companies grew substantially in late 1859 and early 1860 and the new units flooded the governor’s office with requests for arms.\footnote{Barney, \textit{The Secessionist Impulse}, 112.}

The \textit{Daily Mississippian} tracked the progress of the volunteer militia bill and the generally favorable legislative response. On a test vote on appropriating $120,000 to arm the volunteers, the bill passed easily, and a disposition was manifested to appropriate a larger sum.\footnote{“The Military Bill in the House,” \textit{New Orleans True Delta}, November 30, 1859, p. 5, col. 2, copying an earlier story from the \textit{Daily Mississippian}. This report suggest that the legislature
Mississippi’s military response mirrored Alabama’s in several ways. Mississippi had appropriated a large sum of money for weapons, but less than Alabama. On the other hand, Mississippi appropriated more money for each company and did not cap the number of volunteer companies that could enroll. Mississippi spent less on weapons, but more on soldiers. Mississippi envisioned a potentially unlimited participation in its volunteer units but Alabama sought to create a more constrained and thus more elitist volunteer organization.

Louisiana’s lawmakers met later than other Deep South legislatures. On January 18, 1860, Governor Robert C. Wickliffe had addressed the legislature and made some recommendations. First, since Harpers Ferry was an attack on the entire South, rather than just an attack on Virginia, Wickliffe proposed that Louisiana appropriate $25,000 to help Virginia defray the costs of Harpers Ferry.\(^{157}\) He also favored reforming the militia system, and suggested building a depot for the state’s weapons and munitions.\(^{158}\)

The *New Orleans Picayune* noted that “there is a determination, now, to revive the old military spirit of former years and to restore this fine corps [to] its wonted efficiency.” On the question of state support for military organizations, the *Picayune* recommended that money be appropriated “to place the battalion in the proper condition for active service.” The militia units were in earnest. “Our militia seems determined not merely to ‘play soldiers,’” the *Picayune*


related, “but to study seriously that art which they may be called upon to practice in defense of their country.”

The *New Orleans Picayune* pointed out how members of the volunteer units of the city, “so long the pride of New Orleans,” had formed themselves, purchased uniforms and paid dues for the organization of the unit with the understanding that some of these expenses would be reimbursed by the state. The Louisiana legislature, in its two previous sessions, had declined to appropriate money for the support of volunteer units. The *Picayune* felt it was time for the state to meet its obligations. If Louisiana failed to appropriate money to support volunteer units, the state would “stand alone … among the southern states.”

The Louisiana legislature’s military policy changes were more modest than those of her more easterly neighbors. The annual report of the Adjutant General of Louisiana showed a state militia of 91,179 men. The Adjutant General noted that “not all of these regiments had been fully organized and scarcely any [were] properly armed.” Louisiana, in other words, needed immense quantities of modern percussion muskets.

The Louisiana legislature did address the state’s security needs in a limited way. For example, the “State Seminary of Learning” at Alexandria Louisiana was renamed the “State Seminary of Learning and Military Academy.” The legislature directed that instruction was to be given “in the military branches of science,” that “the students shall be styled ‘cadets,’” and that

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each parish will sponsor one cadet at the academy.\textsuperscript{162} The legislature appropriated $20,000 for
the academy. Louisiana also established a Central State Arsenal in Alexandria.\textsuperscript{163}

Louisiana’s measures differed from her neighbors in some significant particulars. For example, instead of exempting volunteers from other civic duties as Alabama and Mississippi had, Louisiana’s law exempted only firemen from militia duty, implying a civic hierarchy of
duties.\textsuperscript{164} Louisiana did not go beyond these modest military reforms.

Beyond militia reform, several states turned their attention to what some white southerners
considered a potentially dangerous population: white northerners. John E. Cook, one John
Brown’s accomplices, had lived in Harpers Ferry for months prior to the raid before revealing
himself as an enemy. That proved troubling for white southerners. Cook, a white northerner, had
posed as an inoffensive neighbor, while in fact, he harbored murderous intentions. Only when
the fighting broke out at Harpers Ferry had Cook revealed his true colors. Historian William
Freehling correctly points out that one of the keys to white southerners’ apprehensions about
security was the worry that white northerners might be “tampering” with their slaves.\textsuperscript{165} Southern

\textsuperscript{162} Louisiana, \textit{Acts Passed by the Fifth Legislature of the State of Louisiana at the First
Session Held and Begun in the City of Baton Rouge, on the 16\textsuperscript{th} of January 1860}, (Baton Rouge:
J. M. Taylor, 1860), 66-69. The state appropriated $15,000 to pay expenses every two years.
Hereafter referred to as “\textit{Acts of the Fifth Louisiana Legislature}.”

\textsuperscript{163} Louisiana, \textit{Acts of the Fifth Louisiana Legislature}, 148-149.

\textsuperscript{164} Louisiana, \textit{Acts of the Fifth Louisiana Legislature}, 76. The exemption did have limits.
The firemen were not exempt from militia duty “in times of invasion, insurrection or civil
commotion.”

\textsuperscript{165} Freehling, \textit{Road to Disunion}, 2:370; William C. Davis noted that, in the wake of Harpers
Ferry, rumors were rife of abolition spies trying to foment rebellion among their slaves, William
C. Davis, \textit{Rhett: The Turbulent Life and Times of a Fire-eater}, (Columbia: University of South
Carolina Press, 2001), 381.
state legislatures wrestled with the issue of northern outsiders in their midst, and especially its most common manifestation, the northern itinerant salesman, or peddler.

The Virginia General Assembly had considered such dangers. For example, a Pennsylvanian named Jesse Bean had been living in McDowell County in mountainous southwest Virginia. He had recently been “driven off” from Tazewell for “tampering” with local slaves and “inducing them to run away.” The *Richmond Dispatch* noted approvingly that the citizens of Bath County arrested a stranger for tampering with slaves. The people of Brunswick County held a meeting on December 27, 1859, at which they asked the General Assembly to revise those acts in regard to “persons tampering with slaves” and adopt “the most stringent laws.” The state legislature reacted to these appeals by establishing a “special police” to “apprehend any and all persons who may be found unlawfully tampering with any slave or slaves.”

South Carolina—whose political system centered on the state legislature—devoted significant attention to peddlers. In Abbeville, a man was arrested for tampering with slaves. Counties (or districts as Carolinians then called them) did not have much authority and had to request state action in many cases. Soon after the Harpers Ferry raid, the Orange District Grand Jury informed the state legislature that “we consider … northern book agents and northern and foreign itinerant pedlars [sic] as great nuisances and respectfully request that they be

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167 “Arrest of a Traveler,” *Richmond Dispatch*, January 23, 1860, p. 2, col. 3. This man aroused suspicion when he refused to say what his business was, and when pressed, told his inquisitors he was heading to South Carolina, when in fact, he was travelling west.

168 “Meeting in Brunswick,” *Richmond Whig*, January 10, 1860, p. 4, col. 4-5.

prohibited." Taking up the issue, the South Carolina legislature adopted an act regulating itinerant peddlers, requiring a license of $30 per year and the posting of a $3000 bond. South Carolina imposed a fine of $2,000 or six months in prison for those convicted of violating this law. Attempting to deal with the related issue of “incendiary material,” the legislature passed a law making it a high misdemeanor to write or distribute seditious material or utter seditious words.

The Georgia legislature tried to limit the presence of peddlers. In December 1859, Georgia levied a “tax on all goods peddled in this state, … by itinerant drummers.” This law required these men to pay a licensing fee of $100 per year per county and a tax of 1 percent on each hundred dollars of sales. One year later, the Georgia legislature reconsidered (perhaps on grounds of practicality) and repealed this act, at least as far as citizens of slaveholding states were concerned. The mania to monitor outsiders sometimes led to seemingly radical proposals. One Georgia legislator suggested allowing African-Americans to testify against white men accused of tampering with slaves.

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170 Orange District Grand Jury Presentment, November 16, 1859, Grand Jury Presentments, Box S165010, South Carolina Archives, Columbia, South Carolina.

171 South Carolina, Statutes at Large, 12:656.

172 South Carolina, Statutes at Large, 12:655.


176 “Georgia Legislature,” Augusta (Ga.) Chronicle, December 1, 1859, p. 1, col. 1. This measure was defeated “with few affirming votes.”
Historian Michael Johnson argued that slaveholders knew that bondage was tyranny. Slaveholders’ admissions that tampering northerners might induce otherwise contented slaves to revolt revealed that slaveholders knew this to be true. Men like T. R. R. Cobb said that if slaves were contented, then the slaves would not be susceptible to northern tampering demagogues. This is a bit of special pleading by Johnson. Slaveholders did not accept liberal notions of racial equality. On the contrary, most slaveholders argued the inferiority of African-Americans. They did not want outsiders whispering in the ears of their slaves stories of emancipation because slaveholders did not believe slaves were ready for freedom. Most nonslaveholding whites likely shared the views of their slaveholding neighbors on black inferiority, but their concern with tampering was a more practical one. They did not wish to be in the neighborhood of any slave uprising.

Alabama did not attempt to go after northern peddlers, but it did take steps to prevent unreliable outsiders from “tampering” with slaves. The *Montgomery Mail*’s editor observed that “never before has it been so necessary to exercise vigilance towards … those northerners who are disposed to tamper” with slaves. Even without legislative action, the people of Macon County organized a vigilance committee to enforce order among the slaves and to guard against “strolling Ossawatomies.” The legislature amended its law to allow patrols to apprehend any white persons suspected of “consorting with slaves or loitering about negro cabins under suspicious circumstances.” Suspects were to be brought before a magistrate for examination, and

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178 See, for example, the county resolutions adopted immediately after the election of Abraham Lincoln in Alan D. Candler (ed.), *The Confederate Records of the State of Georgia*, (Atlanta: Chas. P. Byrd, 1909) 1:58-156.

either committed to jail or discharged. Further, any three freeholders or slaveholders, in the absence of a patrol, would now have the power to detain suspicious persons.\textsuperscript{180} On February 25, 1860, the governor signed a bill increasing the taxes on itinerant salesmen in Alabama.\textsuperscript{181} The people of Alabama, however, hardly needed the forms of law to act against outsiders. There was a stir in Montgomery over a white man allegedly interfering with slaves. On a “full and careful investigation,” the vigilance committee reported that no evidence came to light necessitating any further action.\textsuperscript{182} Being brought before the vigilance committee may have been enough to convince the accused to move on or to be more guarded in his conduct. Two itinerant salesmen named Blake were expelled from Clayton, Alabama, for their “intimacy with negroes.” The salesmen later came back to Clayton seeking the endorsement of people from Clayton as to their good character. This time, the people of Clayton rode the two out of town on a rail and appointed a committee to see that they left the state.\textsuperscript{183}

Unlike Alabama, Mississippi did seek to control outsiders in the state. In November, 1859, when a group of ten out-of-state peddlers arrived in Abbeville, local citizens believed that they were “endeavoring to stir up insurrection” and arrested the lot and ordered them to leave the

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\item[\textsuperscript{180}] Alabama, \textit{Acts of Alabama}, 101.
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One paper urged measures stronger than exile, suggesting that those who incited slaves to rebellion ought to be burned at the stake. The *Semi-Weekly Mississippian* called itinerant peddlers a nuisance and urged the legislature to rid the state of “pestilent and seditious itinerant Yankees.”

A group of white men in Enterprise, Mississippi, asked the legislature to adopt a law “to prevent the missubordination [*sic*] of our slave population by travelling agents.” Eighty men from Lafayette County submitted a petition to the legislature, stating that “peddlers and hawkers infest the county and are an *intolerable* nuisance,” that these men “tamper with, and corrupt the slaves – the fruitful source and *trunk* of the *underground* railroad traffic.” The signatories sought the exclusion of peddlers through steep penalties.

The Mississippi legislature adopted a law to regulate itinerant peddlers. The legislature inserted a unique provision into the law allowing any white man over the age of twenty-one to inform on a peddler. If the peddler was convicted of tampering with slaves, the guilty party

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185 *Handsboro (Miss.) Democrat*, quoted in the *Vicksburg Whig*, December 14, 1859, p. 1, col. 9.


187 Folder 8, Legislative Petitions, Box 14128, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi. This petition is undated, but it is in the folder with petitions from January 1860 and addressed issues before the legislature during the winter 1860 session.

188 Folder 8, Legislative Petitions, Box 14128 Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi.

189 “Mississippi Legislature,” *Jackson Semi-Weekly Mississippian*, November 21, 1859, p. 2, col. 6; Later, Mr. Hudson introduced a bill to exclude “itinerant peddlers, school teachers, and other suspicious characters from the state,” see “Mississippi Legislature,” *Jackson Semi-Weekly Mississippian*, December 5, 1859, p. 2, col. 6
would pay an additional twenty-five dollars in fines, and the informant would pocket that money.\footnote{Mississippi, \textit{Laws of Mississippi}, 382.}

In Louisiana, Governor Wickliffe had recommended tightening controls on “northern agents” and on slaves “hiring themselves out.”\footnote{“Governor’s Message,” \textit{New Orleans Times Picayune}, January 19, 1860, p. 2, col. 4.} Probably seeing a double benefit, Wickliffe wanted the legislature to encourage domestic manufacturing, and tax northern manufactured goods to such a point “as will amount to prohibition.”\footnote{“Governor’s Message,” \textit{New Orleans Picayune}, January 19, 1860, p. 2, col. 6.} This would foster Louisiana businesses and discourage northern visitors. The legislature chose to deal with the problem by allowing parishes and cities to impose taxes on peddlers.\footnote{Louisiana, \textit{Acts of the Fifth Louisiana Legislature}, 65 (New Iberia) and 78 (Harrisonburg).}

Whites were not the only potential threat white southerners faced that winter. Free African-Americans presented white southerners with a different potential threat. They were neither white-and-free nor black-and-enslaved and thus challenged the southern binary world view. The laws pertaining to white people did not necessarily apply, nor necessarily did the slave code. Free African-Americans interacted with slaves, and could be conduits of ideas on emancipation, so the aftermath of Harpers Ferry seemed a good time to re-examine their status. Historian Ira Berlin noted that Arkansas had already expelled free African Americans in 1858, but John Brown’s raid added new impetus in other states.\footnote{Ira Berlin, \textit{Slaves without Masters: The Free Negro in the Antebellum South}, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 375.} The Missouri legislature, for example, sent to

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the governor a bill to expel or enslave all free African-Americans after a certain date. The *Richmond Enquirer* noted with *schadenfreude* a Cincinnati article complaining that, with an exclusion law being passed in Arkansas, Ohio would face a “coming horde” of free African-Americans.

Virginia, being the scene of Harpers Ferry, faced the threat most directly. In his December 1859 address to the legislature, Henry Wise had included recommendations on free African-Americans. These included a law regulating intercourse between slaves and free African-Americans. The governor cited market-places at which free African-Americans could buy from and sell to slaves as a source of trouble. These were venues for unsupervised interaction at which undesirable ideas might be exchanged as well as merchandise. Wise proposed that the legislature outlaw “secret and nightly associations of negroes, bond or free.” Night meetings could easily be subterfuges for insurrectionary plotting and a significant portion of the slave patrol regime was aimed at keeping slaves home at night. Wise also urged the legislature to correct the supposed evil of African-Americans hiring themselves to work in factories, especially in Richmond. Factory managers would not adequately supervise these laborers. Further, slaves would get used to earning wages and might eventually purchase their own freedom. Already almost half of Maryland’s and ten percent of Virginia’s African-American population were free. How long would it be before the former, and then the latter became free states?

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196 “The Coming Horde,” *Richmond Enquirer*, January 20, 1860, p. 1, col. 5. See also, *Staunton Spectator*, January 24, 1860, p. 3, col. 1. The *Enquirer* did not share why it concluded that free African-Americans driven from Arkansas would settle in Ohio. In any case, the “horde” would have been a small one. Arkansas had 144 free African-Americans by the time of the 1860 census, down from 608 in the 1850 census.
Wise, however, urged the General Assembly not to drive the free African-Americans out of the state. Setting aside for the moment the morality of the complete expulsion of all free African-Americans, removing 58,000 free African-Americans from Virginia, would have been economically disruptive. 3,500 free African-Americans lived and worked in the industrial center of Richmond, almost 3,000 in the commercial center of Norfolk, and 10,000 in the staple crop counties of Dinwiddie, Campbell, Isle of Wight, Nansemond, and Southampton. The Democratic-leaning Staunton Vindicator recommended the registration of free negroes, with six white men vouching for each free man of color. If a free African-American could not get six white men to vouch for this good character, then he might be expelled from the state.

Virginia seemed intent, if not on a blanket exclusion of free African-Americans, then at least on taxing them out of the state. The law of 1853 had placed a tax of one dollar on free African-American men between the ages of twenty-one and fifty-five, to fund colonization. In the session of 1859-1860, the legislature adopted an additional tax of eighty cents on free African-American men over the age of twenty-one. There was some question as to whether the latter tax was in lieu of, or in addition to, the former. The State Auditor of Public Accounts directed county commissioners of revenue to assess both taxes.

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201 Munford, *Code of Virginia*, 243. George Munford declared in his *Code of Virginia*, 520, that the one-dollar tax was linked to the state appropriations for colonization to Liberia. That
During the legislative session of 1859-1860, Tennessee, unlike Virginia, considered a blanket exclusion bill. This measure required that any African-American found in the state after July 1, 1860, to be sold into slavery by the county sheriff. This bill brought forth howls of disapproval from Tennesseans. A letter from Judge John Catron of Nashville expressed “outrage” over this “oppression and cruelty.” First, many African-American families had been free for generations. Indeed, Catron wrote, free Tennesseans of color had been able to vote under the Tennessee constitution of 1796. Next, Judge Catron pointed out the awkward fact that many of the free black residents of Tennessee were of mixed race, some were more white than black. The law would actually undermine security of the state as African-Americans enslaved by this law would “preach rebellion in the negro-quarters.” Finally, Catron wrote, such a law would be “odious in the North” and would “crush out” any friends the South had in the North.

Despite these arguments, the editor of the Nashville Union and American urged the adoption of the law. Free African-Americans were, the editor wrote, “a very objectionable class of people.” Whatever action Tennessee took should be “done with a proper sense of humanity to the blacks as well as of justice and protection to the whites.” The government of Tennessee was “intended for free white people, and not free negroes, and if the good of one requires the removal of the other, it is right and proper to do so.” Security of the white community, as far as the editor appropriation was to expire in 1858, and, in Munford’s view, so was the tax. Munford did note, however that the tax was still being collected and paid into the state’s general fund.


was concerned, trumped humanitarian considerations.\textsuperscript{205} The Tennessee House and Senate passed different versions of the bill and could not reconcile the versions, so the bill died.\textsuperscript{206}

Georgia, in the winter of 1859-1860, wrestled with this same question.\textsuperscript{207} Immediately after Harpers Ferry, an anonymous letter writer requested the Georgia legislature to adopt some measure for the removal of free persons of color from the state. “This unfortunate class of beings” in the author’s view, constituted “a dangerous element of population in the slaveholding states.” Even if a free African-American neither committed a crime nor had been guilty of insubordination, “his presence is a perpetual incentive to discontent among his brothers in bonds.” Not accepted by whites, he was envied by slaves. The author begged the legislature to balance the requirements of humanity and prudence. “The public good demands that the slave states be rid of this element, and the sooner it is done the better.”\textsuperscript{208}

The Georgia legislature declined to pass an expulsion measure but did attempt to prevent any additional free African-Americans from entering the state. If a white man accused any free African-American of coming into Georgia, the free African-American had thirty days to leave, or was sold into slavery. One half of the proceeds from such a sale went to the informer and one half to the county. Free African-Americans already in the state were exempt. Under this new law, the burden of proof was on the accused to prove he or she had not arrived since the passage of

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\textsuperscript{205}``The Expulsion of Free Negroes from the State,’’ \textit{Nashville Union and American}, December 8, 1859, p. 2, col. 1.
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\textsuperscript{207}The 1860 census shows 3,500 free African-Americans in Georgia, the largest concentrations of were in the counties in which were Augusta (490 free African-Americans) and Columbus (173).
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\textsuperscript{208}``Free Negroes,’’ Charleston Mercury, November 2, 1859, p. 4, col. 1, quoting a letter from the \textit{Augusta (Ga.) Dispatch}.
\end{flushright}
The law’s effect was to ensure free African-Americans remained where white men could vouch for their free status. Free people of color moving within the state ran the risk of being accused of being a new immigrant, and being sold into slavery.

White Georgians saw free blacks as anomalous, neither free nor white. Free African-Americans were required to pay a registration fee and those unable to pay were temporarily enslaved to any white person who could pay the fee. In the called session of November 1860, the Georgia legislature addressed the status of free people of color. On December 8, 1860, the House passed a bill to expel or enslave all free African-Americans. The bill died when the Senate adjourned without considering it, but the bill shows the extent of white fears of slave rebellion immediately after Lincoln’s election.

The Alabama legislature considered this issue as well. In January 1860, a representative from St. Clair County offered a bill excluding all free African-Americans from the state. The Montgomery (Ala.) Daily Confederation described the free African-American population as “an element of our society as worthless as dangerous.” The Montgomery newspaper reprinted the opinions of the Augusta (Ga.) Constitutionalist on the Georgia exclusion bill. Free African-Americans, wrote the Constitutionalist, were not desirable and “may become a dangerous element in our population.” While eventually the Daily Constitutionalist hoped, there would be

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211 Wallenstein, From Slave South to New South, 90-91; Mohr, On the Threshold of Freedom, 47-50.
212 Mohr, On the Threshold of Freedom, 48.
no free African-Americans in the state, at this time there was “no necessity for their summary or forced expatriation.”\(^{214}\) Alabama did not adopt the exclusion bill, but the legislature did adopt a law regulating the conditions under which a free African-American could become a slave and select his or her master.\(^{215}\)

Alabama did attempt to control free African-Americans through local tax incentives. In the law establishing the town of Montevallo, white men were taxed at a rate of three dollars per year, slaves aged between fifteen and thirty were taxed at one dollar and a half. Free African-American men in Montevallo were taxed at the rate of fifteen dollars per year, and free African-American women at ten dollars per year.\(^{216}\)

Mississippi’s attempts to control free African-Americans yielded some surprising results. In January 1860, the Mississippi legislature also debated (but did not pass) a bill to expel all free African-Americans from the state as of July 1, 1860.\(^{217}\) The Mississippi legislature received a number of petitions from free African-Americans requesting to become slaves to avoid expulsion. Joe Bind asked to “elevate his position” (according to his white scribe) from free person of color to slave because he was married to an enslaved woman and had children by her. Bind did not want to risk being sent out of the state, should the exclusion bill pass, so he requested that he become the slave of Robert Graham, “in order that he may be near to and with


his wife and children.”

One white man, Wilson Melton, writing for Wesley Moore, a free African-American, asked that Moore be allowed to remain in the state, or, if this should not be allowed, to become Melton’s slave. Moore was married to a slave woman and had had several children with her. Melton agreed to assume Moore’s debts (believed to be $500). If his debts should be less than that, Melton would give the residue to Moore “for his personal benefit.” Melton’s letter described Moore as “a negro of good character having been raised in this state and an inhabitant of this county since 1834.”

Some African-American women asked to be allowed to remain in the state with slave husbands. Roseanne, a Hinds County “free woman of color,” asked to be made the slave of Calvin Bolls. Ann Caldwell, “free woman of color,” being married to a slave man and having children, asked to be allowed to remain in the state, “having given ample security for her behavior & that she will not be chargeable to the state or county in which she be permitted to reside.”

Some free African-Americans cited medical reasons for not leaving the state. John Perret of Kemper County, Mississippi, originally of Anson County, North Carolina, had been apprenticed to Reverend Charles Haily and on account of his health wanted to become the slave of Reverend Haily, whom the petition referred to as “a kind master.” Other free African-Americans saw voluntary enslavement as a way out of legal trouble. A free African-American of Itawamba

218 Petition of Joe Bind, Folder 4, Legislative Petitions, Box 14128, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi.

219 Wesley Moore Petition, Folder 4, Legislative Petitions, Box 14128, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi.

220 Petition of Roseanne, Free Woman of Color, Folder 4, Legislative Petitions, Box 14128, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi. Roseanne’s family name was not given.

221 Petition of Anne Caldwell, Folder 1, Legislative Petitions, Box 14128, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi.
County named Fillmore was “convicted of assault and battery on a slave,” and asked to be made the slave of James Lindsay.\(^ {222} \) It is not clear whether these petitions were contingent on the adoption of an exclusion bill or not. The exclusion bill was not adopted, and it is unclear whether the legislature agreed to these petitions.

The “Negro Exclusion Bill” faced some opposition from white Mississippians. Local men submitted a number of requests for exceptions should the bill become law. Ten white men of Wilkinson County, Mississippi, on January 10, 1860, asked that the legislature exempt Peter Antoine, who had a slave wife and children and wanted to be allowed to “remain here on good behavior.” Petitioners from Pass Christian, in Harrison County “warmly approved” the exclusion law removing negroes with “evil designs and such as are unworthy and dangerous.” However, the petitioners suggested “some discrimination should be made.” These petitioners—about one hundred white men—asked that Rosalie Benoit and her extended family be allowed to remain in the state. Another petition using the same wording, was submitted by men from Shieldsborough, Hancock County, implying some form of coordination between the white men of different counties. Thirty-three white men of Hinds County asked that Howard Cash, “a free man of color,” and of advanced years, be allowed to remain in the State “with their children, all of them slaves.”\(^ {223} \) In the end, the Mississippi legislature, like those of the states further east, stepped back from the precipice of exclusion.

\(^ {222} \) Petition of John Perret, Folder 4, Legislative Petitions, Box 14128, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi; Petition of Billard Fillmore, Folder 4, Legislative Petitions, Box 14128, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi.

\(^ {223} \) Petition of the Citizens of Wilkinson County, Folder 1, Legislative Petitions, Box 14128, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi; Petition of the Citizens of Pass Christian, Folder 1, Legislative Petitions, Box 14128, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi; Petition of the Citizens of Hancock County, Folder 1, Legislative Petitions, Box 14128, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson,
Clearly, in the aftermath of Harpers Ferry, southern states wrestled with security issues. Virginia, with mixed success, requested the arrest and extradition of those Harpers Ferry raiders who had escaped. Pennsylvania, led by a Democrat, honored the request. Iowa and Ohio, with Republican governors, relied on excuses that Virginia Governor Letcher considered “frivolous” to decline the requisitions. The significance of the party affiliations of these governors was not lost on white southern observers. Having never known a Republican president, southerners asked themselves if a Republican president act like these Republican governors when faced with prosecuting violent abolitionists.224

Next, most southern states undertook measures to reform their militia. States that had neglected their militias for years awoke to the fact that they might need them on short notice to fight slave insurrections. Military preparations had dual roles, one publicly expressed, one whispered. Publicly, reinvigorating the militia meant preparing for possible slave insurrections and future John Brown raids. Military reform would also be necessary in the event that Union-saving efforts failed. Should secession be the sole remaining alternative, military readiness would answer the objections of anti-secessionists that disunion would only bring a disastrous war. John B. Minor, wrote his sons in December 1859, arguing against rushing to break up the

Mississippi; Petition of the Citizens of Hinds County, Folder 1, Legislative Petitions, Box 14128, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi.

Union: “if we are to dissolve this union, whether peaceably or forcibly, it will be absolutely necessary to make many preparations.”

Finally, southern states sought to control populations perceived to be dangerous. The policy options ranged from blanket exclusion of free African-Americans to taxing northerners coming into the South to controlling specific objectionable actions, such as selling liquor to African-Americans. After considering various measures, southern state governments still chose not to employ the most radical solution, exclusion, and settled for more modest policies. Free African-Americans, in some cases, occupied an essential role in southern society, which no doubt tempered the legislators. What remained elusive, despite all these measures, was a true sense of security.

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225 John B. Minor, letter to his sons, December 16, 1859, Folder 1.6, in the Blackford Family Papers #1912, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
CHAPTER 3: NATIONAL RESPONSES TO ANTISLAVERY VIOLENCE

[The Harpers Ferry raid] was as if an intrusive reptile should strike at the heel of a man who, suspecting nothing, was walking peacefully in his own garden, and [the snake] gets its own head bruised for its pains. But if the serpent was sent there by a neighbor, nay, a professed friend and brother, the whole aspect of the case is altered. … When the sequel has shown that this was but the straw that showed which way the wind was blowing, its importance can hardly be overestimated.1 Virginian Nathaniel F. Cabell, January 1860

In the winter of 1860, two Virginians exchanged letters with friends in New York on the state of the country. All four men were conservative. The southerners were not fire-eating secessionists and the northerners were not rabid abolitionists. The geographical distance between the two sets of friends was around 400 miles. The political differences were wide that winter and growing wider.

In February 1860, Arthur Lee Brent of Bremo Bluff, Virginia, who made his living as a planter in the Virginia Piedmont, wrote to his friend John G. Webb of Utica, New York.2 In a previous letter Webb had assured the Virginian that if a Republican president were elected, he would prove a “harmless sort of animal.” In response, Bent wrote,

[A]s far as I have been able to arrive at the state of public sentiment at the South, …the election of a sectional candidate to the presidency on the ‘one idea’ of an ‘irrepressible

1 Nathaniel F. Cabell to Henry Stephens Randall, 6 January 1860, MSS 2C1116a1, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

conflict’ between free and slave states, will be regarded by us as a *casus belli*. I doubt very much whether the South would wait for any overt act before proceeding to such extreme measures as the crisis might in her judgment demand.\(^3\)

Brent was no secessionist and hoped to see the Union preserved. Yet in this view, the South was the party that had been wronged and it was up to the North to remedy the situation.

I trust that all the conservative men of the North & East will come speedily to the rescue without respect to old party ties & sweep the *pseudo-Republicans* from the field throughout your section of the Confederacy. ... God grant that the banner of the Constitution & the Union may speedily be unfurled by the patriots of the North and the South, & that in November next, we may repose safely under its folds. ... But bear in mind, my dear sir, that *you at the North have to bear the brunt of the conflict*, so I pray you all to *be at & doing*.\(^4\)

The burden of defeating northern antislavery extremists, Brent felt, lay with northern conservatives. Safety and union, in Brent’s view, depended upon northern conservatives convincing their compatriots to turn their backs on the Republicans. Southerners such as Brent would see a Republican victory in November as an endorsement of antislavery violence, of which Harpers Ferry was but an example.

Along with his letter, Brent sent two articles from the *Richmond Whig*: “The Memorial of the Central Southern Rights Association of Virginia: Being a Statement of Grievances and Suggestion of Remedies Therefor,” and “The Wrongs and Remedies of the South.”\(^5\) On

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December 6, 1859, the Central Southern Rights Association of Virginia had held a meeting to present a memorial and recommendations to the state legislature. The Association listed four grievances. First, the non-slaveholding states have used the Union as “a bulwark from behind which to plot schemes and perpetrate outrages against our peace, our property, and our lives.” Second, the northern states had nullified the Fugitive Slave Law or rendered it unenforceable. Third, the northern people “preached against us hatred and malice, … even sedition and slaughter, rapine and anarchy.” This had encouraged incidents such as the Harpers Ferry raid. Fourth, the northern people had formed combinations to “invade our soil, and incite internecine and servile war,” and “midnight treason, murder, and robbery, have marked their footsteps in crime.”

The Association proposed remedies for the sectional tensions of the day. There were some conservative men in the North who disapproved of antislavery violence, but these few kept “doubtful silence.” The Association honored those northern conservatives who have “denounced, with manly eloquence, the actors in the bloody drama of Harpers Ferry, their aiders and abettors,” but there were simply not enough of them. “Either such men as these are in hopeless minority, or in the exercise of criminal neglect of the elective franchise, by giving countenance and control to wicked fanaticism, they have become responsible for its excesses.” It was impossible, the Association declared, “to satisfy an injured people by mere assurances.”

Meanwhile, “large masses of the northern people have promptly sympathized with and

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6 “From Richmond,” *Wheeling (Va.) Intelligencer*, December 12, 1859, p. 1, col. 4-5. The *Intelligencer* did not favor anything smacking of “Southern Rights.” The *Intelligencer’s* correspondent made some sport of the meeting, since it succeeded only in adopting the memorial and amending the organization’s constitution.

sanctioned, have applauded and commemorated, those fiendish acts as patriotic and heroic achievements.\textsuperscript{8}

The Association then suggested how this situation might be changed. The northern people should “rise in righteous wrath and hurl from their high places the panderers to public demoralization and crime.” Further, they should punish by “stringent and effective statutes … all machinations and combinations to invade our soil, or molest our peace, or disturb in any manner our domestic institutions.” Until these were done, white southerners had “no hope of quiet and safety” within the Union. “This condition of things cannot longer exist. … We are put in daily peril of our lives and in constant jeopardy of our property, and the pike of the assassin and the torch of the incendiary beset us in our fields and at our firesides.”\textsuperscript{9}

The Association then proposed a series of steps Virginians could take. First, the people must keep “a watchful eye upon the internal police and means of defense of the State.” Second, the legislature should pass “more stringent and summary laws … for the punishment of offences against slave property.” Third, the Association urged the adoption of regulations to secure the “arrest, expulsion, or other punishment, of all itinerant venders of merchandise.” The Association recommended that the state armory be refitted and the manufacture of arms and the munitions of war be renewed, and finally, the Association suggested new measures for equipping and organizing the militia.

The second article Brent mailed to Webb was an editorial from the \textit{Richmond Whig}. The author of this article, “J. R.,” placed greater blame for Harpers Ferry on Republicans and

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

abolitionists than on Brown himself. “Not the instigators or aiders only of robbery and assassination, but the inciters and approvers are – in their hearts – robbers and assassins,” J. R. wrote. The “subtle and jesuitical dogmas” of the “mock Republicans,” their “Irrepressible Conflict’ and ‘Higher Law’” had infected Brown and his men. To those who argued that Republicans and abolitionists were merely arguing abstract principles, J. R. countered that their “abstract principles [were] taught with an eye to practical results,” and the principles led “inevitably to scenes like those enacted at Harpers Ferry.” According to the editorial, “the Black Republicans, then, and the abolitionists, are justly identified,” one with the other. “If there be any difference in guilt between them, impartial justice will award the bad preeminence, rather to the learned teachers, than to their deluded converts.”

The fact that the normally conservative Whig was publishing such sentiments and men such as Brent were forwarding them to northern friends shows the increasingly tenuous support southern Unionism enjoyed.

Others in the Piedmont shared Brent’s views. Nathaniel Francis Cabell, a planter, wrote a long letter to his New York friend, Henry S. Randall, complaining about the weakness of northern conservative responses to John Brown and Harpers Ferry. Cabell admitted that there were “conservative, right-thinking men at the North.” Those men, however, had “remained, in a degree, passive, while the immense tide of calumny against the institutions and people of the South has been flowing apace.” And in this turmoil, northern conservatives had proven feckless.

The great wrong [of Harpers Ferry] is perpetrated; the multitude of sympathizers (who can tell how many conspirators there were among them) have had their say unrebuked;


11 Cabell (1807-1891) was a planter, owning 55 slaves in 1860, and was a sometime author. 1860 Census, Slave Schedule, Nelson County, Virginia, p. 77. Henry S. Randall (1811–1876) was an author and a former Democrat Secretary of State for New York.
and it is not until the South assumes an attitude that cannot be mistaken, and the pocket-nerve [*sic*] is touched, that our eleventh hour friends speak out, – in behalf of what? – that Union which … must be beneficial to them, however *offensive and dangerous* to us.”

Cabell, like Brent, hoped northern conservatives would be “at and doing.” He warned that southerners had noted the tardiness and feebleness of northern conservative responses to Harpers Ferry. Cabell’s neighbors found these professions of conservative sentiment unconvincing unless accompanied by action, and this had caused Virginians to rethink their commitment to the Union. Secession, Cabell warned, “once would have been viewed with horror by all.” This was no longer true because Harpers Ferry had made that prospect much less frightening.¹²

In response to the alarming state of the country, southerners, Cabell warned, had begun to lay the groundwork for southern independence,

> In view of the *presumed hostility of the North* … self-preservation, as well as self-respect, requires that we should render ourselves as far as possible independent. … [W]e must arm & discipline our people, nor must the military spirit ever again be allowed to become dormant as in time past, but we must be ready at a moment’s notice to assume an attitude of defense.

The South should economize its means, complete “internal improvements,” “encourage manufactures,” “invite skilled labor from abroad,” and “emancipate ourselves from that literary subservience to the North.” Cabell’s was a comprehensive program of preparation for independence. “If the South will now do this, the late outbreak [at Harpers Ferry], as an efficient stimulus to duty, will have proved a signal blessing.” Cabell warned his friend, that “[i]f with his diabolical principles, Seward shall at last prove triumphant, – then I fear our Union will have received its immedicable wound.”

The South, Cabell felt, would adopt an attitude of waiting, watching and preparing.

¹² Nathaniel F. Cabell to Henry Stephens Randall, January 6, 1860, MSS 2C1116a1, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.
I suppose that neither side is prepared for separation just yet. … But the South, I believe, will now in earnest set about the great task of getting ready, should it ever become necessary to act. … If necessary we can become Spartans; – & in more senses of the word than one. For, should it be requisite to compass a great public object, I believe there is no people on earth that would more cheerfully, or persistently, submit to great and unaccustomed sacrifices.”

As had Brent, Cabell told his northern friend that “the remedy … depends more upon the action of the North in the next two years, than on anything which the friends of Union can do here.”¹³ The initiative in the saving of the Union had passed from southern conservatives, according to Cabell. It now lay with northern conservatives. One final observation from Cabell to his New York friend presaged the bitterness of the conflict to come at the federal level over the question of antislavery violence. Cabell decried “the persistence of Northern Rep[resentative]s in voting … for one (John Sherman) as Speaker who has endorsed the infamous book of Helper, & the reception given to Seward, who, as is confidently believed here, was conversant of Brown’s schemes, & did nothing to discourage them.”¹⁴ Brent and Cabell, neither of them political officeholders, probably captured the attitudes of many white southerners as the election year began. These two men were still Unionists, but conditional Unionists. Southern anger at Harpers Ferry had not yet cooled when Congress met.

Harpers Ferry invoked reactions by actors at the national level. Southern political leaders in Congress delivered addresses in which they shared concerns over the meaning of Harpers Ferry and northern reactions to it. The publication, with Republican assistance, of Hinton Rowan Helper’s *The Impending Crisis of the South* and his *Compendium of the Impending Crisis of the

¹³ Nathaniel F. Cabell to Henry Stephens Randall, 6 January 1860, MSS 2C1116a1, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

¹⁴ Letter from Nathaniel F. Cabell to Henry Stephens Randall, 6 January 1860, MSS 2C1116a1, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia. The reference here was to Hinton Rowan Helper’s *The Impending Crisis*, which will be discussed later in this chapter.
South, which contained what some southerners considered to be incitements to slave violence, caused a great stir. The nomination for the office of Speaker of the House of a Republican who had endorsed Helper’s book increased sectional tensions. The Senate investigation of Harpers Ferry and the conspiracy behind it concluded actions at the national level that spring and failed to allay southern white fears of antislavery violence.

When Congress reconvened, tensions were still running high. On January 16, 1860, Senator Stephen Douglas offered a resolution instructing the Committee on the Judiciary to report a bill for the protection of each state from invasion by the inhabitants of another, to make a repetition of Harpers Ferry more difficult. The resolution was “laid over,” at the request of Senator John Hale of New Hampshire. North Carolina Senator Thomas Clingman took this as his opportunity to speak to his colleagues on the condition of the country and more specifically, the agitation of the slavery question.

It was, Clingman said, “eminently futile,” even “mischievous,” for southerners to condemn antislavery agitation, and plead for union and harmony. The Abolitionists in the North “reject with derision the suggestion,” that they abandon their crusade. Instead, Clingman said, they “become only more insolent.”

The North Carolinian took aim at both abolitionists and Republicans. William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips “stimulate[d] others to deeds of blood, [but] are so cowardly that

17 Clingman, Revolutionary Movement, 5.
they avoid all danger themselves.”18 Ralph Waldo Emerson had praised Brown and “was rapturously applauded.”19 At a November 1859 meeting in Natick, Massachusetts, abolitionists had raised funds for Brown’s family, and Republican Senator Henry Wilson was present and had not objected when blasphemous and incendiary resolutions had been adopted.20 Republican Joshua Giddings had proclaimed that no amount of abuse by northerners could spur southerners to resistance, and Republicans generally applauded the declaration.21 William Seward had declared that the South must decide whether its system of society shall be destroyed peaceably or by ‘violence.”22 Seward “fully endorsed the incendiary and revolutionary doctrines of the Helper book, as a large majority of the members of his party in the House have done.”23 The manner in which Republicans reacted to John Brown, with large meetings, sermons and prayers, the tolling of church bells, and the firing of cannon, revealed the Republicans’ true intentions. “Instead of the indignation and abhorrence which the atrociousness of [Brown’s] crimes ought naturally to have excited, there were manifestations of admiration and sympathy.”24

The long-term results of even moderate Republican policy of restricting slavery in the states where it existed, Clingman charged, would be a disaster for the South. Overpopulation would reduce every laborer “to the starving point, as it was in Ireland during the times of the famine.”

18 Ibid., 15.

19 Ibid., 13.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid., 12.

22 Ibid., 7. Emphasis in the original.

23 Ibid., 9.

24 Ibid., 12.
Such a disaster, Clingman emphasized, was the policy of “the most moderate and conservative” of Republicans.25

Clingman, in common with most slaveholders, claimed not to be worried about servile insurrections—unless outsiders tampered with the slaves. “The negroes left to themselves are harmless, yet, when assisted and led on by Europeans in St. Domingo, they destroyed the white inhabitants,” Clingman said.26

If the northern antislavery agitation continued, Clingman said he would embrace secession. “The federal system, instead of giving us protection, only affords our enemies immunities and facilities for attack,” Clingman charged. Instead of being a shield, “the Union has been converted into a sword to stab us the more deeply.”27 Even if most northerners did not openly endorse antislavery violence, the Union was not a safe place for the southern states, because northerners would not intervene to stop violent men like John Brown in their midst. If the South were independent, the threat of war might moderate northern abuses. Remaining in the Union after the election of a Republican, however, did not seem safe to Clingman. Clingman raised such fears when he said, “With a Black Republican President, a hundred such forays as John Brown's might occur in a single year.”28

Staying in the Union under a Republican administration, Clingman warned, would mean submitting to the “humanity of the conqueror.”29 Abolitionists’ recent use of violence, and

25 Ibid., 7.
26 Ibid., 14.
27 Ibid., 8.
28 Ibid., 14.
29 Ibid., 15.
Republican acquiescence in and applause for it, indicated how that “humanity of the conqueror” would manifest itself. If a Republican should win the White House in November, Clingman concluded, “it will become the high duty of the South, at least, to protect itself.”

On January 24, 1860, Georgia Senator Robert Toombs delivered a speech that helped set the tone for the coming presidential election and the secession crisis that followed. It is difficult to overstate the importance of Toombs “Invasion of States” speech because the Georgian, on this occasion, first laid out ideas that he would revisit in a speech urging his state to hold a secession convention as well as in Georgia’s secession declaration.

Toombs offered a strong condemnation of the Republican Party as an implicit and often explicit danger to southern security. First, Toombs condemned Republicans for their constitutional infidelity, particularly for their failure to comply with the “fugitives from labor” provision. Toombs asserted that whenever anyone tried to enforce that law in the North, Republicans winked at antislavery violence and sometimes were active participants. If Republicans assured white southerners they would suppress antislavery violence, said Toombs, they could not be trusted to honor their word. They “mock at constitutional obligations, [and] jeer at oaths. They have lost their shame [along] with their virtue.” Toombs charged that Republicans were saying to southerners, “let us be, brothers, or we will cut your throats—that is, if we can get your negroes to do it.”

30 Ibid., 16.

31 See, for example, Mason Tappan in the Burns case, Henry Wilson and John Andrew attending the November 1859 Tremont meeting for John Brown


33 Ibid., 92.
Toombs then addressed violence itself. He alleged that “great numbers of persons belonging to” the Republican party “are daily perpetrating offences against their confederate states.” Drawing upon the principles of international law, Toombs asserted that the people of one hypothetical country attacked the people of a neighboring country, the victims would have “good and sufficient causes of war.” Georgia’s problem, according to Toombs, was that northerners and southerners were members of the same Union. As such, the Constitution prevented southerners from protecting themselves. Georgia could not threaten war on Ohio, while both were in the Union. Like Clingman, Toombs maintained that his state’s secession would remove this obstacle.

Republicans, in Toombs’ view, had gone even further than the hypothetical country mentioned above. He said, the Republicans “daily attempt, by words and deeds, by counsel and pecuniary means, by the shelter and protection which they give, by law and without law, to the active participants in their schemes, to excite servile and civil war in the slaveholding states, and to subvert their institutions, to devastate the land by fire and sword.” Many of the Republicans’ speeches were “calculated and intended to excite servile war.”

Toombs argued that the Republican Party had adopted an incendiary approach to sectional questions. “Take away those who commit these crimes …, and there is nothing left of the party.” Toombs asked rhetorically who was responsible for “the treason, murder, and arson of John Brown?” The only people who “approved, defended, or palliated” Brown’s actions were Republicans. Toombs admitted that there were thousands of Republicans in the North who “loathe[d] and despise[d] this John Brown raid.” On the other hand, there were other thousands


35. This was an obvious overstatement. There were numerous northerners who excused John Brown that were not Republicans, because the Republicans were not extreme enough on slavery-related issues.
of Republicans who revered John Brown. “They tell us they condemn his acts, but admire his heroism.” According to Toombs, those who openly approved of “the treason, murder, and arson of John Brown, get no condemnation from their party for such acts.” The cumulative effect of all this caused Toombs to wonder, “According to the public law of all civilized nations, we have not just cause of war against our confederates?” Toombs warned his northern colleagues, “Give us the compact; give us peace. Disturb no longer our domestic tranquility.”

If “peace and safety are incompatible in this Union,” Toombs warned that the South would have to fight. “Liberty,” Toombs said, “is but the blood of the brave.” In 1850, Toombs pointed out, Georgia had declared that her connection with the Union depended upon the faithful execution of the Fugitive Slave Law and the full enjoyment of her rights in the territories. Since then, Republican-controlled state legislatures had encouraged defiance of the law. Georgia “waits only the success of the Republican party in the approaching presidential election.” When that day comes, Toombs challenged his fellow Georgians to redeem the pledge made in 1850. “The Black Republican party … every day commits acts of war against you; it has already compelled you to arm for your defense.” Georgians should not pause and listen to “treacherous jargon” about waiting for overt acts. “They have already been committed,” Toombs said. “Defend yourselves: the enemy is at your door; wait not to meet him at the hearthstone. Meet him at the door-sill, and drive him from the temple of liberty, or pull down its pillars and involve

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37 Michael P. Johnson, Toward a Patriarchal Republic, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 92; Freehling, Road to Disunion, 2:429.
him in a common ruin.”\textsuperscript{38} The “common ruin” theme was one of the most quoted portions of the speech when it was reported across the South.\textsuperscript{39}

The speech elicited significant, albeit mixed, responses. The \textit{Weekly Raleigh (N.C.) Register} noted Toombs’ allegation that the Republicans were responsible for Harpers Ferry and agreed that overt violent acts against southerners had already occurred. The election of a Republican president would prove there was a general northern endorsement of Republican principles.\textsuperscript{40} The \textit{New Orleans Daily Picayune} concurred in Toombs’ policy of not waiting for an overt act but seceding if a Republican president was elected. Better to leave the Union “than to live as slaves and die at the will of northern Abolitionism.”\textsuperscript{41}

Yet at this point, many southerners were not quite ready to unify around Toombs’ call to action. The Opposition-leaning \textit{Augusta (Ga.) Chronicle} described Toombs as a “naturally turbulent and seditious” person. The editor also pointed out how in September 1859, Toombs had assured citizens of Augusta that the South was in a better position to have her rights protected than ever before. Then, in January 1860, the Georgia senator realized that the South was “face to face with a revolution.” Yet the personal liberty laws Toombs decried had already been in place in September 1859 when he had spoken in a more moderate tone. The \textit{Chronicle} called out Toombs on the inconsistency and sensed he was merely a politician who feared losing office and supported secession as a means of holding onto power. In any case, the \textit{Chronicle} doubted the wisdom of going into an election having declared beforehand that one would not peacefully

\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Cong. Globe}, 36\textsuperscript{th} Congress, 1\textsuperscript{st} Sess., Appendix, 93.


\textsuperscript{40} “Congressional,” \textit{Weekly Raleigh (N.C.) Register}, February 1, 1860, p. 1, col. 3.

abide an unfavorable result. Historian William Y. Thompson called the September 1859 speech “the high water mark” of Toombs as a moderate statesman. Toombs’ biographer Ulrich Bonnell Phillips pointed out that between Toombs’ optimistic September 1859 speech and his confrontational January 1860 speech, the Harpers Ferry raid made all the difference.

Even in the Upper South, opinion appeared to be shifting. At the end of January Senator R. M. T. Hunter of Virginia delivered yet another response to Senator Douglas’ resolution. Hunter noted that antislavery agitation had been going on since the Missouri compromise and asked his colleagues, “is it surprising that these bitter seeds of sectional hate and alienation, which have been sown so industriously, should have borne their bloody fruit in the raid of John Brown?”

Republicans, according to Hunter, had not done enough to arrest the agitation. In none of the states controlled by the Republican Party had the governors or the legislatures made any move to punish and repress such attacks in the future.

If Republicans did not change their course, the Union was in peril. Hunter introduced what would soon become a popular theme, drawing an analogy between states of the Union and states under international law. France and Great Britain were in an alliance at the time, the entente cordiale. “Suppose the French,” Hunter hypothesized, “were to send such emissaries as this

42 “Speech of Mr. Toombs in the Senate,” Augusta (Ga.) Chronicle, February 15, 1860, p. 2, col. 1.
[Hinton Rowan] Helper into the East Indies to stir up civil strife, to produce domestic
insurrection, to sow the seeds of dissension between Europeans” and East Indians. Suppose the
French government would make their diplomatic communications with the British government
“the means and medium of taunts and insults, … how long would the entente cordiale last? How
long before either shore of the channel would resound with the roar” of cannon? Applying this
reasoning to the American situation, Hunter asked if it was to be supposed “that similar and
worse grievances could be kept up here without leading the consequences of severance and
separation on the part of the South?” Membership in the same Union ought to breed fraternal
relations between states, not the hostility Hunter saw between the North and South.47 Beyond
providing members an opportunity to deliver speeches, nothing came from Douglas’ proposal for
a federal law to prevent invasions of the states. Instead several speakers had made reference to
another threat of antislavery violence (and southern division), this time one that emanated from
an unexpected source.

Hinton Rowan Helper, the man Hunter had mentioned in his speech, was a North Carolina
opponent of slavery. Helper had written a book that quickened the pace and raised the intensity
of intersectional conflict.48 Actually, he wrote two books in the late 1850s: The Impending Crisis
of the South: How to Meet It (1857) and Compendium of the Impending Crisis of the South

47 “Speech of Hon. R. M. T. Hunter on Invasion of States,” Milledgeville (Ga.) Federal

48 A North Carolinian by birth, a member of the landed gentry and son of a slaveholder,
Helper grew to be controversial champion of the antislavery cause and a committed opponent of
the planter class. David Brown, Southern Outcast: Rowan Hinton Helper and the Impending
Crisis of the South, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 14-20. See also, Fred
Hobson, Tell About the South: The Southern Rage to Explain (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State
(1859). *The Impending Crisis*, was so strident in its condemnation of slavery, that it came to the attention of some abolitionist Republicans who asked him to draft a shorter, cheaper and less vitriolic version of the work, with a view to publishing 100,000 copies to aid Republicans in the 1860 elections. Helper’s *Compendium* moderated some of the most heated rhetoric, but the general outlines of the argument stayed the same: that slavery had held the South back economically and socially and that non-slaveholders should unite politically with northern opponents of slavery to rid the country of the institution. Helper used statistical comparisons to demonstrate that slavery had retarded the economic growth of the South.

More striking (and alarming) to many white southerners was Helper’s appeal to class interests, pitting non-slaveholders against slaveholders. In verbiage reminiscent of Charles Sumner’s, Helper wrote that the slaveholding minority worshipped the “black god of slavery.” This god’s “fanatical adorers, the despotic adversaries of human liberty, are concocting schemes for the enslavement of all the laboring classes.”

Not all non-slaveholders were in the same class, however. 347,525 non-slaveowning “slave hirers” formed “an army for the defense and propagation of slavery.” Helper urged his fellow non-slaveholding whites to join together in opposition to slaveowners and slave hirers. Fielding an army “three times as large … for [slavery’s] utter extinction” should be easy. If slaveholders

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50 Helper, *Impending Crisis*, 102-103; Helper, *Compendium*, 55. The *Richmond Dispatch* denied the validity of Helper’s argument that slaveholders and non-slaveholders held incompatible interests. Three quarters of the volunteer militiamen sent to Harpers Ferry to guarantee John Brown’s execution, according to the *Dispatch*, were non-slaveholders. “Non-slaveholders,” *Richmond Dispatch*, December 1, 1859, p. 2, col. 2.

51 Helper, *Impending Crisis*, 149. Helper referred to slave hirers as “lick-spittles.” Helper kept the figure, *Compendium*, 73 and 74, but eliminated references to “lick-spittles” from the *Compendium*. 

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sought to leave the Union, Helper threatened them with violence: “If, by any means, you do succeed in your treasonable attempts to take the South out of the Union to-day, we will bring her back tomorrow—if she goes away with you, she will return without you.”

Helper talked openly of the dangers to slavery and reminded his readers of the Virginia debates on slavery after the Nat Turner rebellion. In 1832, Virginia Delegate Charles James Faulkner had warned his colleagues that if they did not take action on slavery, “the throats of all the white people of Virginia will be cut.” Helper recalled the debate from this period of insurrectionary fear in Virginia to convince white southerners, whether they owned slaves or not, of the danger now before them. In one of the most scandalous and oft-quoted passages of the book, Helper seemed to be endorsing antislavery violence. “The negroes,” Helper observed, “in nine cases out of ten, would be delighted with an opportunity to cut their masters' throats.” Then Helper threw down the gauntlet to southern slaveholders: “It is for you to decide whether we are to have justice peaceably or by violence, for whatever consequences may follow, we are determined to have it one way or the other.” Slaveholders had to choose between being “the

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54 Helper, *Impending Crisis*, 149. This passage was eliminated from Helper’s *Compendium*; “The Crisis at the North,” *Athens (Ga.) Southern Banner*, January 19, 1860, p. 2, col. 6. The editor called Helper “a renegade thief,” a reference to money Helper stole from his employer while in North Carolina.
victims of white non-slaveholding vengeance by day, and of barbarous massacre by the negroes at night.” If slaveholders did not give Helper and his colleagues what they wanted, they would be “instrumental in bringing upon yourselves, your wives, and your children, a fate too horrible to contemplate.” The resulting massacre would surpass “the massacre of St. Bartholomew” in which thousands had been murdered. If slavery was not abolished, “the South shall have furnished a more direful scene of atrocity and carnage,” Helper warned.55

Impressed by Helper’s strong condemnation of slavery and perhaps carelessly ignoring the political ramifications, abolitionists and then Republicans gave his book their endorsement. An advertisement in the Republican New York Tribune in June 1857 announced the book’s publication.56 This was followed a few weeks later by a four and a half column summary of Helper’s argument.57 The book sold well, reaching sales of thirteen thousand copies in 1857.58 In December 1858, a group of Republicans published a card in the New York Tribune, decrying the fact that “the true principles of the Republican party” were not known to people in the South and suggesting that Helper’s book might help remedy that.59 In March 1859, six months before Harpers Ferry, in the Brooklyn Evening Star and New York Tribune, abolitionist William H. Anthon was soliciting donations to have 100,000 copies published to spread these principles,

55 Helper, Impending Crisis, 128. This passage was also eliminated from Helper’s Compendium.


especially in the South.\textsuperscript{60} The \textit{New York Tribune} declared that \textit{The Impending Crisis} was being “commended by many wise men as the best \textit{Republican} text book” and that its circulation “will be a signal and seasonable preparation for a Republican triumph in 1860.”\textsuperscript{61} By December 1859, six weeks after the Harpers Ferry raid, newspapers listed the names of sixty-eight Republican members of the House of Representatives who had endorsed Helper's \textit{Compendium}.\textsuperscript{62} According to reports in southern newspapers, Republican Governor Edwin D. Morgan of New York, for example, contributed $100 toward the distribution of 100,000 copies, and Republican editors Thurlow Weed and Horace Greely each donated $100.\textsuperscript{63} Benjamin Wade declared on the Senate floor that he had “looked [Helper’s book] over and found nothing objectionable in it.”\textsuperscript{64}

White southerners were appalled by Helper’s book and equally alarmed by the Republican endorsements. Robert Toombs of Georgia noted that the Helper book “advises the overthrow of our government by force.”\textsuperscript{65} Despite this, one Republican Senator had joined the sixty-eight


\textsuperscript{63}“War Declared against the South,” \textit{Wilmington Daily Herald}, December 3, 1859, p. 2, col. 1.


Republican Representatives in praising the book. Virginian Andrew Hunter asked, “will it be strange if the northern emissary who goes in our midst, carrying Helper’s book, … should soon be followed by others who bear with them Sharpe’s [sic] rifles and the pike?” If the teachings of Helper’s book were carried out, “it can lead to nothing else than the repetition of such assaults as those that we have lately witnessed.”

Southern anger generated by the Helper book fed directly into the next political crisis: the controversy over the election of a new Speaker of the House of Representatives. Among the endorsers of the Helper book had been John Sherman of Ohio. Sherman had come in second overall in the first round of voting for Speaker so the Republicans fastened on him as their candidate. Historian David Potter described John Sherman as a “thoughtful, moderate” man who was not a militant on the slavery question.

Many southern representatives, however, disagreed and refused to vote for Sherman because of his endorsement of Helper’s book. Representative John B. Clark of Missouri offered a resolution to the effect that “no member of this House who has indorsed and recommended”

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68 Congressional Globe, 36th Cong., 1st Sess., 2.

69 Potter, Impending Crisis, 386.

70 Rep. John B. Clark of Missouri Congressional Globe, 36th Cong., 1st Sess., 3. Clark’s resolution was not adopted, but this was the operative policy of southern members of the House until a compromise Speaker was elected.

70 Virginia General Assembly, Report of the Joint Committee on the Harpers Ferry Outrages, (Richmond: NP, 1860), 3
Helper’s *Impending Crisis* was “fit to be Speaker of the House.”\(^{71}\) William Crawford of Georgia noted that both William Seward and John Sherman had endorsed the Helper book which “calls on non-slaveholders of the South to put down slavery with violence and bloodshed.” This caused Crawford to give up hope for peace in the Union.\(^{72}\) Andrew Hunter, a senator from Virginia, said the Republican party had chosen John Sherman as its candidate for Speaker of the House, “a man who had endorsed a book which preached precisely what John Brown practices,” which recommended that they should “get up servile war and dissension between the different classes of whites, in order to disturb our peace.”\(^{73}\)

Near the end of December, Virginia Representative Roger A. Pryor addressed the House on the speakership controversy and declared the nomination of Sherman in itself, “a proclamation of war.” The Ohioan had clearly been guilty of “complicity in a most mischievous and treasonable publication.” Sherman was, Pryor said, “a man whose mere candidacy is an affront to southern feeling and a challenge to southern resistance.”\(^{74}\)

The Republican Party, Pryor argued, was the problem and Sherman a symptom. The Republicans had applied the spark of encouragement to violent antislavery action, and “then affect[ed] astonishment at the explosion,” the Virginian charged. “After sowing the country broadcast with their dragons’ teeth publications of violence and sedition, they are amazed at the

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\(^{71}\) *Congressional Globe*, 36th Cong., 1st Sess., 3.


irruption of armed men into Harpers Ferry.” In their drive to abolish slavery, Pryor reasoned, Republicans were deceptive. They were “unscrupulous in the employment of means, and pliable under the pressure of circumstances.” For example, in the wake of the Harpers Ferry raid, Republicans had trimmed their sails and disavowed violence. “Whenever the South betrays symptoms of resentment under aggression, and a perception of their purpose, this antislavery party have recourse to moderate counsels and protestations of innocent intention. … The Black Republican party are quick to renounce their violent policy, and to affect the most pacific purposes.” This was, according to Pryor, mere subterfuge. “The South feels the sting of attack and insult in her bosom; her indignation is aroused, and her energies collecting for immediate and effectual resistance.” Republicans then “renounce all their principles, repudiate all their pledges, disclaim all their objects, disavow all their connections, and appear on the stage of public affairs in a decent disguise of respectable patriotism.”

Pryor felt certain this was merely a tactical maneuver to lull southerners into accepting a Republican president. “The mailed hand is gloved for the moment. … The beast sheathes his claws, and we are fondled with an affectionate and innocuous caress.” The Virginian urged southerners not to be fooled by Republicans’ pacific appearances in the wake of Harpers Ferry. The true nature of the Republicans, Pryor argued, was not well hidden, if one examined them closely. “They put forward the gentleman from Ohio to represent them as innocent in intention and inoffensive in action; [yet] among them is the member from New Hampshire [Mr. Tappan], who justifies the assassination of officers engaged in the recovery of fugitives from labor.”

75 Pryor, Principles and Policy of the Black Republican Party, 5.

76 Pryor, Principles and Policy of the Black Republican Party, 5. Mason W. Tappan, a New Hampshire Republican, was an endorser of the Helper book. In May 1854, during the Anthony Burns case in which Deputy United States Marshal James Batchelder had been killed, Tappan had told a crowd that “he was glad Batchelder was shot; that he hoped the mob would knock
Northern actions demonstrated that Republicans could not be trusted with the control of the federal government. The fugitives from labor clause had been a “solemn stipulation of the constitutional compact.” Pryor asked, “how does the North redeem this obligation?” In answer to his own question, he pointed “to their open nullification of the law in eleven of the northern States; to their violent resistance of its execution.” The Union had been formed “to establish justice and insure domestic tranquility," and yet the people of the southern states “are pillaged by compatriots, while fellow-citizens incite our slaves to insurrection!” Such supposed incitement had not yet produced an insurrection, but that hardly comforted Pryor. If the Constitution of the United States were offered up again to the country for ratification, the South, he believed, “would refuse to accept the Constitution, not because of dissatisfaction with its principles and provisions, but for the reason that no faith is to be reposed in her northern confederates.” This was another theme secessionists would resort to over the next year to convince their fellow southerners to embrace disunion. No deal could be made with northerners, because they would no more honor any new agreement they made than they had honored the Constitution.

Pryor then turned to one of the South’s great political enemies: William Henry Seward. The New Yorker’s theory of the "irrepressible conflict" asserted that the sectional controversy was “inevitable and incurable, and must go on with increasing fury until one or the other principle be vanquished and exterminated.” Republicans had taken the odd tack of defending Seward by arguing that his statements were "speculative opinions," which Seward will not carry into the administration of the government. In other words, Pryor explained, “all the earnestness and

down every stone in the courthouse if the fugitive was not released; that he hoped to God they would shoot every government officer who interfered with them, and that he (Tappan) was ready to assist them in doing so.” “Sentiment of a Black Republican Member and Signer of the Helper Manifesto,” Raleigh Weekly Standard, January 4, 1860, p. 3, col. 4. Emphasis in the original.

intensity of purpose which he now affects, is merely the mask of an unscrupulous demagogue.”

If Seward won the presidency, Pryor felt sure that he would not administer the government in the spirit of the Constitution. “Augustus Caesar [had] employed a servile senate to consolidate his despotism.”78 The same adherence to the forms of the republic without its spirit would play out in America, Pryor felt, and the South would suffer for it.79

If William H. Seward should be elected to the Presidency, …he will discover that he has evoked a spirit which he cannot allay; that he has roused a storm which he cannot control. … Impotent would be the attempt of Seward to still the rage of the antislavery fanaticism and to chastise its fury into a decent subordination to the restraints of the Constitution.80

As for how the South should react, Pryor said, “it is the last resource of oppressed and humiliated nationalities, like the Israelites of old, to gather up their household gods and wander in quest of some new home and some happier destiny.” The people of the South, however, were resolved “to vindicate their rights in the Union, peaceably if possible, by force if necessary.” Pryor closed with a warning to his northern colleagues: “Recollect the effect of the explosion at Harpers Ferry; remember with what alacrity the people of Virginia answered to the call of patriotism; … with what ardor and unanimity her gallant sons precipitated themselves in military array on the point of expected attack, ready and resolute to vindicate the honor of the South from the threat of insult or the shadow of aggression.”81 Pryor was sure that any future attack would be met with a similar spirit.

78 Pryor, Principles and Policy of the Black Republican Party, 11.

79 This tension between compliance with the forms of the republic but violations of its spirit would becoming increasingly important over the next year as devoted secessionists attempted to convince their more reluctant neighbors to secede, despite the fact that Abraham Lincoln had done nothing unconstitutional.

80 Pryor, Principles and Policy of the Black Republican Party, 11.

On January 25, 1860, Virginia Representative Alexander Boteler, in whose district Harpers Ferry was located, reinforced Pryor’s points but in a much less abstract way. Boteler described the Republicans as “a band of mutineers” determined to take possession of the vessel of state. “The infamous abolition outrage” at Harpers Ferry was deeply personal for Boteler. “I was present at that horrible Harpers Ferry raid; I was a witness to that abominable outrage; I saw the blood of my friends shed in the streets of Harpers Ferry.”82 For Boteler, the sense of betrayal was equally palpable because of the area’s revolutionary past.

The county in which I live — that county selected by John Brown for his bloody raid — … was the very first in all the South, to send succor to Massachusetts [in 1775]. Well, the visit has been returned! John Brown selected that very county, whose citizens went so promptly to the aid of the North when the North needed aid, as the most appropriate place in all the South to carry out the doctrines of the ‘irrepressible conflict.’

In Boteler’s view, the leaders of the Abolition party “are as much the murderers of my friends at Harpers Ferry as were old John Brown and his deluded followers.” The “poor wretch,” Edwin Coppoc, had been taught that the slaves were oppressed and ready to rise up. Before his execution, according to Boteler, Coppoc realized he had been misled. Who was responsible for misleading this young man? “On whose head is the blood of Coppoc?” Of the Harpers Ferry insurgents, none except John Brown had been born before 1830, and thus they all had grown up “under the influence of abolition preaching.” The Virginia committee and the Mason committee in the Senate investigating Brown’s raid would “prove that the agitation of the slavery question by the great leaders of the Republican Party has been the direct cause of the Harpers Ferry invasion.”

As for the speakership, Boteler beheld “with wonder and amazement” that the Republicans

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had nominated Sherman despite his “connection with the Helper Book,” that “most infamous publication.” Sherman had signed the recommendation of the Helper book at the solicitation of a friend, Boteler admitted. Sherman had been assured that “there would not be … anything objectionable” in it. Yet, despite subsequent revelations, Sherman still had not renounced the book. “He allows the inference to be made” in Congress, Boteler said, “that he does not endorse this most infamous Helper book.” Republican members had privately assured Boteler that they would rise and denounce the book, if Representative Clark would withdraw his resolution that no endorser of Helper should serve as Speaker. Clark had declined.\(^3\) Nevertheless, in Boteler’s view, Sherman’s association with “this abominable Helper book” disqualified him from the speakership.\(^4\)

On the other hand, Boteler praised Pennsylvania’s Democratic Governor William Packer for having done “his duty fully, fairly [and] faithfully in returning to Virginia the fugitives from her justice, and that he was sustained by the people of Pennsylvania in that patriotic act.” Boteler held that there was still hope for the Union, if men like Packer still held power.

Boteler had decided opinions as to what should be demanded of other northerners. Republicans must “disband your antislavery party and take down your piratical flag!” Boteler did not articulate how this separation of the Republican Party from antislavery violence could be achieved in such a manner as would satisfy him.

As for his home state, Boteler’s views were equally strong. Virginia, Boteler said, had determined:

\(^3\) Charlotte (N.C.) Democrat, January 31, 1860, p. 3, col. 4.

that this shall be the end of it: that this slavery agitation shall cease, so far as she is
concerned; that her territory shall be protected from a repetition of that bloody raid. She
has taken some indemnity for the past and means to have security for the future. … She
has buckled on her armor, and her borders are now bristling with bayonets, for she feels
compelled to take the guardianship of her rights and her honor into her own hands. … We
must depend upon our own right arm to protect our state from further outrage, so long as
there remains a ‘Republican’ organization in Congress and the country. 85

Boteler’s speech shows the intensity of southern sectional feeling that winter.

The Republicans had not been very successful in concealing the party’s ties to Helper’s
more extreme rhetoric. Offensive passages from the 1857 version of Helper’s Impending Crisis
had been excised from the 1859 Compendium, but the Republicans had endorsed Helper’s
Impending Crisis before the Compendium was published. 86 Sherman, in his own defense, merely
said that he had endorsed the book without having read it. 87 Seward had denied himself even this
poor excuse. In one version of the Compendium, William Seward had enthusiastically endorsed
the book in these terms: “I have read the Impending Crisis of the South with deep attention. It
seems to me a work of great merit, rich yet accurate in statistical information, and logical in
analysis.” 88 In subsequent printings, of the Compendium and The Impending Crisis of the South,
Seward’s endorsement was removed. 89

85 Boteler, Organization of the House, 6.

86 The famous list of sixty-eight Republican members of Congress who had endorsed
Helper’s book was first published in March 1859, before the more moderate Compendium would
be published in May 1859, when the publisher printed 1,000 “sample copies.” Brown, Southern
A print run of 25,000 copies occurred in November 1859 (i.e. a month after Harpers Ferry).
Brown, Southern Outcast, 151.

87 Potter, The Impending Crisis, 388.

1, emphasis in the original; “The Indorsers [sic] of the Helper Book,” Louisville Daily Courier,
Dishing out a large measure of guilt by association, southern editors went to great lengths to connect Hinton R. Helper, John Brown, and the Republican Party. Macon (Ga.) Weekly Telegraph condemned “John Brown and his adjutant Helper.”90 Virginia Senator R. M. T. Hunter decried the fact that the Republican Party nominated for Speaker “a man who had endorsed a book which preached precisely what John Brown practiced.”91 The relationship between Helper and Brown was not coincidental. “Helper’s book,” claimed the Newbern (N. C.) Daily Progress “assisted very materially to bring the projects of old John Brown to a head, by persuading him that both the negroes and the non-slaveholding whites were ripe for rebellion, and that he [Brown] only had to raise his flag, in order to secure the assistance of the large majority of these classes.”92

From this premise, connection to the Republican Party was not difficult to establish, at least in white southern minds. Helper had advocated violence, and William. H. Seward had been among those endorsing Helper (probably without reading The Impending Crisis closely


89 “Helper’s Crisis – Seward’s Endorsement Suppressed,” Fayetteville (N.C.) North Carolinian, February 18, 1860, p. 1, col. 2, quoting the Pennsylvania Star. A. B. Burdick, the publisher of Helper’s book, published an advertisement for Helper’s Impending Crisis of the South on the back inside cover of another work published in 1858. The advertisement includes the Seward endorsement. See Mary A. Denison, Old Hepsy (New York: A. B. Burdick, 1858), 461. Thus, Seward was endorsing Helper’s original work, not the 1859 Compendium with the offensive language expunged. In every extant 1860 copy of The Impending Crisis of the South and Helper’s Compendium that this author has seen, the Seward endorsement has been removed.


enough).93 The New Yorker, one southern newspaper pointed out, had recommended the circulation of the Helper book, as Seward himself wrote, ‘after careful examination.’”94 As another editor explained, Seward was “an endorser of the ‘irrepressible conflict’ doctrine,” and an “endorser of the Helper book.””95

Helper’s book was widely condemned across the South. The Athens (Ga.) Southern Banner called it, “the treasonable publication of Helper.”96 Besides labeling Helper’s book “notorious,” the Athens (Ga.) Southern Watchman excoriated the “vile incendiary publication of the thief Helper.””97 A Charlotte, North Carolina, paper agreed that it was a “vile incendiary book.””98 To the Republicans who said the work they endorsed “was not the one originally prepared by Helper, but an amended addition,” the Richmond Whig presented an extract from Helper’s original 1857 version: “the negroes … in nine cases out of ten, would be delighted with an opportunity to cut their masters throats.””99 The Athens (Ga.) Southern Banner reported that Illinois Congressman Owen Lovejoy admitted that he had “endorsed the Helper book understandingly.” If the chasm between the “hell of slavery and the heaven of freedom,” Lovejoy declared, “could not be bridged in any other way, it ought to be by the slaves, with the carcasses

93 Stahr, Seward, 177.

94 “The Crisis at the North,” Athens (Ga.) Southern Banner, January 19, 1860, p. 2 col. 6-7.


96 Athens (Ga.) Southern Banner, February 2, 1860, p. 2, col. 5.


99 “A False and Genuine ‘Helper,’” Richmond Whig, January 3, 1860, p. 4, col. 2, emphasis in the original
of the masters.” Such, wrote the Banner, was “a specimen of the language of the supporters of Seward.”

Editors and politicians especially targeted Sherman and Seward. The Maryland legislature adopted a resolution, condemning any representative who voted for John Sherman, or any other member of the present House of Representatives who endorsed the “Helper book.” The Athens (Ga.) Southern Watchman recorded with disgust that the Republicans had attempted “to place an endorser of the infamous incendiary Helper book in the chair.” A Democratic meeting at Savannah, Georgia on January 26, 1860, resolved, “that the election to the presidency of William H. Seward, or any of his party, or any endorser of the ‘irrepressible conflict’ doctrine, or any endorser of the Helper book, or any sympathizer of John Brown scheme, or any mourner for his fate, should be immediately followed by a dissolution of the states.” In the House, Virginia Congressman William Smith asked Sherman if he “disclaimed the doctrines of Helper’s book,” and Sherman “refused to answer.” One Georgia paper warned readers that southerners should “put down forever such restless demagogues and destructive revolutionists as Seward, Helper, Sherman, Wendell Phillips, and the glorifiers of John Brown.”

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100 “Washington Correspondence of the Southern Banner,” Athens (Ga.) Southern Banner, April 19, 1860, p. 1, col. 7.


103 “Democratic Effervescence,” Athens (Ga.) Southern Watchman, February 2, 1860, p. 2, col. 5


105 Milledgeville (Ga.) Southern Recorder, January 24, 1860, p. 1, col. 6
Coming hard upon the heels of Harpers Ferry and the outpouring of sympathy for John Brown, the speakership controversy further alarmed white southerners. As Virginian Nathaniel F. Cabell noted, this latest dispute further undermined white southerners’ confidence in the Union. Despite heightened southern anger, Republicans persisted “in voting … for one as Speaker who has endorsed the infamous book of Helper.” White southerners “confidently believed” Seward had been “conversant of Brown’s schemes, & did nothing to discourage them.” These Republican acts of embracing such men “tend little to conciliate our confidence.”

Any Republican candidate for Speaker who had endorsed the Helper book was simply unacceptable to white southerners. Arkansas Representative Thomas Hindman said “Sewardism, Helperism, and Shermanism are identical.” They would lead to “violence and bloodshed, to revolution and anarchy.” Democratic exploitation of the speakership controversy for partisan political effect did not hide the fact that Democrats and white southerners in general had real concerns about the rhetorical endorsements of violence. The perceived menace which the book represented extended beyond the halls of Congress.

Private correspondence shows that Helper’s book and the speakership controversy garnered considerable public attention. Erstwhile North Carolina Unionist William Walsh wrote to Lawrence O’Bryan Branch that “the endorsement of the Harpers Ferry outrage and Helper’s infernal doctrine has shaken my fidelity” to such an extent that Walsh was “willing to take a

106 Letter from Nathaniel F. Cabell to Henry Stephens Randall, 6 January 1860, MSS 2C1116a1, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia. William Seward, the author of the doctrine of the “irrepressible conflict,” had just returned from an overseas trip and was warmly welcomed in many northern cities.

chance of every probable evil that may arise from disunion.” Alabamian Edward C. Bullock commented that the speakership contest generated “immense interest” and that it was “the concurrent testimony of all men that the disunion sentiment never was half so deep.” Democratic Senator William Bigler of Pennsylvania informed his Virginia friend Robert Tyler that “nothing has made so much bad blood as the endorsement of Helper’s book.” Bigler believed this was even more damaging than “the sympathy manifest for old Brown.”

The speakership contest ossified as both sides dug in their heels and refused to yield to their opponents. Finally, on February 1, 1860, after two months and forty-four ballots, a more moderate Republican, William Pennington of New Jersey, was elected Speaker of the House.

Aside from the question of Republican endorsements, others tried to tie Helper’s incendiary language, to the party itself. The *Wilmington Daily Herald*, while mortified that Helper was from North Carolina, called the book “Old Brown’s text book.” A *Herald* article stated, “There is not a word or sentiment uttered by Brown, his aiders or abettors, that cannot be found printed in this compilation, put forth by the Black Republicans as a free state campaign document, in aid of the election of a Black Republican candidate to the Presidency in 1860.” Writing just prior to John Brown’s execution, the editor concluded, “if this ‘Helper’ had his right deserts, he would now be waiting the doom that will consign his co-worker (Brown) into eternity on Friday next.” Helper,

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according to the Wilmington editor, deserved “and we hope, will receive, a traitor’s reward.”

Just as with John Brown, white southerners attempted to demonstrate the ties of the Republican Party to another advocate of antislavery violence.

The New Orleans Picayune, shortly after Brown’s execution, provided a more thorough critique of Helper’s work. One editorial not only mentioned once again that sixty-eight Republican members of the United States House of Representatives had signed a card endorsing Helper’s work, but also claimed that a “regular organization has been formed to secure ‘a Republican triumph in 1860’” by circulating Helper’s Compendium. That committee included Thurlow Weed, Horace Greely, and the Chairman of the New York Republican State Committee, all of whom had reportedly subscribed money for the publication of the Compendium. As for indications of future policy, this new edition came with an appeal “to elect a president on this platform, in 1860, and to organize physical force to make war on the southern states if they should refuse to submit quietly.”

The Picayune condemned the book’s threatening tone and backed up this assertion with quotations. “The South must be throttled,” Helper had written, and “northern people are … remiss in their national duties because they make no positive attack upon the institutions in the southern States.” Helper argued that “no man can be a true patriot without first becoming an abolitionist.” As for what this meant, the Picayune explained that Helper was “an abolitionist propagandist of the school of John Brown,” and preached “in a fiery strain what John Brown

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112 Ibid.
undertook to put into practice.” Again, southerners who had grown skeptical of the Union used past expressions by northerners to warn of future dangers.

The writer of these incendiary appeals, and those who adopted his sentiments and circulate them, are not a particle better than John Brown. They teach what he practiced, and their teachings would make – if their will were equal to their malice – a Harpers Ferry outbreak at every crossroad in the South.  

For those who wondered what this meant in a political sense, the editor explained, “this open proclamation of aggressive war … comes to us, under the ostentatious approval of nearly one-half of the Republican Party in one house of Congress.” The Republicans were, according to the editor, “our deadly enemies, and there can be no fellowship with them, or with those who sustain them, either actively or by connivance or indifference.” If the northern people sustained the Republicans in November, the Picayune preferred ending fellowship with them by seceding.

Southerners who hoped that violence at Harpers Ferry would bring about a northern change of heart seemed destined for disappointment. The Memphis Daily Avalanche observed that “Old Brown’s acts of treason, rapine [sic], murder and infamy preceded the [November 1859] New York state and municipal elections, yet, black Republicanism was everywhere triumphant.” Union meetings were supposed to be evidence of rising northern conservatism, but New York Governor Edwin Morgan had attended a New York Union meeting after Harpers Ferry yet had recommended Helper’s book. White southerners asked themselves what kind of Unionism

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113 Ibid.

114 Ibid.


could include a man like Morgan. Conversely, of what value to the South was a Unionism Morgan could endorse? According to the editor of the Picayune, northern professions accompanied by political inaction would never satisfy white southerners who wanted to see northerners actively oppose violent antislavery. The Impending Crisis was “a proclamation of eternal war and all who are not for us are for them.”\textsuperscript{117} What was perhaps even more disturbing was the attempt to break southern racial solidarity, and peel nonslaveholding whites away from the pro-slavery forces dominant in the South.\textsuperscript{118}

A pseudonymous author calling himself “Python” published an article designed to reinforce white southern racial solidarity and presented an argument in favor of immediate secession. There is a struggle, Python argued, between Seward and the leaders of abolitionism for control over the future direction of the Republican Party. Seward favored the gradual consolidation of power and then abolition, “through amendments to the Constitution constitutionally made.” Python argued that Seward condemned the Harpers Ferry raid, not for its immorality, but for its timing. The abolitionists, whom Python referred to as “sans-culottes,” and “red-republicans,” favored the immediate abolition of slavery, even through violence. “The abolitionists proper, through the ill-advised raid of ‘Ossawatomie Brown’ at Harpers Ferry” committed a tactical error,” by providing the South a possible impetus to secession. If the abolitionist wing of the party won control, their triumph would lead “directly and inevitably to general starvation and anarchy” in both the North and the South. “To the beastly horrors of the French Revolution in San-Domingo, would be added the ghastly massacres of the French Revolution, and the squalid miseries of the great famine in Ireland.”


Whichever plan the Republicans finally chose would mean the economic and social ruin for the South, Python wrote. The southern states would be convulsed with “internecine servile war, saturating her soil with blood.” These conflicts would be so terrible, “that to live in their midst would be worse than to die.” The next Republican objective would be “the gradual consolidation of the government” and “the conversion of the confederacy into an empire.” Citing the annals of Tacitus and echoing Roger Pryor, Python drew a “striking parallelism” between the social and political condition of the South under the Republicans and “that transition period when the old [Roman] republic was passing into the empire of the Cæsars,” in which the forms of the old republic were observed, but the spirit of republicanism was dead and gone.\footnote{This distinction between the forms of republicanism and the spirit was an oft-repeated theme as secession approached.} The South would have been absorbed by the North, and the Union will have passed from “the banner of the Constitution beneath the eagle of empire.”

Southerners should take note and profit from the lesson of Harpers Ferry, Python wrote, and leave the Union immediately. The Republican Party, “as constructed and directed by Seward,” was for the time being a political force, separate from the “religious fanaticism and moral frenzy” of the abolitionists. “So long as it remains political, it is only potent for evil while the South shall continue in the Union.” Leaving the Union therefore would render Seward Republicans harmless, but the South had to act. “Listen no more to the serpent voice of compromise,” Python urged his readers. If the South should fail to profit by the “overt act” committed at Harpers Ferry, Python warned:

The empire will stand without a Constitution of government, a patriarchal institution, or a single vital principle of subordination—a political and social monster, compelling order through force alone; …having its parallel alone in Rome under Tiberius and his successors, … filled for a time with terrible energies, but finally to perish through its own
crimes and excesses, sweeping society along with itself into the bestial sins of eternal perdition.\footnote{Python (nom de plume), “The Designs of Black-Republicanism, and the Issues of 1860 in their Consequences to the South, the Constitution, and the Union,” \textit{DeBow's Review}, March 1860, 245-272. “Python” was probably John Townsend of South Carolina, since he quotes a Townsend speech and wrote that “I addressed” Congress. See Python, “Issues of 1860,” 252.}

Yet Python ultimately feared constitutional abolition. He couched his argument in terms non-slaveholding neighbors might accept. First, he highlighted the apocalyptic vision of servile war. And secondly, he predicted the collapse of republican restraints on government and ultimately the “Imperator,” the leader who ruled by force and the threat of violence.\footnote{Python, “Issues of 1860,” 272.} Just as Helper had sought to undermine white solidarity, Python sought to buttress it.

Here too at least in the more fevered imaginations the danger appeared all too real. The \textit{Charleston Mercury}, for example, noted that Helper’s book called for non-intercourse with slaveholders, and forming a party for nonslaveholding whites.\footnote{“Helper’s Pamphlet,” \textit{Charleston Mercury}, December 6, 1859, p. 1, col. 3.} Historian David Brown argues that elite southerners were deeply concerned about the attitudes of white non-slaveholders. D. H. Hamilton, for example, declared privately that he “mistrusted our own people more than I fear for all the efforts of the abolitionists.”\footnote{Brown, \textit{Southern Outcast}, 174.} Thus, the Helper book would prove all that more incendiary.

Despite the fears of men such as Hamilton, white racial solidarity seemed to be holding. The \textit{Athens (Ga.) Southern Watchman} approvingly reported that Alabamians were cancelling subscriptions to northern newspapers, “pestiferous material” the \textit{Watchman} called such sheets,
because northern editors had contributed money to “circulate the Helper book and pay for John Brown pikes.”

Local communities across the southern states acted to suppress *The Impending Crisis* and punish those who possessed or attempted to distribute it. Although William Gunnison in Maryland and John Underwood in Virginia successfully sold the book, Harold Wyllys in up-country Greenville, South Carolina, was not so lucky and was sentenced to a year in jail for distributing copies. A consignment of probably over 100 copies was discovered in High Point, North Carolina, and burned. William Stevenson was indicted for possession and circulation in Wood County, Virginia. A “foolish Briton” was arrested in Fairfax County, Virginia. A “vagabond” who had been expelled from Georgia for possessing “incendiary publications” was later found in Quincy, Florida, with a copy of *The Impending Crisis*.

The Guilford County area of North Carolina witnessed one of the most dramatic clashes. Daniel Worth, a North Carolina pastor whom one southern paper referred to as “a reverend cut-throat,” was arrested for having “propagated abolitionist and incendiary sentiments” when he had sold and circulated Helper’s book. The *Raleigh Semi-Weekly Standard* reported Worth’s arrest and called for postmasters to put a stop to any further attempts to spread such poison.

Let every copy of Helper’s book, every copy of the *New York Tribune*, every document franked by Seward, Wilson, Burlingame, John Sherman and other abolitionists, which may come to their offices be committed to the flames. We have a right to protect

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ourselves against the cruel and dangerous machinations of the abolitionists, and we must do it, if we expect to enjoy repose and security.\textsuperscript{127} The \textit{Greensboro (N.C.) Patriot} advised readers that “self-protection is the first law of nature and woe be to that man who comes into North Carolina with a view of exciting our slaves into insurrection, or to stir up a servile war.”\textsuperscript{128} After Worth’s arrest, he refused to condemn Helper’s work and at his pre-trial hearing even read extracts from it.\textsuperscript{129} Locals appear to have taken seriously the threat Worth represented. Court officers “had a very rough time protecting Worth from the indignation of the people.”\textsuperscript{130} Another North Carolinian, Jesse Wheeler of Guilford County, was also arrested for circulating fifty to sixty copies of Helper’s book.\textsuperscript{131} The Democratic \textit{Raleigh Weekly Standard} criticized North Carolina Congressman John Gilmer, in whose district Worth resided, because Helper’s book appeared “most in demand” there and because “all the abolitionists who have thus far been arrested” in the state had been residents of his district.\textsuperscript{132}

The Helper book and the speakership crisis compounded the effects of earlier antislavery episodes. These became two more links in a chain of events exacerbating sectional tensions. Coming on the heels of Harpers Ferry, northern expressions of sympathy for John Brown and

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\item[\textsuperscript{129}] “Incendiary Language,” \textit{Athens (Ga.) Southern Watchman}, January 5, 1860, p. 2, col. 8.
\item[\textsuperscript{130}] Ibid.
\item[\textsuperscript{131}] \textit{Raleigh Weekly Standard}, January 11, 1860, p. 3, col. 2.
\item[\textsuperscript{132}] \textit{Raleigh Weekly Standard}, January 11, 1860, p. 3, col. 1.
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mourning at Brown’s execution, the Helper book and speakership contest simply heightened the sense of alarm. These perceived crises, one after the other, built momentum propelling the southern states toward secession.

They helped secessionists lay the groundwork for disunion. Historian Charles Dew concluded that during the winter of 1859-1860, southern politicians probably coordinated southern responses to the election of a Republican president. Historian David Brown agrees that coordination among secessionists during the winter of 1859-60 was critical. Secessionists sought to rally the voters to their cause. Boteler’s, Clingman’s, Pryor’s, and Toombs’ speeches were reprinted as pamphlets so the congressmen could use the franking privilege to disseminate them. The speech of Virginian R. M. T. Hunter was reprinted in toto in a Georgia newspaper. Publicizing Helper’s attacks on slavery, and southern elite responses to it, were key weapons secession-minded southerners used to mobilize white southern popular opinion in

133 See, for example, Brown, Southern Outcast, 161-162


135 Brown, Southern Outcast, 173; Channing, Crisis of Fear, 128. Brown is citing Steven Channing in this. In January 1860, South Carolina sent C. G. Memminger to Richmond to convince the Virginian legislature to support South Carolina in secession. Linking Memminger’s mission to the Sherman speakership is probably giving the South Carolina secessionists too much credit. It seems more likely that South Carolina secessionists were merely reacting to events.


favor of secession. It was part of the necessary foundational work that would bear fruit a year later. The change in sentiment, for example, occurred in men like Arthur Lee Brent and Nathaniel F. Cabell who were conditional Unionists, but whose patience was wearing thin.

Between December 1859 and June 1860, Congress formally investigated the Harpers Ferry raid and a supposedly wider conspiracy to support John Brown. After visiting Harpers Ferry in October 1859, Senator James Mason of Virginia had decided that a congressional investigation would be necessary. Mason had been one of the first legislators on the scene and had interviewed Brown who had been quite candid in expressing his views but was much more evasive when asked about the involvement of others. Mason released a statement in which he alleged that there had been a “conspiracy outside this state.” The evidence showed that Brown “acted from impressions made upon him by abolition tracts, newspapers, and orators in the circles he frequented.” All that would be required, Brown had believed, was to “put arms within immediate reach” of slaves to start a general insurrection. All the weapons and ammunition captured with Brown and his party must have cost over $10,000, and Mason wondered where that money had come from.

When the Senate convened on December 5, 1859, Mason moved to form a committee to investigate five issues. First, the committee would examine “the facts attending the late invasion.” Second, the committee would determine “whether the invasion was attended by armed

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138 The Virginia Committee which investigated Harpers Ferry had lacked any nation-wide subpoena power, and, therefore, deferred to the Senate investigation. Virginia General Assembly, Report of the Joint Committee on the Harpers Ferry Outrages, (Richmond: n.p., 1860), 7.

resistance of the authorities and public force of the United States.” Third, the committee would investigate whether there was “any organization intended to subvert the government of any of the states” and if so, the character and extent of that organization and whether any citizens were implicated by contributions of “money, arms, munitions or otherwise.” The fourth inquiry focused on the military equipment used by Brown’s band, and how it had been procured and transported. Finally, the committee was to recommend legislation “necessary for the peace of the country.”

Partisanship hindered the proceedings almost immediately. When Republicans sensed the committee might uncover information that would embarrass their party, members would drag their feet or inject procedural hurdles. When Democrats believed the committee might exonerate the Republican Party, they would offer vague and unsubstantiated allegations against Republicans. In response to Mason’s motion, Illinois Republican Lyman Trumbull suggested linking this to an investigation into the December 1855 seizure of the federal arsenal in Liberty, Missouri. Trumbull did not explain why he had waited four years to urge this, but it seems to be an attempt to establish moral equivalency between the pro-slavery attack at Liberty, Missouri, and the antislavery one at Harpers Ferry, since in both cases violent extremists had used force to seize federal weapons. Trumbull’s motion was defeated on a party-line vote.

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141 *Congressional Globe*, 36th Cong., 1st Sess., 11. The arsenal at Liberty, Missouri had been seized by Missouri “border ruffians” who confiscated the cannon and muskets and used them in the “Wakarusa War,” the conflict in the vicinity of Lawrence Kansas that year. “From Kansas,” *Alton (Ill.) Weekly Telegraph*, December 20, 1855, p. 2, col. 5.

142 The next day, Trumbull reversed course, and declared he welcomed the committee: “I hope this investigation will be thorough and complete” in “disabusing the public mind … of the idea that the outbreak at Harpers Ferry received any countenance or support from any
Once the committee got started, Mississippi Democratic Senator Jefferson Davis moved that nobody should be allowed into the room during testimony except members, the witness, and the clerk. In this way, the Democratic majority hoped to control what emerged from the investigation. During the hearings, the Republican-leaning *Janesville (Wisconsin) Daily Gazette* denounced the Mason Committee as “the Inquisition.”

When the question of the committee issuing subpoenas to compel testimony arose, Republicans John Bingham, John P. Hale, Charles Sumner (albeit joined by Georgia Democrat Robert Toombs) denied Congress had the power to subpoena witnesses.

The Committee consisted of five members, three Democrats and two Republicans. The Democrats were James Mason of Virginia, Jefferson Davis of Mississippi, and Graham Fitch of Indiana. The Republicans were Jacob Collamer of Vermont, and James Doolittle of Wisconsin. Although the committee consisted of two southerners and three northerners, in general party loyalty outweighed sectional loyalty in the proceedings.

The committee discovered that Brown’s Provisional Army had acquired 200 Sharp’s rifles, 200 revolvers, and 950 pikes, which Mason estimated must have cost at least $10,000. This considerable number of persons in any portion of this Union.” *Cong. Globe*, 36th Cong., 1st Sess., 5.

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143 Edmund Ruffin noted that the Republicans, the “Brown-Helper party” as he called them, had opposed empanelling a committee. Ruffian, *Diary*, 380, 382 and 386.


meant that if individual donations were not large (which most were not), donors must have been numerous (which they were).\footnote{\textit{Mason Committee Report}, 10.} The committee, however, was unable to prove that the donors were aware of precisely how Brown would use the money.

The committee interviewed abolitionists, fishing for information on ties with Republicans. Samuel Gridley Howe and George Luther Stearns testified without revealing any new information. Richard Realf testified that when he met Brown in the winter of 1857-58 in Iowa, Brown had divulged a plan to “make an incursion into the Southern States, somewhere in the mountainous region of the Blue Ridge and the Alleghenies.”\footnote{Stearns testimony, \textit{Mason Committee Report}, 91, 92. This information seems rather specific. Given the anonymous letter sent in August 1859 to the Secretary of War, from Iowa men not closely connected to the Harpers Ferry raid, it would seem that Brown was not very secretive at all. It would seem there was a good bit of loose talk occurring as to Brown intentions, when men so far from the circle of direct participants knew specific details of Brown’s plans.} Further, Realf confirmed that Hugh Forbes had revealed to Senator Henry Wilson Brown’s plan for “effecting an insurrection in the southern states.”\footnote{Realf testimony, \textit{Mason Committee Report}, 101. Realf testified that John Brown had told him this.}

The committee’s attempt to secure the testimony of Frank B. Sanborn offered more dramatic evidence to worried southern whites. The attempted arrest of Sanborn and his rescue by a Concord mob presented one of the more dramatic events associated with the Mason Committee.\footnote{“Thirty-sixth Congress – First Session,” \textit{Richmond Enquirer}, April 12, 1860, p. 2, col. 7.} The members of the Secret Six had debated the propriety of testifying before the
Mason Committee and Sanborn, Howe, and Stearns had temporarily fled to Canada to escape the committee’s subpoena power.152

The Senate summoned Sanborn. When Sanborn refused to appear, on February 13 the Senate ordered his arrest. Sanborn left again for Canada, but returned to Concord once he concluded his arrest was not imminent.153 In Concord, Massachusetts, when the deputies attempted to make the arrest, Sanborn and his neighbors resisted. A mob formed, and the sheriff apprehended Sanborn and arrested the federal deputies.154 The next day, all parties appeared at a habeas corpus hearing before Massachusetts Supreme Court Justice Lemuel Shaw. Shaw ordered Sanborn released, ruling that the Senate Sergeant-at-Arms was not allowed to deputize anyone.155 Adding insult to injury, Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner later called the Senate deputies “kidnappers” and submitted to the Senate a petition for redress of the “outrages” Sanborn suffered.156 Massachusetts even charged the Deputy Sergeant-at-Arms with assault and attempted kidnapping.157

152 Renehan, Secret Six, 156-157, 167-168, 240-244. Ironically, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who never ran and never shrank from testifying, was the only member of the Six in the U. S. not to be subpoenaed. “XXXVIth Congress,” New York Tribune, February 16, 1860, p. 5, col. 1; “Congressional,” Nashville Patriot, February 17, 1860, p. 2, col. 3; Renehan, Secret Six, 244.

153 Renehan, Secret Six, 257.

154 Renehan, Secret Six, 257-259.


Southern reactions to the Sanborn case were swift and sharp. The Raleigh (N.C.) Weekly Standard noted the story in an article, “More Resistance to Federal Laws.”\(^{158}\) “Republicanism,” the editor of the Wilmington (N.C.) Daily Journal wrote, “is but another word for rebellion.” At the habeas corpus hearing, thirty men, armed “with pistols and bowie knives,” had assembled in the court room to prevent by force any attempt to extradite Sanborn, “even if the Supreme Court of Massachusetts pronounced that he should be delivered up to the select committee of the Senate.” Assessing the significance of the episode, the editor wrote that “Sanborn … is but the weather cock which indicates which way the currents of false doctrines [of Republicanism] are driving us.”\(^{159}\) The Nashville Patriot decried the lawlessness of the Sanborn episode: “From the encouragement of treason and rebellion, [the Republican and abolition fanatics] pass naturally to midnight outrages and incendiaryism.” Some believed that Mr. Davis, postmaster of Concord, Massachusetts, had informed Deputy Sergeant-at-Arms Carlton where Sanborn was to be found. Shortly thereafter, a mysterious arsonist had burned Davis’ barn, “with hay, machinery, tools and wagons.” The editor bemoaned the fact that being merely “suspected of fidelity to the laws and Constitution” was enough to cause a man’s property and life to be threatened by the “lawless proceedings of Massachusetts abolitionists.”\(^{160}\)

Perhaps the most forceful condemnation of the Sanborn rescue came from the Jackson Semi-Weekly Mississippian. The Republican press of Massachusetts had previously disavowed sympathy for John Brown and expressed “virtuous indignation that the Republican Party should

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be even suspected of complicity with the revolutionary schemes of John Brown.” Republicans had insisted that “Ossawatomie Brown had no abettors.” Nevertheless, Republicans had “zealously opposed the punishment of the traitors,” and resisted efforts to “detect and expose their confederates.” In Congress, Republicans had “manifested the greatest reluctance to any investigation of the affair,” and “industriously engaged in throwing obstacles at every step of its progress.” That investigation had revealed, according to the editor, that “Brown’s band of disorganizers had long been pensioners and hireling emissaries of the Republican Party.”

To the case at hand, Franklin Sanborn was a “leading member” of the Republican Party, who “held a secret correspondence with John Brown at the time he was preparing for his descent” on Harpers Ferry. When officials of the United States Senate attempted to apprehend Sanborn to bring him to testify, a mob violently resisted. Thus, “the constitutional authority of the federal government is set at naught in Massachusetts” and “nullification reigns supreme.” Meanwhile, the editor observed, the “champions of this higher law are exulting in their triumph over the Constitution.” Ominously for the future, the editor noted that “it is the so-called moderate Republicans of Massachusetts who heartily endorse the action of the Concord mob.” These moderates were “as much pleased at the perpetration of this outrage, and the discomfiture of the investigating committee, as the most radical of their Garrisonian allies.” For those who might doubt any connection between the Republican Party and antislavery violence, the author claimed that the two were intimately related.

The real connection of the Republican party with the revolutionary movement at Harpers Ferry stands self-exposed in all the blackness of its hypocrisy. While professing to

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162 Probably referring to Brown’s operations in Kansas and the sojourn of Brown’s army in Iowa.
deplore and condemn this movement, and calling on heaven and earth to witness that their skirts are pure and their hands unsullied from the blood of its victims, when challenged to the proof they will have no witness; but seek utterly to stifle investigation, and are not at all scrupulous as to the means.

Republicans, it seemed to the editor, had no problem with resorting to mob violence to prevent serious investigation of the Harpers Ferry raid and the conspiracy to support it. Ending on a depressing note, the editor wrote that, “in the struggle between Union conservation and disunion fanaticism, [Massachusetts Republicans’] active sympathies are rapidly developing themselves on the side of the latter.” ¹⁶³

To white southerners, this episode was probably similar to the extradition of Coppoc, Merriam and Owen Brown. Northern authorities seemed willing to thwart the law, even on flimsy pretexts, when it suited them. Sanborn was the last of the abolitionists whose testimony the committee sought, but the committee also summoned Republicans to testify.

This testimony seemed to reveal some Republican complicity in Harpers Ferry. Hugh Forbes had written that he had disclosed Brown’s plans to Massachusetts Republican Senator Henry Wilson. Wilson deflected that allegation by saying he understood Forbes to mean that Brown intended a counterattack along the Kansas-Missouri border. ¹⁶⁴ Two other Republicans, John Andrew and Joshua Giddings, testified before the committee. Although it had been published in newspapers at the time, Andrew denied knowing that John Brown had had any


¹⁶⁴ Wilson testimony, Mason Committee Report, 141.
connection to the Pottawatomie massacre. Further, Andrew admitted he had known of Brown’s Missouri raid of December 1858, yet had donated money to him. Joshua Giddings testified that he had met John Brown in May or June of 1859, after Brown’s Missouri raid but before Harpers Ferry while Brown was giving a lecture in Ohio. Giddings had helped Brown raise ten to twenty dollars. After the release of the Mason Committee report, the Whiggish Staunton (Va.) Spectator noted that Giddings had retired from public office to return to Ohio and raise hemp. The Spectator shared the opinion that it would be more appropriate “if hemp would raise him.” The Spectator was not a fire-eating newspaper and this shows how previously moderate southern opinion had drifted in a more radical direction.

William H. Seward, the final witness to appear before the committee, offered equivocal testimony. Like Henry Wilson, Seward asserted that Forbes had led him to believe that John Brown intended a slave-freeing raid in Missouri, not something like Harpers Ferry. While Seward successfully parried suggestions he had been an accessory of John Brown’s before the

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166 Andrew testimony, Mason Committee Report, 192, 193.

167 Mason Committee Report, 32. Actual testimony is transcribed on pages 147-156.

168 Giddings’ testimony, Mason Committee Report, 147.


170 Mason Committee Report, 38. Actual testimony is transcribed on pages 253-255.

171 Seward testimony, Mason Committee Report, 254. Seward said he had “no more idea of an invasion by John Brown at [Harpers Ferry], than I had of one by you or myself,” despite the fact that Forbes had informed Seward that Brown had suggested an attack to “beat up a slave quarter in Virginia.” Seward testimony, Mason Committee Report, 254. Seward’s testimony was not published until the entire Mason Committee Report was released in June, so nobody commented on Seward’s testimony at the time Seward gave it.

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fact, his responses were evasive enough that white southerners were hardly convinced of either his innocence or peaceful intentions. Seward’s testimony concluded the inquiry by the committee.

The Committee issued majority and minority reports. The Majority Report concluded that a significant number of northerners had supported Brown financially. There was no evidence, however, that anyone had knowingly donated money for something like the Harpers Ferry raid. It did, however, “appear that money was freely contributed … without inquiry as to the way in which the money would be used.”[172] “The money to maintain the expedition, and the large armament they brought with them, had been contributed and furnished by the citizens of other states of the Union, under circumstances that must continue to jeopard [sic] the safety and peace of the southern states, and against which Congress has no power to legislate.”[173] The Committee recommended no federal legislation. It was, the Majority Report argued, up to the state governments to prevent further raids. If the states themselves did not take appropriate steps, then “the committee can find no guarantee elsewhere for the security or peace between the states of the Union.”[174]

The Minority Report claimed that the investigation had uncovered little new information. “There is no evidence that any other citizens than those there with Brown were accessory to this outbreak, by contributions thereto or otherwise, nor any proof that any others had any knowledge of the conspiracy or its purposes.” This report clearly tried to insulate northern Republicans from being linked to Brown’s plans. “Realf, Forbes, and some very few may have understood it

[173] Ibid., 18.
[174] Ibid., 18.
[Brown’s plan] in 1858,” the minority explained, “when it failed of execution.”\textsuperscript{175} Although it was not one of the points of inquiry, the minority report added that “there was no evidence tending to show that there ever was any conspiracy or design, by any one, to rescue John Brown or his associates from prison in Virginia.”\textsuperscript{176} The minority took the majority to task for hounding abolitionists not connected with the raid, simply to get sensational testimony on the record.\textsuperscript{177} As for the hysteria generated in the southern states, the minority report stated that “time and investigation has happily dissipated much of such alarm and suspicion, and shown that this was but an offshoot from the extensive outrages and lawlessness in Kansas.”\textsuperscript{178} Time may have dissipated alarm and suspicion in the northern states, but the southern states were still stewing about Harpers Ferry and the perception of a cover-up. The minority report included this hopeful passage: “The evidence will remove the suspicion of extensive complicity which the possession of such a quantity of arms, unexplained, was likely to create.”\textsuperscript{179}

The majority and minority reports were released in June 1860, during the lead-up to the Democratic convention in Charleston, South Carolina. On the Mason Committee report, the Savannah Daily Morning News noted the publication and observed that “reference is made to the utter insecurity of the peace and safety of some of the states of the Union, owing to the excited condition of the public mind and its purposes in the non-slaveholding states.” The editor conceded that it was not the committee’s duty to suggest state legislation to suppress

\textsuperscript{175} Ibid., 22-23.
\textsuperscript{176} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{177} Ibid., 24-25.
\textsuperscript{178} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{179} Ibid., 23.
“machinations” within their borders, but it was useful for the committee to “expose the consequences, resulting from the present license in the non-slaveholding states, to the peace and integrity of the Union.” Firearms given for the defense of Kansas had been diverted for the purpose of “exciting civil war” in the slaveholding states. If the Massachusetts Committee had exercised “even ordinary care,” the bloodshed could have been prevented. The Constitution, however, according to the News, did not convey to the federal government any power over acts such as Brown’s. Preventing similar occurrences depended on “a desire to preserve the peace” and “fraternal feeling” within the northern states. If fraternal feeling was absent, the Union was headed for trouble.  

The Newbern (N.C.) Daily Progress believed that testimony before the committee showed that John Brown’s plan was “to commence a servile insurrection in Virginia to extend throughout the South.” The report condemned “the consequences resulting from the present license existing in the non-slaveholding states” which demonstrated “the utter insecurity of the South arising from the feeling in the northern mind” against the South.  

The Staunton (Va.) Spectator agreed that the Mason Committee report proved John Brown’s intention to incite a widespread slave insurrection. According to the Nashville Patriot, the whole investigation revealed “the utter insecurity of the peace and safety” of the slaveholding states “owing to the excited condition of the public mind.” The Memphis Daily Avalanche noted that because the Mason Committee


recommended no new federal legislation it was the responsibility of the states to “guard in future … against similar occurrences.” Should the northern states fail to adopt preventative measures, “the Committee can find no guarantee elsewhere for the security of peace between the states of the Union.”¹⁸⁴ In other words, stopping future Harpers Ferry attacks was not a federal task, it was up to the northern states to prevent similar attacks.

The question of Seward’s connection to John Brown and Harpers Ferry had damaged the New Yorker’s presidential ambitions. Seward tried to recover momentum in his campaign to become the Republican nominee for president. In a February speech in the Senate, Seward called for “mutual toleration” and “fraternal spirit,” and even avoided using the dichotomy “free state” vs. “slave state,” preferring instead “labor state” and “capital state.”¹⁸⁵ Historian David Potter showed that Seward’s new moderate tone proved too little, too late.¹⁸⁶ Republicans during the winter of 1859-1860 began to cast about for an alternative candidate, and as Seward’s star waned, another’s star waxed.

The most important speech by a northern political figure that winter was Abraham Lincoln’s famous Cooper Union Address in New York, which helped establish him as a moderate Republican alternative to Seward. Lincoln denied southern accusations that Republicans sought


to incite servile insurrections and tried to carefully explain his position to white southerners. A slave uprising was unlikely, in his view, for three reasons: the slaves did not have a chance to hear Republicans; the slave population was too dispersed; an insurrection plot would not remain secret.\textsuperscript{187}

The speech did little, however, to placate white southerners. Despite the speech’s conciliatory elements, southern editors generally ignored it and thus, southern readers had limited chances to read it.\textsuperscript{188} Historian Harold Holzer noted that Lincoln’s speech was probably not widely read in the southern states.\textsuperscript{189} After Lincoln’s Cooper Union speech, southern newspapers were much more likely to comment on the earlier and more confrontational “House Divided” speech. The \textit{Wilmington (N.C.) Daily Journal} quoted the most famous passage from that speech,

\begin{quote}
In my opinion, it [slavery agitation] will not cease, until a crisis shall have been reached, and passed. ‘A house divided against itself cannot stand.’ I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other.
\end{quote}

This doctrine was, according to the editor of the \textit{Wilmington Journal}, “revolutionary and treasonable and inconsistent with the perpetuity of the Union.”\textsuperscript{190} The \textit{Fayetteville (N.C.) Courier} (quoting a Connecticut Democratic paper) tied Lincoln to fellow Republican Henry

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{188} Lincoln was not yet the Republican nominee, nor was he the Republican front runner.\\
\textsuperscript{189} Harold Holzer, \textit{Lincoln at Cooper Union: The Speech That Made Abraham Lincoln President}, (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2004), 149.\\
Wilson, who had been present at the Natick, Massachusetts, meeting that had declared “it is the right and duty of the people of the North to incite [slaves] to resistance and to aid them in it,” and to Horace Greely who had written that the free and slave states “ought to be separated.” The Republican Party, wrote the Courier, was “a ‘wing’ of the Abolition army!”

Not all southerners were so skeptical. The Alexandria (Va.) Gazette observed that some Republicans talked in moderate tones. Seward had refused to defend John Brown and Abraham Lincoln had denied emphatically that the “Republicans approve of the principles of John Brown, or the course he pursued.” Such declarations were encouraging, but declarations were not enough. The Gazette wished to “hold the authors of [these ideas] responsible for their promulgation. … Let us see how, hereafter, they stand up to their own declarations. … We have, in the South, nothing to ask of their generosity, and nothing to fear from their prejudices; but we want to know exactly where they stand now, and how they intend to stand for the next four years.”

Alexandria is just across the Potomac from Washington and it is unclear just how far south this cautious optimism extended.

To the extent that white southerners did manage to read the text of Lincoln’s Cooper Union speech, they were not likely to be influenced by its moderation. Lincoln was making an argument that white southerners should not fear a slave insurrection, but the problem was that they did fear one. Nor was the timing good. Lincoln’s address came after the disclosures that Forbes had forewarned Wilson and Seward, after Republican Governor Kirkwood had refused to extradite a Harpers Ferry fugitive, and after Republican endorsements of Helper’s book.

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From the perspective of many white southerners, the Republican Party switched from the candidate arguing for an “irrepressible conflict” to the candidate who declared that this Union “cannot endure half-slave and half free” and will become “all one thing or all the other.”193 The editor of the Charleston Mercury said “it was a false assertion that the people of the South wanted to make the North all-slave states. Lincoln’s assertion of aggressiveness on the part of the South is meant as a justification for his aggressiveness on the part of the North.”194 The eclipse of Seward and the rise of the more moderate Lincoln did not seem to have had the effect on white southerners that Republicans had hoped.195

The ramifications of Harpers Ferry and reactions to it at the federal level were profound. The Helper book, publicly endorsed by some Republicans, reinforced white southern fears about the party’s intentions. The nomination of Sherman for Speaker of the House further intensified the sectional tensions. The results of the Mason Committee investigation were ambiguous enough that observers could see what they wanted to see. Republicans saw enough in Seward’s testimony that they decided to look elsewhere for a presidential candidate. Southern opinion leaders, both in Congress and in the press, reinforced the idea that it was not sufficient for


195 The Mercury was arguably the most extreme pro-secession southern newspaper so its pronouncements must be taken with a grain of salt. In this particular, however, the Mercury was technically correct. No prominent southerner was demanding that the northern states become slave states. Many white southerners were demanding enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act and some expressed an expectation of a “right of sojourn,” to transit northern states with slaves while traveling from a slave state to another slave state. Confederates put that “right” into the Confederate Constitution, Article IV, Section 2.
northerners to condemn antislavery violence. They needed to take positive action against those who would employ violent methods in the struggle against slavery.
CHAPTER 4: THE TEXAS TROUBLES

There is a deep laid scheme of the abolitionists to break up northern Texas, much more dangerous than John Brown’s attempt upon Virginia. It will astonish you when you have full particulars. James M. Cox, Hill County, Texas, to Governor Sam Houston, August 25, 1860.¹

Four episodes of slave resistance in the spring of 1860 exemplify the security problem white southerners faced in maintaining a social order based on chattel slavery. In Essex County, Virginia, Dr. William S. Croxton, “chastised” his slave women for some misdeed. Neither the nature of the misconduct, nor the extent of the “chastisement” was recorded. What newspaper editors did record was that the slave women murdered Croxton with a grubbing hoe and an ax. The slave women then threw the body into the kitchen fire in an attempt to conceal the evidence.²

Near Ocala, Florida, in February 1860, Dr. William J. Keitt lay sick in bed. One of Keitt’s slaves it seems had reached the end of his endurance and slit the doctor’s throat.³ The slave was bathed in blood as the doctor’s throat was cut from ear to ear.”⁴

In Grayson County, Texas, a slaveowner had whipped a slave for some unrecorded misconduct. The slave evidently had had enough. He murdered Kincade, the slaveowner, and

¹ James Cox to Governor Sam Houston, August 25, 1860, Box 2014/109-4, Folder 61, Texas Governor Sam Houston Records. Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.


Kincade’s wife and children. Several white men were implicated in the act, but “nothing definite [was] known.” The community took matters into their own hands and hanged the slave, and left his body hanging as a warning to others. Not knowing who might be tampering with neighborhood slaves, what might set them off and when, must have compounded white southerners’ fears.

Violent resistance by slaves touched property as well as persons. An incendiary in Macon, Georgia, attempted to set fire to the house of bookseller S. P. Richards in the spring of 1860. The arsonist had set a pile of kindling against the door and left “a naked foot[print]” near the door. Richards, the homeowner, had awakened, seen the flames and extinguished them before much damage had been done.

These unconnected incidents were symptoms of a social and labor system resting on force and fear. Historian Eugene Genovese, in his monumental work Roll, Jordan, Roll, explored acts of slave resistance. Generally, slaves resisted what they felt were unjust exactions made on them. Being caught, however, might bring down the entire weight of the slaveholding society on the slave. If an act of resistance occurred and the culprit could not be identified, resistance obviously was more effective, and this also showed to whites, slaveholders and non-slaveholders

5 Kincade’s first name is not presented in the sources. Nor is it possible to confirm the story was true. The 1860 census in Grayson County was taken in July 7, 1860.


7 “Incendiary,” Charleston Mercury, April 11, 1860, p. 4, col. 2.

alike, that slaves were not powerless. Arson was one of those acts of slave resistance where the guilty party might be very hard to identify.

Most white southerners wanted to believe that slaves, left to themselves, would not resist. They believed their slaves would act defiantly only if outsiders tampered with them, putting ideas of freedom in their heads. In the Texas case above, vaguely identified “white northerners” had allegedly incited slave resistance. Outsider-inspired rebellion proved especially frightening to white southerners. These apprehensions, especially as they became more widespread, help explain the psychology of secession as leaving the Union would limit the opportunities of these outsiders to foment slave rebellions.

Into this milieu stepped Republican editor “Long John” Wentworth, of the Chicago Democrat. Wentworth quoted Laurence Keitt, William Lowndes Yancey and the New York Herald each of whom claimed that the Union would not survive the election of Lincoln. Wentworth countered that “this is but the old game used time and again to scare the North into submission to southern demands and southern tyranny.” Wentworth predicted that “outrages perpetrated upon the white men and their families” would continue into the future. “Let the South threaten dissolution,” Wentworth warned, “Let them secede when Lincoln is elected, if they dare. … We would like to see the South get along with its 3,000,000 slaves with no means of preventing a general uprising of them and a hostile people all along her borders.”

9 Freehling, Road to Disunion, 1:334, 370.

10 Edmund Ruffin seemed to fear that white instigators would escape and leave their African-American stooges holding the bag. Ruffin, Diary, 3:456.

11 “The Old Game of Scaring and Bullying the North,” Chicago Democrat, July 27, 1860, p. 2, col. 1. It is interesting to note that Wentworth described the northern people as “a hostile population” in the event of the secession of the southern states.
Wentworth further warned that “there are men in the North who would find secret entrance to the southern states, and there aid the slaves in the work of organizing and preparing for insurrection.” The one factor in the summer of 1860 keeping slaves from revolting, in Wentworth’s view, was the belief that, in the event of a slave insurrection, “the whole power of the federal government would be brought against them to crush them to pieces.” If the South seceded, there would be “a season of anarchy, bloodshed and ruin, which no one can contemplate without horror.” Nor would northern men be passive observers. Some would secretly infiltrate the South and assist the slave in “organizing and preparing.”

Over the course of the summer of 1860 in Texas, white southerners probably began to wonder whether this infiltration process had already begun.

Southern secessionists took note of Wentworth’s heated rhetoric. Excerpts from Wentworth’s editorial were reprinted in the secessionist Charleston Mercury, which used his words to paint a frightening picture of the South’s future in a Union under a Republican administration. White southerners generally looked for signs of security threats, but Texans faced some additional security challenges.

Texans in 1860 believed they faced three distinct but inter-related security challenges: Native Americans, Mexican marauders, and abolitionists. Texas’ western frontier was being attacked by Comanches and Kickapoos. The southern frontier was threatened by Mexican brigands who launched raids from safe havens across the Rio Grande. In addition, abolitionists


reportedly threatened the central portion of the state and the northern frontier with the Indian Nations. The effect of these threats was cumulative and contributed to a pervasive sense of insecurity among white Texans. Native Americans from Mexico, for example, aided Mexicans in attacking the southern frontier. Native Americans also played a role in the imagined abolitionist plots in northern Texas that summer. When arson had rendered northern Texas reportedly “helpless,” the blame fell on both abolitionists and Indians. As to the rumored abolitionist plots, the escape of slaves south to Mexico or north to the Indian Nations appeared plausible.\textsuperscript{15}

The Texas frontier faced multifaceted security threats in the summer of 1860. The most serious came from native Americans, mostly Comanches and Kickapoos, who raided the Texas frontier, killing settlers, and stealing horses and other property.\textsuperscript{16} The U. S. Army was not strong enough to protect the frontier settlements and actually prevented Texas Rangers from pursuing Comanche raiders onto their reservation.\textsuperscript{17} The second security threat came from south of the border, in the form of a Mexican named Juan Nepomuceno “Cheno” Cortina. In September 1859, Cortina and a group of bandits attacked and occupied Brownsville, leading to the dispatch of Texas Rangers to the Mexican border.\textsuperscript{18} Major Samuel Heintzelman and then Colonel Robert

\textsuperscript{14} Indians were one of the threats that Texan John James addressed in his “mode to secure the western frontier,” which James sent to Gov. Sam Houston in January 1860. John James to Sam Houston, January 14, 1860, Box 2014/109-1, Folder 37, Texas Governor Sam Houston records. Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission.


\textsuperscript{17} Walter L. Buenger, \textit{Secession and the Union in Texas}, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 110-111.

E. Lee led the U.S. Army into Mexico against Cortina. By March, 1860, Cortina had been defeated but remained in the field along the Rio Grande.\footnote{Ford, \textit{Rip Ford’s Texas}, 308.} While historian Donald E. Reynolds, in his work \textit{Texas Terror}, briefly mentions both the Native American threat and the threat posed by Cortina, he dwells almost exclusively on the perceived threat of abolitionist-inspired arson.\footnote{Donald E. Reynolds, \textit{Texas Terror: The Slave Insurrection Panic of 1860 and the Secession of the Lower South}, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 10-11.} It is not clear that Texans at the time compartmentalized the security threats this way.\footnote{The “Declaration of the Causes which Impel the State of Texas to Secede from the Federal Union,” cites “Indian savages on our border,” and “the murderous forays of banditti” from Mexico, as well as attempts to “stir up servile insurrection and bring blood and carnage to our firesides,” Ernest William Winkler (ed.), \textit{Journal of the Secession Convention of Texas 1861}, (Austin: Texas Library and Historical Commission, 1912), 61-65.}

Texas’ security threats from the west and south drew able-bodied men away from central and northern Texas. This placed multiple demands on Texas’ military manpower, the same manpower that would be needed for slave patrols and vigilance committees that were considered vital to securing a slaveholding society against the threat of a servile insurrection. Texas had never experienced a major servile insurrection, but any hint of trouble appeared even more frightening when added to the Indian threat on the western frontier and the Cortina threat on the Mexican border.

On Sunday afternoon, July 8, 1860, the security situation in Texas, and by implication, the entire South, turned more ominous. In Dallas, between 1 and 2 p.m., when the temperature stood at 106 degrees in the shade, a fire broke out in Peak’s drug store on the square. There had been a drought that summer, so all of northern Texas was a tinderbox. The flames spread from west to east across the northern side of the square, and then south along the east side. Most of the
buildings were a total loss. On July 9, newspaper Dallas editor, Charles Pryor, wrote to fellow Democratic editors John Marshall, of the Texas State Gazette in Austin, and Edward Hopkins Cushing of the Houston Telegraph, reporting on the July 8 fire.

As Eugene Genovese noted, any fire in a slave society might arouse suspicion of arson. In Dallas, such suspicions spread quickly when nearby towns (or portions thereof) also burned. In Black Jack Grove, fifty miles east of Dallas, Cate’s mercantile house went up in flames that Sunday, with the loss of $30,000 worth of property. At Denton, fifty miles northwest of Dallas, James Smoot’s storehouse (estimated value $10,000) burned. Eighty miles northeast of Dallas, in Ladonia, it was reported that a Mr. Dupre suffered $25,000 in damages when his storehouse caught fire. Eight stores in the frontier village of Belknap burned, and the village of Milford was reportedly destroyed.

On the same day, in several towns in northern Texas, citizens discovered and put out fires before too much damage was done. This happened at Waxahatchie, thirty miles south of Dallas and in Jefferson (Cass County in east Texas) where fire threatened Campbell’s Drug Store and the Jefferson Hotel. On July 11, a fire broke out at the home of E. P. Nicholson outside Dallas but was extinguished before any damage occurred. Fire was also discovered near the office of


the *Austin (Texas) Southern Intelligencer*. On August 5, the town of Henderson was “almost entirely consumed” by fire. Around 8 p.m. on Sunday, August 5, a fire broke out in a building on the town square while most if the inhabitants were at Sunday evening church services. The fire raged until “every house on the square except one, including all the business houses in the place were destroyed.” Dangerfield in Titus County, Belleview in Rusk County, and a stable in Athens in Henderson County were reported to have burned. Similar news came from Gainesville, just north of Dallas. Newspaper reports generally blamed the fires on slaves plotting insurrection.

The map at Figure 3 shows those Texas counties (in red) in which suspicious fires occurred in the summer of 1860 and those counties in which militia, slave patrol or vigilance committee activity was reported. Two deductions stand out. First, the Troubles were widespread, not only over north Texas, but over central Texas as well. Second, there is a positive relationship between counties in which unexplained fires occurred and those in which the local population responded with an increase in militia, slave patrol or vigilance committee activity.

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29 “Rusk, Titus and Henderson Counties,” *Austin Texas State Gazette*, August 25, 1860, p. 2, col. 5. Reynolds groups these reports of fires together and labels them “spurious.”

Figure 3: Reported Locations Affected by the Texas Troubles.\textsuperscript{31}

On July 12, Crill Miller’s stable near Dallas was burned along with all his fodder. Miller’s slave Bruce had informed Miller about the fire, denying any knowledge of how it started. During a subsequent investigation by Miller and his white neighbors, Bruce, with his life being threatened, admitted to having set the blaze. He eventually told his inquisitors that another slave had urged him to burn Miller’s stable, and offered one dollar for the job. Within days of Miller’s “investigation,” Charles Pryor was again writing to Marshall and Cushing. On July 16, Pryor mentioned that the examination of African-Americans and white men by Miller had led to the discovery of “the most diabolical plot to destroy the country.” Abolitionists had supposedly planned to burn supplies in northern Texas. This would leave the area in a helpless condition and prepare the way for a general slave uprising on August 6, the day of local elections. Northern abolitionists and sympathetic southern whites, had reportedly organized each county into districts and sub-districts, with a white man at the head of each group of slaves. On election day, two northern Methodist preachers, presumably William Blunt and Solomon McKinney, who had been flogged and expelled from Texas the previous year, would lead a large abolitionist force into northern Texas to foment the antislavery revolution. This portion of the “plot” seemed


33 Donald E. Reynolds, Texas Terror: The Slave Insurrection and Panic of 1860 and the Secession of the Lower South, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 34. Reynolds accepts that some fires did, in fact, happen in Texas in the summer of 1860, but takes a skeptical view of many of the fires reported in the papers. Unless he found some corroborating source that a fire happened, he generally discounts newspaper reports of arson.

34 William Blunt and Solomon McKinney were two missionaries of the Methodist Episcopal Church North working in Texas. The Methodist Episcopal Church had split in 1844 over the question of accepting ministers who owned slaves, and divided the United States geographically between the MEC South and the MEC North. Gross Alexander, et al., History of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, (New York; Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1904), 15-34. Texas was in the area assigned to the MEC South. Texans could draw two conclusions from the presence of Blunt and McKinney in Texas. First, they were in violation of this MEC break-up agreement. Second,
particularly obscure (or, half-baked, depending on whether one believed the reports or not). It
was unclear from Pryor’s letter which of these details had been elicited by Bruce’s interrogators,
but Miller seems to have been the source of Pryor’s information. Whatever the case, all these
accounts of arson and slave tampering fed white Texans’ fears of a widespread conspiracy.
The cause of all these fires was obviously the subject of intense discussions among white
Texans. John Marshall, of the Texas State Gazette in Austin and Edward Hopkins Cushing of the
Houston Telegraph, dutifully provided readers Pryor’s letter on the July 8 fire. At some point,
poison entered into the picture. Someone had allegedly distributed strychnine to the slaves for
use against slaveholders. On August 3, a slave belonging to a Mr. Barron was found with
strychnine in his possession at Science Hill after “having confessed to having a hand in the
insurrection.” A well was reportedly poisoned in Athens, Henderson County, and during a
search of slave quarters, one hundred bottles of strychnine were found. “After severe
punishment,” one of the slaves “revealed” the plan to poison the whites.

Finally, the salacious detail that the slaves would kill or ravish women was added to stories
of the plot. One report, for example stated that “the old women and children were to be

they opposed accepting ministers who owned slaves, which meant Blunt and McKinney felt
there was something morally unacceptable about slaveholding. Blunt and McKinney had been
whipped and ordered out of the state in 1859. Reynolds, Texas Terror, 208.

35 “Terrible Conflagration: The Town of Dallas Destroyed, Austin Texas State Gazette, July


37 “Rusk, Titus and Henderson Counties.” Austin Texas State Gazette, August 25, 1860, p. 2,
col. 5. The newspaper does not reveal what exactly “severe punishment” consisted of. Setting
aside for the moment moral argument against torturing captives, tortured confessions are
notoriously unreliable, so this “confession” does not lend much credibility to the stories of
poison.
murdered, and the young women were to be taken as wives by the hell-hounds.” 38 Another claimed the insurgents would shoot the women on election day while the men were away voting. 39

Texans reacted predictably. Writing from Palestine to his brother Morris, John Reagan, explained, “A plot has been discovered in Tennessee Colony, and extending out from there between some white men and negroes, similar to that in Dallas, Ellis, and Tarrant Counties. Indeed, it is regarded as the same plot—to poison as many people as they could on Sunday night before the election and on the day of the election to burn the houses and kill as many of the women and children as they could while the men were gone to the election, and then kill the men as they returned home.” Two white men on Catfish Bayou, according to Reagan, had been hanged as ringleaders. A vigilance committee and patrols were active in defending the community. “Henderson has been burned—supposed by incendiaries.” Reagan seemed convinced of abolitionist involvement. “I am strongly persuaded from all I can learn that these things must be the result of an abolition plot arranged elsewhere than in Texas, and that its execution has been committed to the desperate set of Kansas outlaws or similar men.” Concluding on an ominous note, “I do not think one of them ought to be permitted to leave the state alive where his complicity can be clearly shown.” 40

Whether there was some servile insurrection conspiracy or not has been debated since 1860. Historians of antebellum Texas have come down on both sides of the question. William W.

39 Later from North Texas,” Houston Telegraph, July 31, 1860, p. s, col. 4.
White and Wendell Addington concluded that some form of conspiracy existed.\textsuperscript{41} Walter L. Buenger, Randolph B. Campbell, and Donald E. Reynolds present solid arguments against the existence of any abolition conspiracy. Campbell doubts a conspiracy existed, and concludes that if one did, and it included white northerners, then it was not a purely slave uprising, a distinction that might have been lost on Texans of the period.\textsuperscript{42}

No evidence has ever come to light that indicated any real conspiracy. Slave “confessions” extracted through torture would be extremely unreliable. No physical evidence such as bottles of poison or weapons found in the possession of slaves has survived. Reynolds and others point out that a type of match, the so-called “prairie match,” which contained phosphorus, may have been responsible for some of the fires. If the solution in the match head contained too much phosphorus, the match could ignite spontaneously if the air became too hot. There were reports of matches doing exactly this in 1860.\textsuperscript{43} Some problems with the “prairie match” theory remain, however. The United States Army surgeons recorded temperatures at each Army installation. Examining the records from Texas, the hottest part of the summer of 1860 was June, not July. August was somewhat cooler.\textsuperscript{44} The Henderson fire started around 8 o’clock in the evening, not the hottest part of the day.


\textsuperscript{42} Randolph B. Campbell, \textit{An Empire for Slavery: The Peculiar Institution in Texas}, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 185. Campbell uses the word “insurrection” not conspiracy, but this comment was in a broader discussion of slave resistance.

\textsuperscript{43} Reynolds argues that July 8 was the hottest day of the year in Dallas. Reynolds, \textit{Texas Terror}, 205-206.

\textsuperscript{44} Army surgeons at the time kept records of high and low temperatures. Army Inspector General Colonel Joseph K. F. Mansfield reported the high temperature in Texas in June was 108. The high temperature in July was 103, and in August the high was 101. See Jerry Thompson
The strongest evidence of some form of conspiracy came from Texans themselves. In Cherokee County, Texas, M. H. Bonner had originally discounted rumors as sensational and had been skeptical about tales of abolition plots. Bonner nevertheless joined the local slave patrol and what he saw changed his opinion. “In several places, poison has been found with the negroes…. I am opposed, in principle and policy to frequent alarms of this kind, and should not write, if I did not believe there is serious cause of alarm.”45 One correspondent in Lowell, Massachusetts, noted that some people there allegedly knew about a Texas insurrection three weeks before it was reported in the papers.46 In Texas, some people had been skeptical and put forward the idea that the whole abolition conspiracy idea had been put forward merely to advance the fortunes of the Democratic Party in the upcoming elections. The Galveston News scoffed, “as if any slave owner would hang his negroes, or any householder burn his residence or store for such a cause!”47

In sum, the evidence is inconclusive, but any outside assistance from abolitionists seems highly unlikely. The editor of the Columbus (Ga.) Enquirer (quoting the Mobile Register) surveyed the stories in August 1860 and admitted that “some allowance must be made for exaggeration and vivid coloring.”48 The sheer number of suspicious fires seems to indicate that something was happening in Texas that summer. The conspiracy theory held that Blunt and

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46 “Alarming Intelligence, “ Austin Texas State Gazette, September 22, 1860, p. 2, col. 4, citing the correspondent of the Mariana (Fla.) Patriot.


48 “Texas Troubles,” Columbus (Ga.) Enquirer, August 28, 1860, p. 2, col. 3.
McKinney would be leading an abolitionist army into Texas on election day, August 6, and this did not happen. If there was anything more sinister than a series of accidental fires in Texas in the summer of 1860, the fires were probably copy-cat affairs started by individual slaves who saw the uproar that an accidental fire could cause among the white population.

Breckenridge newspapers at the time, however, clearly lent credence to the existence of a conspiracy. The Clarksville (Texas) Standard was quite adamant on this point. “If it is come to this, that John Brownism is not an individual insanity, but an organized plot, to be carried out by associated resources, it may become necessary that we shall examine all new-comers and require credentials of respectability and peaceful character.” A letter from the Dallas correspondent of the Houston Telegraph, revealed the details of “one of the most startling plots that was ever heard in the civilized world.” This plot established a new “depth of human depravity surpassing the atrocities of the most savage barbarians and before which John Brown’s conspiracy pales as a rush light in the fires of hell.” The Telegraph hoped these report would mobilize the public.

“When the torch is set to our dwellings, the knife to the throat of our citizens, and our wives and daughters parceled out to terrible outrages of the hellish miscreants, … it is time to send the alarm throughout the length and breadth of the land. …It is time for all true men to come together… and drive out every man who is not a friend to our institutions!” Neutrality or ambivalence, it seems, was not to be tolerated. To the Texas Times, the sequence of events supported the conclusion that some kind of conspiracy had, in fact, existed. “From the reports of fires in various portions, all having occurred about the same time of day, and on the same day of


the month, we are led to the belief … that it is the work … of abolition emissaries.” The Texas Watchman concluded there was some form of conspiracy going on in Texas. “You may believe this development of startling facts, or turn a deaf ear to the promotions of impending danger; but with circumstances so pointed, and overt acts already committed, we give full credence to the details of this fearful plot.” As to how best to respond, the editor wrote, “Something must be done. We have suffered long, and have been too kind, while on the contrary, the foes of our peace and safety has been coiling for a fatal spring.”

Other paper editors strongly believed in the existence of a widespread conspiracy. While the Seguin Union Democrat condemned “raising any unnecessary alarms,” the editor acknowledged “the late calamities in Dallas and vicinity, together with the diabolical abolition plot that underlies it all.” It was wise, the paper argued, “to be on the alert, and ready to nip in the bud everything that might lead … to a disturbance of the peace and safety of our citizens.” The Paris (Tex.) Press, warned that “their [abolition] emissaries are at this very hour in our midst, actually scattering fire-brands, arrows and death.” Property losses had been immense, amounting to hundreds of thousands of dollars in a single day. “We have reason to believe that they (abolition emissaries) are at this very moment instigating the negroes of northern Texas to exterminate all slaveholders, and all other persons who are opposed to their immediate emancipation.” Thus the safety of slaveholders and nonslaveholders were linked. Undermining the credibility of these reports, some Texas editors kept adding to what they believed were the

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objectives of the plot, for example, the charge that abolitionists were determined to “exterminate all slaveholders.” Historian Donald Reynolds maintained that partisan politics influenced both the stories of insurrection and Texans’ reactions to it. There is much to support this contention. Certainly Breckenridge newspapers were more likely to pick up and repeat stories of insurrection than were Douglas newspapers, or Bell newspapers. About one thing there is no doubt, the press trumpeted reports of the fires and spread tales of abolitionists working to incite antislavery violence.54

The Galveston News came right to the point: “It is evident that a concerted incendiary plan was attempted to be carried out on the same day, over a wide section of our state, and in most instances, it succeeded, ruining scores of industrious citizens and leaving many homeless and houseless.”55 Correspondence from the interior counties caused the editor to believe “that abolition emissaries are scattered through the counties just below the frontier, that they have been detected at several points intriguing with the negroes.” Several of the Texans who had suffered from the fires had been the same men who had been instrumental in expelling Blunt and McKinney in 1859 and these Texans were “threatened with a dire revenge.” The editor concluded that there cannot be “any doubt … as [to] the origin of these disastrous conflagrations.” Despite the evidence and severity of the fires, Texans had been lenient with those apprehended. “In the face of this, several of these detected abolition emissaries have been

54 Reynolds, Texas Terror, 43-44, and 99-100.

55 “The Abolition Raid and Negro insurrection,” Galveston News (no date), reprinted in the Texas State Gazette, August 4, 1860, p. 2, col. 6. The loss of a house or even a barn, with its food stores, tools and livestock could be enough to financially ruin some Texas farmers.
punished by the people by being simply ordered to leave the state!”\textsuperscript{56} Evidently, the editor felt those apprehended should have been executed.

\textit{A Marion (Texas) Herald and Gazette} of August 11, 1860, editorial concluded that recent events “unmistakably indicate that a carefully matured and most diabolical plot [existed], on the part of abolition emissaries from the North, to burn and devastate the country—to incite treason, servile insurrection, slaughter, rapine and anarchy.” Only the vigilance of Texans had frustrated these plans. Defending Texans against charges of acting too hastily or summarily, the editor endorsed the swiftest remedies for the perpetrators of such crimes.

\begin{quote}
We have no regrets to express on their account. They have most wickedly and fiendishly tampered with the dignity and honor of a generous and loyal hearted people, with too much at stake to trifle with incendiaries and cutthroats, and they must pay the forfeit. Let the last one of them hang on the most convenient gibbet.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}

Once Texas newspapers publicized the stories of the alleged insurrection and editorialized about how to respond, white Texans held community meetings to coordinate responses. In these gatherings, Texans listened to local leaders explain their views on what was happening and resolved to take action. While this probably occurred in scores of communities across Texas, a few of examples will suffice to illustrate the process.

On August 14, 1860, the citizens of Fort Bend County, southwest of Houston, assembled to “adopt means for their safety against abolition incendiarism.” The citizens resolved that “in the disturbances in the northeastern counties of our state, we recognize the introduction among us of that type of irrepressible conflict which was first inaugurated in theory by William H. Seward and in practice by John Brown.” Fort Bend citizens considered the Republican Party, Harpers Ferry, and the Texas troubles as all being connected. In nearby Harris County, the citizens

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{57} Reprinted in “Marion,” \textit{Austin Texas State Gazette}, August 25, 1860, p. 2, col. 5.
\end{footnotes}
declared if anyone heard of “an abolition emissary in our midst,” he should call a meeting to investigate and respond. In Bellville, Austin County, citizens joined a vigilance committee. In Washington County, the citizens formed “a rifle company of minute men” and a “committee of safety” to investigate suspicious characters and deal with them “as may seem proper.”

On July 27, 1860, citizens of Denton, Texas, assembled at the courthouse to address the recent fire and its implications. They met “to take into consideration the cause of the destruction of the property in [the] town by fire, … to ascertain the causes of said fire, and to guard against future danger.” The meeting selected a “Central Committee of Safety” for the county and unanimously adopted several resolutions. “Numerous fires and depredations have of late occurred in this and adjoining counties, under circumstances that lead to the inevitable conclusion that there exists in our midst a regular organized band of abolitionists and scoundrels, … inciting our slave population to the most barbarous acts of murder, arson, and robbery.” This rendered “ourselves, as well as our women and children in imminent danger of nightly assassination” and “our property wholly insecure. Second, Denton county and adjoining counties, “are infested by a class of persons of at least doubtful character,” and some are “abolitionists and horse thieves.” Third, some of these received material through the mail “of the blackest and most incendiary character.” Therefore, the citizens of Denton County pledged to “ferret out and investigate the conduct of all suspicious characters … in our midst.” A standing Central Committee of Safety, with sub-branches would investigate suspicious characters. When they found sufficient evidence, the Committee would call a meeting of the citizens, and, after a

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58 The Black Republican Plot against Texas,” Austin Texas State Gazette, August 18, 1860, p. 2, col. 6; “Late Incendiarism,” Austin Texas State Gazette, August 18, 1860, p. 2, col. 7.

fair investigation, the citizens would “mete out such punishment as his or their conduct may
deserve.”

Portions of the state where there had been few if any reports of insurrection plots
nevertheless took action to protect others in the state. In coastal Matagorda County, far from the
disturbances of northern Texas, a group of citizens “heard with surprise and indignation, of the
numerous acts of violence and lawlessness” which they regarded as “a repetition of the horrors
enacted at Harpers Ferry, only upon a broader field, and in all probability [with] far greater
resources.” Therefore, the citizens of Matagorda declared themselves “ready at all times and at
any moment to contribute our means and to march to the assistance of our fellow citizens, and to
the support of their institutions.” They would “at once proceed to organize a company of
mounted men, and appoint a committee to solicit subscriptions … to defray their expenses.”
Finally, the county would “organize an efficient police for the city” and “organize a patrol for the
county.” To head off trouble, the citizens moved to disarm African-Americans. It was “highly
impolitic, if not a flagrant violation of the law,” to allow African-Americans to possess firearms,
and the citizens pledged to search for firearms in black hands and confiscate them when found.
Bucking the hierarchical trend of a slave society, the citizens promised to “prosecute any owner
or manager of a slave, who interferes [with] such disarmament.” Finally, the citizens moved to
reinforce racial solidarity among whites. The meeting warned citizens not to be “on intimate
equality with negroes,” and threatened expulsion from the county for those who persisted. For
historian Donald Reynolds, this is more evidence of Texan hysteria.

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52 (January 1949), 265, citing the Austin *Texas State Gazette*, August 11, 1860.

61 Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 73.
The citizens of Tarrant County assembled for what was reportedly the largest meeting ever held in the county. They adopted resolutions affirming that Paul Isbell, the man who found an alleged abolitionist letter, was “a gentlemen of unimpeachable integrity and veracity.”\textsuperscript{62} Schultz, one of the men mentioned in the letter, had been since taken, and from his confession, the people of Tarrant County sought to rid the country of some of the perceived enemies. “The publication of the letter has caused many abolitionists to leave the State, and thus saved the effusion of blood.”\textsuperscript{63}

These community meetings also adopted measures for self-defense. One immediate step was to establish more active slave patrolling. Southern communities possessed both the means to increase slave patrols as well as the legal authorization to do so. The \textit{Clarksville (Texas) Standard} argued that “patrols should be kept out in every town every night, close watch kept on the negroes everywhere, and all white men found in any sort of private communication with them should be immediately ordered to leave the state at short notice and should be followed off some distance.”\textsuperscript{64} Citizens in Matagorda reinvigorated their county slave patrol.\textsuperscript{65} In Bastrop County, the patrol inspected some of the slave quarters on Walnut Creek and found “large

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\textsuperscript{62} The infamous “Bailey letter,” purported by many to be a real abolitionist’s letter sent to Rev. Anthony Bewley, and the basis for his lynching. See infra. Historian Donald Reynolds presents convincing evidence that the Bailey letter was a forgery, but many Texans accepted it as legitimate.

\textsuperscript{63} “Tarrant County Meeting,” Austin \textit{Texas State Gazette}, September 22, 1860, p. 2, col. 2; Austin \textit{Texas State Gazette}, September, 1860, p. 2, col. 6.


\textsuperscript{65} “Incendiariism—Meeting in Matagorda,” Austin \textit{Texas State Gazette}, August 11, 1860, p. 3, col. 3. Campbell, \textit{An Empire for Slavery}, 226.
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quantities of arms and ammunition,” a keg of powder and “new six-shooters” there.  

A correspondent for the Tyler Reporter informed readers that one hundred citizens were on patrol every night. “The only reason why Tyler had been spared” thus far from incendiaries was the “continued and unremitting vigilance of our citizens.” Such efforts came at a cost, however. After weeks of this, the men were worn out. One exhausted Texan wrote, “It is impossible for us to watch all night and work all day.” In Lynchburg, Harris County, thirty citizens met to discuss the recent disturbances, authorized a slave patrol, and signed up every man present. In Douglas County, the citizens organized a patrol of six men “to traverse the surrounding neighborhoods.” Some communities proceeded with at least a modicum of caution. In Gay Hill, Washington County, residents resolved that “no man of intemperate habits shall be appointed upon the patrol, and no person under the influence of liquor shall be permitted to accompany the patrol on any of their expeditions.” Some communities ignored the threat and paid the penalty. Henderson, in Rusk County, had “put no faith in the reported conspiracy,” and thus had “neglected to appoint a patrol or set a watch.” A fire on August 5 burned every house on the town square.

Texas communities, like other southern communities with security concerns, established vigilance committees. These organizations, of widely varying character, were either extra-legal,

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or at best, operated on the margins of the legal system. A merchant named Cruger reported that vigilance committees in northern Texas were composed of “the best men of the several counties” and that “the people have the utmost confidence in them.”⁷¹ Men suspected of improper relations with slaves, receiving stolen goods, or selling weapons or alcohol to slaves might be denounced by some member of the community and dragged before the vigilance committee. Here the treatment much depended on the charges, how they were answered, and the committee’s composition. Some of the accused might be released, some warned to leave the community or the state, and some were dealt with summarily. Texans behaved much like white southerners in other states, except in Texas suspects may have been more likely to be killed than in slave states further east.

Vigilance committees arrested, interrogated, flogged, and even killed slaves and whites suspected of insurrectionary activity. Crill Miller, for example, had threatened his slave Bruce with execution during his interrogation. Other slaves taken before this committee had been “punished severely” before admitting the existence of an abolitionist plot.⁷² The vigilance committee of Washington County interrogated a number of slaves, who all admitted that white men had given them poison with which to kill slaveholders.⁷³ In Dallas, on July 23, the vigilance committee announced the results of its investigation of the Dallas fire. These men concluded that three black “ringleaders” had been responsible for the fire, and they were to be executed. One of the accused, named Cato, “had always enjoyed a bad reputation.” Another, named Patrick

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Jennings, had had been well-liked by whites in general and children in particular.  Yet his former owner in Virginia had characterized Patrick as a trouble-maker. Sam Smith was a black preacher, who had “imbibed most of his villainous principles from two abolition preachers, Blunt and McKinney.” On July 24, 1860, the vigilance committee marched Smith, Cato and Jennings down to the river bank and hanged them.

Other slaves confessed after being tortured. In Tennessee Colony in Anderson County, the vigilance committee “severely whipped” suspects, who, not surprisingly, confessed. In Tyler County, four slaves were whipped “very severely.” Similar extorted confessions were forthcoming in Rusk County. In Williamson County, “the stable and kitchen of L. Gans … were destroyed by fire.” One slave, “without whipping,” admitted that he had set fire to the stable. “He had been instigated to do so by three white men” whose names he did not know. “One of them told him he would take him safely to Mexico, if he would fire the town, and do other mischief.” Given the liberal application of whipping in these proceedings, slave confessions about the existence of an abolition conspiracy hardly seem credible.

On the other hand, it would be a mistake to assume that the judicial landscape was one of unremitting kangaroo courts, followed by mindless, summary executions. Sometimes African-

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74 Reynolds, Texas Terror, 82.


77 Reynolds, Texas Terror, 79.

78 “Fayette County,” Austin Texas State Gazette, August 25, 1860, p. 2, col. 5. Presumably, a slave confessing to a crime without having been whipped is supposed to increase the credibility of the confession.
Americans and whites were investigated by vigilance committees and released.\textsuperscript{79} If the only evidence discovered against a white man was based on the word of African-Americans, he might be let go because such testimony was inadmissible. A white man named Williamson was arrested in Navasota County, and investigated by the local vigilance committee. Slaves offered the only testimony, and the man was only expelled from Texas, via Galveston. One newspaper, disappointed that Williamson was not hanged, suggested that “there was a shorter way out of the state than Galveston.”\textsuperscript{80}

Vigilance committees also apprehended, questioned, and punished or expelled white men found to have “tampered” with slaves. Immediately after the Dallas fire, a northern nonslaveholding settler named William Crawford was one of the first men summarily executed. Originally from Maine, Crawford had settled for some time in Minnesota before moving to Texas. In Fort Worth, he had spoken out against slavery and had allegedly armed slaves, urging them to fight for their freedom. On July 17, an unknown vigilante group hanged him outside Fort Worth. The next day, a public meeting endorsed the lynching.\textsuperscript{81} At Tennessee Colony, two white men, Anthony Wyrick and Alford Cabelle, were examined by the local vigilance committee, found to have tampered with slaves and to have harbored fugitive slaves. They were

\textsuperscript{79} “Late Incendiaryism,” Austin Texas State Gazette, August 18, 1860, p. 2, col. 7.

\textsuperscript{80} “The Late Incendiaryism,” Texas State Gazette, August 18, 1860, p. 2, col. 7.

\textsuperscript{81} “Texas Items,” Houston Telegraph, August 14, 1860, p. 1, col. 7, quoting the Fort Worth Chief.
both hanged.82 A letter to the Houston Telegraph declared “Woe to the individual who is detected tampering with our negroes, or entertaining Black Republican or abolition principles.”83

Probably the most infamous case of vigilante justice that summer involved the Reverend Anthony Bewley. Bewley, a Tennessean by birth, was a minister of the Methodist Episcopal Church, North, working as a missionary in Texas. He had been in the Dallas area in July 1860, when the fires broke out. Once the second Pryor letter was published, with its allegations that abolitionists had secretly incited slaves to insurrection, Bewley decided that it would be best to leave Texas. He travelled north, making it to Cassville, Missouri, but agents of the Dallas vigilance committee apprehended Bewley on September 3 and returned him to Texas. On the night of September 13, the vigilance committee in Fort Worth pulled Bewley out of jail and hanged him.84 The Anderson (S. C.) Intelligencer reported Bewley’s murder and noted that the New York Christian Advocate had characterized Bewley as “inoffensive” and “pious.” The Intelligencer’s editor wondered if the Advocate would feel the same if Bewley would “set all the slaves at the South to murdering their masters.”85 The Southern Christian Advocate of South Carolina scoffed at the New York Christian Advocate for claiming it took “Turkish cruelty” to hang Bewley. Accepting reports of a general slave uprising in Texas, the Southern Christian

82 “Republican Plot against Texas,” Austin Texas State Gazette, August 18, 1860, p. 2, col. 6.


84 Reynolds, Texas Terror, 152; George C. Rable, God’s Almost Chosen Peoples (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 33.

Advocate charged that northern abolitionists were the ones being cruel in supporting that insurrection.  

On August 25, the Texas State Gazette published a letter from a William H. Bailey, allegedly found in Bewley’s north Texas camp site. The letter opened with a cryptic allusion to “the Mystic Red,” presumably some clandestine abolition organization. The “new associates” of this organization were “desperate characters” who bore watching, the author warned. These men will destroy towns and mills in Texas, the author noted approvingly, and the current residents will leave, and their places will be “filled by honest Republicans.” Once Lincoln was elected, abolitionists would then seize the Indian Nations (in the territory that would become the state of Oklahoma), and then would come the struggle for Texas. Once slaves in Texas were set free, slavery would be hemmed in from the Great Lakes to the Gulf and would “soon sting itself to death.”

The Bailey letter seemed to confirm white southerners’ worst fears about northern-sponsored slave insurrections and thus contributed to southern hysteria that summer and fall. Historian Donald Reynolds has demonstrated fairly convincingly that the Bailey letter was a forgery, designed to justify Bewley’s hanging and the other violent responses to other unfortunate suspects around Texas that summer. The letter was reprinted across Texas and

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86 “Hanging a Preacher,” Greensboro (N. C.) Times, September 15, 1860, p. 6, col. 2.

87 This reference is probably a literary equivalent of the technique in clandestine operations known as “pocket litter,” a meaningless piece of detail inserted into a larger whole to lend credibility to other details.


89 Reynolds, Texas Terror, 148-167.
across the South in the weeks ahead.\(^90\) In the Bailey letter was a supposed list of abolitionist allies in Texas. Pro-slavery men privately and discreetly sent the list to “tried, true and discreet” men elsewhere in Texas, to enable them to apprehend these abolitionists. A broadside urged Texans to use the information to lay traps for the abolitionists named in the letter. “Our advice is (as a general rule) whip no abolitionist, drive off no abolitionist—hang them or let them be.”\(^91\) Driving off an abolitionist would result in the target changing his venue, but not his activities.

The Bailey letter was circulated to sound the alarm and thwart further arson attacks, but some Texans expressed reservations about its publication. The *Houston Telegraph* worried about tipping the hands of those seeking to apprehend the abolitionists named in the letter.\(^92\) Other editors published the Bailey letter while expressing concerns about its authenticity. The *Galveston Civilian and Gazette* commented: “We have no means of judging whether it is a genuine document over a real signature or not.” The *Marshall Texas Republican*, “We should like to know something of the character of the men who found, or pretend to have found, the foregoing letter. … The affair looks suspicious.”\(^93\) Nevertheless, these editors opted to print the letter, probably preferring to err on the side of caution.

The so-called Texas Troubles undermined moderates such as Gov. Sam Houston and

\(^90\) Galveston News, August 19, 1860 as a broadside; The *Galveston Civilian and Gazette*, September 4, 1860; San Augustine Redland Express, September 15, 1860; Marshall Texas Republican, September 15, 1860; “How the Republicans Intend to Carry Texas—Fire and Strychnine,” Charleston Mercury, September 29, 1860, p. 1, col. 4; “How the Republicans Intend to Carry Texas—Fire and Strychnine,” Macon (Ga.) Telegraph, October 4, 1859, p. 5, col. 3.

\(^91\) Bailey Broadside, John Henry Brown Papers, Box W1282, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin. Emphasis in the original.

\(^92\) Houston Telegraph, August 28, 1860, p. 2, col. 2.

\(^93\) Reynolds, Texas Terror, 158, citing the *Galveston Civilian and Gazette* of September 4, 1860 and the *Marshall Texas Republican* of September, 15, 1860.
strengthened the hand of pro-southern extremists. Houston and his political associates urged caution and restraint in pursuing and punishing accused abolitionists. At a Union meeting in September 1860, Houston said, “The people of the South have been filled with horror by these accounts and, instead of Texas being looked upon as the most inviting spot on earth, they turn from it as from a land accursed. Who will buy land here, so long as these continue? What southern planter will emigrate with his slaves to such a country?” If the stories had been true, Houston wrote, “we could bear it without a murmur; but there has been no cause for the present state of feeling.” Houston did not believe the reports and placed the blame for the tensions in Texas at the feet of Democratic editors. “Town after town has been reported in ashes, and by the time the report has been found to be false, some new story to keep up the public excitement has been invented.”

Houston noted the partisan nature of the press reports: “We all know how every occurrence has been magnified by the disunion press and leaders and scattered abroad, and for no other purpose than to arouse the passions of the people and drive them into the southern disunion movement.” If disunionists could make the people believe that the terrible accounts of abolition plots were true, Houston argued, “they will be ready for anything, sooner than suffer their continuance.”

Houston’s critique stemmed from his contempt for disunionists. He discounted reports of fires in part because secessionists were spreading them. “Who are the men,” Houston asked, “that are circulating these reports, and taking the lead in throwing the country into confusion?”

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94 Amelia W. Williams and Eugene Barker (eds.), *Writings of Sam Houston*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1943), 8:156.

95 Reynolds, *Texas Terror*, 133-134.
Houston believed they could not be trusted because they were not slaveholders. “By far the large majority of them never owned a negro, and never will own one.”

The Democratic press bristled at anyone like Houston who advised restraint: “Those men who fear to side with the people, through dread of some political disaster to their party, are not to be trusted in such emergencies, and God forbid, that they should ever be called to posts of honor and responsibility in the hour of danger.” Democrats were especially outraged by Governor Houston’s seeming inactivity in the face of arson. The *Houston Telegraph* condemned Houston’s tepid response: “The frontier country may be overrun with Indians. The northern country may be destroyed by abolition incendiaries. Gen. Houston sees nothing, knows nothing of these things. He cannot interfere to protect the country or establish the supremacy of law.”

The attacks also hardened the attitude of many Texas Democrats who insisted that Breckenridge be elected or the state should secede. In August, Charles Pryor wrote from Dallas, “I do not know a Sam Houston man in this country. If one is here I have not seen him.” Then Pryor rejoiced over the state’s political condition. “From every county surrounding this, we hear of nothing but Breckenridge and Lane men and meetings. It is no time now to look to local and party divisions—the country must be saved and Breck and Lane can do it.” Houston’s restraint in the face of Native American depredations, and perceived passivity toward the abolition menace, undermined the governor’s legitimacy. By extension, in the eyes of many Texans, any

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96 Williams and Barker, *Writings of Sam Houston*, 8:156.


cause Houston espoused would be suspect. Historian Walter Buenger argued that Texans, fearing Republican victory in November, believed themselves to be under attack and saw the “Texas Troubles” as proof of the danger.100

Elsewhere southern whites watched with alarm what was happening in Texas that summer. Several newspapers reported a similar story: “Thirty-three buildings, comprising the best portion of the town of Dallas, Texas, was burnt on the 7 [sic]. Loss not accurately ascertained, but estimated at $300,000 to $500,000, with very small insurance.”101

Another widely circulated report included more details of the fires in Dallas and surrounding counties and repeated the details of the second Pryor letter about Blount and McKinney and an alleged insurrection.102 The article stated that “several white men and negroes have been arrested.” It listed the locales damaged by the fires: Dallas, Black Jack Grove, Denton, Pilot Point, Ladonia, Belknap, and Milford and “several other smaller fires” resulting in damage of between $160,000 and $185,000.103 All the stories concluded that “great excitement” prevailed

100 Buenger, Secession and the Union in Texas, 55.


102 These stories are dated St. Louis Mo., July 26, the articles declared that an extra from Bonham Texas, dated July 17 had been received, containing the second Pryor letter.

throughout the whole country or the state and “prompt and effective measures” would be taken or had been taken “for the preservation of life and property.”

A key piece of evidence about Texans’ belief in a conspiracy was the Bailey letter, which was also widely reprinted in newspapers across the South that summer.\textsuperscript{104} One editor wrote that there was enough similarity between the ideas and language of the Texas conspirator’s letter and some of Seward’s words in his recent speeches to raise alarms. In Bailey’s letter was one remarkable expression about slavery "stinging itself to death.” This phrase was allegedly a favorite one with William Seward who, in his western speeches, wanted to drive slavery like a snake into its hole where it will sting itself to death.\textsuperscript{105} History, according to the editor, will reveal “a perfect understanding between the leading black Republicans and the John Brownites.” Bailey wrote that if Republicans could get control over Texas, they would “then have a connected link from the lakes to the Gulf slavery will then be surrounded by land by water and soon sting itself to death.”\textsuperscript{106}

Some secessionist-minded newspapers outside of Texas took up the Bailey letter and broadcast it.\textsuperscript{107} In early October, the \textit{Macon (Ga.) Telegraph}, quoting an article from the

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\item \textsuperscript{104} “How the Republicans Intend to Carry Texas,” \textit{Weekly (Macon) Georgia Telegraph}, October 4, 1860, p. 5, col. 3.
\item \textsuperscript{105} There is some doubt about whether Seward ever uttered the offending phrase. See Daniel W. Crofts, \textit{Lincoln and the Politics of Other Slavery: The Thirteenth Amendment and the Struggle to Save the Union}, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 302, n11.
\item \textsuperscript{106} “Seward and the Texas conspirators,” \textit{Weekly (Macon) Georgia Telegraph}, October 4, 1860, p. 5, col. 2. Seward allegedly had used the phrase in a speech in 1855, but southern editors were fond of repeating the phrase in 1860. “Secession Tracts for the Times,” \textit{Vicksburg (Miss.) Whig}, December 8, 1860, p. 2, col. 3; “Thoughts upon the Present,” \textit{Nashville (Tenn.) Union and Patriot}, November 2, 1860, p. 2, col. 5.
\item \textsuperscript{107} “The Texas Excitement,” \textit{Nashville Union and American}, September 28, 1860, p. 3, col. 2.
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\end{footnotesize}
Galveston News, contained an excerpt of the Bailey letter. The article assured readers that the Bailey letter was genuine: “No sane man can entertain a doubt on that subject.” The Charleston Mercury also printed the Bailey letter because it supported Robert Barnwell Rhett’s secessionist views.

The Alexandria (Va.) Gazette threw a wet blanket over the abolition conspiracy scare when it republished an article from the New York Herald. Doubting the various charges of an abolitionist conspiracy, the Herald commented:

The telegraphic reports of the discovery of an extensive abolition conspiracy in northern Texas, are of a very startling character, and if they have any substantial foundation in truth, we shall soon have a southern sensation on the slavery question fearful to contemplate. [Widespread reports claimed that] white men, friends of the abolition preachers, Blunt and McKinney, expelled from Texas last year, are instigators of the plot; that the plan was to lay the whole country waste by fire, destroying all the arms and ammunition that the conspirators could lay their hands on, so as to get the country into a state of helplessness, and then, on election day in August, to make a general insurrection, aided by emissaries from the North, and parties friendly to the cause in Texas.

It further appeared that "several white men and negroes concerned in the plot had been arrested."

Numerous destructive fires occurring simultaneously in different parts of northern Texas, were blamed on these incendiaries. This, at least, was the story. The New York Herald, however, was cautious. “We cannot believe it to be wholly true. It may be founded upon facts. An abolition incendiary or two, or some horse thieves or marauding Indians, may be responsible for some of these late fires.” The Texas drought will account for many of said disasters. “It is to be hoped that such will prove to be the case.” After all, the raid at Harpers Ferry had produced wild rumors that John Brown had a body of five hundred followers at his back. Likewise, in this

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108 “How the Republicans Intend to Carry Texas—Fire and Strychnine,” Macon (Ga.) Telegraph, October 4, 1859, p. 5, col. 3.

instance, the facts were doubtlessly exaggerated. While awaiting further information on the subject, the editor was “disposed to attribute this startling programme of a revolutionary abolition conspiracy in Texas, to a panic brought about by more natural causes than the overt acts of a general combination of vagabond abolitionists.” It was possible, however, that “another gang of John Brown abolition martyrs” may have been at the bottom of these mysterious and simultaneous fires.¹¹⁰

Even fire-eater Edmund Ruffin who had heard about the “Texas Troubles” as he travelled in Kentucky, expressed some skepticism. Ruffin’s travelling companion, Johnson J. Hooper, editor of the Montgomery Mail, “told me much that has not entered the newspapers, in which indeed the abolition & incendiary doings in the South. … No doubt there are gross exaggerations of the facts, & probably many innocent negroes may suffer for the guilty.” Among the stories Ruffin heard was that “as many as one hundred vials of strychnine had been taken from slaves, supplied by white inciters to murder, arson & insurrection.” Hooper told Ruffin that “like discoveries have been made in different parts of Alabama.”¹¹¹ Hooper worried that “the infatuated inhabitants have in sundry cases executed summary vengeance (or justice, if not mistaken) on the detected culprits, white and black.” The white instigators, Ruffin felt, were “generally known to be northerners, & probably are always such.”¹¹²


¹¹² Ruffin, Diary, 3:456. Four white men and eight African-Americans were camped around Talladega. One of the African-American revealed that there was to have been an insurrection
White southerners heard the tales and shared Ruffin’s concerns about insurrection but not so much his skepticism about the reliability of all the rumors. In Louisiana, a railroad manager’s daughter named Sarah Wadley noted the “great excitement” concerning the upcoming election. Wadley prayed that it would not be the cause of breaking up the Union. Yet in common with some other southerners, she was not sure that a Union in which “there is no concord, no real heart” was one worth maintaining. “The Abolitionists,” she wrote had “sowed the seeds of dissension and insurrection among us, those seeds are fast ripening.” Wadley feared that “a blood harvest seem[ed] impending,” and wrote the abolitionists have “burnt our homesteads, killed our citizens, and incited our servants to poison us.” The abolitionists, she believed “would take away our freedom and give it to the negro.” Which of these developments was worse, the current antislavery violence or civil war, was a question with which Wadley wrestled. “I shudder to contemplate a civil war, [but] better far for us would be civil war than this dreadful incubus which hangs over us now, this continual wrangling and bitter malediction with which we are persecuted.” Wadley still held out hope for the Union, however, if northern voters would turn away from the Republicans. “May our countrymen see our wrongs ere it is too late, may they retrace their course ere they plunge themselves into a gulf of ruin.”

If war did come, Wadley did not fear the result. The North had a greater population, but southerners, if called to fight, would be fighting for “their homes, for their liberty,” while northern soldiers would consist of “fanatics whose zeal will soon cool,” and sober second thought would show that they were “impolitic as well as wicked.” Besides, Wadley felt sure, the

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after the Presidential election and slaves were to be set free. “The Insurrection in Alabama,” *Richmond Enquirer*, September 11, 1860, p. 2, col. 1-3.
northern population did not consist solely of abolitionists. There were “some true hearts left” who she presumed would refuse to fight for abolition.\(^\text{113}\)

Like Wadley, other southerners struggled to find a response to the reports coming out of Texas. In an address at Crystal Springs, Mississippi, on September 6, Mississippi Senator Albert Gallatin Brown predicted that Abraham Lincoln would win in November and laid out a “cooperationist” program of southern responses. Southern states should resist and demand guarantees “necessary for our own domestic peace, equality and security.” If the people of the North did not adopt guarantees, “the southern states may justly assume that the disposition to oppress us has ripened into a settled determination,” and the South should then secede and form “an independent government.”\(^\text{114}\) Brown informed his audience that the South could not submit to Republican rule. Some hoped that hugging the phantom of the Union to their bosoms would solve the South’s problems. This way “a returning sense of justice will induce the northern people to forbear.” Brown, however, was not sanguine.

Not so my friends. They will never forbear. They hate us now, and teach their children in their schools and churches to hate our children. You cannot long submit if you will. *The John Brown raid*, the *burning in Texas*, the stealthy tread of abolitionists among us, tell the tale. History is experience teaching by example. Take care that the history of San Domingo be not your history.

In San Domingo, emancipation had been followed by “the burning of houses, the murder of men, the butchery of children, the fiendish and worse than hellish outrages of women.” Brown warned his listeners, “Take care that the same scenes be not enacted here.” The planters in San Domingo

\(^{113}\) October 26, 1860, Sarah Lois Wadley, *Diary*, Call number 1258, Manuscripts Dept., Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 77-78.

“died amid the groans and shrieks of their own families, or fled the country, lighted by the conflagration of their own dwellings.” For those who advised waiting for an overt act by the Republicans before fighting back, Brown had one more warning. “You may imagine that when the worst comes to worst, you will take up arms and defend your right. So thought the planters of San Domingo. … The same power that emancipated the negro stood by him and defended him after he was emancipated.” In conclusion, Brown urged, “Disunion is a fearful thing, but emancipation, … was worse.” Better to “leave the Union in the open face of day, than be lighted from it at midnight by the incendiary’s torch.” Brown certainly painted for his listeners a dire picture of what the United States under a Republican administration would look like. He cited events in San Domingo, Harpers Ferry, and recent events in Texas to present an integrated picture of what abolitionists had in store for the people of the southern states.115 Before Harpers Ferry, in February 1859, Brown had enunciated a highly conditional Unionism.116 Now, in the midst of the furor over the Texas Troubles, Senator Brown had almost entirely given up hope for the Union. Other, more radical southerners now found increasing support as they advocated secession.

In the autumn of 1860, William Lowndes Yancey conducted a tour of northern cities, delivering speeches to outline his views of the state of the Union.117 Historian Donald Reynolds wrote that Yancey’s speaking tour made the most extensive use of the Texas slave insurrection


panic. At Washington on September 21, 1860, Yancey addressed a large crowd. “The only issue before this country in this canvas,” Yancey declared, was “the integrity and the safety of the Constitution.” The northern part of the country Yancey argued “is arming itself and training its midnight bands for the purpose of forcing the Union of a mere majority upon the South.” If these Wide Awakes came south to force the southern states to remain in the Union, Yancey did not fear the result. The southern man would act to protect “his own fireside, his own wife, his own child, [and] determines … that nobody shall aggress on him.” Yancey feared that a “higher law” abolitionist government would be established. If that happened, “the ark of the covenant of our safety” would be found “on Southern soil, where the friends of the Constitution live.”

Yancey foresaw a bleak future for the southern states in the Union. The Republican party was about to take control of the federal government, Yancey argued, which “proclaims a war, an ‘irresistible war’ upon the institutions of one half of this Union.”

Suppose that party gets into power; suppose another John Brown raid takes place in a frontier state; suppose “Sharpe’s rifles” and pikes and bowie knives, and all the other instruments of warfare are brought to bear upon an inoffensive, peaceful and unfortunate people, and that Lincoln or Seward is in the presidential chair, where will then be a force of United States marines to check that band? Suppose … that the frontiers of the country will be lighted up by flames of midnight arson, as it is in Texas; that towns are burned; that the peace of our families is disturbed; that poison is found secreted throughout the whole country and immense quantities; that men are found to prowling about in our land distributing that poison in order that it may be placed in our springs and our wells; with arms and ammunition placed in the hands of this semi-barbarous people, what will be our fate? Where will be the United States marshals to interfere? Where will be the dread of this General Government that exists under this present administration? Where will be the fear of the United States army to intimidate or prevent such movements?

Even with a Democrat in the White House, Yancey observed, “Texas is now in flames, and the peace of Virginia is invaded.” Yancey wondered aloud what would happen “when a ‘higher law’ government reigns in the city of Washington. Where then will be our peace, where will be our

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safety.” Slaves would revolt and dangerous men would prowl the countryside, “knowing that they are protected by the administration.” If the southern people accepted this state of affairs, they would deserve the “execration and contempt, not of all mankind only, but of every Republican who would place this government over us.” Though the South deprecated disunion, “we will have the union of our fathers. … We ask only equal rights in our common Government. We ask protection for these rights in our common government. Nothing more, and, so help me God, we will submit to nothing less.”

A member of the audience asked Yancey directly, “What will the South do in the event of Lincoln’s election?” Yancey’s response was as hyperbolic as the passage above.

If a John Brown commits a raid on [your] state while in the peace of God, and while in the peace of the country, under the peace of the Constitution that is supposed to protect it – if he comes with pike, with musket and bayonet and cannon; if he slaughter an inoffensive people; if his myrmidons are scattered all over our country … inciting our slaves to midnight arson, to midnight murder, to midnight insurrection against the sparsely scattered white people; if the brotherhood of this nation shall be broken up and the Constitution be ignored; if the protection that is due from every citizen to every other citizen shall be no longer afforded; if, in the place of it, a wild and bloodthirsty spirit – not for revenge, for we have done no wrong to be revenged – but a bloodthirsty spirit of assassination, of murder, of wrong, takes its place, and we find scattered throughout all our borders these people, and we find the midnight skies lighted up by the fires of our dwellings, and the wells from which we hourly drink poisoned by strychnine; and our wives and our children, when we are away at our business, are found murdered by our hearthstones, my answer, my friend, is in these words: what would you do?

Only northerners could save the Union ‘by putting down the Black Republican party.’” “This Union must be preserved by northern votes. The issue is now left with the North.” As for “the destiny of southern freemen. That we hold in our own hands.” In the meantime, Yancey said, “The South means to defend that Constitution against all attacks from the ‘Wide Awakes,’ the sleepy abolitionists, or anybody else.”¹¹⁹ While Yancey awaited the election in which he hoped

¹¹⁹ “Mr. Yancey’s Speech,” *Richmond Enquirer*, September 25, 1860, p. 2, col. 4-6. Walther argued that Yancey “lashed out at Republicans,” and blamed sectional animosity on northerners.
the northern people would repudiate Republicans, events in the South continued to push southerners toward secession.

Elsewhere across the South, in August, reports of insurrections, perceived or real, cropped up at various places, and white southerners responded as they had in Texas. Historian William Link found that Virginians were deeply concerned about “slave restiveness” and white “tampering” that autumn.\textsuperscript{120} For example, in Orange County, Virginia, the Vigilance Committee whipped one white man for tampering with slaves and expelled him and three others.\textsuperscript{121} In Oxford, Mississippi, “several attempts” had been made to burn the town and the people were aroused to unusual vigilance.\textsuperscript{122} An alleged servile insurrection was detected in Adairsville, Georgia.\textsuperscript{123} In Selma, Alabama, a similar plot was uncovered.\textsuperscript{124} In Talladega, Alabama, alleged abolition plots were discovered. Two white men, Mahan and Stedham, reportedly had incited slaves to rebel. The vigilance committee apprehended both and took them to jail. One account

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 \textsuperscript{121} “Vigilance and Anti-Vigilance Committees in Virginia,” \textit{Richmond Dispatch}, July 17, 1860, p. 1, col. 3. An anti-vigilance committee meeting was called to protest the “unlawful and unjust” action of the Orange County vigilance committee. See also, “Vigilance Orange County,” \textit{Opelousas Courier}, August 4, 1860, p. 2, col. 4.
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 \textsuperscript{123} “Abolition Plot in Texas and Other States,” \textit{Anderson (S.C.) Intelligencer}, September 11, 1860, p. 4, col. 1-2.
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 \textsuperscript{124} “Abolition Plot in Selma,” \textit{Anderson (S.C.) Intelligencer}, September 11, 1860, p. 4, col. 2.
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reported that the white ringleader was dragged out and hanged.\textsuperscript{125} The \textit{Jacksonville (Ala.) Republican} headlined “Abolition Incendiaries & Negro Elections,” and “Servile Insurrection” in Talladega. The supposed plot contemplated “the destruction of Talladega, the massacre of the citizens, the ravaging of the surrounding country.”\textsuperscript{126}

The Texas Troubles carried serious implications. First, sectional tensions increased further, in Texas and across the South. Distrust of northerners generally had grown since the Harpers Ferry raid. Revelations that many northerners had supported John Brown’s activities, applauded his actions, and mourned his death had furthered this distrust. Northern Republican governors had declined to honor requisitions for Brown’s escaped co-conspirators and had thus afforded them protection. The Mason Committee’s investigation conclusion was that many northerners had innocently supported John Brown financially. The endorsement of the Helper book by Republican members of Congress had furthered the sectional crisis. Each one of these events had stoked the fires of sectional distrust. The Texas Troubles appeared to many white southerners to be part of these events and perhaps a culmination.

For sure, the Texas Troubles had undermined more temperate southern voices. Those moderate white southerners, such as Sam Houston, who urged white southerners not to over-react, had trouble contending with mounting fears of slave insurrections. The breadth of the alleged (but unproven) conspiracies, meant that those advocating moderation were seen as soft on antislavery violence. Those who doubted the local vigilance committee’s decision to hang

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suspects, dared not voice those opinions too loudly, lest they come under suspicion. In this way, the Texas Troubles hardened southern demands for conformity.

Finally, the Texas Troubles set the stage for the election of 1860. In the coming political contest white southerners came to interpret Lincoln’s election as a northern endorsement of antislavery violence and that made continued membership in the Union appear both dangerous and unacceptable.
CHAPTER 5: ANTISLAVERY VIOLENCE AND SECESSION

*Consulto, et ubi consulueris, mature facto opus est.*¹ Henry R. Jackson, November 1860

As the nation moved into the presidential campaign of 1860, a possible Republican victory assumed different meanings in the northern states and the southern states. To many northerners, Republican victory meant restricting slavery to the states where it existed and to some, in the longer term, putting it on the path to eventual extinction. To most white southerners, Republican victory meant something altogether different. In describing their perceptions, white southerners used dual-meaning words like “danger” and “safety.” To slaveholders, these words could recall the standing menace of Republicans to the continued existence of chattel slavery and the potential loss of that form of “property” and the income that flowed from it. To non-slaveholders (and to some slaveholders as well), those same words conjured up images of Santo Domingo and Nat Turner. Not all white southerners accepted that dichotomy between danger-from-Republicans and safety-in-John C. Breckenridge, however. Some saw safety within the Union and saw secession as laden with the potential for violence. Later, after northern voters put their imprimatur on the Republican Party, the dichotomy shifted to danger-in-Union and safety-in-

secession, however. Pro-Union whites, especially in the Deep South states, fought an increasingly lonely rear-guard action against their pro-secession neighbors.²

One example was the political isolation of moderate southerner Sam Houston. In a letter to pro-Breckenridge editor John Marshall, Texan Lon Price wrote, “Houstonites are quite scarce. Breckenridge and Lane … are the only men in the field who can save the South from secession, because they will enforce the true interpretation of the Constitution.” Price favored Breckenridge in the coming presidential canvas because he (Price) opposed secession, at least at this point. A Breckenridge victory in November would show that the United States were yet a safe place for white southerners and a Breckenridge victory would thus rob secessionists of their strongest argument about Union being unsafe. In light of the security problems revealed by the Texas Troubles, Price wrote, “This county has formed a vigilance committee for our protection against the hydra-headed monsters (Abolitionists) who have been devastating our towns in ruins, by incendiaries and causing insurrections of the negroes.”³

On the other hand, Lawrence M. Keitt, whose brother had been murdered by his slaves in Florida in 1860, had reached the limits of his patience and was now ready to embrace secession. Abraham Lincoln, Keitt observed to his friend William M. Murray in September 1860, had said, in his speech at the Cooper Union, that “there is a sentiment and a feeling against slavery in this country, which casts at least a million and a half of votes. How much would you gain by forcing the sentiment which created it, out of the peaceful channel of the ballot box, into some other channel?” The phrase “into some other channel” troubled Keitt.

² This, of course depends on which part of the South one was talking about. Unionism remained stronger longer in the Upper South, at least until Lincoln’s call for troops in April 1861. See Daniel W. Crofts, Reluctant Confederates: Upper South Unionists in the Secession Crisis, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

Are not the ‘higher law’ and the ‘irrepressible conflict’ here avowed and approved? What does he mean by ‘forcing the sentiment into some other channel?’ He means, that the South must yield the government to the Republicans, to be used by them to abolish slavery, or she must expect more John Brown raids; more hostile invasions, more torches to her dwellings and more poison in her fountains. He means that the South must be abolitionized, or she must be lighted with the blaze of the incendiary, and harried with the steel of the assassin.  

This largely ignored the broader context of Lincoln’s statement, but such a reading reflected Keitt’s paranoia. Lincoln was drawing a contrast between the pacific policy of the Republican Party and John Brown’s violence, but such distinctions did not suit Keitt’s argument or temperament.  

By September 1860, Keitt had decided his course. “If Mr. Lincoln is elected, I shall urge disunion, because the South will be in danger from the principles and the policy of his administration. … A cloud of witnesses may rise up to convict abolitionism of excess and terrors; fields of bottomless and sickening slaughter may appeal against its horrors.” To Keitt and other secessionists, the danger signs were all around.  

Pro-Breckenridge (and subsequently pro-secession) newspapers such as the Charleston Mercury, the Richmond Enquirer and the Texas State Gazette, filled their pages in the autumn of 1860 with themes that set the stage for secession. These editors noted the erosion of southern Unionism. They observed that Stephen Douglas had endorsed the federal use of force against any state that tried to secede. They reported the continued, if sporadic, slave insurrection panics across the South. They provided their readers with lurid images of what life would be like for the South under a Republican administration. Finally, they laid out the argument that secession would avert this danger.

The Breckenridge editors noted with satisfaction the erosion of moderate southern Unionism. The *Montgomery (Ala.) Mail* reported that Thomas Watts, a Bell man, had declared that “the election of Lincoln is sufficient cause for secession.”\(^5\) Events since Harpers Ferry had removed, at least in Texas editor John Marshall’s eyes, any excuse for supporting Republicans. “Before the John Brown and Texas conspiracies,” Marshall wrote, “we can understand that a man may have been a Black Republican or an abolitionist simply because he was a dupe, but now how a man can teach abolition doctrines, or support the Black Republican Party and not be a villain, our casuistry does not permit us to determine. Such a man is logically an incendiary and a murderer, whatever he may be in purpose.”\(^6\) In Louisiana, Senator John Slidell agreed,

> I have reluctantly arrived at the conviction that, unless some great and, to me, unexpected, revolution shall take place in the sentiments of the people of the free states, we cannot with safety and honor continue the connection much longer. ... [Dissolution] can only be permanently averted by impressing upon the northern mind the belief which it so obstinately rejects: that the South can, by any degree of wrong and humiliation, be forced into resistance.\(^7\)

Thus, past compromises, in Slidell’s view, had brought about the unintended consequence of encouraging further northern advances. The *Richmond Enquirer* believed that the time for resistance had finally come. “In 1856, no Harpers Ferry raid had roused Virginia to the consideration of her imminent peril; no ‘irrepressible conflict’ had been announced by the leaders of the Black Republican Party but then Virginia ... declared ... for resistance. ... John

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Brown has shown the extent of the increase of hostility to slavery.” Moderation seemed increasingly untenable.

“Cooperation” or cooperative southern resistance to northern attacks contained some constitutional problems that could be politically tricky. States could consult, but the Constitution prohibited them from seceding jointly. Virginia’s ex-governor Henry Wise did not himself advocate secession, but he defended the right of those states that did wish to be out of the Union: “Let each state leap at once, for herself, and by herself, into the contest.”

The idea of a post-secession reconstruction of the Union, however, salved the consciences of some reluctant secessionists. Once the southern states left the Union, so the theory went, the northern people would finally realize the seriousness of the situation and might grant the guarantees the southern states demanded to entice back seceded states. An anonymous Virginian wrote in October, “It is plain, however, that no guarantees can be obtained whilst the Union lasts. There is but one way of obtaining them, and that is by dissolving the present Union, and then, if the North will give to the South such guarantees as they require, the Union might be reconstructed.”

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9 “No State shall enter into any Treaty, Alliance, or Confederation.” Article I, Section 10.

10 “Governor Wise on the Crisis,” *Charleston Mercury*, October 26, 1860, p. 1, col. 4. Wise at this time was espousing a bewildering array of positions. In general, however, and into the state convention, Wise continued to speak of “fighting within the Union.” Simpson, *A Good Southerner*, 230-231.

Moderate southerners advised their more impetuous neighbors to wait for an overt act in violation of the Constitution before turning to secession. The *Mercury* responded to this line of reasoning.

Although you see your enemy load his rifle with the declared purpose of taking your life, you are to wait, as a wise expedient of defense, until he makes the ‘overt act’ – shoots you. This is one of those glaring absurdities, which only such daring submissionists as Botts and Crittenden are capable of proposing. No ordinary man can hope to comprehend its mysterious sublimities.\textsuperscript{12}

The *Montgomery Mail* wrote “As soon as the election is over, our citizens will be pretty well united – God send that day speedily! The ‘overt act’ men are gradually disappearing.”\textsuperscript{13} In October “an old Union merchant” wrote, “We are now a disunited country virtually; it only remains for a practical announcement of the fact. ...I think our only safety is in dissolution or separation from the existing Confederacy.”\textsuperscript{14} It was not uncommon for individuals to ascribe their position to their neighbors, and the *Mercury* certainly had reason to highlight any evidence of growing support for secession, but this shift in sentiment appears to have been real and widespread.

Stephen Douglas unwittingly dealt southern Unionism a serious blow in August 1860 when he discussed federal coercion. At a campaign appearance in Norfolk, Virginia, an attendee asked if the election of Lincoln warranted secession. Douglas said it did not. The interrogator pressed further, if a state should secede in response to Lincoln’s election, would Douglas support the use of force? “It is the duty of the president … to enforce the laws,” Douglas said “The president … should treat all attempts to break up the Union by resistance to the laws, as Old Hickory treated


\textsuperscript{13} “The People of Alabama Preparing,” *Charleston Mercury*, October 29, 1860 p. 4, col. 4.

\textsuperscript{14} “Letter from an Old Union Merchant,” *Charleston Mercury*, October 31, 1860, p. 1, col. 2-4.
the nullifiers in 1832.”

This position brought into question the voluntary nature of the Union and Douglas’ pronouncement, while candid, cost both Douglas and the Union itself support in the southern states. The Richmond Enquirer noted disparagingly that “Mr. Douglas … proposes to maintain the Union … by invoking the strong arm of the military power, by employing the brute force wielded by the federal army and navy.” In another editorial, the Enquirer argued that Seward, Lincoln, and Douglas are three of a kind. The first two “would rob the Southern citizen of the means of subsistence, and the third would shoot him if he had the courage to resist.”

Southern papers from as far away as Texas expressed their disapproval of Douglas’ “Norfolk doctrine.” An editorial in the (Austin) Texas State Gazette declared “Douglas’ Norfolk doctrine … strips the states of the chief attribute of sovereignty, to wit: the right to determine when their existence is put to hazard as to the means necessary to their preservation.” Further, Douglas’ view affirmed that it would be legitimate for northerners to inflict upon the southern states whatever they wanted, but “it would be treason in the people of the South to obey the orders of their states in opposition to federal authority.” This view, the Gazette believed, was “subversive of that constitutional theory, in which alone the rights of the States are to be found.” Worst of all, “it has, at this moment, and under the circumstances, a bloody significance.” The enemies of the South in the northern states, had selected Abraham Lincoln to lead them in the

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“irrepressible conflict” and Seward had declared that with Lincoln’s election, that “‘irrepressible conflict’ will be pressed to its infamous and bloody close.”\textsuperscript{18} The Washington Constitution reported that the Norfolk speech was causing former Douglas men to abandon him.\textsuperscript{19} Using a maritime metaphor, the Texas State Gazette wrote, “The explosion of the ‘Little Giant’ at Norfolk has killed and wounded the few personages from Texas then on board.”\textsuperscript{20} Douglas’ Norfolk doctrine hardly supported antislavery violence, but it was a declaration of support for federal opposition to southern states’ efforts to protect themselves from antislavery violence by secession. Southern reaction to Douglas’ Norfolk speech also illustrates white southerners’ penchant for find threats of antislavery violence everywhere, even from conservative northern Democrats. If northern Democrats joined Republicans in favoring federal coercion, then the Union might not be worth saving at all. This schism within the Democracy would bear fruit the following spring.

Moderate newspapers such as the Richmond Whig and Nashville Patriot identified a much different set of dangers. The Whig argued that a vote for Breckenridge was a vote for disunion and only the moderate (and southern) Bell could defeat the Republicans. John Minor Botts, a Virginia Unionist, avoided the topic of antislavery violence and denied the premise of the secessionists that there was an “irrepressible conflict” between the sections. Botts felt only “agitating politicians” kept up the pretense and charged that “Disunionists had painted Lincoln

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\textsuperscript{19} “Mr. Douglas’ Norfolk ‘Force’ Speech,” (Austin) Texas State Gazette, October 20, 1860, p. 3, col. 3-4.

\textsuperscript{20} “Not a Douglas Meeting,” (Austin) Texas State Gazette, October 20, 1860, p. 4, col. 2.
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blacker” than he really was.\textsuperscript{21} The \textit{Nashville Patriot}, in turn, saw the contest as one between party loyalty on one hand and saving the Union on the other. The sectional agitation was only kept up for the “suicidal purpose of building up parties.”\textsuperscript{22} The \textit{Patriot} urged readers to “sink all party disputations to the bottomless deep,” and save the Union.\textsuperscript{23}

While Douglas was undermining southern Unionism and Constitutional Unionists were urging Bell’s candidacy, the southern press continued to report servile insurrections (or rumors of them). In Lunenburg County, Virginia, local whites believed there was a slave insurrection plot, fostered by “abolitionist emissaries.” The slaves had declared that “they would be free before Christmas.” Election day was to have been the day for insurrection.\textsuperscript{24} Historian William Link discovered rumors of slave insurrections in Amelia, King and Queen, and Caroline Counties in Virginia. These rumors produced more noise than anything else and only one slave was convicted of arson.\textsuperscript{25} In Bastrop, Texas, the wave of suspicious fires over the summer continued. The house of Judge George W. McKown was set afire, “perhaps by his own slaves.”\textsuperscript{26} A white man in Spartanburg, South Carolina, was jailed for “tampering” with African-


\textsuperscript{22} Dwight Lowell Dumond, \textit{Southern Editorials on Secession}, (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1964), 189.

\textsuperscript{23} Moderate southern presses obviously had some effect, since the Constitutional Unionists eventually won Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia. Allan Nevins, \textit{The Emergence of Lincoln: Prologue to Civil War 1859-1861}, (New York: Charles Scribners’ Sons, 1950), 313.


\textsuperscript{25} Link, \textit{Roots of Secession}, 214-216.

\textsuperscript{26} “Incendiарism in Bastrop,” \textit{(Austin) Texas State Gazette}, September 29, 1860, p. 2, col. 2-5.
Americans.\textsuperscript{27} Two men in Clio, South Carolina, were arrested on suspicion of being abolitionists. They carried an invoice for $300 worth of firearms and ammunition and another for $900. One of them, according to a slave trader living in Pekin, North Carolina, said he had the invoices because he was going to escort settlers from St. Louis to Santa Fe. The location of this arrest cast doubt on their professions of innocence. “Clio is near the spot marked in Marlboro District on old John Brown’s maps. This is a significant fact,” one newspaper reported.\textsuperscript{28} In Currituck County, North Carolina, Thomas Carroll, a white man, was sought under warrant for inciting insurrection.\textsuperscript{29} Later, an Irishman in Currituck allegedly induced a man’s slaves to run off.\textsuperscript{30} In October, an insurrectionary plan was discovered in Plattsburg, Winston County, Mississippi.\textsuperscript{31} Another John Brown plot was reported in Norfolk, Virginia, and nearby Princess Anne County.\textsuperscript{32} News of alleged plots travelled far. The \textit{New Orleans Daily Delta}, quoting the \textit{Norfolk (Va.) Argus}, reported the alleged plot in Princess Anne and Norfolk counties.”\textsuperscript{33} This insurrection story was being repeated as far away as New Orleans and Texas and such stories fed white southern paranoia going into the election.

\textsuperscript{27} “Abolitionists in Spartanburg,” \textit{Charleston Mercury}, October 1, 1860, p. 3, col. 5.

\textsuperscript{28} “Cheraw Correspondence,” \textit{Charleston Mercury}, October 13, 1860, p. 1, col. 2-3. See chapter 1 on the significance of “John Brown’s maps.”


\textsuperscript{31} “Abolitionism at Work in Mississippi,” \textit{Charleston Mercury}, October 22, 1860, p. 4, col. 3.


\textsuperscript{33} “Insurrectionary Designs in Virginia - Two Men Shot,” \textit{(Austin) Texas State Gazette}, October 27, 1860, p. 1, col. 4-7.
The *Richmond Enquirer* asked what policy Lincoln would follow in dealing with slave uprisings, and foresaw a bleak future in the Union under a Republican administration. “Federal officers may refrain from immediate participation in criminal acts, but the abductors of slaves, the fomenters of servile incendiaryism, and the coming John Browns, will pursue their iniquitous labors, in full confidence that, if arrested and brought to trial, it will be by marshals, prosecuting attorneys, juries, and judges that sympathize with them.”

White southerners believed that even before Lincoln’s election they were experiencing insurrections, with worse in store. The source of these plots was the usual: outsiders tampering with slaves.

Pro-Breckenridge newspapers emphasized a fourth theme during the fall: security threats from the North. The *Charleston Mercury* reprinted a pessimistic editorial from the *New York Herald* which claimed that “the Republicans aim at negro equality, which has never failed to result in the death of the minority section, Hayti and the Dominican Republic being examples.”

Secessionists reveled in incendiary quotations. The *Mercury* reported that the “Republican Campaign Handbook” (*sic*, actually the *Republican Campaign Textbook*) says, “We have either to succumb to, or triumph over the slave power. There is no middle course.”

Massachusetts abolitionist Elizur Wright was reported to have said: “John Brown was gloriously right in what he did at Harpers Ferry; and if he erred at all, he erred by being too tender-hearted and too much

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afraid of shedding innocent blood.” One article from the Austin Texas State Gazette trumpeted the words of Republicans Abraham Lincoln, Hinton R. Helper, John Andrew (“John Brown was right”), Charles Sumner, Henry Wilson (“the agitation of the slavery question will continue while the foot of a slave presses the soil of the American Republic”), Owen Lovejoy (“May the God in human nature be aroused and pierce the very soul of our nation with an energy that shall sweep this abomination of slavery from our land”). Such statements from the past, the Texas State Gazette believed, augured ill for the future if Republicans won.

Republican “Wide Awake” groups provided grist for the mills of conspiracy-minded white southerners. One correspondent using the nom de plume “Carolina in Gotham,” citing the New York Herald, claimed that the Wide Awakes numbered 400,000. The correspondent wanted to know why Wide Awakes met at midnight, carried lamps which made them unrecognizable, why they drilled in uniforms, and wondered whether they were aping the old Know Nothings. The Richmond Enquirer believed that “the name ‘Wide Awake’ came from John Brown’s company in Kansas.” The Wide Awakes had uniforms, drilled like soldiers, and carry rails, “like the rails used to break in doors at Harpers Ferry.” The Richmond Enquirer concluded, “Let the first armed invader, whether a federal minion, or an abolition drilled incendiary, who violates the sanctity of her territory find her citizens not only wide awake, but prepared to meet him.”

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41 Wide Awakes,” Richmond Enquirer, September 28, 1860, p. 1, col. 5.
Every Democrat, the *Enquirer* urged, must work for the defeat of “Squatter Sovereignty aids, Black Republicans, and Helperites, Brownites, and Revolutionary Wide Awakes.”

Pro-Breckenridge editors spread reports of secret, anonymous antislavery agitators. Texas politician Colonel John Wharton termed “the devilish enactments of the Black Republicans in Texas” as “aiders and abettors of the fires and poisoning.” With breathtaking exaggeration, a letter to the *Mercury* under the nom de plume “Nemo” claimed that the United States was a country “where all is brutal incendiarism, insolence and assault, … where one section is all concentrated, led by the Furies, crying havoc and ready to let slip the dogs of war.” The Union had become a place of “brutal bitterness of epithet; incendiarism in Virginia and bloodshed; and the poisoning of wells and fountains in Texas from which the women and children slake their thirst.” These were the terms of debate in the South. Almost no southerner mentioned the Republican Party plank condemning raids like that at Harpers Ferry.

Stories of secretive abolition agents continued to appear in Breckenridge newspapers during the autumn. The *New Orleans Picayune* of September 23, 1860, reported a large and suspicious fire in New Orleans: “Many of [the strangers] driven from Texas under suspicion of being dangerous persons, are known to have sailed for this city.” The Austin *Gazette* concluded, “Threats to lay waste our towns and cities, to poison our families, and bring ruin upon leading

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44 “The Union” *Charleston Mercury*, October 2, 1860, p. 1, col. 5.

members of society, have been made in Texas by abolitionists, but these threats have not been
confined to our state alone.”

The future under a Republican administration, according to some southern newspapers,
would mean frequent attempts by northerners to incite servile insurrections. One Charleston
Mercury editorial argued that, if Lincoln were to win, “insecurity and alarm will extend from
Harpers Ferry to the borders of Texas.” Repeating the story of the alleged slave revolt in
Princess Anne and Norfolk Counties in Virginia, the Mercury reported that the slaves had
confessed to a planned uprising. A vigilance committee shot a white man named Flynn, and a
free African-American named Smith. The Mercury asked readers to imagine what the South
could expect in the future. If the Republicans won and the southern states did not secede, the
South should witness “more John Browns and Texas incendiaries.” Republican Joshua Giddings
“will laugh at our calamities and mock when your fear cometh. … The terrors of submission are
tenfold worse than the terrors of disunion.” One particularly somber Mercury editorial declared
that “if Mr. Lincoln was to come out and declare that he held sacred every right of the South with
respect to African slavery, no one would believe him,” because Republicans did not keep their
word. The election of a Republican president clearly threatened “the safety and self-government
of the South.” The editorial quoted Lincoln’s speech in Kansas.

While we elect a president, it will be our duty to see that you submit. Old John Brown has
been hung for treason against a State. We cannot object, even though slavery is wrong.

46 “The Incendiarism in New Orleans’ Bonham Era,” (Austin) Texas State Gazette, October
6, 1860, p. 3, col. 4.


48 “Insurrectionary Designs in Virginia - Two Men Shot,” Charleston Mercury, October 10,
1860, p. 1, col. 3.

That cannot excuse violence, bloodshed, and treason. It could avail him nothing to think himself right. So, if constitutionally, we elect a President, and, therefore, you undertake to destroy the Union, it will be our duty to deal with you, as Old John Brown has been dealt with. We can only do our duty.\textsuperscript{50}

While Lincoln was condemning John Brown’s means, he also seemed to be threatening the use of force should South Carolina withdraw from the Union. Given southern conceptions of honor, this itself was an incitement to secession.

The \textit{Enquirer} painted an apocalyptic picture of the threats the South faced. “When all the offices of the Government were in the hands of men sympathizing with the principles of Lincoln and Seward, the emissaries of the Abolitionists would be found everywhere through the South with strychnia (sic) to put in their wells, as they were now found in Texas.” In Texas, “men calling themselves reverend” had been arrested with “strychnia (sic) upon their persons and arms had been found stored away.” These men had come there “for the purpose of carrying on the ‘irrepressible conflict.’ The emissaries of the Abolitionists there crawled about at midnight, with their incendiary torches, poison and incitements to insurrection.”\textsuperscript{51} Mississippi militia general E. L. Acee addressed a public meeting in Jackson and warned that “a thousand servile insurrections will occur in Mississippi as soon as it is announced that Lincoln is elected.”\textsuperscript{52} Allegations of abolitionist conspiracies put moderates in the position of defending a negative. How could one prove that abolition conspirators were not in the South, especially when John Cook had lived openly in Harpers Ferry for months before revealing his willingness to employ antislavery violence?

\textsuperscript{50}“Mr. Lincoln’s Forthcoming Proclamation,” \textit{Charleston Mercury}, October 13, 1860, p. 1, col. 2-3.


\textsuperscript{52}“Sentiment of the South,” \textit{Richmond Enquirer}, October 19, 1860, p. 2, col. 4-5.
The *Richmond Enquirer* returned to the old complaint that two states had refused to extradite fugitives from justice connected with Harpers Ferry. “Is not then the [fugitives from justice] clause of the Constitution powerless, and did not two Black Republican Governors make it so?... Is it … probable that Lincoln will regard his oath any more than they have shown themselves ready to regard it?” Sixty-five Republicans had endorsed Helper’s book, “stimulating our negroes to cut the throats of their masters, and their masters’ wives and children, to burn their dwellings and destroy their property.” John Brown’s foray was the “legitimate result of Black Republican philosophy. Were not the incendiarisms and murders in Texas, the poisoning of springs and wells, a fruitful sequence to the logic of Black Republican argument?” If Abolition “Wide Awakes” attempted coercion, the *Enquirer* assured its readers, “they will be welcomed with bloody hands to hospitable graves.”

Similar editorial commentary appeared across the South. The *Texas State Gazette* wrote that “Abolitionist newspapers inform us with the utmost sang froid, that there are thousands of men at the North ready and eager at any moment to enact John Brown raids and forays of poisoning and arson similar to that which was lately consummated in Texas.” These men were “only restrained from present outrage by the existence of a conservative and national administration willing and able to employ the arms of the federal government to repress insurrection and repel invasion.” Once Lincoln was in the White House, the editor of the *Gazette* argued, that restraint would be removed.

The *Charleston Mercury* emphasized the absolute necessity for white solidarity. Rhett painted a dire picture of the future under a Republican administration: “The midnight glare of the

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incendiaries torch will illuminate the country from one end to another, while pillage, violence, murder, poisons and rape will fill the air with the demoniac revelry of all the bad passions of an ignorant, semi-barbarous race, urged to madness by the licentious teachings of our northern brethren.” The South would face a war of races. “A war of extermination must arise, like that which took place in St. Domingo.” Still attempting to connect the Republican Party and antislavery violence, the New Orleans Picayune declared that the Massachusetts Republican Party Convention had shown “what abominations it must embrace.” Northern Republicans endorsed “not simply war upon the South, but approval of assassination, murder and rapine is the demand made upon them, not sympathy with the [abolitionist] pioneers of Texas, when arson demolishes their trains, paralyzes their industry, and arms assassins for a midnight revel in blood, but sneers at the ‘fright’ of the victims of such savage atrocities.” The effort to connect the Republican Party to antislavery violence had been going on in earnest since Harpers Ferry, and continued through the presidential election.

One New York merchant advised the South not to wait for some overt act by Lincoln but instead “prepare … to defend your families and property from the attack of those who, judging by precedents, … arm the ignorant and insane fanatics as instruments of their higher law doctrines.” If the South acquiesced in the election of Lincoln, “more John Browns [would] stir up the risings of the slaves (with sympathy and stealthy aid of the government representatives).” It was the duty of southern citizens “to see the danger before the chance of defense is taken


away.”57 A Georgian condemned those who were “shutting their eyes to John Brown’s raid in Virginia – to the incendiarisms and insurrections in our sister states – to the murder and poisoning of unoffending people.” The time had come to act decisively, while the South still could act. “Our irresolution, will bind us, hand and foot, and give our homes and families to the horrors of another St. Domingo.”58 To illustrate the extremes to which northern opinion had gone, two southern newspapers reminded readers that John Quincy Adams had exclaimed: “let emancipation come, though it come stained with the blood of five hundred thousand southern men, women and children.”59

White southerners responded to such threats, as they had frequently done before, by forming organizations to improve security. In September, at a public meeting in Saint Paul’s Parish, South Carolina, a new militia company was organized.60 A vigilance committee formed in Goliad, Texas, and issued a defiant challenge: “If any of the disciples of John Brown wish to immortalize themselves, let them come into Goliad and attempt their mad schemes.”61 A meeting

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60 “Public Meeting in St. Paul’s Parish,” Charleston Mercury, September 25, 1860, p. 4, col. 3.

at Hempstead, Texas, organized the Courtney Light Guards.\textsuperscript{62} By mid-October Virginia had ninety companies of cavalry ready for a grand encampment at Richmond.\textsuperscript{63}

A new type of security organization appeared in the autumn of 1860, one not recognized by law or custom, one whose role was yet to be defined: the Minute Men. At a public meeting in Princess Anne County, Virginia, on October 24, Henry Wise proposed the formation of “Committees of Safety” in each magisterial district of the county and a force of Minute Men, subject to the committee’s orders.\textsuperscript{64} The meeting passed resolutions announcing that Princess Anne had formed “committees of public safety” and suggested other counties do likewise. If Lincoln was elected, Princess Anne would select delegates to a state convention to “discuss measures for protecting our own safety and honor as a people, for defending the Constitution of the United States, for saving our rights in the Union, and for obtaining the sanction of the sovereign state of Virginia.”\textsuperscript{65} The names “Committees of Safety” and “Minute Men” hearkened back to the eighteenth century and reminded white southerners of their revolutionary antecedents.\textsuperscript{66}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[63] “Virginia Marshaling Her Forces,” \textit{Charleston Mercury}, October 18, 1860, p. 1, col. 2. The militia reforms and military appropriations in the winter of 1860 started bearing fruit in the autumn of that year. See chapter 2 \textit{supra}, and Link, \textit{Roots of Secession}, 320, n. 43.
\item[66] Wise had been writing alternatively of “fighting for southern rights in the Union” and “not submitting” if Republican rule.” See Simpson, \textit{A Good Southerner}, 235-238. He was so ambivalent that Edmund Ruffin believed Wise was deliberately obfuscating the matter so he could do whatever he wanted. Ruffin, \textit{Diary}, 1:491.
\end{footnotes}
Although there was no broader organization, “Minute Men” groups cropped up in several southern states. Minute Men operated in the Kershaw, Abbeville, Richland, and Colleton Districts of South Carolina. “The organization is already complete and powerful, embracing the flower of youth, and led on by the most influential citizens.”67 A “Minute Men” group formed at Macon, Georgia and another at Montgomery, Alabama.68 Local men in Enterprise, Mississippi, formed a Minute Men company in October, although in this case, the organization appeared to function more like a regular militia company.69 When a Republican Club was formed in Portsmouth, Virginia, the Richmond Enquirer suggested the forming of Minute Man companies “to keep down Black Republicans.”70

Pro-secession editors took pains to explain why secession would solve the South’s problems. In an editorial, the Texas State Gazette wildly argued that “if Lincoln is elected, every department of the government will have fallen into the hands of the sympathizers of John Brown.”71 Only withdrawal from the Union could save the South. “E. R.”, possibly Edmund Ruffin, wrote from Virginia, October 30, 1860, “The greatest power for our injury possessed by our northern enemies, is in the employment of secret emissaries and incendiary and


68 “Political,” Charleston Mercury, October 17, 1860, p. 4, col. 4-5. Emphasis added.

69 “Minute Men in Enterprise,” Jackson Weekly Mississippian, November 7, 1860, p. 3, col. 1. The resolutions passed at the meeting indicated that the men were offering their services to the governor of Mississippi, which was the norm for militia companies.

70 “Practical Fruits of Southern Apologies for Black Republicanism,” Richmond Enquirer, November 6, 1860, p. 1, col. 5-8.

insurrectionary agents – which power would cease, or could be entirely defeated, and whether in war or peace – as soon as the assailing sections are under different governments.”

The *Charleston Mercury*, after presenting quotations from Helper’s *Impending Crisis*, urged readers, “Let us awaken from our dreams of security, and crush the hydra-headed monster Abolition, while it is yet comparatively feeble! It is madness for us to … wait … until an ‘overt act’ in the shape of a John Brown raid or a Texas conflagration, extending from the Delaware to the Rio Grande, shall furnish indisputable evidence that the doctrines enunciated in Helper’s *Impending Crisis* are intended to be practically enforced.” The *Mercury* was appalled that some southerners remained apathetic in the face of impending Republican victory. “Is it because these atrocities do not take place in our very midst, at our very homes, and within our own doors, that we are thus unmoved? … Must the rattlesnake actually strike us before we raise our hand against it?”

The *Mercury* was willing to wait until after the election, presumably on the outside chance that Breckenridge might win, but once it was clear that Lincoln had won, the *Mercury* would urge immediate secession.

In a series of articles called “The Crisis,” in the *Austin Texas State Gazette*, the editor made a case for secession. Wide Awakes were “named after the party headed in Kansas by old John Brown,” organized “expressly for the purpose of stealing negroes, murdering slave owners, and burning their dwellings.” This was an indication of “the many outrages now meditated against the South” and should serve as “a solemn warning to southern men to stand by their

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72 “What Would a Seceding State Suffer from Northern Invasion and Open Warfare?” *Charleston Mercury*, November 6, 1860, p. 1, col. 4-5.


arms, and to put their house in order, to meet a coming conflict, in which our rights as states, and the lives and properties of our citizens are threatened by constant attack and destruction.”

Editor John Marshall painted a dire picture of the future. Blood was to “crimson the homes and firesides of the slaveholders.” Black Republicans would “circulate their pestilential opinions.” The federal government “would either aid the slave, or stand by as a spectator, when the master was struck down to the dust, and his house and property burned.” With a Republican in the White House, “can we suppose the fires of the incendiary in Texas will not be rekindled; that John Brown raids will be forgotten?”

“The common sentiment of a large majority of the northern people … actuated John Brown in his bloody raid upon Virginia” and “desolated portions of Texas with incendiary fires, placed poison and arms in the hands of deluded slaves, and sought to overwhelm Southern society with the bloody tide of servile and civil war.” Once the Republicans assume power, “other John Browns will lead armed bands into the heart of the South. Incendiaryism will light its midnight fires, … while open violence will assail us on every hand.” Native Americans “under the lead of a Black Republican agent, and shielded by United States troops,” would “break up the large frontier counties, and carry their depredations into the very heart of the state.” In conclusion, Marshall wrote, “the people of the South are called upon, not only to defend their constitutional liberties, but to protect the safety of their homes, the lives and honor of their families, and the existence of society.”


While Breckenridge Democrat and secessionist presses were painting apocalyptic pictures, moderate white southerners were more optimistic about the future of the Union. On October 27, at a public meeting in Jackson, Mississippi, ex-governor Henry Foote denounced William Lowndes Yancey as a traitor. A public meeting in Loudoun County, Virginia, turned the table on the Breckenridge Democrats. While the latter predicted horrific violence as a consequence of the South remaining in the Union under a Republican, Loudoun citizens saw violence in secession, since fighting would break out and Virginia would be on the front lines.

Going into the election, Bell and Everett men (and later Cooperationists, although the two groups were not identical) did not accentuate the danger of antislavery violence in their pronouncements. They were generally optimistic about the future of the country. They were Unionists first and this made them skeptical about tales of slave insurrections. In fact, the *Hinds (Miss.) Gazette*, November 7, 1860, for example claimed that rumors of insurrectionary movements had been “manufactured out of whole cloth” for political effect, to “fire the southern heart.” Because they loved the Union, Whiggish or “Opposition” newspapers and politicians did not believe stories of antislavery violence or dire predictions of future violence.

In striking contrast, Breckinridge men believed that the future of slaveholding states was dark and dangerous. Just prior to election day, the *Louisville (Kentucky) Daily Courier*, asked

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79 “Foote on Yancey,” *Vicksburg Whig*, November 1, 1860, p. 2, col. 2. Yancey was continuing his northern speaking tour, enunciating sentiments similar to those in his September 1860 speech in Washington, but the Alabamian cancelled a speaking engagement in Staunton, Virginia because of strong Union sentiment there.


82 The pro-Houston Texas editors cited in chapter 4 and Houston’s pronouncements provide other examples of such skepticism. Amelia W. Williams and Eugene Barker (eds.), *Writings of Sam Houston*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1943), 8:156. See *supra*, chapter 4.
“Why Should the Southern States Secede?” In answer to the question, the editor produced a long list of scandalous (and sometimes spurious) quotations from Republicans. The editor asked, “If the South can, by secession, escape the doom threatened by Helper, and Seward and John Quincy Adams, would it be strange if they should do so?”

Thus, Breckenridge editors and speakers were more pessimistic about the nature of the Union and human nature itself. They were willing to remain in the Union until it was proven that the northern people would endorse Republicans, whom pro-Breckenridge men held to be devils incarnate.

The northern voters’ endorsement of Republicans on November 6, 1860, set in motion the wheels of secession but the groundwork had been laid months before. On February 24, 1860, while passions ran high in the aftermath of Harpers Ferry, the Alabama legislature adopted resolutions calling for a state convention in the event of a Republican victory. The resolutions declared, that “antislavery agitation” … had evinced “a deadly hostility to the rights and institutions of the Southern people,” including a resort to “violence and bloodshed.” The Republican Party, through “the public avowals and secret machinations of its leaders to the execution of these atrocious designs” had gained strength in the northern states. To submit to the administration of a Republican president “would be an act of suicidal folly and madness.” To “escape such peril and dishonor,” the legislature declared, “it shall be the duty of the governor,” to put into motion Alabama’s election machinery “to elect delegates to a convention of the state.” The legislature expressly recognized “the right of any state to secede” whenever “such a step is demanded by the honor, interests and safety of her people,” especially in light of “the assaults

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upon the institution of slavery, and upon the rights and equality of the southern states, 
unceasingly continued with increasing violence and in new, and more alarming forms.”

Historian J. Mills Thornton argued that these resolutions were a sop to secessionists. 
Alabama moderates wanted an excuse for declining South Carolina’s invitation to a southern 
state convention, and these resolutions gave them that excuse. Additionally, moderates thought, 
if a Republican was not elected (by no means a foregone conclusion in February 1860), the 
resolutions would require no action at all. On the other hand, they did require the governor to call 
for the election of delegates to a state convention if a Republican won in November. Thus these 
resolutions set in motion events that led to secession.85

On December 5, 1860, Governor Andrew Moore laid out the reason why he felt a 
convention should be called. The people of the northern states “have invaded the state of 
Virginia, armed her slaves with deadly weapons, murdered her citizens, and seized the United 
States Armory at Harpers Ferry. They have sent emissaries into the state of Texas, who burned 
many towns, and furnished the slaves with deadly poison for the purpose of destroying their 
owners.”86 Moore asked rhetorically, “What do honor and safety require at our hands?” His 
response was that “the only hope of future security, for Alabama and the other slaveholding 
states, is secession from the Union.”87

84 William R. Smith, The History and Debates of the Convention of the People of Alabama, 
Begun and held in the City of Montgomery, on the seventh Day of January, 1861, (Atlanta: 
Wood, Hanleiter, Rice & Co. 1861), 13; “The Alabama Resolutions,” Milledgeville (Ga.) Daily 
Federal Union, November 9, 1860, p. 3, col. 3.

85 Thornton, Politics in a Slave Society, 405-407.

86 William R. Smith, The History and Debates of the Convention of the People of Alabama, 
Begun and Held in the City of Montgomery, on the Seventh Day of January, 1861, (Montgomery: 

87 Smith, Convention of Alabama, 15-16.
Other southern governors issued similar appeals. Governor Madison Perry of Florida informed Governor William H. Gist of South Carolina that he would call a state convention once the electoral college made Lincoln’s victory official.\(^{88}\) Gist convened the South Carolina legislature to appoint the state’s presidential electors and suggested that they adopt measures to hold a state convention. Sensing future trouble, Gist urged that “every man in the state between the ages of eighteen and forty-five be armed,” and that ten thousand volunteers be called out and drilled. “We are contending,” Gist said, “for the safety of our homes and fire-sides.”\(^{89}\) Thoughts of political resistance to Republicans moved quickly to thoughts of security.

In a special message to the legislature on November 7, 1860, Georgia Governor Joseph E. Brown charged that the northern people had encouraged criminal behavior. If southerners should “invade [northerners’] territory and burn down their factories, … how differently they would view the question of criminality!” After recommending a series of retaliatory laws against Massachusetts, Brown declared, “the time for bold, decided action has arrived. …. I am no disunionist per se,” but if Georgia did not secede, “a hungry swarm of abolition emissaries” would invade the state, “engender discontent” among the slaves and “create in the South a state of things which must ultimately terminate in a war of extermination between the white and black races.” Brown recommended the legislature appropriate one million dollars to put the state’s defenses in order.\(^{90}\) In a theme common across the South, Brown noted that no respectable


\(^{90}\) “Special Message of the Gov. Joseph E. Brown to the Legislature of Georgia,” *Milledgeville (Ga.) Daily Federal Union*, November 10, 1860, p. 1, col. 2-5 and p. 2, col. 1-5. This was a significant change for the state that had appropriated the measly sum of $75,000 the previous winter.
southerner would accept a position in the Lincoln Administration, and thus federal positions
would be filled by northerners.\textsuperscript{91} Practical political considerations combined with fear of
antislavery violence to form a potent secessionist brew.

Three main positions emerged in the South that winter: immediate unilateral secession,
cooperative resistance or “cooperation,” and Unionism. Secessionists urged each state to leave
the Union immediately and unilaterally. Cooperationists sought three main objectives. Some
were worried that their state would secede alone, and have to face the federal government
unaided.\textsuperscript{92} Some wanted any decision by a state convention to be referred back to the voters for a
referendum. Many sought a convention of the southern states to draft a series of demands. If the
northern states did not respond, then the southern states could withdraw from the Union. Outright
Unionists were relatively rare in the Deep South. Presented with the alternative of an immediate
secessionist or a cooperationist, north Georgia Unionist James Eason refused to vote for either.
“There was only about five or six days’ difference between them.”\textsuperscript{93}

\textsuperscript{91} Whether this assertion is true or not is a matter of debate. Freehling argued that
secessionists were worried that white southerners would accept positions in the Lincoln
Administration and undermine white southern (Democratic) unity. Freehling, \textit{Road to Disunion},
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\textsuperscript{92} This had been South Carolina’s problem in the Nullification crisis and secessionism’s
problem in general in the Compromise of 1850. See William W. Freehling, \textit{Prelude to Civil War:
The Nullification Crisis 1816-1836}, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965) and Freehling,
\textit{Road to Disunion}, 1:530-531.

\textsuperscript{93} James Eason File, (File 14319), \textit{Southern Claims Commission, Approved Claims, 1871-
1880: Georgia}, 1. Eason found that the secession candidate was for immediate unilateral
secession and the “Union” candidate was for “delay & ultimate secession,” so he declined to vote
for either.
The South did not monolithically support secession. Many people urged their neighbors to wait and not act with precipitation.\textsuperscript{94} Other voices, however, denounced such hesitation as weakness. One anonymous author from Columbus, Mississippi, had limited patience for the arguments in favor of delay. “Delay is dangerous,” the author wrote. “It is the only policy our enemies have yet been able to suggest.” Most importantly, asking northern state legislatures to repeal “personal liberty laws” southerners felt were unconstitutional and waiting until they did so would be futile and demeaning to the southern petitioners making the appeal.\textsuperscript{95}

The generally more moderate \textit{Charleston Courier} succumbed to the growing fury by printing extracts from a pro-secession speech by South Carolina politician W. W. Boyce. Boyce reminded his audience that the Republican Party hated the South and that northerners, “not just by mobs and violence, but in representative bodies,” had expressed sympathy with John Brown. In the North, one would find “the John Brown feeling,” and on Brown’s death, bells had been tolled “with all the pomp and circumstance “as if a great martyr had suffered.” The South, Boyce concluded, must arm itself and resist.\textsuperscript{96} That the moderate \textit{Courier} was printing this Boyce speech shows a change in political stance.

The journey of one Alabama politician from Unionism to secession illustrates the path that many would take that winter. Thomas H. Watts, an old-line Whig, was an example of one who

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[94]{94}{A November 19 meeting in Essex County, Virginia, asked South Carolina to refrain from acting until Virginia could be heard. \textit{“A Large Meeting,” Alexandria (Va.) Gazette}, November 26, 1860, p. 2, col. 1; For Rhett’s response, see \textit{“Delay,” Charleston Mercury}, December 3, 1860, p. 1, col. 2-3.}

\footnotetext[95]{95}{\textit{“Delay,” Charleston Mercury}, December 3, 1860, p. 1, col. 2-3.}

\footnotetext[96]{96}{\textit{“Demonstration in Columbia,” Charleston Daily Courier}, November 7, 1860, p. 1, col. 1-2.}
\end{footnotes}
moved from opposing Democrats to accepting secession. Watts was a supporter of Bell and Everett but decided that “the election of Lincoln is sufficient cause for secession.”

In a letter to northern friends on November 10, 1860, fur days after Lincoln’s election Watts fretted over “the best means of averting the dangers which surround us.” He bristled at suggestions that the South delay taking action to leave the Union. A written constitution could not save the South from “the giant march of abolition fury,” Watts wrote. Staying in the Union would lead to danger. On the question of immediate unilateral secession or cooperation, Watts returned, however slightly, to his moderate roots: “Let us therefore, take counsel of our sister states whilst preparing to exercise the highest power of a sovereign people.” Watts is an example of a Bell man moving from the conditional pro-Union camp before the election to the pro-secession camp afterwards.

As opinion rapidly shifted in the immediate aftermath of Lincoln’s election, white southerners remained publicly alert and active. They attended town meetings, listened to local leaders and expressed their opinions on the questions of the hour. Because the Union had been formed by states acting in state conventions, the southern states seceded as states acting in state conventions. Within states, counties were key. Delegates to the state conventions, pro-secession, cooperation, or pro-Union, were generally elected from county jurisdictions.

On December 10, 1860, citizens of Botetourt County, in the mountains of central Virginia, assembled at their courthouse. After listening to speakers, they adopted resolutions “with but two dissenting voices.” There was, the resolutions stated, “a spirit of pharisaical fanaticism prevailing in the North in reference to the institution of slavery.” This feeling had prompted “a hostile incursion upon our own soil and an apotheosis of the murderers who were justly condemned and

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executed.” The resolutions condemned “the industrious circulation of incendiary publications” which produced “discord and division in our midst,” and incited slaves “to midnight murder and every imaginable atrocity against an unoffending community.” The idea that there was an “‘irrepressible conflict’ between free and slave labor,” was a sentiment which inculcated “warfare between the two sections of our country, without cessation or intermission, until the weaker is reduced to subjection.” The election of a president by a sectional majority was itself “an incentive to robbery and insurrection.” Once secession took place, any attempt by Congress to enforce federal laws “would be an act of war of nation against nation.”98

In Georgia, too, citizens listened to speeches by local political leaders and adopted resolutions. One town meeting in Athens, Georgia, defined the problem this way: “To be controlled by a party, strictly sectional, whose principles and legislation are hostile to our interests, our rights and our safety, is not to be tolerated. The Union so destitute a fraternity and good fellowship as ours has now become is not worth preserving.”99 A similar gathering in Floyd County, Georgia, declared: “The abolition sentiment of the northern states … has led to long continued and ever increasing abuse and hatred of the southern people.” This sentiment had “prompted the armed invasion of southern soil, by stealth…for the diabolical purpose of inaugurating a ruthless war of the blacks against the whites throughout the southern states.” It prompted “large masses of northern people openly to sympathize with the treacherous and traitorous invaders of our country; and elevate the leader of a band of midnight assassins, and robbers…to the rank of a hero and a martyr.” The people must unite to prevent “a common


99 “Public Meeting,” *Athens (Ga.) Southern Watchman*, November 22, 1860, p. 3, col. 3.
government, armed by us with power only for our protection, [from becoming] an instrument, in the hands of enemies, for our destruction.”

Georgia county meetings shared some common threads. For example, many Georgia communities expressed their thanks to northern conservatives for the cooperation they had offered over the years. The Athens town meeting resolved, “We remember with gratitude … the noble efforts of the friends of constitutional equality throughout the northern states, who cooperated with us in an earnest effort to save the government from falling into the hands of fanatical traitors to the Constitution.” Most of the meetings accused Republicans of fostering racial equality. Most counties supported a general call to arms. The Athens town meeting resolved that “the governor and legislature should take every care and precaution to place the state in a position to meet any emergency which may arise.” The Floyd County meeting agreed, “We respectfully suggest to the legislature to take immediate steps to organize and arm the forces of the State.”

Where the Georgia county meetings did diverge was in their views on strategy. Several of the Georgia counties suggested that the southern states should cooperate with each other to ensure effective resistance. Counties endorsing cooperation among the southern states did not usually describe the threat of antislavery violence in sensational terms. The Athens town meeting declared, “Georgia, should earnestly invite the cooperation of our sister southern states to unite

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101 “Public Meeting,” Athens (Ga.) Southern Watchman, November 22, 1860, p. 3, col. 3. Many other county meetings adopted similar expressions of thanks to northern Democrats.

102 “Public Meeting,” Athens (Ga.) Southern Watchman, November 22, 1860, p. 3, col. 3.

103 Candler, Confederate Records of Georgia, 1:117.

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with us and forming a confederation on the basis of our present Constitution.”

The Milton County meeting did “not think secession is the proper remedy,” but suggested “the calling of a national convention.” The Greene County meeting simply stated: “We do not think that [Lincoln’s] election is *per se* a sufficient cause for the immediate dissolution of this Union.”

Upson County waxed prophetic. It would be “monstrous” if any southern state should secede by itself. “In union there is strength, in division and separation, danger and ultimate defeat.” For those Georgians opposed to secession, embracing this “go-slow” approach offered the best chance of keeping the Union together without being tarred with the label “submissionist,”

Historian Michael Johnson noted that Cooperationists viewed the election of delegates with sadness and resignation. Secessionists in Georgia, historian Clarence Mohr observed, played to racial fears to whip up popular support for leaving the Union.

Most of the Georgia county resolutions called for immediate secession. In Macon, on the day after the election, a town meeting noted that sixty-eight Republicans in Congress had encouraged the publication of the Helper book “that recommends to the slaves the indiscriminate massacre of their masters, and the re-enactment of the horrors of St. Domingo upon our wives and daughters.” John Brown, “with his band of assassins, … is canonized as a saint.”

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104 “Public Meeting,” *Athens (Ga.) Southern Watchman*, November 22, 1860, p. 3, col. 3.

105 Candler, *Confederate Records of Georgia*, 1:151.


107 Candler, *Confederate Records of Georgia*, 1:64.


Houston County gathering resolved that Abraham Lincoln “has distinctly and emphatically avowed principles destructive of the vital interest, safety, honor, and happiness of the southern states.”\textsuperscript{111} A Banks County meeting on November 24 was equally emphatic: “Our Northern brethren … have declared … an irrepressible conflict, and made a military descent” on Virginia “not only endangering the lives of law-abiding citizens, but periling the lives of helpless women and children.” Further, they have “attempted to subvert the government of the sovereign state of Texas, by sending into her midst their emissaries, hypocritically clothed with the garb of religion, to excite her slaves to insurrection, to burn and plunder the dwellings of their owners, and to massacre their defenseless families.”\textsuperscript{112} A Floyd county meeting charged that “the abolition sentiment … prompted the armed invasion of southern soil” sought to incite “a ruthless war of the blacks against the whites throughout the southern states.” Worse, “large masses of northern people openly …sympathize with the treacherous and traitorous invaders …, and elevate the leader of a band of midnight assassins, and robbers, … to the rank of a hero and a martyr, [and have] sent … vile emissaries to instigate the slaves to destroy our property, burn our towns, devastate our country, and spread distrust, dismay and death by poison, among our people.”\textsuperscript{113} Hart County, on November 24, declared, “with armed mobs [Republicans] have invaded our territory, incited discontent and insurrection among our slaves, disturbing our peace, destroying our property and jeopardizing the lives of our wives and children.”\textsuperscript{114} On the same

\textsuperscript{111} Candler, Confederate Records of Georgia, 1:123.

\textsuperscript{112} “Public Meeting in Banks,” Athens (Ga.) Southern Banner, December 13, 1860, p. 3, col. 2-3.

\textsuperscript{113} Candler, Confederate Records of Georgia, 1:115.

\textsuperscript{114} “Political Meeting in Hart County,” Athens (Ga.) Southern Banner, Dec 13, 1860, p. 3, col. 2.
day, the White County meeting declared, “the northern states, … have … sought the ruin of our happiness, by inciting murder and insurrection in our midst.”\textsuperscript{115}

In the maps below, two characteristics stand out. First, for those counties that submitted resolutions, the tenor of the county meetings is a good indicator of how the delegates would vote on secession. Second, Unionist counties in northern Georgia and the east-central region tended not to submit resolutions at all. The “silence of the Cooperationists” might lead the observer of the first map to overestimate secessionist sentiment in Georgia overall. In any case, those counties expressing a preference for secession often tied their decision to the threat of antislavery violence. The Georgia legislature voted on November 21 to hold elections on January 2, 1861 for a state convention that would meet on the 16\textsuperscript{th} of that month.

\textsuperscript{115} Candler, \textit{Confederate Records of Georgia}, 1:90-92.
Figure 4: Georgia County Resolutions and Secession Votes

The upper map shows those counties which sent county resolutions to the state legislature. Red indicates pro-secession resolutions. Purple indicates cooperation resolutions. Purple with red interior indicates resolutions that were pro-cooperation, but ultimately pro-secession position. Red and purple stripes indicates two sets of resolutions sent, one pro-secession and the other pro-cooperation. The bottom map indicates how delegates voted on the Georgia secession declaration. Red for immediate unilateral secession. Blue opposed to immediate unilateral secession. There is a close (~90%) relation between the tenor of the county resolutions and how the delegates eventually voted. Four counties (the ones circled) sent resolutions favoring one position but elected delegates on the opposite position.
Southern secession took place through state conventions (the same medium used in ratifying the Constitution), but these were composed of delegates generally selected at the county level. Three case studies will illuminate the mechanics of how those county-level elections worked. In “Up-country” Anderson District, South Carolina, voters elected a slate of delegates favoring the immediate, unilateral secession of South Carolina. In Calhoun County, Alabama, voters had a choice between two slates of delegates. One slate was dedicated to immediate secession, and the other was committed to “cooperation.” In Augusta County, Virginia, in the Shenandoah Valley, two slates of candidates were also presented to the voters, one slate committed to “cooperation” and the other favoring immediate secession. In all three cases, the candidates made their positions abundantly clear in public speaking engagements, the voters selected their delegates based on those positions, and the delegates went to the state convention and voted accordingly.

The voting on state conventions was not simultaneous across the South. Some states voted before others and the later states voted with the knowledge that other had already seceded. For example, Alabama voters went to the polls with the knowledge that South Carolina had already left the Union. The Georgia Convention met with the knowledge that South Carolina, Florida and Alabama had seceded. Below is a table showing when the elections of delegates occurred in the various states.

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116 Tennessee was the exception. Tennessee seceded through action by the state legislature followed by a state-wide referendum.

117 These case studies were selected for two reasons. One the records were preserved showing how the candidates had presented their views and how the people of the county voted. Second, they were selected for the variety of the candidates’ positions. In one (Anderson), immediate unilateral secessionists ran unopposed. In the other two, the “Immediatists” were opposed by Cooperationists, the Immediatists winning one county (Calhoun) and the Cooperationists winning the other (Augusta).
Table 1: State Conventions 1860-61

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Decision to hold convention</th>
<th>Election of delegates</th>
<th>Convention met</th>
<th>Secession vote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>10 Nov 1860</td>
<td>6 Dec 1860</td>
<td>17 Dec 1860</td>
<td>20 Dec 1860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>29 Nov 1860</td>
<td>20 Dec 1861</td>
<td>7 Jan 1861</td>
<td>9 Jan 1861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>30 Nov 1860</td>
<td>22 Dec 1860</td>
<td>3 Jan 1861</td>
<td>10 Jan 1861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>6 Dec 1860</td>
<td>24 Dec 1860</td>
<td>7 Jan 1861</td>
<td>11 Jan 1861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>21 Nov 1860</td>
<td>2 Jan 1861</td>
<td>16 Jan 1861</td>
<td>19 Jan 1861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>12 Dec 1860</td>
<td>7 Jan 1861</td>
<td>23 Jan 1861</td>
<td>26 Jan 1861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas(^{118})</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>Various</td>
<td>28 Jan 1861</td>
<td>1 Feb 1861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>14 Jan 1861</td>
<td>4 Feb 1861</td>
<td>13 Feb 1861</td>
<td>17 Apr 1861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>15 Jan 1861</td>
<td>18 Feb 1861</td>
<td>4 Mar 1861</td>
<td>6 May 1861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tennessee(^{119})</td>
<td>No, 9 Jan 1861</td>
<td>Leg. 6 May 1861</td>
<td>Ref. 8 Jun 1861</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>18 Apr 1861</td>
<td>13 May 1861</td>
<td>20 May 1861</td>
<td>20 May 1861</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Anderson District, South Carolina, in the Up-country portion of the state, had established a reputation for conservatism in the crisis over the Compromise of 1850.\(^{120}\) Over the subsequent decade, attitudes had changed. The editor of the local newspaper, the *Anderson Intelligencer*, had played a role in shifting public opinion as the sectional crisis deepened. Pro-secession South Carolinians in Anderson District opened the debate in the newspapers using florid language laced with imagery of antislavery violence. An editorial told readers that Lincoln was “pledged to destroy and devastate the interests, safety and independence of the South, for all these things

\(^{118}\) Texas Governor Sam Houston declined to call together the state legislature, fearing it might vote to have a convention, which he opposed. Secessionists circumvented the legislature by issuing a call for counties to hold elections anyway. On February 1, 1861, the Texas convention voted 166-8 to secede, pending the results of a referendum. On February 23, 1861, Texans voted 46,153 for *secession* and 14,747 against.

\(^{119}\) On January 9, 1861, before Fort Sumter, Tennesseans voted against holding a convention. On May 6, 1861, the Tennessee legislature voted to secede, pending the results of a state-wide referendum. On June 8, 1861, Tennessee voters vote to secede 105,000 to 47,000.

\(^{120}\) Freehling, *Road to Disunion*, 1:530-531.
[were] involved in the maintenance or destruction of slavery.” South Carolina need not fear acting unilaterally, since Georgia, Florida, Alabama and Mississippi would follow the Palmetto State’s secession. ¹²¹ A letter from prominent Georgian Robert Toombs printed in the Anderson Intelligencer simply stated: “the time has come for secession—nothing else will meet the public danger and insure the public security.” ¹²²

Local leaders in Anderson District prepared the public for secession in a series of town meetings and speeches. The newspaper printed the results of a November 23 town meeting in nearby Hartwell, Georgia, at which citizens had expressed their dismay and outrage that “armed mobs, [Republicans] have invaded our territory, excited discontent and insurrection among our slaves, disturbing our peace, destroying our property and jeopardizing the lives of our wives and children.” ¹²³

The local paper carried a speech by former Virginia governor Henry Wise that listed the outrages and aggressions of the North against the South. Northerners nullified the Fugitive Slave Law and “denied extradition of murderers and marauders and other felons.” Further, Wise said, the Republican Party had “caused and shielded the murder of masters or owners in pursuit of fugitive slaves.” The Republican Party sent “emissaries of incendiaries to corrupt our slaves and … excite them to rebellion and insurrection.” The party was “incessantly scattering firebrands of incendiary appeals in our midst.” It had “invaded a territory by arms furnished by Emigrant Aid Societies, … invaded Virginia and shed the blood of our citizens on her own soil.” Almost as


exasperating, the Republican Party, according to Wise, had “justified and exalted to the highest honors of admiration and respect the horrid murders, arsons and rapine of the raid of John Brown; and … canonized the felons themselves as saints of martyrdom. The Republican Party had “burned the towns …, and formed midnight conspiracy for the depopulation of north Texas.” As South Carolinians considered their response to Lincoln’s election, such arguments encouraged pro-secession views.

“A few years ago,” General Joseph Newton Whitner of Anderson District, said in a speech at Kingstree, Williamsburg District, the Republican Party “was ridiculed as fanatics.” Now, the Republicans were about to inaugurate a president. “Our enemies of the North would seek to stir up strife between the slaveholder and the non-slaveholder South, but they would fail in this.” In an hour-long speech in Anderson, Representative W. W. Boyce warned that though there were dangers in secession, “there is certain death and subjugation in submission.”

While secessionist opinion leaders were mobilizing public opinion, military organizations mobilized as well. At a town meeting in Anderson on November 13, former Congressman James L. Orr suggested that South Carolina start preparing munitions of war. One of the objects of this meeting was the formation of a volunteer corps to tender their services to the governor. At

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124 Whitner would also go on to represent Anderson District in the South Carolina Convention.


another political meeting on November 15, Orr, perhaps trying to allay fears aroused by the prospects of immediate secession, cited Georgia’s $1 million defense appropriation as a serious indication of secession sentiment. In the wake of the Republican victory, the Palmetto Riflemen, an existing volunteer unit, called a meeting and new units organized at Fort Hill and Claytonville. A new company formed on November 29, 1860 at Slabtown quickly raised seventy volunteers. At a town meeting at Belton, on November 22, after hearing pro-secession speeches, Captain William J. Broome, commander of the local volunteer company, the Independent Blues, was requested to call out the company on December 5 to vote on offering services to the governor. Governor William H. Gist indirectly defended the raising of volunteer companies in his annual message to the legislature. The federal government, Gist said, could not “rightfully attempt to use force to prevent a state from seceding” or force her back into the Union. Despite this belief, Gist felt it behooved the state to undertake military preparations, in case the Republicans did not share Gist’s beliefs on the limitations on federal powers. “I cannot too earnestly urge upon you the importance of arming the state at the earliest practicable


period, and thus be prepared for the worst.”\textsuperscript{133} It was one thing to assert that a state could secede, but if northerners opposed secession by force, South Carolina had to be ready to meet force with force.

James Chesnut, in a speech at the Anderson courthouse on the evening of November 20, 1860, recounted the outrages northerners had inflicted on the South. Abolition societies “have employed every means to prevent quiet and beget strife. They have agents now … to instigate servile insurrections and to apply the lighted torch when families are wrapt in slumber.” Chesnut declared that “in times past, he had been a conservative Union man.” Now he saw “that there is no hope for us in the Union. … All the dangers that beset our pathway are in the Union. … Outside of this Confederacy there may be danger, but no dishonor.”\textsuperscript{134} He called the Union “a tyrannical confederacy” and “a fatally dangerous connection.” Chesnut asked, “if the state is sovereign, and we believe that the liberties and lives of her citizens are in danger, we have the right to prevent the infliction of such an enormous evil. Shall we see them coming with lighted torch, when our wives and children are slumbering, and wait until the torch is applied before striking?”\textsuperscript{135}

On December 6, 1860, the voters of Anderson District went to the polls to select five delegates for the state convention. Secessionists Joseph N. Whitner, James L. Orr, Jacob P. Reed, and R. F. Simpson were elected along with and one probable Cooperationist, Rev. Benjamin F.


Mauldin.\textsuperscript{136} In the South Carolina convention, on December 20, 1860, these delegates voted as they had said they would, for immediate secession.\textsuperscript{137} Once South Carolina seceded, immediate secessionists in other states no longer had to worry about standing alone if their state decided for disunion.

At a series of county meetings in Calhoun County, Alabama, community leaders expressed their support for secession. At a “Southern Rights” meeting on November 17, Col. William B. Martin assured the audience that the “abuses of the federal government” necessitated secession. George C. Whatley spoke at length of “the drama of northern aggressions.” The meeting then adopted resolutions declaring that “repeated acts of aggression” by the “dominant sectional party of the North” provided sufficient cause for leaving the Union.\textsuperscript{138} A county convention, held on December 8, nominated George Whatley, an attorney, Daniel Ryan, a farmer and John Crook, a planter. The newspaper described them as men “long and well and favorably known to the people of Calhoun County.” After being nominated, the candidates declared themselves

\textsuperscript{136} Support for secessionists was overwhelming. Joseph N. Whitner garnered 1,079 votes out of a possible 1,104 votes (97.7). James L. Orr received 1,054 (95.5 percent). Jacob P. Reed 974 (88 percent), Simpson 917 (83 percent). One probable Cooperationist, Rev. Benjamin F. Mauldin received 893. “Official Return,” \textit{Anderson (S. C.) Daily Intelligencer}, December 13, p. 2, col. 5; See also, South Carolina, \textit{Journal of the Convention of the People of South Carolina}, (Charleston: Evans & Cogswell, 1861), 6; A political card had suggested Mauldin as a candidate for which “cooperationist and separate state actionists” could vote. “For the State Convention,” \textit{Anderson (S. C.) Daily Intelligencer}, November 22, 1860, p. 2, col. 6.

\textsuperscript{137} News did not travel instantly. The vote in the convention was unanimous, 169-0. South Carolina, \textit{Journal of the Convention of the People of South Carolina, Held 1860, 1861 and 1862}, (Columbia: R. W. Gibbes, 1862), 43.

\textsuperscript{138} “Southern Rights Meeting in Jacksonville,” \textit{(Ala.) Republican}, November 22, 1860, p. 2, col. 2.
“emphatically and unequivocally in favor of secession and separate state action, without evasion, cooperation or compromise.”

Elsewhere in Calhoun County, also on December 8, cooperationists met in Oxford to nominate their own slate of candidates. The Oxford meeting adopted resolutions condemning the Republican Party as “hostile to our rights, interests and peace” and declaring that the South had “nothing to expect from said party but insults, wrongs and oppressions.” The cooperationists, however, called for “cool but firm and decided resistance,” an “undivided South,” and Alabama “acting … in concert with her sister southern states.” This meeting nominated cooperationists Joseph McAuley, B. O. Ramey, and Dr. C. B. Taylor.

On December 24, by a margin of 1573 to 550, voters in Calhoun County chose secessionists Whatley, Crook, and Ryan to represent them in the state convention rather than the cooperationist ticket of McAuley, Ramey, and Taylor. Once in the convention, these pro-secession delegates voted exactly as they had promised. Cooperationists had advanced two other planks: giving northern states a chance to repeal their personal liberty laws and suppress violent abolitionism before southern secession and referring the convention’s decision back to the voters for confirmation or rejection. Calhoun voters could have endorsed these by voting the cooperation slate, but they chose not to. They voted for, and got, immediate unilateral secession.

Citizens of Augusta County, Virginia, wrestled with the question of how to respond to Lincoln’s election, and they turned to conservative leaders for solutions. At a public meeting on

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November 17, local leaders delivered speeches “in favor of our glorious Union.” At a November 26 meeting conservatives again took the lead. Conservatives conceded to secessionists that some northerners had supported invasions by John Brown, but the conservatives did not want to appear weak by accepting such attacks. The meeting condemned northern attempts to “incite forays upon our borders, for the purpose of disturbing our peace” as “flagrant wrongs and breaches of faith.” While acknowledging the wrongs committed, the meeting begged the people of the Cotton States not to secede. In a move that showed the conservative tenor of the meeting, when J. H. Skinner, a local Democratic attendee offered a resolution calling for a state convention to consider how Virginia should resist, that resolution was voted down. Augusta County men, at least at this stage, wanted nothing to do with anything that smacked of secession.

On January 14, 1861, the General Assembly passed a bill authorizing a Virginia convention. Voters were to elect delegates and decide whether any decision by the convention was to be confirmed in a referendum. Alexander H. H. Stuart explained his views in a letter published in the Opposition newspaper. “The true policy of Virginia,” Stuart wrote, “is that she should remain in the Union until all constitutional means of obtaining redress for the past and security for the future, shall have proved fruitless. I do not think the time has come for an appeal to the arbitrament of arms,” which secession would entail. Another Staunton Unionist

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143 “Augusta County Union Meeting,” Staunton (Va.) Spectator, November 27, 1860, p. 2, col. 4-5.


145 “, Staunton Spectator, January 22, 1861, p. 2.
candidate, George Baylor, wrote to the local newspaper assuring voters that he was a Unionist, but he opposed any federal coercion of a seceding state.\footnote{Staunton Spectator, January 29, 1861, p. 2, col. 6.} All the candidates in Augusta County, both secessionists and those opposed to immediate unilateral secession, spoke at a public gathering at the courthouse on Monday evening, January 28, 1861. At this meeting they stated their views as to what Virginia should do in this crisis so the voters could make informed decisions in the election of delegates to the Convention. The speeches, a local paper reported, “were listened to with marked interest and elicited frequent and loud applause.”\footnote{“Speeches on Monday,” Staunton Spectator, January 29, 1861, p. 2, col. 3. The substance of the speeches, unfortunately, were not recorded.} Antislavery violence did not appear as a significant issue in these speeches.

In the election of February 4, the cooperation candidates, Alexander H. H. Stuart, John B. Baldwin, and George Baylor, won handily over the more secession-minded candidates Imboden and Harman.\footnote{“Vote of Augusta County,” Staunton (Va.) Spectator, February 12, 1861, p. 2, col. 3. Baldwin received 3224 votes, Baylor 3173 and Stuart 2885. Secessionists candidates Imboden received 550, and Harman 328.} In the Virginia convention, Baldwin and Stuart were outspoken proponents of keeping the Union together and supported measures the convention undertook to reconstruct the Union by building a compromise that would be acceptable to both the northern states and the already seceded southern states.\footnote{The Virginia convention adopted resolutions urging both the Federal authorities and the seceded states not to take any action that would result in a clash of arms and make a voluntary reconstruction impossible. George H. Reese (ed.), Proceedings of the Virginia State Convention of 1861, (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1965). 1:41, 1:48, 1:108,} Because Augusta County leaders were not obsessed with antislavery violence, they believed the Union was salvageable, and went about trying to salvage it.
The Deep South conventions generally moved as fast as parliamentary procedure would allow to the all-important decision over secession.\textsuperscript{150} The conventions did not spend much time debating the constitutionality or advisability of secession. They allowed their post-secession declarations to publicize what had motivated them to take that step. The conventions of South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Mississippi, and Texas issued declarations explaining the reasons for their secession.

The South Carolina convention issued its “Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union.” This declaration, borrowing language from the Declaration of Independence, stated that “whenever any ‘form of government becomes destructive of the ends for which it was established, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new government.’” The northern people had formed societies, “whose avowed object is to disturb the peace and to eloign the property of the citizens of other states. They have encouraged and assisted thousands of our slaves to leave their homes; and those who remain, have been incited by emissaries, books and pictures to servile insurrection.” Further, northern politicians had declared that the “government cannot endure permanently half slave, half free,” and that “the public mind must rest in the belief that slavery is in the course of ultimate extinction.”\textsuperscript{151} Fugitives from justice who had engaged in antislavery violence had not been extradited. “The States of Ohio and Iowa have refused to surrender to

\textsuperscript{150} South Carolina convention sat for four days before adopting a secession resolution, as did Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas. Alabama sat for five days and Mississippi for three. Florida sat for a week. And those brief intervals included the election of parliamentary officers and establishing rules. In other words, the Deep South conventions proceeded fairly quickly and did not leave significant records of debates over the policy of secession.

\textsuperscript{151} “Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union,” South Carolina, \textit{Journal of the Convention}, 461-466.
justice fugitives charged with murder, and with inciting servile insurrection in the state of Virginia.” Citing Daniel Webster’s reasoning in 1851, the declaration ended, “Thus the constituted compact has been deliberately broken and disregarded by the non-slaveholding States, and the consequence follows that South Carolina is released from her obligation.”

Mississippi seceded three weeks after South Carolina. The convention opened its declaration with a blunt statement: “Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery—the greatest material interest of the world.” According to the Mississippi declaration, northern hostility to the institution “promotes insurrection and incendiaryism in our midst. It has enlisted its press, its pulpit and its schools against us, until the whole popular mind of the North is excited and inflamed with prejudice.” Northern hostility had “formed associations to carry out its schemes of emancipation in the states and wherever else slavery exists. … It has invaded a state, and invested with the honors of martyrdom the wretch whose purpose was to apply flames to our dwellings, and the weapons of destruction to our lives. It has broken every compact into which it has entered for our security.” To cooperationists seeking one last chance to present a compromise to the northern states, secessionists countered that no compromise would be accepted by the northern people. The Constitution already contained provisions for the extradition of fugitive slaves, and fugitives from justice. Although the Republican platform had denounced “the lawless invasion by armed force of the soil of any state” as “among the gravest of crimes,” Republican governors had protected Brown’s associates from extradition, and the

152 Webster’s speech in Capon Springs Virginia in 1851. See supra, p. 3.

153 South Carolina, Journal of the Convention, 461-466.

154 J. L. Power, Proceedings of the Mississippi State Convention, Held January 7th to 26th, A. D. 1861, (Jackson: Power & Cadwallader, 1861), 47.

155 Power, Mississippi State Convention, 48.
celebration of John Brown’s life on the day of his execution had been widespread in northern states. If this was an indication of northern sentiment, what purpose would compromise serve?

The Florida convention adopted secession on January 10, 1861. Florida never issued a declaration laying out the causes of their state’s action, but the convention did empanel a committee to write such resolutions. A draft stated,

> By the agency of a large proportion of the members from the nonslaveholding states, books have been published and circulated amongst us the direct tendency and avowed purpose of which is to excite insurrection and servile war with all their attendant horrors. … In so many words, [northern extremists are] saying to you, we will not burn you at the stake but we will torture you to death by a slow fire.  

Florida’s secession took a third state out of the Union and attention shifted to the “Empire State of the South,” Georgia.

Georgia seceded on January 19, 1861, and issued its declaration of causes ten days later. The Georgia declaration was drafted by a committee which included Robert Toombs and followed Toombs’ argument in his January 1860 “Invasion of the States” speech, and his November speech before the Georgia legislature. The people of the nonslaveholding states “have

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156 Florida Declaration of Causes, (undated and untitled), State Archives of Florida, Series 577, Carton 1, Folder 6. In the Journal of the Florida Convention, “On January 21, 1861, Mr. Gettis of Hillsborough County offered the following resolution: “Resolved, That a Committee of five be appointed by the President of this Convention to draft a declaration setting forth some of the grievances which compelled the state of Florida to dissolve her political connection with the late Federal Union, and that said committee be instructed to report at the adjourned or called session of this Convention.” … James Gettis, J. B. Dawkins (Alachua County), S. M. G. Gary (Marion County), William G. M. Davis (Leon County), and Thompson B. Lamar (Jefferson County) were appointed to said committee.” Journal of the Proceedings of the Convention of the People of Florida, Begun and Held at the Capitol in the City of Tallahassee, on Thursday, January 3, A.D. 1861, (Tallahassee: Office of the Floridian and Journal, 1861), 102-103. With the outbreak of war, this endeavor was overcome by more significant events and the draft resolution was never adopted.

endeavored to weaken our security, to disturb our domestic peace and tranquility, and persistently refused to comply with their express constitutional obligations to us in reference to that property.” Pointing to supposedly vengeful motives, Georgia declared, “The faithless conduct of our adversaries is not confined to such acts as might aggrandize themselves or their section of the Union. They are content if they can only injure us.” The declaration then proceeded to more substantive issues. The Constitution stipulated the extradition of fugitives from justice. For twenty years the nonslaveholding states had shielded “persons charged with crimes affecting slave property.” The northern states “with punic faith,” had shielded persons who had broken the laws regarding slavery. “This clause of the Constitution has no other sanction than their good faith; that is withheld from us; we are remediless in the Union; out of it we are remitted to the laws of nations.” This passage reveals Toombs’ impact on the committee’s draft declaration.

The thwarting of the law of nations also troubled the Georgia convention. The Georgia declaration then expressed Toombs’ thinking on *jus gentium* and its applicability to Georgia’s situation. The law of nations “requires every state to restrain its citizens or subjects from committing acts injurious to the peace and security of … their neighbors.” These are “sound and just principles.” Unfortunately for Georgia, “they are wholly disregarded by the people of the northern states.” Worse, the federal government is impotent to maintain them. For twenty years the “abolitionists and their allies” had attempted “to excite insurrection and servile war among us,” and had sent emissaries to accomplish this end. Equally threatening, “a majority of the Republican leaders approved of these acts, “the same men who are now proposed as our rulers.” In one instance, these efforts “led to the actual invasion” and “murderers and incendiaries” who
escaped found “fraternal protection” at the hands of the governors of Iowa and Ohio. “These are the same men who say the Union shall be preserved.”\(^{158}\)

Georgia’s declaration ended with a dramatic flourish. “We know their treachery; we know the shallow pretenses under which they daily disregard [the Constitution’s] plainest obligations. … The people of Georgia … know the value of parchment rights in treacherous hands.” The state could then hardly submit “to the rulers whom the North offers us. … their avowed purpose is to subvert our society and subject us not only to the loss of our property but the destruction of ourselves, our wives, and our children, and the desolation of our homes, our altars, and our firesides.” Secession therefore became the only course that would protect the people of Georgia.\(^{159}\)

Neither Alabama nor Louisiana issued secession declarations, but antislavery violence was discussed in the proceedings of their conventions. Alabama Governor Andrew Moore, in announcing his plans to hold a convention, noted why one was necessary. He said, in part, that northerners had “invaded the state of Virginia, armed her slaves with deadly weapons, murdered her citizens, and seized the United States Armory at Harpers Ferry.” Further, they had “sent emissaries into the state of Texas, who burned many towns, and furnished the slaves with deadly poison.”\(^{160}\) Alabama commissioner to Kentucky, Stephen F. Hale, explained why secession was necessary. In 1859, Hale wrote, there had been “an armed incursion upon the sovereign state of Virginia, slaughtering her citizens, for the purpose of exciting a servile insurrection.” The previous summer, “the Abolition incendiary ha[d] lit up the prairies of Texas, fired the dwellings


of the inhabitants, burnt down whole towns and laid poison for her citizens.” Sympathy had been manifested “all over the North” for John Brown, and he was “celebrated with public honors, and his name canonized as a martyr to liberty.” Hale provided lurid details of what life under the Republicans would look like. The election of Lincoln, Hale wrote to Governor Beriah Magoffin, was “nothing less than an open declaration of war.” It meant a new theory of government that would “destroy the property of the South, lay waste her fields, and inaugurate all the horrors of a San Domingo servile insurrection, consigning her citizens to assassinations, and her wives and daughters to pollution and violation, to gratify the lust of half-civilized Africans.” This was especially true in the Deep South where, “in many localities, the slave outnumbers the white population ten to one.”

David Clopton, Alabama commissioner to Delaware, made a similar appeal. The victory of Republicanism, he wrote, defeated the ends of the Constitution. “It endangers … domestic tranquility, … circulates insurrectionary documents and disseminates insurrectionary sentiments” among slaves. Republican victory “permit[s], within the limits of some of the states, the organization of plans for the armed invasion of others, and by refusing to surrender the criminals when fugitives from justice.”

Louisiana also declined to issue a declaration of causes, but cooperationist delegate Joseph A. Rozier, offered a resolution calling for a convention of southern states to which he appended the following in its preamble: large bodies of citizens of the nonslaveholding states had been “assailing, by all the means they can employ, the peculiar institution of the southern states,” and aided the attack with propagandistic “appeals to the prejudices and passions of the ignorant and fanatical.” Further, many northern citizens had exhibited “much sympathy … and

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162 Smith, *Convention of Alabama*, 440.
encouragement … to bands of lawless ruffians, making attacks upon the slaveholding States, and
endeavoring to incite insurrection among the slaves.”\textsuperscript{163} Although he did not support immediate
secession, Rozier attempted to show his peers that he was not insensitive to the wrongs of the
South. Rozier did not succeed in delaying secession, but he probably did fend off charges of
being a “submissionist.”

Texas initiated its two-step secession process by adopting a secession resolution on February
1, 1861, and a referendum to be held on February 23. The day after adopting the secession
resolution, the Texas convention pointed to the “disloyalty of the northern states” and “the
imbecility of the federal government” that had created rule “by violence and mob law,” in
Kansas. The federal government “has for years almost entirely failed to protect the lives and
property of the people of Texas against the Indian savages on our border, and more recently
against the murderous forays of banditti from the neighboring territory of Mexico.” Northern
politicians had “refused to vote appropriations for protecting Texas against ruthless savages, for
the sole reason that she is a slaveholding state.” Texas had expended large amounts of money for
security and “the federal government has refused reimbursement.”\textsuperscript{164}

The Federal Congress had become “the arena for spreading firebrands and hatred” between
the slaveholding and nonslaveholding States. Northern citizens had proclaimed “the
revolutionary doctrine that there is a ‘higher law’ than the Constitution and laws of our Federal

\textsuperscript{163} Louisiana, \textit{Proceedings of the Louisiana State Convention}, (New Orleans: J. O. Nixon,
1861), 10.

\textsuperscript{164} A Declaration of the Causes which Impel the State of Texas to Secede from the Federal
From the Original in the Department of State}, (Austin: Texas Library and Historical
Commission, 1912), 61-65.
Union.” The northern states had allowed “lawless organizations to steal our slaves and prevent their recapture,” and southern citizens had been murdered while trying to recover fugitive slaves. “They have invaded southern soil and murdered unoffending citizens, and through the press their leading men and a fanatical pulpit have bestowed praise upon the actors and assassins in these crimes.” The governors of Ohio and Iowa had “refused to deliver parties implicated and indicted for participation in such offences, upon the legal demands of the states aggrieved.” Northern abolitionists had “sent seditious pamphlets and papers among us to stir up servile insurrection and bring blood and carnage to our firesides. They have sent hired emissaries among us to burn our towns and distribute arms and poison to our slaves for the same purpose.”

With the withdrawal of Texas, the wave of Deep South secessions came to a close. Some southern Unionists still clung to the idea of a reconstructed Union by enticing seceded states back. Samuel Ogden of Connecticut wrote a letter to his friend, Alabama Whig Jeremiah Clemens, complaining that “the ‘illegal and violent action of the Cotton States’ has robbed the northern conservatives” of political legitimacy.165 Clemens responded out of pent-up frustration.

You see only the evils of disunion; and forget that there are wrongs to which submission is infamy. … The scornful refusal of northern governors to surrender criminals indicted under the laws of the southern states awakens in your bosom no feeling of resentment. … You would not defy a despicable demagogue Seward, if his irrepressible conflict doctrine had been preached to a class of laborers in your midst, nor would any people, not hopelessly embittered against us, have greeted with rounds of applause the declaration of Wendell Phillips that the name of a St. Domingo negro deserved to be written high above that of Washington on the roll of fame.

As for the suggestion that Southerners should wait and give northern conservatives a chance to win an election and arrest the abuse, Clemens wrote, “We have allowed the people of the North ‘a chance to vote,’ not once, but often, and every time that chance was allowed them, they

exhibited a growing fondness for the worst men, the worst doctrines with which your section of
the Confederacy is cursed.” Citing examples, Clemens asked, “can a slaveholder go to Ohio or
Pennsylvania recapture a fugitive slave without being sued or murdered by a mob? … Will any
northern governor surrender a felon who has deprived me of my property? Until you answer
these questions to my satisfaction neither my voice, nor my vote shall ever be given for a
reconstruction of the Union.”

Ogden had written that if the southern states desired peace they could have it, but they could
not maintain it by armed violence. To this, Clemens, responded:

We do desire peace, but we are not willing to purchase it at the sacrifice of our manhood;
and threats of coercion will not frighten us into quiescence. We have been guilty of no
violence\textsuperscript{166} – we have armed ourselves as it becomes a free people to do when their
liberties are endangered, and have prepared to welcome all invaders in strict accordance
with the advice of a northern statesman – \textit{with bloody hands to hospitable graves}. No
collision will take place unless you bring it about, … Peace or war is entirely at your
option.

If the North attempted coercion, however, Clemens warned his friend, “the lambs of this latitude
are provided with deadly fangs and are troubled with no scruples against using them in self-
defense.”

\textbf{Addendum: Upper South Secession.}

Secession sentiment had swept seven states out of the Union by early February, but that
sentiment was not strong enough to carry the Upper South. The stasis achieved between the
centrifugal forces of secession and the centripetal ones of Unionism did not prove a stable one.
The Virginia convention met on February 13, 1861, and remained in session until May. For

\textsuperscript{166} Several southern state governments, including North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia,
Alabama, Florida, Mississippi and Louisiana, had seized federal property in those states by
March 1860, in some cases, before those states had even seceded. See Dumond, \textit{The Secession
secessionists, antislavery violence and incitement to insurrection were frequent topics of debate. On February 26, John Goode, Jr. of Bedford told his colleagues, “Nineteen Northern States … have continued to agitate the subject of slavery … with a view of exciting servile insurrection and rebellion in our homes.” Sixty-eight Republicans in Congress endorsed the infamous Helper book, “which advised our slaves to rise at midnight and cut the throats of their masters, and murder our wives and innocent little ones.” On March 2, Thomas F. Goode of Mecklenburg declared that northern men had “sent amongst us … hired emissaries to incite our slaves to rebellion and violence.” The inevitable result of antislavery agitation, was “the formation of insurrectionary plots. … A band of armed conspirators from the northern states, … made an incursion into the state of Virginia, for the purpose of inciting slaves to insurrection, of putting arms into their hands, of aiding them in plundering their masters, murdering them and their families, and overthrowing the government of the Commonwealth.” There was, Goode felt, “a wide-spread conspiracy in many of the northern states.” Many at the North regarded, “the hero of Harpers Ferry” as “a martyr in a holy cause.”

Several secessionists noted Republican protection afforded to Brown’s associates. On March 2, Goode pointedly remarked that the free states had “refused to surrender criminals [sic] from


168 Ibid., 1:329. Thomas Goode did not vote on the April 4 secession resolution, but he voted in favor of secession on April 17.
justice.” On March 14, former President John Tyler reminded the convention: “One of John Brown’s raid flees to Iowa. A requisition is made upon the Governor for the man who has violated your own homestead, and who has dared to tread with impious footsteps upon Virginia soil. You make a demand upon the Governor for him.” Republican governors declined the requisition, “and the incendiary goes free.”

On March 30, Samuel Woods of Barbour County observed, “Fugitives from justice escaped into northern states, are protected and honored. Justly fearing similar insults and outrages, … and the untold horrors of servile war, … seven southern states have dissolved their connection with the Federal Union.”

On March 26, Benjamin Wilson of transmontane Harrison County said “a few months ago, … a band of murderers and marauders, headed by John Brown, seized the government armory at Harpers Ferry, … took some of our citizens prisoners and shot others down like dogs.” When Brown was executed, “his remains were carried to the North, where they were worshiped by whole communities.”

On April 3, George W. Richardson of the Piedmont county of Hanover said, “Myriads in the North claim the crown of martyrdom for the thieves, bandits and assassins who, under the lead of John Brown, invaded our soil and murdered our citizens.”

On April 9, William L. Goggin, of the Piedmont, presented the resolutions from a public meeting in Bedford County, on April 6. The “abominable doctrines” of the northern people, the resolutions read, have resulted in “an invasion of the soil of Virginia by an armed band to murder our people and to seduce our slaves

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169 Ibid., 1:326.

170 Ibid., 1:670. John Tyler voted in favor of secession on April 4, and again on April 17.

171 Ibid., 2:536. Woods voted in favor of secession on April 4, and again in favor on April 17.

172 Ibid., 2:359. Wilson voted against secession on April 4 and abstained on April 17.

173 Ibid., 3:87. Richardson voted for secession on April 4 and on April 17.
into a servile insurrection against their own masters.”¹⁷⁴ This meeting had urged immediate secession.

On March 16, George W. Randolph of Richmond city noted that, even with a friendly President in the White House, “our soil was invaded, our citizens murdered, … our slaves themselves were incited to rebellion.”¹⁷⁵ What would happen, Randolph asked, when a Republican was in the White House? On March 19 Samuel Woods of Barbour wondered who would have thought that the state of Virginia “would be invaded by an incendiary and murderous force, and that the citizens of Virginia would be murdered in cold blood in their own streets?”¹⁷⁶ Ardent secessionist James P. Holcombe said, “the northern people. … have cherished in the bosom of their society, associations … not infrequently expressing sympathy with insurrection, rapine and murder.”¹⁷⁷ Invoking the memory of St. Domingo, Holcombe reminded the convention that “the tragedy at Southampton, in our own state, has been traced to the influence of [antislavery] agitation. The John Brown raid was its offspring.”¹⁷⁸

Holcombe probably spoke for many when he expressed grave doubts about a future in the Union. “I cannot discover any ground of rational hope, upon which to expect a change in the relative feeling between the two sections. The great masses of the northern people are not accessible to any argument or any appeal which it is within our power to make.”¹⁷⁹ Jeremiah

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 3:378. Goggin voted for secession on April 4 and again on April 17.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 1:730. Randolph voted in favor of secession on April 4, and again on April 17.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 2:52.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 2:79.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 2:85-86. Holcombe voted in favor of secession on April 4, and again on April 17.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 2:79.
Morton, of Orange County in the Piedmont, shared Holcombe’s pessimism. “Principles hostile to our institutions have been inculcated in the northern mind and ingrained in the northern heart, so that you may make any compromise you please, and still, until you can unlearn and unteach the [northern] people, we shall find no peace.”

Not all delegates accepted the argument that antislavery violence legitimatized secession. On February 25, anti-secession delegate Samuel Moore of Rockbridge offered resolutions, which stated that the “free States [had wronged the South] in refusing to give up criminals fleeing from justice; … in circulating incendiary pamphlets among us; in furnishing arms to bands of assassins to invade our borders and murder our people.” This litany of abuse, however, only justified Virginia “in demanding … that those wrongs shall not be repeated.” Secession opponent George Baylor of Augusta County told his colleagues that “my position is simply this: I am in favor of exhausting all fair and honorable means” before resorting to secession. Baylor condemned the secessionist delegates for “inflaming the passions of the people” by bringing up the John Brown raid and holding the Republican party responsible for the raid, “I say it is unjust to charge the Black Republican party … with countenancing the John Brown raid.”

On March 4, Waitman Willey of transmontane area warned his colleagues, “Dissolve this Union—take away the common obligation of a common government, how then will the case stand? Instead of one John Brown raid in 75 years of our history, we will have John Brown raids every month, and, perhaps, every week, all along our borders. … The section of the state where I live, will be

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180 Ibid., 1:254-255.

181 Ibid., 1:172. Moore voted against secession on April 4, and again on April 17, but later changed his vote to yes, to foster political unity.

182 Ibid., 1:289. Baylor later clarified that “the Chicago platform, … did not endorse the John Brown raid, but on the contrary that it distinctly denounced it.” Reese, Virginia Convention, 1:373. Baylor opposed secession on April 4, but voted to secede on April 17.
subjected to these same John Brown raids; if, indeed, there is such hostility in the North as
gentlemen assert there is. I believe there is not.”

On March 7, John S. Carlile, also of transmontane Virginia, said, “with our extended frontier, with our defenseless sea coast, tell me
the amount of money that would be required so to fortify the state, … against those John Brown forays upon a larger scale? … It was fourteen of the marines of this very federal government,
which you want to destroy, that took John Brown and his men out of the engine house.”

The Virginia convention had adopted resolutions urging both the federal authorities and the
seceded states from undertaking any action that might lead to violence. The Committee on
Federal Relations on March 9, produced a report which asked both sides to abstain from any
action “tending to produce a collision of forces.” The Virginians were trying to build some
compromise that would be acceptable to both northern states and the federal government on one
side and the seceding states on the other. Any military clash would make that impossible.

The stasis of early February ended in early April with the dispatch of a federal military
expedition to Fort Sumter and Fort Pickens. South Carolina (and later, Confederate) officials
had said that any attempt to reinforce Fort Sumter would be seen by South Carolina as an act of
war. With the firing on Fort Sumter, President Lincoln called on the states to provide troops to

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183 Reese, *Virginia Convention*, 1:364. Willey voted against secession on April 4 and again
on April 17.

184 Reese, *Virginia Convention*, 1:477. Carlile voted against secession on April 4 and again
on April 17.


186 The preparations for a military expedition were not closely held secrets. “Note of
Preparation: Important Movements of the Army and Navy,” *New York Times*, April 6, 1861, p. 1,
col. 4-5.

187 South Carolina Governor Pickens had informed Major Anderson of this on January 9,
deal with “combinations too powerful to be suppressed by the ordinary course of judicial proceedings.” This request brought many Upper South conditional Unionists into the secessionist camp. It appeared to many that, when push came to shove, President Lincoln was enlisting the federal government on the side of antislavery violence.

Virginia Governor John Letcher, when he received the call for troops doubted the genuineness of the request. Once he realized it was genuine, he responded, “The militia of Virginia will not be furnished to the powers at Washington for any such use or purpose as they have in view. Your object is to subjugate the southern states. … You have chosen to inaugurate civil war, and having done so, we will meet it in a spirit as determined as the administration has exhibited towards the South.” The Virginia convention had handily defeated a secession motion on April 4, 1861, but, after Lincoln’s call for troops, on April 17, the convention voted to withdraw from the Union, pending the results of the state-wide referendum on May 23, 1861.

The map at Figure 5 indicates how delegates at the Virginia convention of 1861 voted. Those counties in blue or dark blue indicate anti-secession voting. Lighter blue counties are those which had only one delegate, darker blue had more than one. Pink or red indicate a vote for immediate secession. Counties in pink had only one delegate, while those in red had more than one delegate. Counties whose delegates abstained are depicted in grey. Blue and red stripes

188 “Gov. Letcher’s Reply to Secretary Cameron,” Staunton (Va.) Spectator, April 23, 1861, p. 2, col. 5.

indicate a split delegation. The switch to secession between the April 4 vote and the April 17 vote was most pronounced in the Valley, in southwest Virginia and what is now eastern West Virginia. In the piedmont, several abstentions on April 4 turned into pro-secession votes on April 17.
April 4, 1861 Secession Resolution

Counties sharing a delegate
- Bath
- Alleghany
- Pulaski
- Botetourt
- Craig
- Rockbridge
- Loudon
- Frederick
- Clarke
- Hampshire
- McDowell
- Wyoming
- Tazewell
- Taylor
- Boone
- Raleigh
- Fayette
- Clay
- Nicholas
- Webster
- Buchanan
- Wise
- Lee
- Scott
- Washington
- Russell
- Smyth
- Grayson
- Wythe
- Carrol
- Pittsylvania
- Henry
- Patrick
- Floyd
- Franklin
- Bedford
- Jefferson
- Preston
- Tyler
- Wetzel
- Marion
- Fauquier
- Rappahannock
- Culpeper
- Pleasants
- Giles
- Montgomery
- Roanoke

Two or more pro-secession votes
Two or more anti-secession votes
One anti-secession vote
Mixed delegation
Abstention
One pro-secession vote
Two or more pro-secession votes

April 17, 1861 Secession Resolution

Counties sharing a delegate
- Bath
- Alleghany
- Pulaski
- Botetourt
- Craig
- Rockbridge
- Loudon
- Frederick
- Clarke
- Hampshire
- McDowell
- Wyoming
- Tazewell
- Taylor
- Boone
- Raleigh
- Fayette
- Clay
- Nicholas
- Webster
- Buchanan
- Wise
- Lee
- Scott
- Washington
- Russell
- Smyth
- Grayson
- Wythe
- Carrol
- Pittsylvania
- Henry
- Patrick
- Floyd
- Franklin
- Bedford
- Jefferson
- Preston
- Tyler
- Wetzel
- Marion
- Fauquier
- Rappahannock
- Culpeper
- Pleasants
- Giles
- Montgomery
- Roanoke

Two or more pro-secession votes
Two or more anti-secession votes
One anti-secession vote
Mixed delegation
Abstention
One pro-secession vote
Two or more pro-secession votes

Figure 5: Votes of Virginia Delegates on April 4 and April 17, 1861

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At the time of the firing on Fort Sumter, Arkansas was the only southern state besides Virginia with a convention sitting (albeit adjourned). In reply to Secretary of War Simon Cameron’s request for 780 troops from Arkansas, on April 22, Govern Rector responded, “In answer to your requisition for troops Arkansas to subjugate the southern states, I have to say that none will be furnished. The demand is only adding insult to injury. The people of this commonwealth are freemen, not slaves, and will defend to the last extremity their honor, lives, and property against northern mendacity and usurpation.”\(^{190}\) The Arkansas Convention reassembled on May 6, 1861 and voted that day to leave the Union.\(^{191}\)

North Carolina Governor John Ellis gave a similarly terse reply to Cameron. “I regard the levy of troops made by the administration for the purposes of subjugating the states of the South, as in violation of the Constitution, and as a gross usurpation of power. I can be no part to this wicked violation of the laws of the country and to this war upon the liberties of a free people. You can get no troops from North Carolina.”\(^{192}\) Ellis convened the legislature on May 1, which passed a bill to elect delegates on May 13 and hold a state convention. The convention assembled on May 20, 1861. The North Carolina convention voted to secede that same day.\(^{193}\)

\(^{190}\) Arkansas, *Journal of Both Sessions of the Convention of the State of Arkansas, Which was Begun and Held in the Capitol, in the City of Little Rock*, (Little Rock: Johnson & Yerkes, State Printers, 1861), 150-151.

\(^{191}\) Arkansas, *Journal of Both Sessions of the Convention of the State of Arkansas, Which was Begun and Held in the Capitol, in the City of Little Rock*, (Little Rock: Johnson & Yerkes, State Printers, 1861), 121-123.


Tennesseans had voted in January 1861 not to have a state convention.\textsuperscript{194} When Governor Isham Harris received Secretary Cameron’s April request for troops, Harris replied, “Tennessee will not furnish a single man for coercion, but fifty thousand, if necessary, for the defense of our rights and those of our southern brethren.”\textsuperscript{195} The Tennessee legislature passed a Declaration of Independence on May 6, 1861, pending the results of a state-wide referendum on June 8, 1861. On June 8, the voters of Tennessee opted out of the Union by a vote of 104,471 to 47,183.\textsuperscript{196}

In the election season of 1860, white southerners experienced real fear of antislavery violence. Before the election, newspaper editors and private citizens painted a dark, foreboding picture of what life would be like under the Lincoln Administration, a future filled with John Brown raids, slave insurrections, supported in the North and abetted or ignored by the federal government, so they supported Breckenridge. White southerners supporting Bell or Douglas tended not to imagine such a dangerous future. Once Abraham Lincoln was elected, most Breckenridge supporters advocated secession as the appropriate southern response. Only by leaving the Union, they believed, could they save themselves from hordes of incendiaries and revolutionists. With Lincoln’s election, many supporters of Bell and Douglas lost faith in the Union and joined the secessionists. White southerners reacted to the new situation as they frequently did, assembling in their communities to discuss the issues and adopt resolutions. Fearing future antislavery violence, they also turned to security organizations: vigilance

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item\textsuperscript{194} Crofts, \textit{Reluctant Confederates}, 326-325.
\item\textsuperscript{195} “Gov. Harris’ Reply to Lincoln!” \textit{Memphis Daily Appeal}, April 19, 1861, p. 2, col. 3.
\item\textsuperscript{196} Crofts, \textit{Reluctant Confederates}, 341-345 provides a detailed analysis of the voting patterns of the Tennessee referendum.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
committees, militia units, and the new manifestation, the “Minute Man” organization. Upper South secessionists, who shared the Deep South’s fears of antislavery violence, were initially unsuccessful in getting their states to secede. After President Lincoln’s call for troops, however, Upper South conditional Unionists who refused to support the federal use of force joined the secessionists, and supported secession. With the collapse of Upper South Unionism, and four Upper South states soon left the Union. And the war came.

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CONCLUSION.

“Men, remember what you are fighting for! Your homes, your firesides, and your sweethearts! Follow me!” General Lewis Armistead, July 3, 1863.¹

Fear of a slave insurrection always exists in any slave society. In the South, fear of antislavery violence was both pervasive and persistent. If that fear was not universal in the Deep South, it was widespread and even common in portions of the Upper South. The fear did not, as some have written, subside over the winter of 1859-1860.² A series of events kept southern concerns simmering: the mourning of Brown, the refusal of Republican governors to extradite Brown’s accomplices, the Helper book, the Mason Committee, and the Texas Troubles. The belief that northern opinion would support or condone antislavery violence attached ominous new meaning to Lincoln’s election. The possibility of slave insurrection inspired or led by northerners, or even by the federal government, strongly influenced the thinking of white southerners in 1860-61 as they considered leaving the Union. This shows the importance of antislavery violence and fear of such violence in bringing about secession. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine secession happening without the stimulus that antislavery violence gave it between October 1859 and April 1861.

The demographics of the Deep South clearly shaped how seriously white southerners took the likelihood of slave insurrection. The two states with the highest African-American population


² Reynolds, Texas Terror, 170; James L. Abrahamson, The Men of Civil War and Secession and Civil War, 1859-1861, (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 2000), 47.
as a percentage of the total population, South Carolina and Mississippi, were the first two states
to secede.\(^3\) Within the seceding states, the counties with the highest percentage of African-
Americans were the most likely to support secession. In fact, within the counties with a majority
African-American population (239 of 874 counties), black population is a slightly better
predictor of secession sentiment than the number of slaveholders.\(^4\) Slaves did not vote, but those
who feared an uprising did.

A modern examination of social movements offers theoretical insight into the process of
secession. According to sociologist Rodney Stark, social movements share four salient
characteristics: shared grievances, a precipitating event, hope of success, and network ties.\(^5\)
White southerners shared a number of grievances, including the fear that their northern
countrymen would incite a slave insurrection and that this insurrection might engulf all white
southerners whether they owned slaves or not. The most obvious precipitating event would be
Harpers Ferry. There followed a series of body blows delivered to southern Unionism over the
eighteen months between October 1859 and April 1861. The raid itself, followed by the

\(^3\) The order of secession followed almost exactly the order of southern states by percentage
of African-Americans.

\(^4\) In the counties that had over 50 percent black populations (239 counties), only sixteen did
not support secession and thirteen had split delegations. In the 239 counties with the highest
slaveholding percentage, twenty opposed secession and eleven had split delegations. Thus, a
large black population is a (slightly) better predictor of secession support than high slaveholding.
In the round, fear of insurrection outweighed local elites urging secession. There are exceptions.
Taliaferro County, Georgia, Alexander Stephens’ home county, was 63 percent black, and 78
percent slaveholding, but opposed secession. In this case, a significant local political figure,
Alexander Stephens, openly opposed to secession.

Stark used the civil rights movement of the 1960s as his example, but his thinking could also be
applied to the secession movement of the 1860s.
celebration of John Brown’s life, the refusal to hand over those who had escaped from Harpers Ferry, the Helper book and associated speakership struggle, the Mason Committee and Sanborn extradition, the Texas Troubles, and finally the election of Abraham Lincoln, all contributed to a growing fear (and some paranoia) that led to the demise of southern Unionism.

As for hope of success, the seven states of the Deep South held more people than all thirteen colonies could boast in 1776, and white southerners felt confident about the future.\(^6\) Jefferson Davis, in his inaugural address of February 1861, sounded a hopeful note based on the apparent unity of white southerners. “It is joyous, in the midst of perilous times,” Davis said, “to look upon a people united in heart.”\(^7\) Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens’ “Cornerstone” speech expressed similar confidence as he noted that the territorial size and population of the Confederate States was greater than that of the colonies in 1776.\(^8\) Finally, there was also strong evidence of network ties. Across the South, white southerners had ties through the Democratic Party, and in the Upper South, among both Democrats and former Whigs. Within individual southern counties, white southerners in both pro-secession and anti-secession areas were often related or in some ways closely tied to each other. For example, in Calhoun County, Alabama, convention delegates John Cook and George Whatley were related by marriage. In Augusta County, Virginia, state convention delegate Alexander Hugh Holmes Stuart was the brother-in-


\(^8\) Henry Cleveland, *Alexander H. Stephens in Public and Private, with Letters and Speeches before, during and since the War*, (Philadelphia: National Publishing Company, 1866), 724. This was part of the infamous “Cornerstone” speech.
law of delegate John B. Baldwin. Family ties undoubtedly shaped secession debates and the ultimate decision.

The importance of local and regional ties in the secession crisis carried into the war and even revealed something about combat motivation. One Confederate lieutenant, in the midst of the carnage of Pickett’s charge, bolstered his men’s courage by reminding them, “Home is over beyond those hills.” General Lewis Armistead uttered similar sentiments. In which he had to suspect were his last few moments alive, Armistead did not engage in maudlin and deceptive sentimentality. He articulated a sincere belief that he and the men of his brigade were fighting to protect their homes and loved ones. And implicit here was the goal of protecting homes from the threat of slave insurrections or some other type of antislavery violence. Looking back on the events of the war, we know that no general slave uprising would engulf the South in a racial holocaust. Actors of that day did not have the benefit of that hindsight. White southerners, did not, as Lincoln had pleaded, listen to the “better angels of our nature.” They took counsel of their fears. Perhaps they felt they had too much at stake to guess wrong.

Finally, the story of secessionism from Harpers Ferry to the start of the Civil War serves as a cautionary tale. In this period, extremists took center stage. Acts of violence, condoning acts of violence, and protecting the perpetrators of violence raised the stakes of political conflict. White southerners were clearly not without sin in this regard, given the inexcusable treatment of McKinney and Blount, the lynching of poor Anthony Bewley, and myriad other, less deadly, acts.

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11 See Armistead’s quote at the beginning of the conclusion.
of mob violence across the South along, of course, with the violence of slavery itself. So too, sectional perceptions and fears often governed action. In the eighteen months between Harpers Ferry and the first shots of the Civil War, white southerners were keenly aware of their minority status. They were just as keenly watching for any threats to their social system and saw any northern sympathy for antislavery violence as a most disturbing sign. When a majority of the voters of the southern states concluded that northern actions (or in some cases inaction) posed a significant threat to their security, the days of the Union were numbered.
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