
One should consider notions of nationality with notions of revolution as a fundamental component of that revolution. Revolutionary peoples should have an idea of who they, collectively, want to be after the struggles of revolution are complete. As a result, the fate of the revolutionary nationalism is tied to the fate of the revolution. For example, revolutionary ideals of liberty and representative democracy survived the war with England in the American colonies; *liberté, égalité, fraternité* survived the dark days in Paris and the maturation of modern-day France. The ideals of the revolutionaries, who lose, however, are often discarded with the fates of the traitors themselves. In *Mastering America*, Robert E. Bonner, associate professor of history at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, suggests many of the nationalist ideals of slaveholders not only contributed to cause of secession and the formation of the Confederate States of America, but also fundamentally contributed to the larger notions of American nationalism within the United States of America well beyond the American Civil War of 1861-1865.

Professor Bonner separates his work in three major sections dealing with the pre-war geopolitics, a larger view of proslavery Americanism, and Confederate nationhood. His discussion on geopolitics covers a wide range of topics intending to set the stage for how proslavery sentiment, political action, and religious support flourished in pre-Civil War America and describing the key elements of the national psyche at play. Prior to 1860, Bonner claims the strength of the Union was essential for slavery’s survival and was key in the development of southern identity. The westward expansion offered new territories to exploit while the
economic boom of “King Cotton” fueled a level of relative wealth unparalleled elsewhere in the world. Additionally, a growing federal state provided a measure of protection against the Caribbean unrest, European incursions in the west, and Mexican incursion in the southwest. Federal strength thus protected the outer boundaries while the booming economic growth and westward expansion offered southern politicians increased clout in the Congress. Protected from without and politically supported from within, slavery was relatively secure in the southern states until the late 1850s.

The larger view of proslavery sentiment throughout America offers a more complex picture. Professor Bonner paints a picture of complex psychology where the American political and social conscience was beginning to sense its role in the larger world; where the larger Western world was beginning to loose its chattel; and where religion was called upon to defend both sides. At the heart of the intellectual battle is the hypocrisy of the Jeffersonian agrarians who extolled the virtues of liberty while demanding enslavement of whole peoples. Bonner cites such leading voices such as B.F. Stringfellow, who claimed “in a republic based on racial slavery, the institution, ‘elevates the character of not only the master, the actual owner of slaves, but of all who wear the colour of freeman’”(p. 88). Bonner responds by quoting the opposing voice of Edmund Burke who, seventy-nine years earlier, said, “the political capacities of white American masters had been sapped by their ‘unlimited right over the lives and liberties of others’”(p.88). Intellectual debate was also stifled by blind acceptance by southerners of “the orthodoxy of accepted truth” which “declare[ed] that further inquiry was unnecessary”(p.97). Bonner argued that southerners reached a point where debate was rejected and the truths of the sovereignty of slavery were self evident.
Bonner also reasoned slavery’s support in the role of national identity is based on a large demonstration of religious support for slavery. Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, and Baptists all rose to provide divine approval for the institution of slavery and formed a southern view while paradoxically strengthening larger views of American identity. There were objections within each denomination, but the rejections succeeded only in producing schism in the Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists not any significant shift in the southerners. The result was a very strong, largely sectional, southern contingent of each marching forward to provide a religious basis for a slave-holding society. The South found an intellectual rationale for slavery and divine backing to give them a common voice behind their inordinate political power. The South formed what Benedict Anderson would call an imagined community with a common language of slavery against a common enemy of the north. In the 1850s, the strength of the Union was no longer as critical as before so the imagined community shifted to focus on the central issue of slave holding society.

To counter the civic influence of a louder politico-religious voice in the South as well as the inordinate political power of southern politicians, Bonner describes the Republican party’s consolidation of political power in the North. Bonner claims, as a result of the rising voice from below and the increasing power of the Republican party, in a Republican victory in 1860 “would come not simply a shift in national power, but a destruction of proslavery political capital that had been decades in the making” (p. 213). The proslavery voices that consolidated power in the South gave rise to an enemy with a focus on disrupting and destroying that power in the northern Republicans.
Bonner’s most convincing arguments came in his third section exposing the absolute logical fallacies and ultimate breakdown of southern nationalism. Bonner describes the atmosphere just before the election of 1860 as one later similar to the period just before World War I when all parties expected a purifying war experience to set things right. The South knew if Lincoln won there would be war and slavery would be under direct assault leaving the South politically impotent in the new Republican framework. The imminence of war focused the southern eyes on the common enemy of the Yankee who was the agent opposing God’s will for a slaveholding society. Bonner says, “Lincoln had done more to unite the South over the course of several months than they had managed through far and more considerable efforts over the span of decades” (p.220). The South would break away and war would begin, but the martial conflict with the Union would be one of many problems the South would face.

Bonner details the conflicts, logically, philosophically, and politically that would attack the Confederacy from its beginning on December 24, 1860 with the Secession of South Carolina. Suddenly, the ardent states’ rights activists had to rapidly consolidate a new federal power, raise a cohesive army, and go to war while drafting a Constitution and forming a new federal government. For the leading politicians, states’ rights no longer applied to the individual states of the Confederacy but of the federal Confederacy as a whole. Ideals of liberty and independence likewise applied to the whole Confederacy, not its constituent parts. Bonner highlights the war’s progression with Confederate President Jefferson Davis’ restriction of many civil liberties and ultimately the enlistment of the very slaves they were fighting to keep.

Bonner also describes the sudden loss of cohesion as soon as the Confederacy was born. There was no strategic vision in the South. Beyond the desire for slavery, the South could agree
on very little. Even the Confederate Constitution offered little radical protection for slavery beyond an opportunity to address the issue at a later time. Southerners viewed themselves as inheritors of the revolutionary ideals of colonial America while confronting the notion of being “the world’s first proudly and self-consciously slaveholding republic” (p. 254) and defending their view in terms of martial paternalism on behalf of their constituent slave populations.

As the war drew to its inevitable conclusion, the specter of slave conscription logically nullified all that the war was fought over. The ideals that formed the South became hollow and the ideals of a larger American identity remained. The Lost Cause sentiment that grew after the war would seed more southern nationalism and unity than the South could muster before or during the war. Regardless, there was no significant debate over the South rising again. The defeated South adopted the nationalism of Union and set about beginning to deal with racism, not slavery.

Bonner paints a very convincing picture of a simultaneously coexistent and combative nationalism before the war. He supports his theory that the South needed the Union for a period to establish a certain measure of security. During that time, southern politicians gained power and influence at the same time a common voice in the press and the pulpit gave rationale and divine blessing for slavery. This increased sectionalism galvanized the North and the Republicans to confront the political inequities and imbalances of their southern brothers. Professor Bonner’s claim that secession and confederacy failed in part because the South could only muster enough cohesion to break away, not stay together. Simultaneously, the focus against slavery and the South brought the North together with fervent pro-union sentiment.
The careful analysis and weight given to religious voices, political voices, and press voices offers a unique picture of how southerners came to view the world. In essence, southerners saw themselves in a complex and contradictory light, at once espousing the ideals of liberty and Christianity while ignoring and shutting debate on the inconsistencies of holding human chattel.

Bonner is thoroughly convincing. His evidence is well researched and presented from several perspectives: religious, political, press, North, and South. This text is not for the typical Civil War buff interested in the great story of good versus evil or of theories of why the war was fought or what events transpired. This is a complex narrative of intertwining views of nationality and how they changed over time and offers a partial explanation of how the South was reintegrated after the war best suited for academic audiences interested in the broader complexities and better able to accept a history that does not neatly fit into a simple equation. Consequently, this text could benefit from more analysis of that reintegration process to determine how well and where the notions of nationality from the North or the South played in the post-war reunion.

Professor Bonner’s arguments for the influence, cause, and relationship of nationalism in the South and in the Union is well considered and an essential text. It does little to create unnecessary angst for the partial reader and does much to offer reason, logic, and defense for the impartial. As a result, many questions are answered, but many more are introduced. This work informs any intellectual study into the remaining questions and offers a new approach to existing questions about American nationalism.

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