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The South in the Age of Nationalism

The history of the American South has always been part of a broader, international story, at least from the time the first transatlantic immigrants arrived in ships from England, Spain, or Africa, and the first crops of tobacco, rice, cotton, and sugar went out from southern ports to the world beyond.

Among those who have interpreted the history of the American South are many of the pioneers in comparative, international history: Stanley Elkins, Herbert Klein, George Fredrickson, Carl Degler, and Peter Kolchin, to name but a few, all demonstrate a long-standing and notable interest in placing the American South within a larger framework. The focus of most of these studies has been heavily on comparative studies of slavery and race, which has enlarged our understanding of those subjects immeasurably. Not enough attention has been given to the many other levels of exchange in the Atlantic world.

In this essay I want to take a different approach to internationalizing southern history, focusing on that moment in the 1860s when the American South tried to claim a place in the world of nations. The story of the American Civil War has been told largely in terms of the military and political conflict between combatants in the North and South. We generally leave diplomacy and foreign relations as a side story and one mostly focused on formal relations between the Union and Britain or France. Let us consider international relations in a broader sense, one that incorporates public opinion and ideology, and look at the wider world of Europe and Latin America in the Age of Nationalism.¹

Nationalism, one Brazilian scholar put it, is “the story we tell ourselves about ourselves.”² Our knowledge of this “domestic nationalism” in the South has been greatly enhanced by a number of excellent studies, particularly Drew Faust’s cogent examination of *The Creation*

of *Confederate Nationalism*.³ What I want to turn to today is another dimension of southern nationalism, the story nations tell the world about themselves, who they are, and why they deserve to be nations.

The Confederate appeal to the world for its place in the “family of nations” has remained surprisingly neglected. The last comprehensive study of Confederate diplomacy was Frank Owsley’s *King Cotton Diplomacy*, published in 1931. This is a thorough study of the Confederacy’s disappointed hope that Britain and France’s economic interest in southern cotton was the key to foreign recognition and independence. Owsley acknowledged that world opinion was against slavery but refused to admit it was the major obstacle to Confederate diplomatic success, at least in Britain.⁴ Charles Hubbard’s *The Burden of Confederate Diplomacy* (1998) constitutes a valuable update, not least because Hubbard makes a convincing case for how close the Confederacy came to gaining recognition, and with it financial aid, military intervention, and national independence. As I read Hubbard’s account, but for its “poorly chosen diplomats” (oafish tobacco-chewing emissaries who made impolitic remarks in crude Creole French) the Confederacy might well have secured the international support they needed to sustain independence, especially during the first two years of the war when the verdict of the battlefield was unclear, when the Union’s aim was only to maintain national authority, and when international opinion favored the claims of nations aspiring to independence. Both Owsley’s and Hubbard’s Confederate diplomats recognize the world’s hostility to slavery, but they resent it and counterattack by exposing the North’s and Europe’s hypocrisy on the issue. They score debating points, but not many diplomatic victories.⁵ Both Owsley and Hubbard stick closely to the formal diplomatic dealings, and they keep their focus on Britain and France.

Missing from the picture of American foreign relations during the Civil War is arguably the most important ideological force shaping the modern world: nationalism. The simple notion that a distinctive people with a common territory have the right to govern themselves transformed the Western world beginning in 1776. From the U.S. to France, through Europe to Greece, Italy, Ireland, Germany, Hungary, Poland, and through Latin America from Mexico to Argentina, the “national idea” redrew the map of the Atlantic world.

Today we tend to think of nationalism as a chauvinistic, aggressive ideology, the intellectual property of reactionary regimes promoting imperialist conquest and ethnic cleansing. Current scholars of nation-

alism typically see it as a false, pernicious ideology of 'imagined communities' and 'invented traditions' constructed by elites to manipulate the masses to no good ends. Our view of nationalism has been darkened by the deep shadow of fascism, but this ought not to obscure the liberal, humanitarian origins of the 'national idea,' which began as a revolutionary ideology firmly aligned with ideals of self-rule, equality, and reform of all kinds.

Foremost among such reforms was antislavery, a close ally to nationalism throughout the Atlantic world. With the notable exception of the American South and Brazil, the emancipation of nations and slaves followed hand in hand. Nationalism and abolitionism used the same language of universal freedom. Giuseppe Mazzini, the Italian nationalist, explained to one abolitionist: "We are fighting the same sacred battle for freedom and the emancipation of the oppressed, – you, Sir, against *negro*, we against *white* slavery. The cause is truly identical." "Do not forget whilst at work for the emancipation of the black race, the millions of white slaves, suffering, struggling, expiring in Italy, in Poland, in Hungary, throughout all Europe, . . . desecrated by arbitrary, tyrannical power, by czars, emperors, and popes."⁶

At the beginning of the Civil War, while the Union kept a safe distance from emancipation, the Confederacy made its case before the world of nations by comparing its cause with that of other emerging nations. The most obvious inspiration for Confederate nationalism was found in the American Revolution – the original model for liberal nationalism. Drew Faust has shown how Confederates appropriated the language and symbols of liberal civic nationalism by likening the spirit of 1861 to that of 1776. Confederates adopted George Washington as the father of their country and placed his likeness on the national seal. Several declarations of secession borrowed language from the Declaration of Independence.⁷ Confederate president Jefferson Davis' inaugural address drew heavily on the Declaration to make his case for the independence of the South.⁸

To the international world Confederates placed themselves beside other aspiring nations in Europe and Latin America, pointing out to British and French diplomats that their policies toward Italy, Hungary, Greece, and Poland were exactly what the Confederacy was asking of them: recognition as an aspiring nation.⁹

Jefferson Davis understood far better than many of his fellow Confederates the necessity of this appeal to liberal nationalist principles of self-determination, and he recognized the political difficulty of

trying to make the case to the world in the language of white supremacy and proslavery ideology. He was furious with his vice president, Alexander Stephens, when in March 1861 he issued what came to be known as the ‘cornerstone speech.’ Like Davis, Stephens aligned the Confederacy with the most hallowed principles of American constitutional democracy, but he went on to underscore the main difference between the new southern nation and its predecessor by taking after the Founding Fathers for their errant antislavery ways, for they believed

that the enslavement of the African was in violation of the laws of nature; that it was wrong in principle, socially, morally, and politically. . . . Those ideas, however, were fundamentally wrong. They rested upon the assumption of the equality of races. . . . Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its corner-stone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery – subordination to the superior race – is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth.¹⁰

During wartime diplomacy, Union agents never missed an opportunity to remind the world of Stephens’ proposition that slavery was the cornerstone of the Confederacy. It was this association with proslavery and racism that put the Confederate cause in such bad odor with liberal public opinion across much of Europe and Latin America, and it was this that doomed their cause as much as reverses on the field of battle.

Garibaldi’s Question

The contradictions between these two expressions of national identity and purpose, one domestic, the other international, could coexist so long as the Union disclaimed slavery as the central issue of the war. The Union, too, came to define its national purpose in the process of telling the world what the war was about and why it must not recognize southern rebels as a nation.

This was illustrated in the summer of 1861 when Giuseppe Garibaldi, the Italian nationalist, received a letter from J. W. Quiggle, U.S. Consul in Antwerp: “The papers report that you are going to the United States to join the Army of the North in the conflict of my country . . . ,” Quiggle wrote. “If you do, the name of La Fayette will not surpass yours. There are thousands of Italians and Hungarians who will rush to join your ranks and there are thousands and tens of

thousands of Americans who will glory to be under the command of 'the Washington of Italy.'"11

Garibaldi wrote back to Quiggle: "I have had and still have a great desire to go." He raised several conditions and then posed the question of the hour: "Tell me also, whether this agitation is [about] the emancipation of the negroes or not."12

Secretary of State William Seward wanted nothing more than to enlist Garibaldi in the Union cause, not because he believed the aging general – or even the thousands of his red shirted followers who volunteered to come as well – would actually help in the outcome of the military contest as such. Seward understood that to have Garibaldi on the Union side would carry tremendous influence in Europe, Latin America, and beyond. He sent Henry Shelton Sanford, U.S. Ambassador to Belgium and an acquaintance of Garibaldi, to personally invite the "Hero of Two Worlds" to come fight for "the cause of Human Freedom" in America.¹³

Garibaldi wanted to come to America, his 'second country' as he fondly referred to it, but he issued two conditions that neither Seward nor anyone else in the Lincoln administration was prepared to honor, at least at this stage in the war. First, Garibaldi insisted on having total command of all Union armed forces. Second, he asked for the power to declare the war against slavery. Without the former, Garibaldi calmly explained to Sanford, he would be of little use as a subordinate officer. Without the latter, "it would appear like a civil war in which the world at large could have little interest or sympathy."¹⁴ Negotiations ended, and Sanford went back to Rome, but Garibaldi's question loomed over the war during the next two years of what seemed to remain, as Garibaldi characterized it, only a civil war.

George Perkins Marsh, a Vermont abolitionist and the first U.S. Ambassador to the United Kingdom of Italy, knew better. Conversant in some twenty languages, a veteran diplomat with experience in the Middle East and Europe, Marsh understood world opinion as well as any American of his time. He wrote to Seward that summer: Europeans see this conflict as "a contest between the propagandists of domestic slavery and the advocates of emancipation and universal freedom." If the Union showed it condoned slavery or failed to show "at least, moral hostility to slavery," he warned Seward, "I have no doubt that the dissolution of the Union would be both desired and promoted by a vast majority of those who now hope for its perpetuation."¹⁵

Pariah Nation

Meanwhile, Confederate agents overseas answered Garibaldi's question forthrightly by pointing to Lincoln's own assurances that slavery would be protected in the states where it existed. Their struggle for national independence had little to do with slavery, they argued; it was about tariffs and the imposition of northern industrial power on the agrarian South. Confederate agents sought to educate diplomats and public opinion as to the 'true' causes of the conflict, to distance their cause from slavery and racism, and seek recognition based on their national right to self-determination.

But Confederates had little success persuading the world that slavery was not the issue, despite the Union's neutrality on the question. By this time, the South was nearly alone in its adherence to slavery. The Empire of Brazil was the only other independent nation in the Western world that still sanctioned slavery. Colonial remnants of the Spanish Empire, Cuba and Puerto Rico, and some Dutch Caribbean colonies, also continued to permit slavery. The American South was alone among the republics of the world in its support of slavery.

Confederates were frustrated by the international hostility to slavery. Believing notions of white superiority over Negroes to be widespread, Confederate diplomats were often irritated by what they considered hypocritical and sanctimonious opinions against slavery. Most of all, they were frustrated by the tendency of the slavery question to interfere with their case for national self-determination.

Confederate commissioner Ambrose Dudley Mann found a more sympathetic audience at the Vatican. Pope Pius IX, the arch foe of liberal Europe since 1848 when he resisted Mazzini and Garibaldi's efforts to erect a Republic of Rome, agreed to issue a public letter of support to President Jefferson Davis. Confederates had swayed him with reports of the persecution Irish and other Catholic immigrants had suffered at the hands of Protestant bigotry in the North. Unlike other European rulers, the Pope had no liberal electorate to answer to. As Stalin later observed, the Pope had no battalions either, and it was not clear what diplomatic, military, or financial advantage might be gained by this act of recognition. To be sure, Rome's influence in Catholic Europe remained strong in the 1860s. France's Napoleon III, an abiding ally of the Pope since 1848, was all that stood between the Vatican and Garibaldi's red shirts. The Pope's letter was widely published, and Confederates eagerly interpreted the Pope's use of the

word 'president' as tantamount to formal recognition. Perhaps France and conservative Catholics in Europe and Latin America would align behind the Pope, they speculated hopefully. But no such recognition was intended, and in the end the Pope's blessings only further clarified the Confederacy as a nation bound to reactionary institutions against main currents of reform and universal freedom.¹⁶

Once Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation toward the end of 1862, the Confederacy's commitment to slavery became a far greater diplomatic hazard. Eugene Dumez, a Confederate emissary in Europe, cringed at the thought of Confederates begging recognition from Popes and kings, to say nothing of its scheme to ally with France's puppet monarch in Mexico. But for slavery, he wrote in January 1864 to Henry Vignaud with the Confederate legation in Paris, Europe would treat the South as it did Poland, Hungary, and Italy, an aspiring republic deserving independence. Instead, he lamented, the South was aligning with the very reactionary forces that had a long history of suppressing such nationalist aspirations.¹⁷

Back in Dalton, Georgia, a young Confederate major general, Patrick Cleburne was composing a memo to his commanding officer suggesting a radical scheme he hoped would change world opinion of the South. Cleburne had left his native Ireland after service in the British army and came to Alabama. It took a foreigner, and one from an aspiring nation like Ireland, to understand that "some extraordinary change" was now needed. Cleburne's proposal to arm slaves to fight for the Confederacy in exchange for freedom stirred the most attention, then and now. But no less important was Cleburne's international strategy. Ending slavery, he reasoned, "will compel the enemy to draw off altogether or in the eyes of the world to swallow the Declaration of Independence without the sauce and disguise of philanthropy" and "strip the enemy of foreign sympathy and assistance." "The enemy has three sources of supply: First, his own motley population; secondly, our slaves; and thirdly, Europeans whose hearts are fired into a crusade against us by fictitious pictures of the atrocities of slavery, and who meet no hindrance from their Governments in such enterprise, because these Governments are equally antagonistic to the institution."¹⁸

Cleburne's 'monstrous proposal,' as one officer referred to it, was quickly censured, and all discussion of it ceased within the ranks of the military. But the Confederate high command pursued a similar international policy one year later. Duncan F. Kenner, a wealthy Loui-

siana slave owner, was sent in February 1865 to offer Britain and France emancipation in exchange for recognition. By this time, however, military events had destroyed all vestiges of hope that the Confederacy would win independence. The Confederate struggle for national independence was not lost on the battlefield alone; it failed to win recognition in a new world of nations that embraced national independence and human freedom as one.

Notes

- ¹ Robert E. May, *The Union, the Confederacy, and the Atlantic Rim* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1995), is a recent review of the subject with essays by several able historians, but the scope of their interests is still very much within the traditional mold of Northern-British diplomatic negotiations. Michael Hunt, *Ideology and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), takes a broader approach to international relations and foreign policy to consider the ideological forces shaping diplomacy.
- ² Hermano Vianna, *The Mystery of Samba: Popular Music and National Identity in Brazil*, ed. and trans. John Charles Chasteen (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).
- ³ For the South this includes works by John McCardell, *The Idea of a Southern Nation: Southern Nationalists and Southern Nationalism, 1830-1860* (New York: Norton, 1979); Emory Thomas, *The Confederate Nation, 1861-1865* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979); Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); and Sarah Anne S. Rubin, *A Shattered Nation: The Rise and Fall of the Confederacy, 1861-1868* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). For the North, Susan-Mary Grant, *North Over South: Northern Nationalism and American Identity in the Antebellum Era* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2000); and Melinda Lawson, *Patriot Fires: Forging a New American Nationalism in the Civil War North* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002), have made outstanding recent contributions.
- ⁴ Frank Lawrence Owsley, *King Cotton Diplomacy: Foreign Relations of the Confederate States of America* (1931; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).
- ⁵ Charles M. Hubbard, *The Burden of Confederate Diplomacy* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998).
- ⁶ William Lloyd Garrison, introduction, *Joseph Mazzini: His Life, Writings, and Political Principles*, by Joseph Mazzini (New York: Hurd and Houghton, 1872) xvi; Joseph Rossi, *The Image of America in Mazzini's Writings* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1954) 127.
- ⁷ Faust, *Creation* 14. Confederate declarations of secession and the Davis inaugural address can be found at "Confederate States of America: Documents," *The Avalon Project at Yale Law School*, ed. Yale Law School, 1 Nov. 2006 <<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/csa/csapage.htm>>.
- ⁸ Jefferson Davis avoided any reference to slavery until after Stephens' impolitic cornerstone speech when he made a point of explaining to the world that the

British, not the Confederate states, were responsible for bringing slavery to America. Davis' first inaugural address is found online at *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*, ed. Rice University October 2005 <http://jeffersondavis.rice.edu/resources.cfm?doc_id=1508>; Mattson 9.

- ⁹ Hubbard, *Burden* 59. Irish nationalism was another obvious model but not one Confederates trying to win British favor would employ.
- ¹⁰ Alexander H. Stephens, "The Cornerstone Speech, March 21, 1861," *TeachingAmericanHistory.org*, ed. Ashbrook Center for Public Affairs, October 2005 <<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?documentprint=76>>; Charles Dew, *Apostles of Disunion: Southern Secession Commissioners and the Causes of the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001) 14-15; Gregory Louis Mattson, "Pariah Diplomacy: The Slavery Issue in Confederate Foreign Relations," diss., University of Southern Mississippi, 1999, 9.
- ¹¹ Quoted in John Parris, *The Lion of Caprera: A Biography of Giuseppe Garibaldi* (New York: David McKay Company, 1962) 269; Jasper Ridley, *Garibaldi* (London: Constable, 1974) 521.
- ¹² H. Nelson Gay, "Lincoln's Offer of a Command to Garibaldi," *Century Magazine* LXXV (New York, 1907): 66-67. See also H. Nelson Gay, "Garibaldi's American Contacts and His Claims to American Citizenship," *American Historical Review* 38 (October 1932): 1-19, reprinted in Antony P. Campanella, ed., *Pages from the Garibaldian Epic* (Sarasota, Fl.: Institute of Garibaldian Studies, 1984); Ridley, *Garibaldi* 520-21; Parris, *Lion of Caprera* 269. Translations of this and other correspondence vary; I am relying on Gay, a Harvard scholar who found the original manuscript letters in European archives and translated them himself.
- ¹³ Gay, "Lincoln's Offer" 67.
- ¹⁴ Gay, "Lincoln's Offer" 69.
- ¹⁵ George Marsh to Seward, July 6, 1861, *University of Wisconsin-Digital Collections: Foreign Relations of the United States*, Vol. 1. 1861, May 2005 <<http://www.wisc.edu/wendt/frus/317s.html>>; See also, David Lowenthal, *George Perkins Marsh: Prophet of Conservation* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000) 235. Lowenthal and others suggest Marsh was under Seward's instructions to push the antislavery line, but it seems clear from Marsh's writings that his antislavery stance needed no encouragement from Seward.
- ¹⁶ Mattson, "Pariah" 321-24.
- ¹⁷ Mattson, "Pariah" 160, 325-26.
- ¹⁸ Cleburne's proposal can be found in the *The war of the rebellion: A Compilation of the official records of the Union and Confederate armies*. Series I Vol. 52 (Part II) 586-92, *Making of America*, ed. Cornell University, 9 October 2005 <<http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/moa/>>. My thanks to Bruce Levine for bringing this document to my attention. Bruce Levine, *Confederate Emancipation: Southern Plans to Free and Arm the Slaves During the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) deals with this fascinating episode in full detail.

