

Gettysburg College

FORTENBAUGH LECTURE

The Robert Fortenbaugh Memorial Lecture is the outgrowth of a series of Civil War Conferences held annually at Gettysburg College from 1957 to 1961. Organized by Professor Fortenbaugh and his colleagues in the Department of History, the conferences attracted some of the outstanding historians of the nation. Papers presented at these conferences appeared in various scholarly publications such as C. Vann Woodward's *The Burden of Southern History* (1960). The proceedings of two conferences were published in their entirety in book form: *Why the North Won the Civil War* (1960), edited by David Herbert Donald, and *Politics and the Crisis of 1860* (1961), edited by Norman A. Graebner.

The Fortenbaugh Lecture is presented each year on November 19, the anniversary of the Gettysburg Address. It was sustained during its first two decades by an endowment contributed by Mr. and Mrs. Clyde B. Gerberich of Mt. Joy, Pennsylvania, in honor of Professor Fortenbaugh, Mr. Gerberich's classmate (Gettysburg '13) and longtime friend, who taught history at their alma mater from 1923 until his death in 1959. The endowment has been substantially supplemented by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Harry D. Holloway Fund, the Hewlett Foundation, and the alumni and friends of the College who have contributed to commemorate the 79 years of combined service to Gettysburg College by Professors Basil L. Crapster and Charles H. Glatfelter, who retired in 1988 and 1989, respectively. The roll of donors includes Michael Bishop (Gettysburg '57), the winner of the 1989 Nobel Prize in Medicine. The Fortenbaugh Fund continues to welcome contributions from the friends of the lecture and the College.

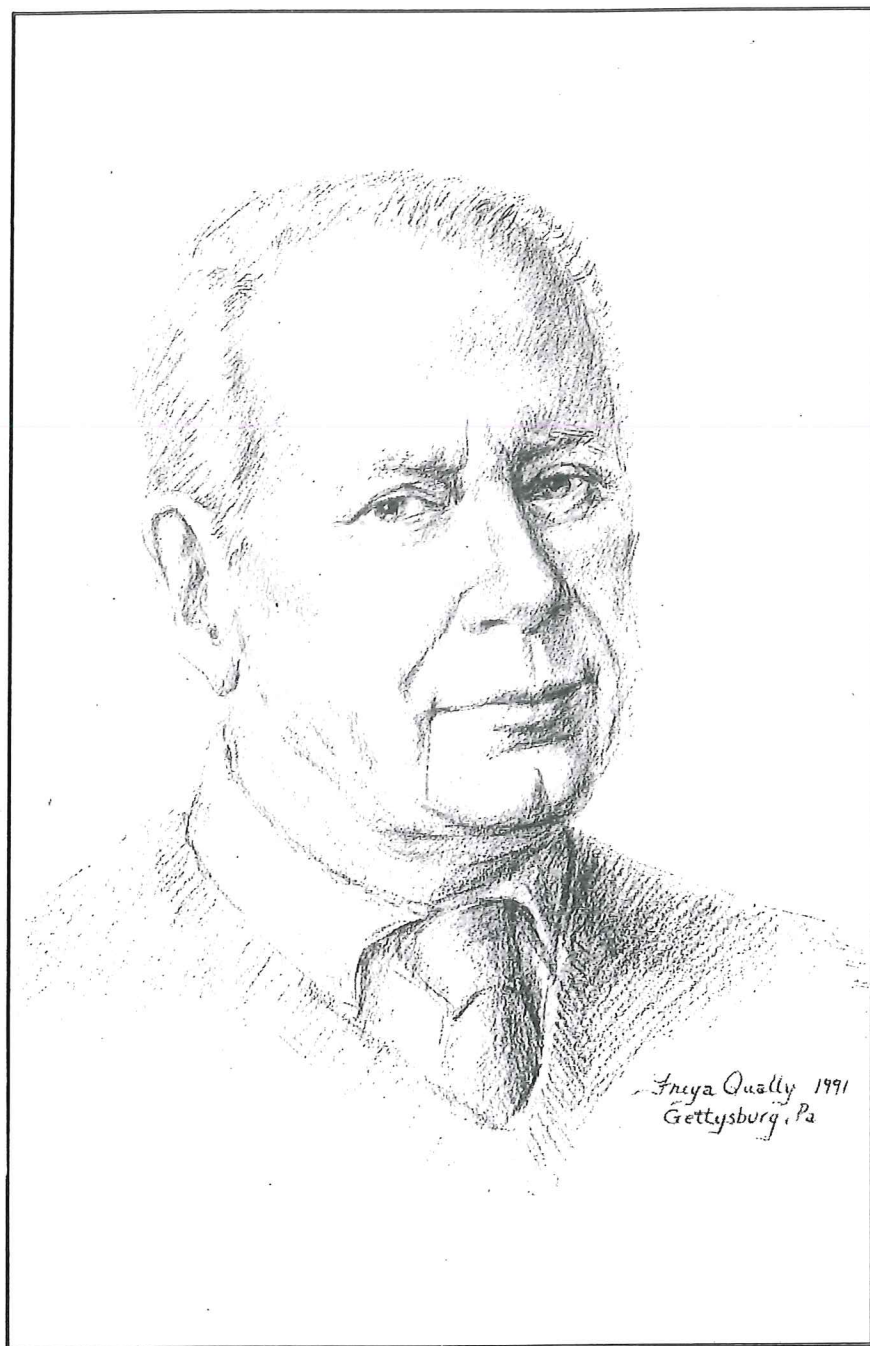
The first Fortenbaugh Lecture was delivered in 1962 by Bruce Catton; the twentieth by C. Vann Woodward in the 150th year of Gettysburg College, in 1981. With the twenty-first lecture by Jacques Barzun, in 1982, the College commenced the annual publication of the lectures.



The United States and National Self-Determination: Two Traditions

Kenneth M. Stamp

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National Self-Determination**



Kenneth M. Stamp
Charcoal sketch by Freya Qually, Autumn, 1991, Gettysburg

The United States and
National Self-Determination:
Two Traditions

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PREFACE

Self-determination once again appears to be the guiding spirit of the day. The old Soviet empire provides us with the most obvious illustration as its myriad nationality groups are reaching for autonomy or independence. But what in German history used to be called "particularism" appears to be a movement affecting many parts of the globe. In the United States, too, with its stirring of cultural diversity, similar breezes can be felt. In such a milieu Kenneth Stampp turns to a subject which has interested him for long, as he intimated in a recent interview with Lew Lord of *U.S. News and World Report*.¹

Americans have an age old tradition of supporting the self-determination of nations around the globe. Mr. Stampp mentions, among other examples, early nineteenth century stands in favor of the independence of the Latin American states, and Woodrow Wilson's policies early in the twentieth century proclaimed eloquently in the Fourteen Points. The lecture goes on to argue, however, that "there was one tradition for export, another for use at home." The one great attempt at applying the principle of self-determination in the United States came in the Civil War. And "the South learned at a terrible price" the harsh truth of the American double standard. Setting up thus a disturbing historical problem, Professor Stampp goes on to dissect it and so find meaning as well as moral guidance for our time and future times.

Thanksgiving Day, 1991
Farm by the Ford
Gettysburg

Gabor S. Boritt

¹"On the Brink of War," *U.S. News and World Report*, January 21, 1991.

To be invited to deliver the Fortenbaugh Memorial Lecture on the anniversary we are observing is an honor indeed, but it is also a daunting challenge. We will never forget what Abraham Lincoln said here 128 years ago, as the celebrated orator Edward Everett, who shared the platform with him, was the first to recognize. Only my recollection of his compassion and "charity for all" prevented his shade from palsying my hand as I turned to the task of writing a Gettysburg address of my own. Lincoln is a major figure in my account of American attitudes toward the principle of national self-determination, and I trust it will do him justice.

We have been stunned by the recent political collapse of one of the world's so-called superpowers: the resulting success of the Baltic republics in regaining their independence, and the disintegration of the rest of the Soviet Union into a loose economic federation of autonomous or independent republics. Elsewhere in Europe, notably in Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, religious and other ethnic differences seriously threaten national unity. Few modern national states, in fact, are without substantial ethnic minorities, and it is always tragic when a government finds no better way to avoid political fragmentation than by the use of troops and tanks. The alternative is to accommodate minorities either by respecting their ethnic identities or by granting them a measure of autonomy within the framework of a less centralized nation. In some cases, when a substantial majority of a localized disaffected ethnic group desires independence, a negotiated separation would seem preferable to military control. A nation held together with bayonets alone is likely to be terminally ill.

The United States has a long tradition—not unmixed, of course, with self-interest—of sympathy for movements abroad which sought to vindicate the doctrine of national self-determination—if I may use a twentieth-century term for a nineteenth-century nationalist concept. Early in the nineteenth century North Americans greeted the Latin American revolutions for independence from Spain and Portugal as replications of their own struggle for self-government. "They adopt our principles," boasted Henry Clay, "copy our institutions, and, in many instances, employ the very language of our revolutionary papers." The Monroe Doctrine of 1823, in part a defense of self-determination, warned European powers not to violate the sovereignty of the independent nations of the New World.¹ During the revolutions of 1848, politicians such as Daniel Webster, William H. Seward, and Stephen A. Douglas

expressed enthusiastic support for Hungary's struggle to free itself from Austrian rule. After Austria, aided by Russia, had crushed the rebellion, the American public lionized its exiled leader, Louis Kossuth, during an extended tour of the United States.² In the 1860s and 1870s the unification of Germany and Italy, as expressions of self-determination, elicited a favorable American response. Cuba ultimately won its independence from Spain with American military assistance, although motives in this instance were a good deal more complex.

National self-determination was almost formalized as an American doctrine during the first World War when Woodrow Wilson, in an address to a joint session of Congress, January 8, 1918, announced his famous Fourteen Points. Hoping to make them the foundation of a just and lasting peace, he devoted eight of his points to specific applications of the principle of self-determination—among them, the return of Alsace-Lorraine to France, the restoration of an independent Poland, and the provision of opportunities for “autonomous development” of ethnic groups within the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires.³

There have obviously been occasions when the intrusion of economic or strategic considerations has compromised our traditional respect for the right of self-determination. The Spanish-American War freed the Philippines from Spanish rule, but freedom from American rule was long delayed. Wilson himself was a party to several violations in the Treaty of Versailles. Our government felt obliged, however reluctantly, to tolerate some egregious violations after the second World War. Moreover, throughout the twentieth century, even after the formulation of President Franklin Roosevelt's Good Neighbor policy, America has frequently meddled, both overtly and covertly, in the internal affairs of the republics in Central America and the Caribbean. The intervention has been so persistent as to suggest a reluctance among our policymakers to permit self-determination to operate in our own backyard. These violations of a long-standing tradition have seldom gone unchallenged. They have often provoked substantial and, occasionally, effective protests in Congress, in the press, and from various civic and ad hoc organizations.

However, I wonder what the public response would be if the question of self-determination should arise as an American *internal* issue, as it now presents itself in many other nations, including our Canadian neighbor. Canada presently confronts the problem in French-speaking Quebec, whose gradually escalating demands for autonomy may yet

culminate in a movement for full independence. The Canadian government has elected to deal with the problem peacefully through negotiation, and a resort to a violent resolution at present appears unlikely.

The idea that such a problem might one day confront the United States government might seem preposterous, but since the future is unpredictable a little speculation may be justified. Suppose the large Spanish-speaking population in Florida, or southern Texas, or southern California continues to grow until it becomes in one or another of these regions a governing majority. Suppose also that within this population ethnic consciousness increases and grievances and resentments accumulate, culminating, as in Quebec, in a movement for political autonomy. Would the tradition of self-determination prevail, or would a second tradition—the one sealed at Appomattox after the loss of 600,000 American lives—be invoked? Abraham Lincoln defined the second tradition succinctly in his first inaugural address: “I hold, that in contemplation of universal law, and of the Constitution, the Union of these States is perpetual. . . . Continue to execute all the express provisions of our national Constitution, and the Union will endure forever—it being impossible to destroy it, except by some action not provided for in the instrument itself.”⁴ In short, as the South learned at a terrible price, self-determination was not applicable to the federal Union. Apparently there was one tradition for export, another for use at home.

The second tradition, which Lincoln upheld with such relentless determination, had evolved only slowly and uncertainly over many years following the American Revolution.⁵ Although the Articles of Confederation had explicitly stated that “the Union shall be perpetual,” the Constitution did not settle that question with such clarity. Nationalists could only infer the Union's perpetuity from certain passages in the document, all of which were subject to more than one interpretation. Even Lincoln seemed to concede that the language of the Constitution was not conclusive. Taking another tack, he argued that perpetuity “is implied, if not expressed, in the fundamental law of all national governments. It is safe to assert that no government proper, ever had a provision in its organic law for its own termination.”⁶

Neither the debates in the Philadelphia convention nor those in the various states ratifying conventions revealed a general understanding that the Union formed by the Constitution was to be perpetual. James Madison, in one of his contributions to *The Federalist*, assured

the public that the Constitution was to be ratified "by the people, not as individuals composing one entire nation; but as composing the distinct and independent States to which they respectively belong." Although Madison later recalled that it had been the "sincere and unanimous wish" of the Philadelphia delegates that the Union would be preserved, several of them were quite philosophical about the possibility that it would eventually dissolve.⁷

For many years after the new Constitution had been ratified the general consensus was that the Union was an experiment, valued not as a good in itself but as a device to achieve certain valuable ends. The Union, John Randolph asserted in 1814, was "the *means* of securing the safety, liberty, and welfare of the confederacy and not itself an end to which these should be sacrificed." There was at that time little evidence of an American national identity that would encourage a belief in the Union as an absolute good.⁸ Fear that the Union would divide along sectional lines arose as early as the 1790s, and President Washington alluded to it in his Farewell Address. "Is there doubt whether a common government can embrace so large a sphere?" he asked. He was not sure of the answer but urged that it be left to experience, for it was "well worth a fair and full experiment."⁹

A few years later, Madison and Jefferson wrote a series of resolutions, adopted by the Virginia and Kentucky legislatures, formulating a theory of the Union that eventually would be used to justify southern secession. The Constitution, they contended, was a compact agreed to by the sovereign states, each of which retained the right to "interpose" its authority against unconstitutional federal acts and to decide upon the appropriate remedy. During his presidency, Jefferson, who never questioned the right of a state to secede, speculated about a possible separation of the eastern and western states at some future time. "God bless them both," he wrote, "and keep them in the union if it be for their good, but separate them if it be better."¹⁰ Meanwhile, during the Jefferson and Madison administrations, the disaffection of New England Federalists grew so intense that some began to doubt the value of the Union. Timothy Pickering of Massachusetts found "no magic in the sound of Union. If the great objects of union are utterly abandoned . . . let the Union be severed. Such a severance presents no Terrors for me."¹¹

As late as the 1820s the general view of the Union as an experiment still persisted, and the alleged right of secession had not yet been

challenged by a systematic argument affirming the perpetuity of the Union. Nevertheless, the state of the Union had by then changed significantly. Its practical economic value was widely understood. Moreover, during and after the War of 1812, a strong sense of nationhood and pride in American citizenship had developed. The United States did not escape the current of romantic nationalism that was sweeping over the western world. The time was ripe for a new conception of the federal Union as an absolute good.¹²

Massive support for the idea of an unbreakable Union first developed in the early 1830s when South Carolinians attempted to nullify the federal tariff laws and threatened secession. The nationalists responded with the first elaborate arguments for perpetuity. Among them the most comprehensive was President Andrew Jackson's Proclamation on Nullification of December 10, 1832, prepared for him by Secretary of State Edward Livingston. Neither Lincoln, in his first inaugural address, nor the Supreme Court, when it finally took up the matter in *Texas v. White* in 1869, added much to Jackson's case. The Constitution, he asserted, was no mere compact between sovereign states. Rather, it had been framed and ratified by the people. They had formed "a *government*, not a league," and it operates directly on the people, not the states. The Supreme Court, rather than the states, is the proper authority to settle controversies arising under the Constitution. Secession is not a constitutional remedy reserved to the states but an act of revolution, and the duty of the President is, according to his oath, "to take care that the laws be faithfully executed."¹³ Jackson's argument had its flaws, both historical and logical, but so did the argument supporting the right of secession. "It is the odious nature of the question," John Quincy Adams once observed, "that it can be settled only at the cannon's mouth."¹⁴

In the years that followed, the increasingly disaffected South remained the last stronghold of the old and once widely respected concept of the Constitution as a compact and of the Union as a voluntary federation of sovereign states. Yet, hardly anyone, including the nationalists for whom the Union had become as absolute good, wanted the question to be settled by force. Even Jackson had hoped to avoid bloodshed.¹⁵ As sectional tensions mounted, most conservative Unionists tried desperately to avoid political disruption by urging compromises rather than a violent confrontation. To substitute military coercion for the voluntary loyalty of the past, many feared, would deform the Union

and transform the federal government into a Leviathan under which civil liberties would perish. By the 1850s a more militant Unionism was emerging among antislavery Republicans, many of whom seemed ready to meet the southern secessionists head-on.¹⁶ But conservative northern and border-state Democrats and old Whigs, although firm Unionists, still viewed such a collision with dread.

Finally, after Lincoln's election, southern secession, which had been threatened so often in the past, became a reality. In justifying their action, some political leaders in the eleven states that eventually seceded invoked the American revolutionary tradition and identified themselves with the patriots of 1776. More commonly they claimed to be resorting to a constitutional right reserved by the states as a remedy for intolerable violations of the federal compact. South Carolina, in its "Declaration of the Causes of Secession," affirmed its sovereignty, enumerated its grievances (all involving northern attacks on slavery), and announced that it had "resumed [its] position among the nations of the world, as a separate and independent State."¹⁷

Although the term was not then in use, southern secession was in essence an assertion of the right of self-determination. But this movement had its oddities. First, the three million enslaved blacks, the Confederacy's true ethnic minority and its most severely oppressed population, had no voice in the matter and no reason to support secession. Second, white Confederates, in spite of their claim that they had become a distinct and separate people, had no ethnic characteristics to distinguish them from Northerners—no notable differences in language, religion, political traditions, or population origins, and few unique traits to give them a clear cultural identity.¹⁸ Rather, at the core of the white South's drive for independence was its perception of Lincoln as a threat to its slave labor system and its conviction, based on racial fears, that emancipation would be an economic and social catastrophe. The "immediate cause" of secession, according to Alexander H. Stevens, Vice President of the Confederacy, was slavery. In the Confederate government, he avowed, "its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery . . . is his natural and moral condition."¹⁹

When northern nationalists were at last convinced that the disunionists were in earnest, they ridiculed the constitutional justification of peaceful secession as a feeble argument long since discredited. Southern ordinances of secession, in Lincoln's blunt words, were

"insurrectionary or revolutionary, according to circumstances."²⁰ As for the *right* of revolution, proclaimed by Thomas Jefferson, that drastic course could be justified only in a struggle *against* oppression, not in its defense. The Philadelphia *Press* doubted that any revolution was ever commenced "on more trifling and trivial grounds" than those advanced by the South.²¹

Yet, standing on the brink of a great national crisis, many Unionists faltered briefly before making their fateful decision to deny, with whatever force was necessary, the right of self-determination to their dissatisfied southern countrymen. At the last minute a few Republicans toyed with the idea of letting them, after all, depart in peace, as the abolitionist follower of William Lloyd Garrison had urged for many years.²² More frequently those who hoped to avoid violence found an attractive alternative in what they described as a "Fabian policy" of "masterly inactivity." All that was required of Northerners, they said, was to remain calm, avoid threats, and wait patiently for Southerners voluntarily to return to their allegiance.²³ Senator Seward of New York, who would become Lincoln's Secretary of State, was a firm exponent of this policy and did not abandon it until Confederate guns opened fire on Fort Sumter.²⁴

Meanwhile, throughout the secession winter, northern Democrats and border-state Unionists turned to the traditional Union-saving remedy: compromise. Congressional Republicans, however, blocked every proposed compromise that involved a retreat from the principles of their national party platform. Moreover, by February 1861 the Senators and Representatives from the Deep South, having themselves shown little interest in compromise, had resigned and gone home. Although the tradition of sectional compromise dated back to the constitutional convention of 1787, those who tried to uphold that tradition failed for two obvious reasons: first, because southern secessionists insisted that the time for compromise had passed and, second, because most northern Republicans, on that point at least, agreed with them.²⁵

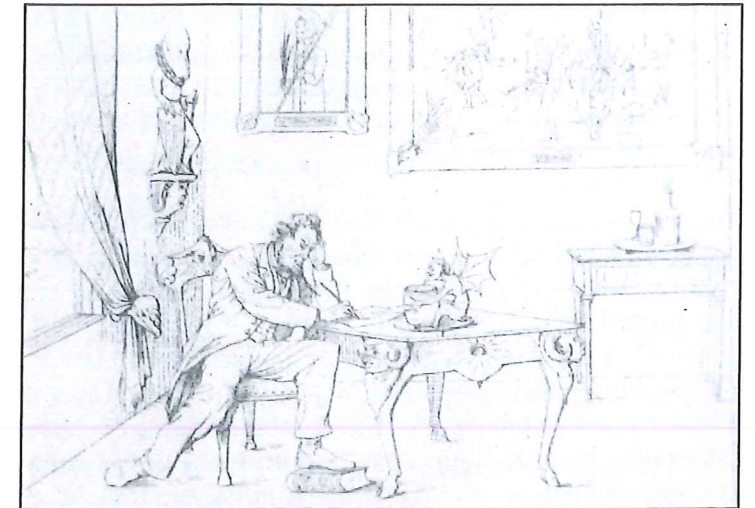
From the very beginning of the crisis a powerful contingent of "stiff-backed" Republicans had openly asserted that, sooner or later, the secessionists would have to be suppressed by force and that there would be no better time for that necessary task than now. Even the conservative New York *Times* warned secessionists that among the likely consequences of their action "*the most unquestionable is War. . . .* [There] is no possibility of escaping it."²⁶

President-elect Lincoln shared the determination of the “stiff-backed” Republicans to defend the Union, whatever the cost. Long before his inauguration he realized that stern measures might eventually be necessary. Recognizing southern independence would be a violation of his oath of office. The President derives his authority from the people, he said, and they had not empowered him to arrange the terms for a dissolution of the Union.²⁷

In the past Lincoln had spoken eloquently in support of self-determination for Hungary and, more generally, of all people’s “sacred” right of revolution. In 1848, while serving in Congress, he had said, “Any people anywhere, have the *right* to rise up, and shake off the existing government, and form a new one that suits them better.” Moreover, that right is not limited to cases in which the whole people of a nation choose to exercise it. “Any portion of such people,” he avowed, “*may* revolutionize, and make their *own* of so much of the territory as they inhabit.”²⁸ In 1861, however, when contemplating domestic rather than foreign revolution, Lincoln qualified his position. “The right of revolution,” he now claimed, “is never a legal right. . . . At most, it is but a moral right, when exercised for a morally justifiable cause. When exercised without such a cause revolution is no right, but simply a wicked exercise of physical power.”²⁹ Lincoln thus viewed the southern rebellion as established governments have always viewed rebellion, whatever its cause—that is, as lacking the moral base required to give it validity. The true issue, he said, was not self-determination but whether “a democracy—a government of the people, by the same people—can, or cannot, maintain its territorial integrity against its own domestic foes.”³⁰

Lincoln was equally adamant in rejecting any compromise that involved a retreat for the platform on which he had been elected. “Hold firm, as with a chain of steel,” he admonished his Republican friends in Congress. “The tug has to come, and better now, than any time hereafter.” Concessions won by the threat of secession, he warned, would destroy the government.³¹

Looking back late in the war, Lincoln said, “I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me.”³² That was only half true. He could not, of course, have controlled the South’s radical response to his election, but his was the decisive voice in the development of the Union government’s determined counter-response. Given his administrative inexperience, Lincoln’s clarity of



LINCOLN AS THE BLOODY DICTATOR

Top: The c. 1864 etching of Adalbert Volck of Baltimore showed Lincoln writing the Emancipation Proclamation with his foot on the American Constitution and the devil holding his inkstand.

Bottom: In John Tenniel’s 1863 *Punch* cartoon Lincoln meets his equal in the Czar of Russia, Alexander I. Both were putting down rebellions at the time, one in the American South, the other in Poland. Both cartoons are in the Gettysburg College Special Collections.



EXTREMES MEET.

vision, sureness of purpose, and skill in execution during the crisis was quite remarkable. While others in the North talked of peaceful secession, or of "masterly inactivity," or of compromise, sometimes wavering uncertainly between them, Lincoln carefully but resolutely prepared to do what he believed his oath of office required of him—that is, "to run the machine as it is."³³

As soon as he heard of South Carolina's secession, he asked Lieutenant General Winfield Scott to be as well prepared as possible "to either *hold*, or *retake* the [southern] forts, as the case may require."³⁴ An Illinois friend recorded Lincoln's opinion that "far less evil and bloodshed would result from an effort to maintain the Union and the Constitution, than from disruption and the formation of two confederacies."³⁵ In February, while en route to Washington for his inauguration, the President-elect found an opportunity during one of his stops to assure the public that he did not propose to use the army to invade and coerce the southern states. But, he asked, would it be invasion or coercion merely to hold federal property and collect federal revenues? The Unionism of those who thought so he regarded as "of a very thin and airy character." In his inaugural address, he denied that he would be responsible for any violence that might ensue: "In *your* hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, and not in *mine*, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail *you*. You can have no conflict without being yourselves the aggressors."³⁶ Defining coercion and aggression as he did, Lincoln could renounce them both and yet make clear his firm determination to enforce the laws and defend the government from aggressive acts against it. As one admiring Republican editor observed, Lincoln had hedged the secessionists in "so that they cannot take a single step without making treasonable war upon the government, which will only defend itself."³⁷

After the inauguration, Lincoln wasted no time in preparing to implement the policy he was determined to pursue.³⁸ When he learned that the federal garrison at Fort Sumter in Charleston harbor was running short of supplies, he hesitated only because Major Robert Anderson, its commander, and General Scott advised him that supplying the garrison would require a larger military and naval force than could be mobilized in time to succeed. Early in April, in spite of their advice, as well as the urgent recommendation of Secretary of State Seward that Sumter be abandoned, Lincoln dispatched a relief expedition. Although it failed and the fort was lost, he had every reason to believe that even by the

loss his policy had been well served. "You and I both anticipated," he wrote the commander of the expedition, "that the cause of the country would be advanced by making the attempt to provision Fort Sumter [sic], even if it should fail, and it is no small consolation now to feel that our anticipation is justified by the result."³⁹ The Confederates had fired the first shot, and Lincoln now had a nearly united North behind him.

The resulting war engaged two similarly limited political democracies—limited, because all the Confederate states and all but a few of the loyal states gave the franchise only to white males. Both belligerents at the start set for themselves decidedly conservative goals. Jefferson Davis, in a message to the Confederate Congress, described the southern struggle for national self-determination as an effort to maintain an "indispensable" African slave-labor system and to protect "property worth thousands of millions of dollars."⁴⁰ Most Northerners in turn claimed to fight only to restore the old Union. In July, 1861, both houses of Congress resolved overwhelmingly that when the rebellion was suppressed the states would retain all their "dignity, equality, and rights. . . unimpaired," thus assuring Southerners that slave property would not be disturbed. "The Constitution as it is, and the Union as it was," soon became the slogan of conservative northern Democrats.

None was more determined than the nationalist Lincoln that the war should be waged solely to preserve the Union. Although he had long hated slavery and had asserted that the Union could not endure permanently "half slave and half free," he had never advocated the overthrow of slavery by force. In the present crisis he believed that the cause of the Union must have priority over the cause of the slave. In his message to a special session of Congress, in July 1861, Lincoln recalled and confirmed the pledge he had made in his inaugural address: "I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists."⁴¹ For the first two years of the war vindicating the principle of a perpetual Union remained his single goal.

In contrast, militant abolitionists always professed a dual purpose. "We mean both *Emancipation* and *Union*," wrote one, "the one for the sake of the other and both for the sake of the country." Neal Dow, the Maine abolitionist, predicted that northern soldiers would not return from their mission "until the question of slavery should be settled forever." Once the war began even the Garrisonians abandoned their

pacifism and resolved to turn the war into an antislavery crusade. "I speak under the stars and stripes," the Boston abolitionist Wendell Phillips now affirmed, for "to-day the slave asks God for a sight of this banner, and counts it the pledge of his redemption."⁴²

Month by month, with no end to the war in sight, the ranks of those who demanded the destruction of slavery increased, and the Republican majority in Congress began to act. In December 1861 the House of Representatives refused to renew its pledge of the previous July not to interfere with slavery. In 1862 Congress abolished slavery in the District of Columbia and prohibited it in the territories. Two confiscation acts sought, with only limited success, to emancipate southern slaves used for military purposes and those owned by disloyal masters.⁴³

Lincoln, however, refused to budge. Instead he pressed his own conservative program of gradual, voluntary emancipation and the colonization of free blacks abroad. He urged Congress to give financial assistance to any state that would adopt a program of gradual emancipation. Although he was disappointed in the result, his aim was to win the cooperation of the border slave states and thus deprive the Confederates of the hope that they would eventually secede.⁴⁴ Clearly, Lincoln was not shifting his ground but merely pursuing his same fixed goal by other means.

By the summer of 1862 some radical Republicans were outspokenly impatient with his stubborn conservatism, and abolitionists attacked him bitterly. Lincoln's actions, the black abolitionist Frederick Douglass complained, had been calculated to protect the property of slaveholders, and his policy was "to reconstruct the union on the old and corrupting basis of compromise." "He is nothing better than a wet rag," fumed Garrison. In the opinion of Wendell Phillips, he was conducting the war "with the purpose of saving slavery." The present conflict was "aimless . . . wasteful and murderous. Better that the South should go to-day, than that we should prolong such a war." To Lincoln the most painful attack came from Horace Greeley. In an open letter to him published in the New York *Tribune*, Greeley accused the President of "mistaken deference" to rebel slaveholders and to the "fossil politicians" of the border slave states. Every "disinterested, determined, intelligent champion of the Union," he asserted, believed that "all attempts to put down the Rebellion and at the same time uphold its inciting cause are preposterous and futile."⁴⁵

The transparently angry President was uncharacteristically sharp

in his reply. He had not meant to leave any doubt about his policy: "My paramount object in this struggle *is* to save the Union, and is *not* either to save or to destroy slavery." To advance that cause he was ready to free all of the slaves, or some of them, or none. "What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do *not* believe it would help to save the Union." Lincoln concluded by repeating his genuine and "oft-expressed *personal* wish that all men everywhere could be free."⁴⁶

The fact that Lincoln had decided a month before his reply to Greeley to issue an Emancipation Proclamation did not mean that he was secretly pursuing one policy and publicly another. In his Preliminary Proclamation of September 22, 1862, he announced that "hereafter, as heretofore," the war would be prosecuted to preserve the Union, and that he would continue to press for voluntary, gradual, compensated emancipation and colonization. Lincoln justified the final Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863, as "a fit and necessary war measure" for suppressing the rebellion. In applying it to the states or portions of states still in rebellion he described it as "an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity." The remark of one historian that the Proclamation "had all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading" was descriptively accurate; but it overlooked the mitigating fact that Lincoln was offering a constitutional justification for his action and seeking maximum support from conservative Unionists who wanted no part in an abolitionist crusade.⁴⁷

Even so, the Proclamation, which also authorized the recruitment of blacks for the Union army, did less than justice to an act potentially so momentous in its social consequences. Apart from political expediency, the reason, in all probability, was that when Lincoln issued it he himself did not fully recognize that the conflict thereby would be transformed into a great social revolution. In his view, it was still a war for the Union, nothing more. "For this alone have I felt authorized to struggle," he assured a critic, "and I seek neither more nor less now."⁴⁸

What, then, caused Abraham Lincoln, the nationalist, the narrowly focused, almost obsessive defender of the Union during the war's first two years, to broaden his vision and become at last the Great Emancipator? It was hardly a role that he had anticipated. This remarkable transformation began sometime in the summer of 1863. By then the war had gone on too long, its aspect had become too grim, and the escalating casualties were too staggering for a man of Lincoln's sensitivity

to discover in that terrible ordeal no greater purpose than the denial of the southern claim to self-determination. The great battles of the spring and summer of 1862—Shiloh, the Seven Days, Second Bull Run, and Antietam—had brought home to him the magnitude of the task he had undertaken. The combined Union and Confederate casualties in those four battles and in the four that followed—Fredericksburg in December, Chancellorsville in May, 1863, Gettysburg in July, and Chickamauga in September—numbered 234,000. Proportionally, in our present population, the casualties of those eight battles, fought in a period of eighteen months, would have amounted to nearly two million.

Sharing responsibility for the events that had brought these lamentable results was more than Lincoln had bargained for when he won the presidency. As Richard Hofstadter observed in a perceptive biographical essay: "Lincoln was moved by the wounded and dying men, moved as no one in a place of power can afford to be. . . . For him it was impossible to drift into the habitual callousness of the sort of officialdom that sees men only as pawns to be shifted here and there and 'expended' at the will of others."⁴⁹ Bearing this heavy burden, being a deeply religious man, it was natural for him, amid the death and destruction, to search for a divine purpose, one that perhaps he had failed to comprehend.

An early indication of Lincoln's broadening conception of the war's meaning was his response to a serenade a few days after the Union victory at Gettysburg. He was not then prepared, he said, to deliver an address worthy of the occasion, but he spoke briefly and feelingly of the need to defend the principle that "all men are created equal" against those who would subvert it.⁵⁰ He returned to that theme in his memorable Gettysburg Address, in which, near the end, another sign of his nascent vision appeared. When Lincoln expressed the hope that those who died at Gettysburg "shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom," he was, for the first time, anticipating the imminent end of slavery as well as the preservation of the Union.⁵¹ It is reasonable, I think, to give an abolitionist meaning to his phrase "a *new* birth of freedom."

By the time of his Gettysburg Address Lincoln had abandoned his public posture of indifference to the fate of southern slaves manifested in his letter to Horace Greeley the previous year. On several occasions, including his third and fourth annual messages to Congress, he vowed that he would not "retract the emancipation proclamation; nor, as executive, ever return to slavery any person who is free by the terms

of that proclamation, or by any of the acts of Congress." Could such treachery, he asked, "escape the curses of Heaven, or of any good man?"⁵² By the summer of 1864, after the 86,000 Union and Confederate casualties of General Grant's Wilderness campaign, the change in Lincoln's vision was complete, for he would no longer make peace merely on the basis of a restored Union. Fully aware of the contribution of black troops to the Union cause, he now insisted that an acceptable peace must include both "the integrity of the whole Union, and the abandonment of slavery."⁵³

In June 1864, when the Thirteenth Amendment, providing final and complete emancipation, first came to a vote in the House of Representatives, it failed to win the required two-thirds majority. Lincoln's wholehearted support was crucial in getting that vote reversed the following January. Responding to a serenade after the passage of the amendment, he congratulated the country "upon this great moral victory."⁵⁴ Lincoln had indeed become the Great Emancipator, and William Lloyd Garrison concluded that he was more than a "wet rag" after all. In a letter, dated February 13, 1865, Garrison commended him warmly for the part he had played in the final abolition of slavery: "As an instrument in [God's] hands," he wrote, "you have done a mighty work for the freedom of millions . . . in our land. . . . I have the utmost faith in the benevolence of your heart, the purity of your motives, and the integrity of your spirit."⁵⁵

An instrument in God's hands. That seemed to be the role to which Lincoln had resigned himself when he delivered his beautiful and deeply moving second inaugural address. In this, his final effort to grasp the meaning of war, he came full circle, for the cause of the Union now seemed ancillary to the approaching liberation of four million slaves. Perhaps it was God's will, he suggested, that the war must continue "until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword."⁵⁶ Lincoln spoke without malice. In his view the cause of the slave was beyond malice, the guilt of slavery was shared by all, and retribution was best left to divine judgment.

The profoundly religious sentiments expressed in the second inaugural address were those of a man who not only had led the nation through a devastating crisis but, because of it, had experienced an unsettling personal crisis as well. The address was his testament, his

witness, that, by embracing the cause of the slave, he had found the war's ultimate justification and thereby a way to come to terms with his God and with himself. Nothing less personal could explain the depth of feeling that his words revealed.

Reading Lincoln's private letters and public papers from 1848 to 1865 leaves one with the impression that on the issue of self-determination his legacy to posterity is both ambiguous and complex. In spite of his earlier defense of that principle, his nationalism and belief in the perpetuity of the Union had led him to crush the one attempt in our history to apply it at home. Secession, he affirmed, was neither a constitutional procedure nor an appropriate extralegal remedy for alleged grievances in a democracy such as ours.

That was part of his legacy. But he left unanswered the question of when, by whom, and for what cause the right of self-determination could be justifiably invoked. That question still remains unanswered. Being an internal matter, it has never been treated in international law. Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points only dealt with specific cases, and his more general statements were vague to say the least. The United Nations Charter commits its members to respect the principle of self-determination, but it, too, fails to establish standards by which to judge the claims of the many ethnic groups who assert their right to independence.⁵⁷

Historically, the success of movements for self-determination has had little to do with the justice or morality of individual cases. Success has depended on the good will of the national state involved, as may eventually be the case of Quebec; or on its inherent weakness, which has been the case of the remaining republics in the Soviet Union; or on the decisions of victorious great powers, as were the cases of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia after the first World War; or on the military strength of the rebels themselves, as was the case of the United States, in alliance with France, in 1783.

In 1918 Robert Lansing, Woodrow Wilson's Secretary of State, expressed skepticism of the very principle of self-determination, believing that it was unworkable and full of mischief. Recently, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., warned that the current widespread assertion of the principle is a potential threat to the unity of most national states, and that even in the United States "the outburst of multicultural zealotry threatens . . . a new tribalism." Moreover, Lansing wondered, if self-determination were a valid principle, how can we justify Lincoln's refusal to grant independence to the southern Confederacy?⁵⁸

However, Lincoln ultimately escaped that dilemma by attributing Confederate defeat to divine intervention on the side of a just and moral cause. In the end, when the cause of the Union no longer seemed to be sufficient, he invoked the cause of the slave, rather than the authority of the Constitution, to justify the sacrifice of so many lives. That is what makes his legacy ambiguous.

Even so, if self-determination should ever again become an internal issue for the United States, it would be quite logical for us to turn to Lincoln's messages and papers for guidance. Among them we would find not only the clear imperative of his militant first inaugural address but the chastening words of his second inaugural address as well. Let us be sure, if such a time should come, that the foundation of the Union cause will be at least as just and moral as his!

Endnotes

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