

CHAPTER 21

Suspicious Southerners and Lincoln's Election

After the National Democratic Party split, could Republicans reunite the old National Whig Party elements, despite ex-Whigs' failure to fuse in 1856? A Republican Party's southern wing could come from two sources: from Helper-Blair-Clay heretics or from John Bell-John Crittenden-Henry Winter Davis mainstreamers. Either way, Southern Democrats claimed, Southern Republican collaborators, by thrusting free debate inside the South, would make democracy and slavery incompatible.

– 1 –

Every four years after 1836, claims of opponents' disloyalty to slavery had smeared southern presidential campaigns. The slander had most wounded Southern Whigs, allied with northern enemies of the Fugitive Slave Law and the Kansas-Nebraska Act. In the early 1850s, Lower South Whigs had to disown those allies. Seldom again would Whiggish politicians in the most tropical South seek a national opposition to the Democracy.

But Upper South ex-Whigs, lately called Americans or Know-Nothings but now called Oppositionists, remained hopeful of fusing with Northerners who opposed the Democracy. Southern would-be fusionists dreaded any new agitation on slavery, for that issue had poisoned the old National Whig fusion. In 1856, Upper South ex-Whigs had begged former northern colleagues to attack only foreign voters. But ex-Northern Whigs more often assaulted the Slave Power. Fusion with these antisouthern Republicans would convict ex-Southern Whigs, all over again, of softness on slavery.

In early 1860, in hopes of a new fusion, Maryland's Congressman Henry Winter Davis cast the lone southern vote for the Republicans' William Pennington to be Speaker of the national House of Representatives. As 1860 wore on, Davis and other Upper South would-be fusionists begged Northern Republicans to spread Pennington's silence on Hinton R. Helper to all slavery

matters. The beseechers prayed for agitation only against Democrats' economic policies. Such a National Opposition Party would stress national expansion of roads, banks, railroads, and canals. By avoiding slavery issues, a National Opposition Party would prove the old adage that sleeping dogs must be kept asleep—or rather the new adage that artificially stimulated dogs must be soothed into taking a nap. Instead of the Democracy's proslavery agitators' "eternal howl on the negro question," argued Henry Winter Davis, let us realize that "the way to settle the . . . question is to be silent on it."¹

As a motto for a fighting cause, silence had a built-in weakness. Nonagitation usually generated colorless pacifiers. Only the rare agitator who roared for nonagitation could maximize excitement. Understanding this irony, Southern Democrats rushed to the attack when a magnetic champion of nonagitation, Richmond's John Minor Botts, sought a reformulated *National* Republican Party's presidential nomination.

Both worshippers and detesters called Botts "the Bison." Botts possessed the right credentials to charge against the Virginia establishment: a proper father. Benjamin Botts was a famous Virginia lawyer. But John Minor's father and mother perished in the Richmond Theater's famous fire on the day after Christmas, 1811.

The orphan considered himself old enough, at age nine(!), to make his own way. During the nine years after flames consumed his parents, Botts streaked through school, conquering Greek, Latin, French, and mathematics, and then, in a six-week spree, the law. Only Patrick Henry had been admitted to the Virginia bar as swiftly, and Henry, unlike Botts, had served an apprenticeship to a senior lawyer.

In his six subsequent years at the Richmond bar, young Botts secured a golden trail of clients. Then, in his midtwenties, the comer decided that lawyering offered too little reward. On his Henrico County estate, the precocious squire achieved record farm yields and raised famous blooded horses. In 1828, still under thirty, Botts swept into the state legislature as a Whig representative of a usually Democratic district. In the 1840s, he served three terms in Congress from Richmond City.²

After all these unlikely triumphs, no one could tell John Minor Botts anything; and he did love to tell off the Democracy. In the Bison's opinion, a land of opportunity deserved loving patriots. Instead, the Democracy harbored reeking traitors. Botts dammed the Democracy's Kansas-Nebraska Act as "the most wanton, the most mischievous, the most suicidal, and the most unpardonable act ever committed." With "utter loathing and contempt," he termed the secessionists "enemies," "insane," "infamous." Such tyrants not only over blacks but also over dissenting whites forget that muzzles are "for dogs, not men. No press and no party can put a muzzle on me."³

As befot an unmuzzled insulter, the Bison flaunted a huge frame with a massive chest, a bulging waist, and a thick face. While other squires looked

as overbearing, no Virginia titan matched Botts's hint of the savage: his unruly hair. Wayward locks curled crookedly down his stern face and stout neck before brushing his exquisite suit, fashioned from the best English cloth. In appearance as in language, this Virginia squire fused polish and pugnacity.

Botts's pugnacious agitation for nonagitation contrasted revealingly with the other 1860 comer who could be seen as an incongruous combination of opposites. Renowned aristocrats in the oldest South sired Botts and William Lowndes Yancey. Both fathers died tragically early. But where Yancey suffered dependence on a righteous abolitionist stepfather, Botts cherished the independence of an Horatio Alger striver. Where Yancey's experience with a castigator of southern morality provoked hatred of Yankee presumption, Botts's performance of a rags-to-riches saga inspired adoration of a free labor Union. Where the Alabama extremist surprised moderates with his mellow voice and mild appearance, the Virginia moderate unsettled ultras with his fiery insults and unbridled appearance. By acting and looking exactly the opposite of the way that folks expected, both stood out from their own crowd; and opponents considered both eccentrics perilously attractive.

In early 1860, Botts embraced the political peril of fusing with almost anyone—assuredly Republicans and even free blacks—who denounced the Democracy.⁴ Botts's only reservation: no one, black or white, could indiscriminately insult all Southerners. A viable National Republican Party must insult only agitators for slavery's unnatural expansion.

Republicans need only halt slavery's unnatural expansion, Botts explained, because natural expansion halted itself. The South lacked the migrants for natural expansion. The Union's remaining territories also lacked the slaveholder-friendly climate for a thinly populated regime to invade without unnatural props. Nor could territories more congenial to slaveholders be added to the Union, unless the federal government unnaturally forced the acquisition. Damn only the artificial forcing, concluded the Bison, and silence all other damnations of Southerners. Then discreet Republicans and unin-sulted Southerners could fuse against the Democracy's unnatural slaveholding expansionists—and behind Botts's presidential campaign.

The would-be Republican presidential nominee remained discreetly silent about his belief that without unnatural slavery expansion, the institution would naturally contract to a few Lower South states. To lure Republicans with this disguised antislavery bait, Botts chose Anna Carroll, the wealthy Baltimore lobbyist. Although barred from voting or holding office, rich ladies charmed politicians in Washington drawing rooms. The provoking Botts relied on the winsome Carroll to cajole the cautious Thurlow Weed, New York's Republican titan and a likely mover and shaker in the party's presidential nomination process.⁵

If Southern Democrats had discovered that their Richmond nemesis “un-sexed” himself by secretly appointing a lady to sweet-talk him to a Republican

presidential nomination, much less that he privately hoped for slavery's Upper South extinction, they would have possessed the smoking gun, demonstrating that this agitating nonagitator masked disloyal principles. But Southern Democrats thought that Botts's thick smoke sufficiently demonstrated a hidden fire. After the Richmonder outdid Republicans in slandering proslavery agitators as immoral and in smearing slaveholder expansionism as unnatural, how could he help but be a secret opponent of slavery? And how could a barely hidden Republican collaborator fail to shuck his camouflage, once his northern friends held power and offered patronage? Then no one would outdo the Bison in selling Republicanism to restive nonslaveholders and (inadvertently) to restive slaves. Thus for a season, John Minor Botts swelled up as the most dangerous of potential Upper South Republicans.

– 2 –

The danger faded not because Botts's foes erred about the Bison but because the Virginian erred about the Republicans. Months before their presidential nominating convention, Republicans dismissed Botts. Unless Republicans taught the public to hate slavery, they believed, the abomination would spread, even if Botts called the expansion unnatural. So a colorless Southerner such as Missouri's Edward Bates, Anna Carroll sadly wrote back to the deflated Virginian, might better muster a Republican fusion by softly calling slavery wrong. In contrast, the colorful Botts's fury at proslavery agitators could impress scant potential northern fusionists, without publicly expressed fury at slavery itself.

With Republicans requiring verbal blasts at slavery as a precondition for fusion, and with such supposedly disloyal verbiage destroying southern election prospects, mainstream Upper South Oppositionists sought alternative political campaigns in 1860, as they had in 1856. Four years earlier, they had supported Millard Fillmore's American Party. In 1860, Southern Oppositionists championed the National Constitutional Union Party.

The new party held its initial presidential nominating convention in Baltimore in early May, five weeks before the second Democratic Party convention disintegrated in the city. Since the National Constitutional Union Party aimed to preclude disintegrations, the peacemakers' platform intoned admiration only for "the Constitution, the Union, and the Laws." For their presidential nominee, these nonagitators paid scant heed to the agitating Botts and focused instead on three older longtime U.S. senators, all aged in the service of Thomas Hart Benton's nonagitating traditions: Tennessee's John Bell, six years older than Botts; Texas's Sam Houston, three years older still; and Kentucky's John Crittenden, seven additional years elderly. On the second ballot, the choice fell upon the youngest of these aging nonagitators, Tennessee's stolid, slow, safe John Bell. If these convention results sounded drowsy, this predominately Upper South movement urged that fanatics above and below most needed to be lulled into silence.⁶

- 3 -

While the Middle South's Bison silently disappeared behind the somnolent John Bell, the Border South's heretics loudly paraded behind Abraham Lincoln. Back in December 1859, at the beginning of the House Speakership controversy, Missouri's John Clark had warned that Northern Republicans' financing of Hinton R. Helper's *Impending Crisis* portended a National Republican Party, with North Carolina's Helper, Virginia's John Underwood, Kentucky's Cassius Clay, and Clark's least favorite Missourian, Frank Blair, Jr., leading the southern wing. During the next year, these Border South Republicans confirmed Clark's warning.

Throughout 1860, the *St. Louis Democrat*, the *Wilmington Delaware Republican*, and northwestern Virginia's *Wellsburg Herald* and *Wheeling Intelligencer* assaulted slavery with Hinton R. Helper's arguments. We care too exclusively about white nonslaveholders, they declared, to be called Black Republicans. Rather, our foes are the Black Democracy. Enslavers forget "that there are other interests . . . than the negro interest."⁷

Slaveholders' interests devastated nonslaveholders' interests, charged Southern Republicans. Only in the South is physical labor derided as "nigger work." Only in the South are poor whites called trash. Only in the South do slaveholders buy up the best land and blacks work the most fertile terrain. Only in the South does slavery repel white migrants, who prefer the free labor North. Only in the South is free public education impoverished or nonexistent. Only in the South do slaveholders repress free speech, a free press, and free discussion. Only in the South does a "dastardly and abominable spy system flourish," ferreting out the supposedly "awfully offending man or woman" who "dares even to *doubt* the holiness and divine right of slavery."⁸

Southern Republicans most aspired to free not blacks from enslavement but themselves from repression—and from blacks. They meant to quicken the Border South's slow drain of slaves toward the Cotton Kingdom. During Kentucky's slavery debate, 1849–51, Cassius Clay had proposed a state law, freeing slaves who remained in the state after a certain date. Then before the deadline, Clay maintained, slaveholders would cash in their blacks at Lower South slave auctions. Almost a decade later, the antebellum South's only antislavery congressman, St. Louis's Frank Blair, Jr., urged Congress to acquire Central American areas, as an outlet for freed blacks.

On January 25, 1860, Blair expanded his message at New York's Cooper Union. The United States, proposed Blair, should acquire tropical areas, open only to slaveholders who signed an emancipation pact. Slaveowners must agree to allow enslaved migrants eventual freedom and land ownership, in reward for hard work. Migrating slaves, enchanted by the goal of liberty, would labor eagerly in torrid tropical areas, yielding their masters "ten-fold" more profits than slaves' slovenly toil in cool borderland climes. In "a few years," the owner's extra profits would "repay . . . the price of manumission" and the price of freedmen's land. With the northern South's slaves'

“gradually receding to create tropical wealth,” migrants “from the North and from abroad” would replace Upper South slaves’ previous “exacted, begrudging toil” with voluntary “self-gratifying labor.” Free labor would everywhere triumph in North America, thanks to blacks’ salutary departure.⁹

Like Blair’s, almost every other southern emancipation scheme, since Thomas Jefferson helped inaugurate the tradition, had included departure of free blacks. Kentucky’s John Fee provided the glorious, and doomed, exception. By coupling America’s whitening with blacks’ liberty, other southern antislavery agitators trumped proslavery agitators’ racial argument. Slaveholders claimed that nonslaveholders’ racial interests demanded control over blacks in their areas. The South’s antislavery men countered that slaveless toilers’ economic and political interests compelled removing blacks from their areas.

To triumph in so race-obsessed a democracy, southern emancipators had to demonstrate that the section or the nation could in fact deport blacks. Sometimes, as in the Virginia and Maryland slavery debates of the early 1830s, white emancipators had proposed removal of blacks to Africa. Maryland had developed its own colony for the purpose. Jefferson had suggested cheaper removals, to lands closer to home. Blair adopted Jefferson’s position. But no other Southerner, least of all Jefferson, had ever presented a rounded argument for the Jeffersonian panacea so openly on congressional or Cooper Union platforms.

Blair’s platform presence made him the more impressive.¹⁰ The Missourian polished his speeches into prose diamonds. Blair looked as polished as his words. In an age when establishment stars displayed swelling midriffs, he was tall, thin, wiry. In an era when titans’ beards became more common, he kept clean shaven, save for a perfectly shaped mustache. He also combed his every rebellious wisp of red hair into thick tranquility. This young Southern Republican looked as untroubled as his proposed emancipation idyll.

Appearances deceived, about the planner as much as the plan. The suave public man hid a shaky private soul. His nervous distress came partly from vainly striving to meet a famous father’s crushing expectations. Frank Preston Blair, Sr., had been at the center of Andrew Jackson’s administration, then at the core of Democratic Party journalism throughout Junior’s privileged upbringing. “Preston,” as intimates called “Senior,” aspired to make “Frank,” as friends called “Junior,” an even more significant American power broker.

Frank’s teachers, however, considered Preston’s son of scant significance. Yale College expelled the heir. The University of North Carolina repeated the ouster. Junior then barely graduated from Princeton. Later, Frank fell in and out of western adventuring, into \$100,000 of debt (and out again, thanks to Preston’s mercies), in and out of a promising law career, in and out of his suffering wife’s favor, in and out of his position as Thomas Hart Benton’s disciple, in and out of his seat in Congress.

Throughout his chronic ups and downs, excruciating headaches afflicted the junior Blair. Frank also threatened the antebellum records for number of

cigars smoked and amount of liquor quaffed. Missouri's antislavery congressman surprised no one when he drove himself to paralyzing early strokes and a premature demise. But a decade before his demons brought him down, Frank harnessed his inner turmoil enough to become *the* Southern Republican. With his national family connections, his education (even if not exploited) at the nation's finest universities, his nervous energy, his debonair appearance, his friendship with Lincoln, and his easy camaraderie, the Missouri redhead gave Southern Republicans a vivid leader with a vivid plan to sweep the South's northernmost third clear of slaves, and of blacks too—and thus to fuse with procolonization Northern Republicans.

– 4 –

Fusion came to its first climax when the Blairs swerved to help secure Lincoln's nomination at the Republican National Convention. The convention, meeting in Chicago's Wigwam from May 16 to 18, 1860, contained ninety Southern Republican delegates, 20 percent of the total. Full delegations represented all four Border South states. Delegates from the most northwestern and most lily-white section of Virginia, along with a few straggling Texans, slightly augmented the Border South force.

Blair Jr. brought to the Wigwam not only southern delegates but also a southern presidential candidate. Frank championed Edward Bates, the colorless St. Louis lawyer who had steamed past John Minor Botts as a fusionist presidential hopeful. Bates's key credential: Unlike Botts, he publicly called slavery an evil.

Blair Jr. secured not only all of Missouri's Republican delegates for Bates but also all of Delaware's and most of Maryland's (controlled by Preston Blair and by Frank's brother, Montgomery). On the convention's first ballot, Bates received 48 votes, almost as many tallies as Pennsylvania's Simon Cameron (50½) and Ohio's Salmon P. Chase (49) but not nearly as many as New York's William H. Seward (173½) or Illinois's Abraham Lincoln (102).¹¹

Atop the surprise that a Southerner received 10 percent of the Republicans' first-ballot votes came the greater surprise that Seward and Lincoln each received 20 southern votes (a fifth of Lincoln's total). Southern Republicans' support for the future Great Emancipator swelled as Lincoln inched toward the nomination. On the second ballot, the Illinoisan secured 29 southern votes. On the third ballot, where Lincoln squeaked to victory, Preston and Montgomery Blair switched Maryland's delegation from Bates to Lincoln, giving the Railsplitter 42 southern votes (almost half of the South's total and 18 percent of Lincoln's tally). Since Lincoln would have been far short (perhaps fatally short) of nomination on the third ballot without this southern support, Southern Republicans helped anoint slaveholders' Civil War nemesis.

After Lincoln's nomination became apparent, B. Gratz Brown, Frank Blair's cousin, punctuated the revealing fact with an outburst: "I am instructed

to cast the entire vote of Missouri—eighteen votes—for that gallant son of the West, Abraham Lincoln.”¹² Lincoln himself had the last word. Despite Douglas’s claim that the Democratic Party was national and the Republican Party sectional, bragged the Republicans’ nominee, “I had more votes from the Southern section at Chicago [42] than he had at Baltimore” [28½].¹³

Lincoln’s glee was as important as his numbers. The Republicans’ choice, an ex-Whig who had loved his former National Whig Party, relished going national again. He already enjoyed a southern wing. Blair Jr. had campaigned for him during the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas Debates. Blair Sr. had swung pivotal votes to his column at the convention’s pivotal moment.

A president-elect customarily rewarded such favors with patronage, especially when the chief executive admired his supporters’ ideas. Blair’s Cooper Union conception of federal colonization of blacks, to ease whites toward gradual antislavery, perfectly fit Lincoln’s hopes. As president, Lincoln would help secure over \$500,000 for that scheme. So too, Border South Republicans’ conception of themselves as Ohio Valley Westerners more than Mississippi Valley Southerners fit Lincoln’s conception of himself as a son of the Border West. In another example of supposed southern heretics as actually good midwestern Republicans, Kentucky’s Cassius Clay came in second for the Republican Convention’s vice presidential nomination, with over a hundred votes on the first ballot.

Any such Border South Republican beginning, John Underwood had predicted in late 1859, would swell when a Republican president handed out federal patronage. “Slaveholding gentlemen will cross the Potomac in swarms,” Underwood had gloated, “and clamor at the Capitol for the privilege of serving their country in public office—Slavery or no Slavery.” Underwood had in mind just such confidence men as John Minor Botts (who in fact would soon be hinting that he would relish patronage from President-elect Lincoln).¹⁴

Georgia’s J. Henley Smith, himself a Washington, D.C., Treasury Department functionary thanks to James Buchanan’s largesse, explained more fully why a southern rush for the loaves and fishes of office could endanger the Peculiar Institution. If a President Lincoln dispensed federal patronage, Smith warned, he would “have adherents and supporters all over the South.” Right now, with Southern Republicans condemning slavery only at the fringes of political debate, nonslaveholders “would come up as one man and drive back abolitionism at the point of the bayonet.” But not tomorrow, “not after an antislavery party shall get possession of the government” and bring debates about slavery’s sins to the respectable center of Border South public life.¹⁵

– 5 –

After the 1860 presidential nominations, four men competed to direct the nation’s public life. Two Illinoisans, the Northern Democrats’ Douglas and

the Republicans' Lincoln, dominated the northern canvas. Two Upper South U.S. senators, the Southern Democrats' John Breckinridge of Kentucky and the Constitutional Unionists' John Bell of Tennessee, dominated southern votes. While the collapse of the national two-party system muddied the waters, Lincoln could clarify everything by retaining the northern states that Frémont had won in 1856 and adding the Border North states that Buchanan had barely salvaged (and then lost by a landslide in the congressional election of 1858). But while Lincoln needed no southern vote to win, he would need some southern appointments to govern. John Minor Botts and Frank Blair, Jr., could hardly wait to compete for his favors.

The prospect of a mainstream Southern Republican Party, constantly calling slavery wrong in the middle of southern communities, became more alarming during the presidential campaign. A pivotal reason for repression of heretical debate, potential slave unrest, had never seemed so omnipresent. As the long hot summer of 1860 dragged on, panics about supposed black arsonists spread from Texas eastward. The hysteria lasted longer and reached wider than the late fright about Brown's insurrectionary plans, partly because the threat seemed more creditable. John Brown's aim, a mass slave insurrection, had not threatened the regime since Nat Turner's uprising, over a quarter century earlier. Slaves' zero response to Brown confirmed that a successful collective revolt scarcely imperiled this regime.

But another peril swelled. Not the group insurrectionist but the individual black who lived in the Big House and snuck a lethal little something into the pot (or who threw a lighted match into the curtains) became this Domestic Institution's domestic dread. House servants became suspected whenever something went afoul in the household. If a white fell ill, a slave poisoner might have struck. If the Big House went up in smoke, a slave arsonist might have lit the match. If some white stranger inhabited the neighborhood, he might be corrupting the latest gullible Cuffee.

Yet since blacks could not testify in white men's courts, and since blacks' coerced confessions in extralegal courts could be as phony as Cuffee's docility, who would say whether the right culprit had been accused? If domestic disasters multiplied and suspicious whites and blacks abounded, the impossibility of pinning blame nourished ugly waves of extralegal deportations and hangings, amidst a most undomestic Domestic Institution. The Texas Fire Scare of 1860 brought such periodic southern panics about individual slaves to climax, just when apprehensions about Lincoln's boost to Southern Republican agitators mounted.

Individual slaves' most effective resistance had usually featured dashes toward freedom. Runaways had been most successful at the South's edges. The most endangered outposts had been in the Border South, near the northern border.

The scare that individual slaves ignited Texas fires transpired in an intriguingly similar area, albeit this time deep in the South. Northernmost Texas combined a prime Lower South characteristic, a lush tropical river

valley, with a prime Border South characteristic, hostile neighbors across the river. The Red River separated northern Texas from the so-called Indian Territory (the state of Oklahoma after 1907). Partly because of nearby Indians, the Texas side of this fertile river valley contained only around 15 percent slaves—a Border South-style pittance, despite lush Cotton Kingdom terrain.

Northern Texas slaveholders also endured an atypically wide-open Lower South culture. In this scarcely inhabited sprawl of land, strangers outnumbered residents whenever cowboys and Indians rode under the big skies. In an even more disturbing Lower South anomaly, the *Northern* Episcopal Church developed northern Texas outposts. Iowa's Reverend Solomon McKinney, for example, migrated to the so-called Cow Country in the late 1850s. The newcomer's sermons to whites stressed a Christian's responsibility to preserve blacks' marriages and to allow the Word to be preached. As for McKinney's sermons to blacks, absent whites could hear only rumors.

On August 17, 1859, the *Dallas Herald* cheered that rumors had at last inspired retaliation.¹⁶ Texans, declared the newspaper, would no longer abide an Iowan's "impertinent and insulting instructions" about "how to manage the servants." Nor would they longer tolerate a Yankee loose in the quarters, "whether his objects be good or evil." Several public meetings had heard "ample evidence" that the supposed fanatic had "preached insurrectionary and inflammatory doctrines" to the slaves. White men's regular courts could not receive the supposedly incriminating evidence, all gathered from blacks. So we must "resort to other means to protect our lives and property."

Undemocratic strategies started with another public meeting, demanding that the preacher take his Yankee opinions back North. The Iowan responded that the Word knew no North, no South. Four "aged and responsible farmers" then went to call on the alleged incendiary. The Yankee confronted his visitors with his rifle. The inquisitors retreated to collect more vigilantes. The refortified mob captured and jailed the outsider and a supposed accomplice, one Parson Blunt.

Another mob ripped the alleged foes from prison. These vigilantes treated the two whites to a black's whipping. Lynchers then followed the humiliated, terrified Yankees to the Texas border, hooting and hollering until the supposed incendiaries fled into Indian Territory.

The two alleged white demons had deserved a black's mortification, bragged the *Herald*, after rousing "a general spirit of insubordination." The preachers had provoked docile slaves to become uppity and thus to be repeatedly flogged. By lashing and expelling the white troublemakers, we have demonstrated "that the 'Cow Country,' as our section of the State is called, is sound on the slavery question."¹⁷

For the following year, every time a black in Cow Country seemed unsound, blame fastened on Solomon McKinney's late Yankee preaching or on some white's contact with blacks. In February 1860, a black woman belonging

to Mr. Collier allegedly thrice attempted to burn down Collier's house. Supposedly, a white foe of Collier's put her up to the arson.¹⁸

In July, such supposed arsons multiplied, sending shudders across Cow Country, then across the South. A scorching drought afflicted northern Texas. For over six weeks, daytime temperatures, averaging 104 degrees, peaked at 114. Wells dried up. Cornstalks drooped. Cotton plants withered. Mortgage foreclosures blossomed. And then a fierce southwestern wind blew, turning every match into a threat to consume entire frontier towns, dotted with wooden dwellings.¹⁹

On July 7–8, flames destroyed over half of Dallas, unofficial capital of northern Texas. The following week, blazes lit the skies every day in the countryside beyond Dallas. The next week, Austin, Gainesville, Denton, Pilot Point, Belknap, Black Jack Grove, and Henderson became charred wrecks.²⁰

The circumstances invited several explanations. Sober folks knew that any white who disliked another could have won revenge with a match. Any slight accident could have also torched a city. But most communities blamed this world's prime scapegoat. Slaves, went the theory, had seized opportunities ever since Solomon McKinney had planted libertarian Christianity in gullible heads.

The mammoth drought had assuredly given restive domestics unusual opportunity. A Cuffee's single match could consume Massa's entire parched city. A single vial of strychnine could turn a town's shrinking pool of drinking water into a puddle of mass murder.

But blacks faced unprecedented dangers too. The moment any white threw up his dinner or yet another fire lit up the Cow Country, any slave might be blamed. So lynch mobs roved under the big skies. The Rust County Vigilance Committee, bragged a participant, has seized several whites, and "the jail and court house [are] full of negroes." We have [allegedly] uncovered "a deep plot" and "large quantities [of] strychnine." Slaves [supposedly] confess that traveling preachers and peddlers gave them the vials and taught them to poison the wells, torch the houses, and flee across the border. So fifty of us patrol each night, forcing strangers to "show their documents—and prove themselves sound."²¹

In Dallas, kangaroo courts ordered 147 allegedly unsound blacks flogged. In Tyler County, whites mauled four blacks with lashes, killing one. In Chapel Hill, Texas, vigilantes expelled "old man Clock" and his son. Those alleged abolitionists had been seen conversing with slaves. In Anderson County, lynch mobs hung Antney Wyrick and his cousin Alford Cable for [supposedly] "selling liquor to slaves," after "firearms and strychnine were [allegedly] found in possession" of their customers.²²

Supposedly, Parson McKinney had planned that slaves' domestic demolition would climax while white men voted on the local election day, August 6. Instead, two-thirds of the voters stayed home to patrol their terrified

neighborhoods. But vigilantes could find no one to lynch. Then the northern Texas panic collapsed, only to swell up over and over again, as Souths east of Cow Country held their elections.²³

“These days,” reported the *Savannah Republican*, “every passing breeze bears with it rumors of insurrection. . . . Every unusual sound or chance expression is tortured into some secret sign or signal.” While the editor considered the “whole matter the veriest humbug” and the lynch mobs more terrifying than the supposed insurrectionists, he urged “officers to be on the alert.”²⁴

Alabama’s Governor Andrew B. Moore kept alert. Two whites, he reported on August 30, had been arrested for slave tampering near Talladega. One had been hanged. Fayetteville citizens, having swept town stores clean of firearms, begged the governor for more; he dispatched fifty pistols. With “these occurrences . . . becoming common throughout the slaveholding states,” Moore deplored visiting “Northern fanatics” who aroused “the poor misguided and deluded Negroes.”²⁵

Panic about allegedly deluded slaves continued to spread as Lincoln’s election approached. In early September, the *Baltimore Clipper* claimed that five blacks had attempted rapes of white ladies during the previous three weeks. In early October, vigilantes in Virginia packed the Portsmouth jails with blacks and arrested other supposed incendiaries in Norfolk, Hickory Ground, and Princess Anne County.²⁶

In late October in Missouri’s Calloway County, an enraged slave assaulted her youthful mistress, Miss Susan Jemina Brown. The black slashed off Miss Susan’s lower lip. Then the murderess smashed a fire tong against Brown’s head, spewing teeth, brains, and blood all over the house. Civil authorities discovered the slave’s bloody clothes while she nonchalantly worked in the field. Then an incensed mob seized the killer from officers and hanged her from the nearest tree.²⁷

These Calloway County lynchers possessed, for once, undeniable evidence that a black had harmed a white (although as usual, no undeniable evidence of white provocation). Much more often, indistinct tidbits became evidence aplenty to turn frightened southern communities into paramilitary societies, as the most distressing election these Southerners had ever experienced drew near. “Not one in twenty” Yankee settlers “might tamper with our slaves,” conceded George Fitzhugh. “But one man,” warned Fitzhugh, “can fire a magazine, and no one can foresee when the match will be applied, or what will be the extent and consequences of the explosion.”²⁸

Yet distressed Southerners could create a previously nonexistent peril. James Harper Starr, one Texan who believed that few if any slaves’ hands had set the horrible fires, warned that “these panics work great mischief.” We “magnify” any “actual danger” by showing “the slaves that we are afraid of them.” Moreover, hysterias deter needed migrants. No white stranger wants to suffer the “moments of excitement” when “Judge lynch supplants the law (an evil of greater magnitude than all others).” With “panic stricken

juries and executioners (the worst as well as the best citizens taking part)," one consequence is all too possible: "innocents killed," white and black. Starr's correspondent, also writhing over undemocratic injustice, concurred that we aid the abolitionist "by exhibiting what they will consider our weakness."²⁹

The corrosive weakness threw the South's precarious balance of democracy and despotism into especially dysfunctional disbalance as Lincoln's possible election approached. Five years earlier, James Hitchens, a Northerner, had come South to pursue carriage manufacturing and repairing.³⁰ Despite his commercial success, the Yankee faced North Carolina mobs in both 1858 and 1859. Each time, vigilantes scoured the artisan's house and found Republican literature. Each time, he told tormentors that he found Republicanism acceptable because the party did *not* urge invasion of the South. Each time, North Carolina mobs tossed the newcomer out of their town.

Hitchens finally landed in the worst state for a Lincoln fancier. In October 1860, South Carolina vigilantes, brandishing bowie knives and hanging ropes, seized him and his carriage-making son, stashed them in prison, threatened his wife, ransacked his house, and confiscated his property. When he pled for a trial under the law, vigilantes informed him that "they were their own law and would try us."

After ten days, inebriated patrolmen opened the jail door and told father and son to get out. The two Hitchinses bolted, with some mob members "threatening our lives" and the "milder ones" aiding their escape. The fugitives took to traveling at "night through woods," to "elude other gangs that were pursuing us." After many nights of terror, they reached the North, but without James's wife, their four other children, and their property. After a month, the two victims had still not heard about their loved ones.

The South's latest well-hunted fugitives, this time prospering white citizens who simply thought Lincoln would be the best president, carried with them a letter from seven "justices" on their kangaroo court. These South Carolinians certified that James Hitchens and his son had "been arrested . . . under suspicion of entertaining feelings unfriendly to the institutions of the South. We have investigated the matter thoroughly and have come to the conclusion that our suspicions were not well founded. They have been honorably discharged with the understanding that they will leave," a decree "deemed prudent from the excitement."

The discomfort of the embarrassed "judges" who found the Hitchinses not guilty, as well as the dismay of the "milder" vigilantes who helped the innocents escape, showed that this dictatorial regime, under this democratic pressure, had turned against itself. A system that separated democracy and despotism at the color line had to preserve democracy for whites and paternalism for blacks. These panics instead produced dictatorial justice for whites, antipaternalistic savaging of blacks, and no way of knowing if a single Texas black ever lit a single match.

The mysterious fires and savage justice underlined tormenting questions about Southern Republicans. What would be the ethical basis of domestic slavery, or its chance for endurance, if Lincoln appointed Southern Republicans to rule inside? What if the appointees incited constant debates over whether slavery was wrong, constant suspicions of blacks, and constant panicky injustice for both races? How indeed could black slavery be defensible in a white republic if the likes of James Hinchins and son were the fugitive slaves? Never, southern ultras such as Yancey exploded, if Republicans' agitation crept inside the South, turning the mix of democracy and slavery intolerable for both races.

– 6 –

In mid-October, William Lowndes Yancey invaded the North, in part to explain why Yankee voters must not impose intolerable conditions on the South. The Alabamian's southern opponents found his mission preposterous. How could the most insufferable disunionist bring Northerners to consider Lincoln disastrous? "If he went North for any other purpose" than offending the Northerners and thus "helping the Republicans," exclaimed northern Alabama's Jere Clemens, he must be "under the influence of a weak & childish vanity."³¹

Yancey's supposedly vain invasion of the North instead deployed his usual tactics. The extremist again went out of his way, this time hundreds of miles out of his way, to convince nonextreme folks that he would fight with them to save a tolerable Union. As always, his listeners, whether southern friends or Yankee foes, found the orator not intolerable but likable. If any southern ultra could charm Northerners out of Lincoln, William Lowndes Yancey was the enchanter.

Around the northern circle the genial extremist swept: New York's Cooper Institute on October eleventh, Boston's Faneuil Hall on the thirteenth, Syracuse on the fifteenth, Cincinnati on the twentieth. Huge crowds packed the great northern temples of liberty, usually the stage for Emerson, Thoreau, Sumner, Lincoln, and lately Frank Blair, Jr., now the arena for a southern disunionist to pray for Union. For three hours each time, Yancey entreated Yankees not to wrap "your arms around the temple of our liberties," thereby bringing "that great temple" down "on your heads as well as ours." Elect anyone except Lincoln and you save the Union. Raise up the Black Republican and you bid farewell to our nation.³²

Yancey conceded that most Republicans sought only slavery's containment. But "carry out" that aim, "and it will necessarily follow that the institution will die out in . . . many" southern states. "In others, it will be far less valuable than it now is."³³ Moreover, if Lincoln filled southern federal offices with Republican appointees, "abolitionists would be found everywhere through the South, with strychnine to put in their wells as they were now found in Texas. . . . With the offices of the Government in the hands" of our

enemy, "property would be deteriorated," with "general desolation" and "universal ruin" following.³⁴

Yancey spelled out the ruinous process more completely when he returned to the South. His southern speeches reached their climax in New Orleans on the evening of October 30, a week before the election. New Orleanians loved a parade. Yancey's partisans staged the most colorful march through the Crescent City's streets since Mardi Gras. The Breckinridge Guards, the Yancey Rangers, and the Yancey Guards led the orator toward his pulpit. Bearers of torchlights, ornamental lanterns, and decorated banners pranced behind. Paraders snaked toward a huge reviewing stand, packed with 500 dignitaries, while citizens jammed Canal Street from Camp Street to St. Charles. Yancey treated the crowd to one of his greatest speeches.³⁵

"The times are serious" and "the issues . . . grave," declared the orator, and we must emulate "our forefathers . . . in 1776." Some say that Lincoln will be "conservative." They mean that he will reject laws that would interfere with slavery inside southern states. But a president must appoint officers in the South, and "do not suppose that no" Southerners will "take office under Lincoln. Do not suppose that . . . no men among you . . . sympathize with him."

His officers will bring "the irrepressible conflict" seeping "through the Southern States, as water percolates through a rock." His appointees will accomplish "his object . . . without legislation. There will be free speech, as they call it, everywhere for the propagation of Abolition opinions. There will be a free press, as they call it, for the circulation of Abolition documents." There will be a "Black Republican president at Washington, to protect and encourage them." Southern Republican "numbers will soon be doubled, quadrupled,—yea, increased a hundred fold in our midst."

Since slaves torch Texas even before a Republican takes a southern office, continued Yancey, "what mischief may you . . . expect when Lincoln gets into power," even if Republicans "do not legislate at all?" We can expect, answered the Alabamian, that "slave property in Kentucky, and Maryland, and Virginia, and Missouri, would become worthless, by intimidation, by fear, and by other causes." After "the abolition of slavery" in the "border states, . . . the whole South would" become "another St. Domingo or Jamaica." Republicans are already "coming over the border." Look "at John Minor Botts of Virginia, Cassius M. Clay of Kentucky, F. P. Blair of Missouri." Look at the "foundation in the Southern States on which these men stand." Give these heretics "your closest attention, if you wish" to know "the position, power, and aims of the [Republican] party."

As Yancey brought to climax the South's summer of suspicion, torchlights lit up the New Orleans skies, unnervingly like the blazes lately ascending in Cow Country. The South's most fiery disunionists could almost feel, as Albert Gallatin Brown warned in Mississippi, "the stealthy tread" of Black Republicans marching among us.³⁶

Lincoln's march to Electoral College victory seems inevitable to posterity. But at the time, the Republican's triumph seemed more uncertain, not least to Yancey and to Robert Barnwell Rhett. Because of disunionists' uncertainty, their secessionist campaign did not begin until mid-October. The resulting short prerevolutionary period provided a crucial atmosphere of rush.

Before the revolutionary haste, revolutionaries wondered whether Lincoln could capture almost every northern state, his only way to procure the required majority of Electoral College votes. If Lincoln fell short in the Electoral College, the House of Representatives, voting by states, would select the president. With just under 50 percent of the states, the South would exert more leverage than in the Electoral College, where the slaveholding states wielded just under 40 percent of the votes.

As if to confirm contemporaries' sense of uncertainty, Lincoln ultimately won an arguably thin Electoral College victory.³⁷ True, despite losing all southern and three northern electoral votes, the Republican secured 180 Electoral College ballots, a robust twenty-eight more than he needed for his Electoral College majority. Lincoln also gathered a decisive 54 percent of the northern popular vote (although only 40 percent of the nation's voters).

Still, if Lincoln had lost California, Oregon, Illinois, and Indiana, the House of Representatives would have elected the president. The Republican would have fallen short in the Electoral College if 378 Californians, plus 578 Oregonians, plus 5979 Illinoisans, plus 11,763 Indianans had switched their votes from Lincoln to Douglas. Since this 5 percent of Lincoln voters in these four states could have overturned the Lincoln bandwagon, Southerners may well have given Lincoln his decisive momentum. Because Southerners split the National Democracy, Douglas lost the aura of the last national party. The Little Giant thus became less attractive to the few extra Yankee voters that he needed in order to throw the election into the House of Representatives' hands. This southern contribution to Lincoln's victory was fitting, for the South's aggressive defensiveness had precipitated the events (Dred Scott, Lecompton, and proposals for Caribbean expansion and African slave trade opening) that had undermined James Buchanan's slim 1856 victory.

Nothing was slim about the North's 1860 rejection of Slave Power aggressive defensiveness. From many Southerners' perspective, Douglas's Freeport Doctrine, declaring that territorial legislatures could abolish slavery (by doing nothing), was as pernicious as Lincoln's doctrine, affirming that Congress could halt slavery's expansion (by decreeing territorial abolition). Yet the two Illinoisans together received 89.6 percent of northern popular votes, with John C. Breckinridge collecting only 8.2 percent and John Bell only 2.2 percent of the Yankee tally.

For a quarter century, Southerners had shown how minorities dominate majoritarian processes. The overwhelmingly anti-Slave Power North had

now shown how an awakened majority routs a minority. Could the minority now show how to secede from the majority?

– 8 –

The presidential election results demonstrated that secessionists faced towering obstacles. Almost all disunionists favored Kentucky's John Breckinridge. Yet the Southern Democrats' presidential candidate secured less than half the Southerners' ballots. Breckinridge's approximately 44 percent of southern popular votes hardly drowned out the around 40 percent for the Constitutional Unionists' (and Tennessee's) John Bell. Meanwhile, circa 16 percent of southern voters preferred Douglas or Lincoln to either Southerner.

The Little Giant, lately the focus of southern rage, won one in seven southern popular votes. Douglas also swept up embattled Missouri's Electoral College votes. How Austin King did love his state's vindication. How William L. Yancey, John Clark, and Davy Atchison did loathe Missouri's statement.

As the Missouri outcome showed, the farther northward in the South, the more Breckinridge's appeal drooped. The Kentucky Democrat won all the Lower South's Electoral College votes and 56 percent of its popular votes (to Bell's 34.7 percent). In the Upper South, however, where two of every three southern whites resided, Bell won thirty-nine Electoral College votes (to Breckinridge's twenty-five) and 43 percent of the popular votes (to Breckinridge's 39.7 percent). Breckinridge barely won the Middle South (where he secured 46.7 percent of the popular votes to Bell's 45.2 percent). The Southern Democrat decisively lost the Border South (where Bell received 40.6 percent of the popular votes to Breckinridge's 31.9 percent).

Nor did Breckinridge's strength in the Lower South necessarily portend imminent secessionist victory in that most enslaved region. In the fall campaign, Breckinridge's positions aimed as little at disunion as Bell's and only a little more at proslavery agitation. Breckinridge campaigned atop not secession but Jefferson Davis's formula that Congress should protect slavery, only if later necessary. Breckinridge trusted "that the time may never come" when the federal government need "interfere for the protection" of our rights.³⁸ After Lincoln's election, Breckinridge would deny that the time had come for secession. After the Civil War commenced, he would deny for months that the time had come for Kentucky to renounce its neutrality.

Breckinridge could thus attract the many Lower South moderates who always had been Democrats and never had been for secession. He could also attract the extremists who considered Breckinridge's form of southern moderation at least a lesser evil than Bell's. While Breckinridge kept putting the time for agitation into the future, Bell kept insisting that no proslavery agitation had ever been necessary. The Breckinridge vote proved that a large majority of Lower South voters wished to agitate for their rights, not that the majority wished to agitate for disunion. Breckinridge's less than half of

southern votes also indicated that no Southwide majority even desired proslavery agitation.

Southern Democrats derided Bell's nonagitation position as a dangerous insistence on saying nothing about the very issue that must be discussed. To Yancey, Bell smacked of the emperor who thought himself "incapable of doing anything for the good of Rome." The hapless fellow "went to his room and picked up a fiddle, and fiddled while Rome burned." Well, not just Texas towns but the Union was now afire, and "Bell would tinkle, tinkle, tinkle. My friends, this is no time for tinkling bells."³⁹

Unfortunately for the ridiculer, many southern moderates preferred tinkling bells to crashing alarms. They thought that alarmists had too long been spreading crises rather than saving slavery in such doomed antics as the Kansas caper. They feared that an unnecessary civil war would imminently destroy their beloved Union. They worried that other people's fruitless battles would be fought on their farmlands. Slavery was precisely what they did *not* wish to speak about.

John Bell was their perfect spokesman. If his mind worked ponderously, if his speeches sounded sluggish, if his face and figure looked ordinary, those attributes provided the ideal wet blanket. He had earned the right to tell agitators to cool off with his accurate record of predicting, before every proslavery effort and especially the Kansas hijinks, that hot fury would yield icy disappointment for the South and disaster for the Union. Now, to secessionists' dismay, John Breckinridge's only somewhat warmer attitude toward proslavery agitation had secured only eleven out of every twenty-five southern votes, to ten for tinkle, tinkle, tinkle—and four for the Douglas-Lincoln insistence on no proslavery tinkling at all.

To secessionists' even greater dismay, the election tally showed that Lincoln's forces had established a beachhead inside John Bell's Border South stronghold. None of Lincoln's 26,375 southern votes came from the Lower South and only 1887 from the Middle South (all in extreme northwestern Virginia). But the Republican captured 5.8 percent of Border South popular votes, including 10.3 percent of Missourians' ballots and 23.7 percent of Delawareans' choices. An incrementally swelling Southern Republican Party already existed in these two Border South states, even before the president-elect started handing out that sustenance for party, local patronage offices. The Blair family, having delivered key convention votes for Lincoln's nomination and then one in ten of Missourians' popular ballots, had earned a rich patronage banquet.

Yancey had lately described the consequences of such feasting amidst the flickering New Orleans torchlights. He had instructed his October listeners that now was the time "to show your love for the Union" by preparing your ballots. "After the Lincoln party is elected, . . . you will be called to show your love by preparing your rifles."⁴⁰ But after Yankee presidential candidates had secured almost one in six southern votes, and after John Bell had collected two in five votes for nonagitation, and with so many of the South's

only 44 percent of Breckinridge voters, including Breckinridge himself, still against disunion, secessionists looked incapable of rallying a Southwide majority for Yancey's riflemen, at least before a civil war commenced.

Then again, secessionists would need no sectionwide majority to commence a departure from the Union, any more than Yancey had needed a majority of southern delegates to commence a departure from the Charleston convention. Back at the time Texas fires had swirled out of control, David Boyd, a professor at the precursor of Louisiana State University, had unhappily prophesied how a minority of the southern minority might begin a revolution. "Disunion might be brought about in many ways," Professor Boyd had warned. "In many places in the South, whoever accepts or holds offices under Lincoln will be lynched." The new president "will of course attempt to enforce the laws; that attempt will be resisted; and once the strife is begun, God only knows where it will stop."⁴¹

The professor's crystal ball slightly befogged the climactic scenario. But this Virginian turned Louisianan accurately foresaw that a minority of Southerners, provoked by Lincoln's imminent patronage appointments, could start a disruption that the majority could not stop. Still, some one state would have to begin a minority revolution. South Carolina, the most likely beginner, had often shuddered to go first. Would the state this time dare?

This page intentionally left blank