

An exchange of letters on the Emancipation Proclamation

29 September 2012

Below we post a letter from a reader on "150 years since the Emancipation Proclamation" and a reply by the author, Tom Mackaman.

Dear Tom,

I'd like to examine the implications of one of the passages from your very fine essay on the Emancipation Proclamation. You wrote: "[T]he Republican Party had won the 1860 election on a platform that promised slavery would not be abolished where it already existed; it would be banned only from new territories. Notwithstanding the Southern elite's violent rejection of this position in the form of secession and war, the Lincoln administration waged the Civil War in 1861-1862 as a struggle to return to the status quo ante."

In pledging to restrict slavery "only" in new territories, the radical Republicans thwarted efforts by the slave-holding elites and their Northern counterparts to establish what Lincoln called "the perpetuity and nationalization of slavery," even as the institution was becoming exhausted socially and economically.

Imagine if a major political party today adopted an uncompromising stand against the dismantling of New Deal and Great Society legislation, "as with a chain of steel," demanding that any new factories and housing developments be required under "established law" to provide social safety nets to the workers and residents residing there—but exempting pre-existing communities and businesses from the early legislation. In other words, a return to the "status quo ante," when labor union leaders and capitalists had formed an alliance to permit reforms to capitalism, in order to evade socialism. (Of course, a political party of this kind cannot arise in our era; as David North pointed out, "liberalism is dead on its feet.")

Within the current crisis of capitalism, would not the "reaction" from the financial aristocracy be "violent" and risk plunging the country into chaos? And what would the effect be when the police state is unleashed—is being unleashed—upon workers to suppress a return to the status quo ante?

It seems to me that Lincoln's tactical position on the territories had strategic implications that forced the slave interests to act recklessly in an attempt to avoid their fate, and was not a fundamentally reactionary position on his part.

RR

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Dear RR,

Thank you for your thoughtful letter. It raises a number of important historical and contemporary questions that merit further consideration.

It must be stressed that Lincoln's position in the 1860 election—that slavery could remain in the current slave states but not be expanded to new territories—did not mean that he supported slavery's indefinite

continuance. He opposed slavery, and believed that it would eventually disappear.

Lincoln spelled out his thoughts on the matter most clearly in his "House Divided" speech of 1858:

A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing, or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward, till it shall become alike lawful in all the states, old as well as new—North as well as South.

Lincoln's opposition to slavery and his hope that it would wither away echoed the sentiments of the revolutionary generation of 1776. George Washington had said, "[T]here is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do to see a plan adopted for... abolition." According to Patrick Henry, there was no practice "so totally repugnant to the first Impression of right and wrong" as slavery. And Thomas Jefferson believed that the American Revolution had set the stage for abolition: "The spirit of the master is abating, that of the slave rising from the dust, his condition mollifying, the way, I hope, preparing, under the auspices of heaven, for a total emancipation."

Washington, Jefferson and Henry were all Virginia slaveowners. Yet they were aware of the contradiction between the assertion of equality spelled out in the Declaration of Independence and the existence of slavery. They hoped, and believed, that it would vanish.

This position did not hold among the slaveholders. By 1837, the leading Southern politician, John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, declared slavery to be "a positive good," and by 1860, the South demanded that slavery be accepted as such by the entire nation. This was the essence of the Dred Scott ruling (1857), authored by Chief Justice Roger Taney, a Maryland slaveholder. Taney ruled that people of African descent, slave or free, had no rights as citizens or as people, and that Congress had no authority to outlaw slavery anywhere in the US.

In this sense, you are right that the Republicans' position in 1860—that slavery could stay where it already existed, but that it could not be allowed to spread to new territories—led to war. The Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854) and the Dred Scott ruling had outraged public opinion in the North. It was in response to these events that the Republican Party and Abraham Lincoln rose to power.

Yet Lincoln and the Republicans believed the South would *not* secede with his victory. There had been many instances of Southern threats of secession dating all the way back to the Nullification Crisis of 1832, and leading Republicans thought that the new threats were also bluffs.

The war changed Lincoln's position. He was not a revolutionist, but by summer of 1862 he had come to understand that to defeat the Southern counterrevolution required revolutionary policies: the union could not be saved without destroying slavery. The determination with which Lincoln prosecuted this revolutionary goal elevated him to the stature of one of the great political leaders of modern history.

Your suggestion that slavery was becoming "exhausted socially and economically" warrants scrutiny. It is true that the Northern industrial economy was growing far more rapidly, and with it the Northern population. By 1860, Pennsylvania and New York *each* had greater industrial output than the *entire* seceding South.

The sudden emergence of the Old Northwest—Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa and Minnesota— was radically altering the balance of power with the South. The dynamism of the Northern economy gave rise to a social order tightly linked and organized by the railroad and the telegraph, where a common school public education was the norm, and where a growing university system was developing legions of technicians, engineers and professionals. All of these things were lacking in the South.

Even so, to most, the end of slavery appeared a remote prospect in 1860. "The peculiar institution" was more profitable than ever, with record income generated by the cotton boom that tied the Southern economy closely to Great Britain, then the world's greatest power by far. Even in tobacco-producing Virginia and Maryland, where slavery was fading as a labor solution, the slaveholders were securing great profits by selling slaves to the Cotton Belt. Huge and growing fortunes were being built on slaves and cotton, so that on the cusp of the Civil War a disproportionately large number of the richest Americans were Southerners.

All of this may make it appear surprising that the South stormed out of the Union and then precipitously fired the first shots of the Civil War. Yet closer examination shows that there was a motive to the madness.

The Southern elite's concern with claiming as slave territory places such as Kansas had far less to do with *direct* economic interest than its overriding drive to maintain political power in Washington.

Westward expansion had persistently raised the question of which section would control the levers of federal power. With the rising population of the North securing it greater representation in the House of Representatives, the question of the Senate—the upper legislative house to which each state sends two senators, regardless of its population—became decisive. The sectional deals beginning with the Missouri Compromise of 1820 had aimed to maintain a balance between free state and slave state senators.

The South used its political weight in Washington for definite ends. In addition to protecting slavery, it sought to block developments it perceived to be favorable to Northern industry—the transcontinental railroad, protective tariffs, legislation favoring the population of the Great Plains (the Homestead Act), and the land grant public university system, to name a few.

It also wielded its political power to corner new lands for slavery. The purchase of Florida from Spain in 1819 on threat of war, Andrew Jackson's shameful removal of the Southeastern Indian tribes in 1830, and the war on Mexico (1846-1848) had been carried out for this purpose. The Mexican-American War brought Texas into the union as a slave state—and led a disgusted young Lincoln, then a Whig congressman, to quit politics and return to his Illinois law practice until he was roused by the "crime against Kansas." Even after the war with Mexico, the Southern elite launched repeated provocations

against Cuba and Nicaragua. They sought, in the words of historian James McPherson, an "empire for slavery."

In light of all of this, the hypothetical comparison you make does not work. Your premise is that if some political party were to come to power and stop "the dismantling of New Deal and Great Society legislation," this would cause the financial aristocracy to respond with violence.

The problem is twofold. First, the New Deal and Great Society have already been largely dismantled. Second, as you yourself point out, there is no political party that could play an analogous role to the Republican Party in 1860.

The entire spectrum of bourgeois politics today is fully dedicated to the destruction of what little remains of the social safety net and the impoverishment of the working class. In contrast, the Republican Party and the Southern Democratic Party in 1860 represented two separate ruling classes and two opposed economic principles: free labor and slave labor.

In this sense, the Republicans and Lincoln represented the ascendancy of a historically progressive social order. However, the fundamental social contradictions of triumphant industrial capitalism soon emerged after the Civil War. By 1877, the Republican Party was conspiring with the Democratic Party to crush the Great Uprising of railway workers. The same year, not coincidentally, it ended Reconstruction in the South and rehabilitated the heirs of the old slaveocracy.

The challenge to today's ruling class will not come from a capitalist party. It will come from the working class—and ultimately it must and will be led by a working class political party basing itself on a socialist and internationalist program. This challenge has in fact already begun. The mowing down of striking South African miners on the orders of the ANC provides a glimpse of how capitalists and their political servants will respond.

As was the case with the Southern elite, today's financial aristocracy will not permit any challenge to its power. And as was also the case with the Southern elite, its response will only accelerate the very revolution it hopes to forestall.



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