

The Irrepressible Conflict *

Perhaps no military conflict in history has produced more anguished writing about whether it was evitable or inevitable than the American Civil War. The problem, of course, is one that can never be solved conclusively even by the most exhaustive research, because it involves metaphysical questions about free will and psychological questions about the limits of human choice. Yet historians do sometimes indulge in "counter-factual history"—informed speculation about how things would have been if certain other things had or had not happened—and that essentially is the kind of history that revisionists have written. They were interested not only in explaining why the Civil War occurred but in showing how, by a different course of action, it could have been avoided and how much better off the country would have been if its history had been one of continued peace.

The Civil War settled the issues of the sectional conflict at a cost of more than half a million lives. The revisionists' alternative to the war was compromise, delay, patience, and the avoidance of recrimination and confrontation in order to maintain a milieu of political tranquility in which sectional differences could have been rationally resolved. Their conviction that evolutionary forces would soon have ended slavery peacefully was a basic premise of their case. In his account of the crisis, James Buchanan contended that, "If left to the wise ordinances of a superintending Providence, which never acts rashly, [slavery] would have been gradually extinguished in our country . . . without bloodshed. . . ." [The historian Charles W.] Ramsdell, though relying on economic and geographic forces rather than Providence, made this the moral of his argument that slavery had extended to its natural limits. "[Can] we say with conviction," he asked, "that this war accomplished anything of lasting good that could not and would not have been won by the peaceful processes of social evolution? Is there not ground for the tragic conclusion that it accomplished little which was not otherwise attainable?" E. Merton Coulter [another historian] made the point concisely: "The Civil War was not worth the cost. . . . What good the war produced would have come with time in an orderly way; the bad would not have come at all."

Precisely when slavery's peaceful end would have come no revisionist could say, but most of them guessed that it could have lasted no longer than another generation, or no later than the end of the nineteenth century. In any event, when emancipation came, it would not have cost the life of one soldier for every six slaves freed—a per capita cost that [David M.] Potter quite understandably found rather staggering. On the other hand, the postponement

of emancipation for a generation, while saving the lives of soldiers, would have exacted its own price. It would have meant that the four million slaves of 1860, as well as their descendants, would have remained in bondage until the forces anticipated by the revisionists moved white masters in their own good time to grant freedom to their black laborers. How to balance the lives of half a million soldiers against the prolonged bondage of four million slaves is a question with profound moral implications; how one resolves it will doubtless depend in part on one's judgment of slavery itself. Clearly, the revisionists believed that the survival of black bondage for another generation would not have been too high a price for avoiding the bloodshed of the Civil War. Given their characteristic view of southern slavery, their resolution of this moral dilemma was logical enough.

In considering the plausibility of the case for a repressible conflict, one must note that the writings of historians who advanced it were not always models of measured and temperate discourse. Some revisionists wrote with a passion that approached the intensity of those antebellum orators whose verbal excesses they so roundly condemned. More important than style, however, was a logical inconsistency that lay at the heart of their argument. Revisionists advanced a highly deterministic explanation of how slavery would have been abolished if the Civil War had not occurred. Unalterable conditions and uncontrollable trends—the realities of western soil and climate, the impact of the laws of supply and demand on cotton and slave prices, "the processes of social evolution," and the resulting realization of rational Southerners that slavery was a burden—would have led inevitably to the ultimate adaptation of southern agriculture to a free-labor system. Yet, revisionists rejected the deterministic concept of an irrepressible conflict as an explanation of the Civil War itself. They discerned no logical, fundamental forces operating to bring on this great and tragic event, only the unnecessary, irrational behavior of a blundering generation of politicians and agitators. But if one generation of Northerners could produce a needless war over issues irrationally perceived, might not another generation of Southerners have defied all the presumably sound reasons for abandoning slavery and preserved it for irrational—say, for example, racist—reasons? Revisionists, though apparently assuming that history normally follows a rational course, by their analysis of the sectional crisis, themselves made a substantial case for irrational behavior as a historical force. Thereby, they comprehend their optimistic hypothesis that slavery, in a logical progression, was destined "within a comparatively short time" to be abolished without war.

Assuming that historians of the repressible conflict were justified in their optimistic belief that sectional problems were amenable to resolution without violence, the problem still remains of determining how the antebellum crises could have been avoided while the benevolent forces of peaceful change did their work. The revisionist answer was clear enough: abolitionists should not

* Stamp, Kenneth M. *The Imperiled Union: Essays on the Background of the Civil War*. (Chapter 2) New York: Oxford University Press, 1980.

have carried on their agitation; Free-Soilers should have trusted [Stephen A.] Douglas's principle of popular sovereignty to keep slavery out of the territories; Republicans should not have made political issues of the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, the Kansas question, or the Dred Scott decision; in short, Northerners should have avoided provoking Southerners and left the resolution of the slavery issue to them. Apart from its transparent one-sidedness, this exercise in counterfactual history contains a serious analytical flaw. To question the necessity of certain specific incidents in antebellum sectional relations is one thing; to object wholly to the temper of an age is quite another.

A plausible analysis of antebellum politics and of the options that were reasonably open to that generation must begin with the assumption that an antislavery movement would exist in the northern states. That such a movement did exist was hardly the unfortunate result of some perverse historical accident, such as the emergence of a William Lloyd Garrison, or the outbreak of an epidemic of acute neuroses in the northern population, as the portraits of abolitionists in revisionist literature would seem to suggest. Characterizations of them as "pious cranks" troubled with "maladjustments, inferiority complexes, and repressed desires" may describe accurately a few of the more bizarre figures attracted to the movement, but not the members or leaders in general. No historian has demonstrated convincingly that neurotics were proportionally more numerous among abolitionists than among their critics. Nor has a persuasive case been made for the hypothesis that abolitionist leaders were a displaced elite, victims of the industrial revolution, losing status and finding an outlet for their discontents in a crusade against slavery. The idea that abolitionists responded not to an objective, external social problem but to their own internal psychic problems and status anxieties is not adequate to describe a group with as varied personalities and economic, social, and cultural backgrounds as Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Arthur and Lewis Tappan, Theodore Dwight Weld, James G. Birney, Sarah and Angelina Grimke, Gerrit Smith, James Russell Lowell, Theodore Parker, and Thomas Wentworth Higginson. . . .

Abolitionism, of course, was always a movement of a minority, for even in an era of reform most men and women were absorbed in the problems of their own daily lives and were either indifferent to reformers or regarded them as disturbing nuisances. Nationalists disliked abolitionists for disregarding constitutional restraints and endangering the Union; practical men of business viewed them as a threat to their rich southern trade; and conservative clergymen feared them as a disruptive force in the churches. Above all, the racism that was nearly universal in nineteenth-century America, by fostering anxieties about the consequences of liberating millions of black slaves, severely limited the abolitionist appeal. Indeed, as historians have amply demonstrated, the abolitionists themselves, though far in advance of their contemporaries, were by no means free of race prejudice. To appreciate the importance of racism as a

deterrent to abolitionism one needs merely to consider how much stronger the movement would have been if the South's slave population had been white rather than black. . . .

Both contemporaries and historians criticized abolitionists more often for their commitment to "immediatism" than for any other alleged shortcoming. Only impractical, irresponsible fools, they charged, would ignore all the social problems of emancipation, the need for a period of gradual transition, and call for slavery's immediate end. But this criticism was an oversimplification of the abolitionist goal and took it out of the context of the times. Immediatism, as abolitionists usually understood the term, was not a naive program to abolish slavery in a day; rather, it meant that the process of abolishing slavery, a sin, should commence at once, though its completion would probably take some time. It also meant a rejection of the gradualism that would postpone even the commencement of emancipation until some future date.

To this antebellum generation of reformers, familiar with religious revivalism, with the spectacle of mass responses to the sermons of preachers such as Charles G. Finney, and with the miraculous experience of conversion and the instant renunciation of sin, the goal of immediatism did not seem unrealistic. In the early years of their crusade, abolitionists dared hope that their tactic of "moral suasion"—trying to convince slaveholders that slavery was sinful and imperiled their salvation—might, like a great revival, bring masses of slaveholders to an immediate decision to emancipate their slaves. In any case, moral suasion was the only tactic open to them, for the federal government had no power to interfere with slavery in the southern states, and the abolitionists, committed as they were to peaceful methods, did not countenance a slave insurrection. They never addressed their appeals to the slaves themselves, only to white masters, and the danger of slave rebellions if emancipation were not adopted was a persistent theme in their literature.

If abolitionism of a moralistic, immediate type is accepted as a logical and quite inescapable product of antebellum society, and slavery as an exotic aberration, the task of historians who would make a case for a repressible conflict is not to wish away the abolitionists but to explain how an atmosphere favorable to political tranquillity, compromise, and patient delay might have been maintained in spite of the irritant of an antislavery crusade. This would require a rather radical reformulation of the problem as revisionists customarily perceived it, for much of the responsibility for avoiding sectional confrontation would be transferred from the North to the South. In effect, antebellum Southerners asked for the tolerant acceptance of an institution which, however vital it may have been economically, was a moral anachronism in their age, until they found a convenient and safe way to give it up. They asked a great deal of their generation, and their best hope of avoiding a national crisis—of keeping the conflict repressible—was to defuse the antislavery movement by minimizing its appeal to the northern public, and thus to soften the impact of some quite

compelling ideological forces. To consider how this might have been possible involves another exercise in counterfactual history, one premised on the existence of *both* southern slavery and northern antislavery.

The first requirement was that Southerners avoid aggressively proslavery postures which would diminish the traditional expectation that through a natural progression slavery would give way to a free-labor system. The fact that many post-Revolutionary Southerners conceded the evils of slavery and assumed at least a vague antislavery stance encouraged northern reformers to be temperate and patient. However, the gradual change to a less apologetic tone—a change that antedated abolitionism—eventually altered perceptions of the possibility for emancipation without intervention from the outside.

During the eighteenth century some Southerners had defended slavery occasionally on racial and religious grounds; during the Missouri controversy they justified it more vigorously; and during the following decade their defense accelerated until, in 1832, Thomas R. Dew of Virginia published the first book-length treatise upholding slavery as a positive good. As the defense became increasingly sweeping, invoking biblical authority, historical experience, scientific evidence, and racist concepts, southern intellectuals romanticized slavery into an ideal paternal relationship beneficial to both master and slave. Reacting to these changed circumstances, a northern reformer expressed dismay at "the sentiments openly expressed . . . that slavery is not an evil. . . [and] that it is criminal toward the South ... to indulge even a hope that the chains of the captive may some day or other, no matter how remote the time, be broken." The positive-good hypothesis, an aggressive vindication of slavery about which many Southerners themselves had uneasy feelings, by shocking northern reformers into organized activity, played a major role in undermining sectional peace. It was, in the terminology of revisionism, an irresponsible blunder that needlessly heightened tensions between North and South.

A second basic condition for the preservation of political tranquility was a southern program to reform the institution of slavery in those aspects where it was most exposed to sensational abolitionist attacks. To this end, and at the cost of compromising somewhat the property rights of slaveholders, southern legislatures should have given legal protection to slave marriages, prohibited the breakup of slave families when estates were sold for debt or divided among heirs, reduced the brutal aspects of the slave trade, given slaves greater protection from violent assault, defined the rape of a slave woman as a crime, given slaves a stronger position in courts of law, regulated more strictly their labor and living conditions, and repealed the laws against teaching them to read and write, thus shifting the emphasis in the legal codes from slaves as property to slaves as persons. Reforms such as these would not have made bondage acceptable to abolitionists, but they would have blunted their attack by depriving them of some of their most effective propaganda weapons. The

vulnerable slave woman, exposed to her master's lust, faced with the dissolution of her family at her master's will, required to engage in heavy field labor; the slave coffles driven to the plantations of the Southwest by unfeeling traders; the physical punishment inflicted by some callous masters—these were the materials from which abolitionists constructed their accounts of slavery. By improving the condition of the slave the southern states would not only have reduced the abolitionist appeal but checked the growing sense that without external pressure nothing would ever change. . . .

A third essential requirement for avoiding an irrepressible conflict was acceptance of a federal policy of confining slavery to the fifteen states that recognized it at the time of the Mexican War. Nothing alarmed Northerners more than the aggressive demand of southern politicians that the western territories be opened to slavery; nothing lent more credence to the abolitionist charge that a Slave Power conspired to make slavery a national institution. The fact that much of the northern opposition to slavery expansion was less an expression of moral feelings than of race prejudice does not in the least diminish its importance as a political force. Traditionally, historians of the repressible conflict placed the onus on the North for agitating what they thought was an issue without substance; but Daniel E. Somes, a congressman from Maine, shifted the responsibility to those who probably most deserved to bear it. "You say it is a mere abstraction for which we are contending," he told Southerners. "And yet you regard this abstraction of so much importance to you that you say you are willing to dissolve the Union ... to secure it. If it is an abstraction with us, of course it must be an abstraction with you." For this alleged abstraction, this issue without substance, southern politicians waged a bitter fight against the adoption of the Wilmot Proviso. In 1854 they secured the repeal of the Missouri Compromise before they would permit the passage of legislation to organize the territories of Kansas and Nebraska, thus provoking an unprecedented uprising of the northern people, encouraging the formation of the purely sectional Republican party, and doing severe damage to the conservative national Democratic party.

By the 1850s many southern politicians and editors supported Calhoun's doctrine that the Constitution protected slavery in all the territories; and in 1857 they rallied behind the Supreme Court's decision in the Dred Scott case, which denied that slavery could be bafred by either Congress or a territorial legislature. Subsequently, when Douglas claimed that, in spite of the Court's decision, the people of a territory could exclude slavery simply by refusing to protect it, southern politicians proposed a remedy so extravagant as to suggest not merely irresponsibility but a flight from reality. They demanded that Congress adopt a code protecting slavery in all the territories and, in 1860, that the Democratic party incorporate their demand in its national platform. The reckless southern agitation of the slavery expansion issue was a blunder whose consequences included the fragmentation of national political

organizations and the destruction beyond repair of the conditions essential to continued sectional peace.

A fourth requirement was that Southerners set an example of temperate response to antislavery criticism and of open-mindedness to moderate proposals for eventual manumission. Instead, southern defenders of slavery sought to prevent discussion altogether; they seemed prepared, if necessary, to violate the federal Bill of Rights and thus to threaten the liberties not only of black slaves but of white freeman as well. Southern laws designed to protect the white community from slave insurrections were interpreted so broadly as to prevent all discussion of slavery in the schools and colleges, in the press, or in public meetings. "The expression of Black Republican opinions in our midst is incompatible with our honor and safety as a people," wrote a North Carolina editor during the presidential campaign of 1856. "Let our schools and seminaries of learning be scrutinized, and if Black Republicans be found in them, let them be driven out. That man is neither a fit nor a safe instructor of our young men, who even inclines to . . . Black Republicanism." By constructing an "intellectual blockade," as Clement Eaton called it, proslavery Southerners gave northern reformers additional reason to despair that slavery would ever be abolished by internal forces alone.

One of the most serious tactical blunders southern politician ever made was supporting the passage of a Gag Rule to prevent congressional discussion of petitions and memorials relating to slavery. Between 1836 and 1844, while the rule was in effect, the right of petition was seriously compromised, and abolitionists could argue plausibly that the Slave Power would even subvert the Constitution to preserve their evil institution. Rather than reducing agitation, the Gag Rule increased the flood of petitions and enabled abolitionists to present their cause to the country in a manner most favorable to them. Meanwhile, angry southern congressmen made wild threats and uttered indiscreet remarks that provided more grist for the abolitionists' mill.

Having flouted every requirement for the preservation of an atmosphere conducive to compromise and political tranquillity, politicians of the Deep South committed the ultimate blunder of attempting secession after the election of the first Republican President, Abraham Lincoln. Their action was swift and impetuous—all seven states had seceded within less than three months after the election—and they gave Congress no opportunity to consider a compromise plan. As early as December 13, 1860, thirty southern congressmen signed a letter to the southern people declaring, "The argument is exhausted. All hope of relief in the Union . . . is extinguished. . . . We are satisfied the honor, safety and independence of the Southern people require the organization of a Southern Confederacy." Before the end of January nearly all the congressmen from the Deep South had resigned, and northern and border-state moderates had no one with whom to discuss a compromise and the restoration of peace and political tranquillity.

Since only one of the seceding states submitted its ordinance of secession to popular ratification, the debate among historians whether the secession conventions represented the will of the people will doubtless go on indefinitely. Yet, granted that the people might have changed their minds six months or a year later, there is little reason to doubt that secession was the will of a substantial majority at the time the decision was made. The majority for secession was overwhelming in every secession convention, the closest vote being 61-39 in Alabama. Texas was the only state to provide for a popular referendum, and there secession was approved by a plurality of approximately three to one.

Northern and southern conservatives argued in vain that secession was a reckless act, that, so far from giving the South greater security, secession would heighten the dangers it faced and threaten the supreme disaster of defeat in war. They reminded secessionists that Lincoln was not an abolitionist, that he acknowledged slavery to be a local institution over which the federal government had no jurisdiction, and that he recognized his duty to enforce the fugitive-slave law. Secession, they warned, would prevent slaveholders from recovering fugitives, for the federal government would no longer be obligated to assist them; it would strengthen the abolitionists, for love of the Union would cease to be an inhibiting force; and it would deprive the seceding states of all the territories, for none would be open to them. The conservatives insisted that Lincoln's election was not a threat to the South, for as a minority President with less than 40 percent of the popular vote his position would be weak. The new Congress would have an anti-Republican majority; hence the Republican legislative program would be effectively blocked, and Lincoln's appointments would require the approval of a hostile Senate. Finally, the conservatives described the Republicans as internally divided, a loose coalition of discordant elements which might fall apart before the next presidential campaign. How, then, could secession be viewed as anything but the last and greatest blunder of an irrational and irresponsible generation of southern politicians?

The alternative case for a repressible conflict presented here has the merit of taking into account some of the fundamental conditions of northern antebellum society that traditional revisionists chose to ignore. But in a different way it, too, is flawed. While accepting northern antislavery tendencies as an inescapable force in sectional relations, it is premised on an assumption that Southerners were exposed to no comparable social pressures—that they were free to choose between the acts they committed, which brought on a profound crisis and Civil War, and a more rational, controlled, and peaceable course. In short, like the old revisionist interpretation, it is one-sided, for it fails to recognize the predicament of the South.

In a slave society, especially one in which racial and cultural differences separated masters and slaves, certain intrinsic stresses existed that added another

factor to the antebellum political equation and made southern behavior as understandable and predictable as the rise of abolitionism in the North. These southern stresses, together with the circumstances that produced northern antislavery, make untenable either the revisionist concept or the alternative concept of a repressible conflict. They bring us back to Seward's "irrepressible conflict between opposing and enduring forces," but not to the clash of economic interests seen by [Charles A.] Beard, or even to the clash of cultures variously described by, among others, [Edward] Channing, [Allan] Nevins, and [Eugene D.] Genovese. Slavery produced in the South not a unique culture in any primordial sense, but a special set of problems.

Slavery, of course, was at bottom a labor system, and property in slaves constituted the largest capital investment of most masters. That the South's nearly 400,000 slaveholders should have been reluctant to surrender this vast interest may not have been admirable, but it was hardly irrational. James H. Hammond of South Carolina was being coldly realistic when he posed his well-known rhetorical question: "[Were] ever any people, civilized or savage, persuaded by arguments, human or divine, to surrender, voluntarily, two billion dollars?" That a proslavery argument should have been devised to defend an interest of such magnitude was not surprising, and it is logical to assume that a substantial number of slaveholders, by accepting its validity, truly believed in the morality of slavery and thus insulated themselves from the abolitionist assault.

As a justification of a viable labor system and large capital investment the proslavery argument was in part a product of the practical realities of southern economic life. However, in its most common form, it was not a defense of slavery in general but, more specifically, of the subordination of black slaves to white masters. The racial dimension of southern bondage explains, perhaps better than the economic interests involved, the violent and sometimes irrational response to antislavery attacks. Slavery thus injected not one but two ineluctable realities into southern life: first, the large economic interest is represented, and, second, the emotion-laden race issue which deeply concerned slaveholders and non-slaveholders alike. In 1860, black slaves constituted nearly one-third of the southern population. In two states (South Carolina and Mississippi) they outnumbered the whites; in four others (Florida, Georgia, Alabama, and Louisiana) the number of slaves and of whites was about equal. If racism was a powerful force in the northern states, which contained a scant quarter-million free blacks, it was a force of overwhelming proportions in the southern states, where one-third as many whites lived with a quarter-million free blacks and four million black slaves.

Given the almost universal conviction, heavily stressed in the proslavery argument, that blacks were not only physically but intellectually and emotionally different from and inferior to whites, and that assimilation would be a racial disaster, slavery had great significance as a system of control. Slavery was—so went the conventional wisdom—the only sure way to maintain the

supremacy of the white race. Phillips identified white Southerners as "a people with a common resolve indomitably maintained—that [the South] shall be and remain a white man's country. The consciousness of a function in these premises, whether expressed with the frenzy of a demagogue or maintained with a patrician's quietude, is the cardinal test of a Southerner and the central theme of Southern history." This statement may border on hyperbole, but it was inspired by the knowledge that many white Southerners, non-slaveholders not the least among them, made the preservation of white supremacy a central concern of their lives. Accordingly, an attack on slavery was a threat not only to the southern economy but to the entire white race.

However, if Southerners preserved slavery in part to govern an alien race, they relied on a system with some serious built-in dangers. The volatile ingredient inherent in a slave society was the unpredictable behavior of the slaves, who were controlled primarily by force or the threat of force. Individual acts of violence against whites were not uncommon; organized conspiracies and insurrections occurred infrequently, but the danger was ever present. Southerners never forgot the Santo Domingo insurrection of the 1790s, in which most of the white population was exterminated, or the Gabriel conspiracy in Richmond in 1800, or the Denmark Vesey conspiracy in Charleston in 1822, or the Nat Turner insurrection in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831, in which nearly sixty whites lost their lives. In the South the white population had to be forever on guard—to maintain special patrols, to restrict the movements of slaves, to prohibit them from gathering in large numbers unless whites were present, to give whites despotic power over slaves, and almost never to question a white man for his treatment of a slave. The antebellum South was a land troubled by a nagging dread of slave insurrections; indeed, it is impossible to understand the psychology of white Southerners, or the events of the sectional conflict, without taking this fact into account.

If the fear of slave violence was a constant, at certain times, when a conspiracy was discovered, or more commonly, when rumors of a conspiracy were afloat, the fear bordered on the pathological, if it did not explode into pure hysteria. John Randolph once told his fellow congressmen: "I speak from facts when I say, that the night bell never tolls for fire in Richmond, that the mother does not hug the infant more closely to her bosom. I have been witness to some of the alarms in the capital of Virginia." In 1822, a group of Charlestonians sent a memorial to the state legislature asserting that there was "only [one] principle that can maintain slavery, the 'principle of fear.' . . . We should always act as if we had an enemy in the very bosom of the state, prepared to rise upon and surprise the whites, whenever an opportunity afforded."

These candid statements of the anxieties that were endemic in the antebellum South tell a great deal about the sources of the American sectional conflict. In the name of white supremacy and to protect the South from the horrors of Santo Domingo, as well as to secure the slaveholders' economic

interests, the agitation of abolitionists *had* to be suppressed, the Gag Rule enforced, the mails censored, the "intellectual blockade" maintained. These were the inescapable imperatives of southern life as surely as abolitionism was an unavoidable product of intellectual currents in the nineteenth-century North. Without these imperatives John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry might have been dismissed as a ridiculous event, at most a minor irritant, and would not have induced the acute slave-conspiracy hysteria that swept the South during the crucial presidential election of 1860.

A significant number of Southerners seemed not to have found the proslavery argument a fully convincing defense of their peculiar institution, and consequently the pressure on them in this tension-ridden society was all the more severe. Many, perhaps most, slaveholders accepted the system because the slaves were black, but great numbers of them were tormented by the accusation that they were parties to a betrayal of the principles embodied in the Declaration of Independence. Those who were troubled by moral uncertainties seldom resolved their problem by surrendering their investments and abandoning a profitable labor system, and certainly their private doubts made them love their abolitionist critics none the more. Rather, they united with those who firmly believed in the morality of slavery in a desperate attempt to escape the threat of abolitionism from without and to minimize the danger of slave rebellion from within. As a last resort they sought both security and tranquillity through independence.

The historians of the repressible conflict thus failed to reconcile their case not only with the essential reality of a northern antislavery movement but with certain inescapable facts of southern slave society. Economic interests, racial beliefs, and fear of slave insurrections impelled Southerners to make demands and take actions that precipitated a series of sectional confrontations culminating in the secession crisis of 1860- 61. The Republican party of the 1850s was not an abolitionist party, as most Southerners seemed to think, and slavery in the southern states was never a clear issue in the politics of that decade. But the party was vaguely antislavery; its ranks contained an articulate minority of strong- minded abolitionists; and, for both racist and moral reasons, it was firmly committed to keeping slavery out of the territories. This is what gave substance to the southern perception of the Republican party as a threat to its peculiar institution. The interplay of these proslavery and antislavery forces, not the irresponsible blunders of northern or southern politicians, or economic conflict, or irreconcilable cultural differences, brought on the irrepressible conflict about which Seward spoke.

There still remains the question of the evitabil- ity or inevitability of the Civil War itself—a question that will probably continue to be, as it is now, unanswerable. It may well be that the country reached a point sometime in the 1850s when it would have been almost impossible to avoid a violent resolution of the sectional crisis. During that decade, northern antislavery and southern

proslavery radicals became increasingly militant and prone to anticipate an ultimate resort to armed conflict; and the point of no return may have been reached in 1857 with the Dred Scott decision, the Kansas crisis, Douglas's break with the Buchanan administration, and the severe economic panic of that year. This, of course, is sheer speculation, for, as Seward would have reminded us, to make a case for an irrepressible conflict is not to prove the inevitability of war. But somehow the war came, and it seems no less tragic because it resulted from conditions and events more substantial than the irresponsible acts of a blundering generation. The irrepressible conflict of antebellum years made the war, if not inevitable, at least an understandable response to its stresses by men and women no more or less wise than we.