

‘GREASE AND SLIDE BACK INTO THE UNION’: PATRIOTIC ESSENTIALISM, THE CIVIL WAR, AND POSTBELLUM REUNIFICATION

By Adam Thomas

During a speech in South Carolina in July 1859, Southern secessionist stalwart Robert Barnwell Rhett told his audience:

We endure [...] a despotic government. The First step in the broad road to ruin and dishonor, with nations as well as individuals, is often decisive of their destiny. How thoroughly did our great ancestors understand this truth, when they fought their great battles for liberty! They did not allow the hand of oppression to rest on them [...]. Let us place before the world fully and fairly the rights which we claim under the Constitution, denied by our Confederates in the North. (Davis 2000, 6-8)

Rather more famously, Abraham Lincoln said in his Gettysburg Address in November 1863 that:

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great Civil War, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. (MacArthur 1996, 368)

We have here the views of a Union leader and an outspoken and extreme proponent of the Confederate cause. Both cite the memory and philosophy of the founding fathers, both use rhetoric from the Revolution, and both refer to the doctrines of the government they created. Two politicians, fundamentally opposed and at war, evoked the same brand of American patriotism to justify their beliefs. This was by no means a unique occurrence; men on both sides of the conflict, from foot soldiers to Presidents, believed that their cause was the true defence of American ideals and that their opponents' viewpoint would only corrupt their country's ideology. Even when the South formed its own nation, it did so not to separate itself from the ideals of the United States, but to return to them, feeling they had been lost in the North. The Confederate Constitution, with few exceptions (most notably the legitimisation of slavery) reflected verbatim the original (Rable 1994, 44). As Anne Sarah Rubin states, 'new Confederates created a national culture in a large part by drawing on the usable American past' (Rubin 2005, 11). The first paradox is: two sides, bitterly opposed fought a violent war, but with matching adoration for the same country and the same confidence in their righteousness.

When reminiscing about his experiences at war's close, Confederate soldier William Fletcher recalled a conversation between a foot soldier and cavalryman in the North Carolina Regiment. The former asked the latter if he had any bacon, to which the response was positive: 'Grease and slide back into the Union,' said the infantryman (Fletcher 1997, 195). This, for Fletcher, summed up his feelings about reunification with the North; it was that easy and natural. Fletcher's narrative was first published in 1908, by which time the remaking of popular memory and the 'Lost Cause' mythology were well underway, and therefore it is noticeably devoid of references to ideological conflict. Many soldiers obviously experienced far stronger emotions than Fletcher did when rejoining the Union, and the spirit of independence is still felt by many Southerners – even to this day, the Confederate flag still flies outside South Carolina's Capitol building, although it was moved from the rooftop to

the lawn in 2000 (*Callaloo* 2001, 196; Bonner 2002, 1). But, despite these remaining tensions, the restoration of the Union was in fact almost as quick as Fletcher felt it should be.

This does not suggest that the process was easy. Reunification was made possible only by economic collapse and the drastic cultural and political changes that Radical Reconstruction mandated of a society broken by war. For many Southerners, like filmmaker D.W. Griffith, Reconstruction was 'agony' (Griffith 1915). But the fact that Southern whites perceived themselves to have suffered quite so much makes their repatriation all the more incredible. When viewed *prima facie*, it is difficult to see how ideological difference and (to the Southern mind) the cruel punishment of Reconstruction were overcome. But the difficulties were overcome, and the South slid back into the Union. The second paradox is: by the early twentieth century, a section that had fought for independence so fiercely only two decades before had become comfortable in a reunified nation, and was welcomed by its Northern white counterparts almost as if discord had never occurred.

Both inconsistencies can be resolved with a single explanation: the fundamental ambiguity surrounding what exactly it meant to be American both antagonised and alleviated sectional conflict. Differing views on what the American nation truly stood for allowed each side to view their opponents as deviants from the national ethos they themselves still upheld. Furthermore, opposing views could easily be reconciled after time because when all else was stripped away, each view was effectively patriotic, allowing for a relatively swift reconciliation of such a tumultuous episode in American history. This is not to say that the Union was univocal in one view of America and the Confederacy in another; these ideas were fluid and crossovers occurred. As we have already seen, the founding fathers and their work could be cited on either side (Bryan 1950, 53), and as Robert Cook says, there was a 'strong sense among Americans of a shared Revolutionary heritage [...]. Americans on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line were taught [...] to revere the military exploits of the Revolutionary generation' (Cook 2003, 11). However, despite cultural similarities, differing mindsets dominated on either side of that famous border, and it is these inconsistent interpretations of America and all its symbols that precipitated both a civil war and the reunification.

Few historians deny that patriotism played a role in both sections before and during the war, but there is a panoply of views on what purpose patriotism served and how it was conceived. There are considerably more studies of Confederate notions of nationalism than there are of Unionist ones, chief among which are the works of Emory M. Thomas, Paul D. Escott, Anne Sarah Rubin and Drew Gilpin Faust. Thomas denies the existence of any sense of nationalism, while Escott uses an absence of patriotism as evidence of Jefferson Davis's ineptitude as a leader (Thomas 1979, 19; Escott 1992, ix). Rubin and Faust dispute the absence of patriotism, arguing instead for concerted efforts made towards the creation of Confederate unity. Rubin focuses on the shift from 'corrupted' American to 'pure' Confederate nationalism, and the omission of slavery in nation-building discourses, while Faust deals primarily with Southern religiosity as both a uniting and divisive force (Rubin 2005, 3). The existence of Confederate patriotism cannot be denied seriously; that the Confederacy successfully created its own constitution, government, postal service, currency, army and flag is suggestive of the powerful belief behind it (McPherson 1988, 257-8; Rubin 2005, 11). While some see Confederate loss as testament to a lack of patriotism, it makes more sense to argue that the South was able to make a brutal war last four years against a foe vastly superior in numbers and materials in part because of the citizens' righteous pride in the existence of the Confederacy.¹

The most significant study of the Union is Melinda Lawson's *Patriot Fires* (2002). Lawson convincingly argues that during the war leading figures in the North deliberately recreated American nationalism through a focus on pre-existing religious, political and cultural values and on a new

¹ Kenneth M. Stampp makes this argument about Southern defeat equating to a lack of nationalism in *The Imperiled Union: Essays on the Background of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 255.

concept of a benevolent state (Lawson 2002, 11). George M. Frederickson's study of intellectuals, *The Inner Civil War* (1965), and Jeanie Attie's study of women, *Patriotic Toil* (1998), are limited in focus to specific groups. As Frederickson's subjects were instrumental in the creation of nationalist sentiments, it remains useful. Such works are important in understanding the minutiae of patriotism, but as it is not their main focus, they are understandably detached from the broader context that would allow the full impact of Civil War patriotism to be realised. As Faust claims, more studies of patriotism in itself are required (Faust 1990, 4).

Surprisingly, only one short survey of Civil War national loyalty attempts to compare Northern and Southern ideas. James McPherson's assertion that Southern patriotism was formed across ethnic ties, while Northern ideas were based on civic duty is a milestone, but hardly definitive (McPherson 1999, 102). It reinforces the argument formed here that the North put great emphasis on government rule of law, but does little to investigate the roots of Southern ideology. In avoiding comparison, the current historiography is incapable of connecting secession with reunification, and thus does not address the full impact of divergent, yet not so divergent, nationalisms. This study seeks to make exactly that connection. By examining how these different interpretations of being American affected and were affected by some of the issues touted as the causes of war (economic and cultural difference, slavery, State's rights) and reunification, a suitable place can be found for the role of nationalism in Civil War history.

In the North, focus dominated on individual civil freedoms guaranteed by stable federal government. It was a nation founded on 'legislative and institutional notions of benevolence' (Lawson 2002, 17). The North felt more strongly than the South a literal sense of the inalienable rights that the Declaration of Independence provided and, furthermore, in many areas (although by no means all), a belief that these rights were due to *every* man. If an individual symbol was to be picked for Northern patriotism, the Bill of Rights would be the most appropriate. Indeed, it is possible to trace a direct link between the Bill of Rights and the most tangible result of Northern patriotic thinking, the Fourteenth Amendment (Watson 1998, 446; Curtis 1982, 237). Freedom stipulated by the Constitution manifested itself in manumission, wage labour and, more coherently, in suffrage. It was predicated upon the theory (though not necessarily the practice) that one and all had access to the economy and political machinery. It is of no surprise, then, that anti-slavery sentiment was a large factor in the development of the War. As well as preserving the Union, many soldiers enlisted in response to slave-power and slavery itself. When one Captain in the 115th Ohio Volunteer Infantry announced his enlistment, his father replied, 'Son, the last twenty years I have been praying to God to let the oppressed go free; after the darkness light will come; go, my son.' (Switzer 2005, 90). Anti-slavery opinions obviously stretched beyond the abolitionist stronghold of New England. In short, the Union vision of liberty was largely capitalist, emancipationist, centralised, and conducted from Washington, D.C.

Southern rights were not supplied by Washington; they were almost literally 'grown' at local level. In keeping with its single biggest influence - Jeffersonian republicanism - the Southern American mindset enjoyed freedom that was achieved through physical independence, not guaranteed on paper by the central government. The self-sufficiency incumbent upon a small agricultural homestead was for Southerners the true meaning of America; it was literally, the 'land of the free.' Focus on the necessity of landownership, cultivation and hand-to-mouth survival nullified any potential incongruity in the existence of slavery and the belief in liberty for mankind, justifying enslavement as a means to avoid debt (Morgan 1972, 7). Thomas Jefferson had said in 1787 that to relinquish any land was 'an abandonment of the fairest subject for the payment of our public debts, and the chaining those debts on our own necks, *in perpetuum*' (Jefferson 'Letter to James Madison'). Paranoid fear of financial obligation was a constant staple of Jefferson's philosophy, and to him the best antidote was the 'encouragement of agriculture.' Thus, ownership as a bulwark to debt was adopted, while requests that 'the minority possess their equal rights' were ignored by large portions of the

antebellum South when considering the expansion of slavery (Browne 2003, xiv, xv). They equated racial equality with potential personal jeopardy; only the ownership of property, both land and slave, could secure the independence that had been sought since 1776.

The southern slave-holders were not the only ones who were patriotic. Non-slave-holding classes joined the elites in fostering Southern nationalism, and used their participation to alleviate class inequalities. In exchange for social reform, they continued to support slavery-inclusive 'American' nationalism (Faust 1990, 34). A perceived attack on slavery was thus an attack on American principles. Previously loyal Unionists such as Jubal Early were perfectly sincere in the belief, once war began, that 'Abraham Lincoln, his councillors and his supporters, [were] the real traitors who had overthrown the government and constitution of the United States' (Early 2001, xxi). When Confederates went to war to uphold their right to keep slaves, they did so as self-conscious patriots. One Southern soldier claimed that to suggest differently did 'a grievous injury to half a million patriot soldiers who were animated by as pure a love of liberty as ever throbbed in the bosom of man' (McKim 1911, 18).

Despite this critical duality in the culture of Americanism, it would be hugely inaccurate to depict North and South as polar opposites. To this end we must avoid labelling Southern society as 'anti-capitalist,' labelling the North as non-agricultural, or claiming there was no interaction between the two economies (Pessen 1980, 1123). However, the Southern relationship to agrarianism manifested itself differently; it formed the basis of its culture, whereas in the North it no longer did. Industrialisation and manumission had shifted its focus. In keeping with Clifford Geertz's model of nationalism, a more modernised society moved away from a focus on ethnic community ties to civic ones (Hutchinson and Smith 1994, 31). The South, as a less modern, more reactionary section, did not. As McPherson points out, culturally the North had changed, while 'the South changed relatively little' (McPherson 2004, 432).

The change exacerbated the division in patriotic imagination, and it was never more explicit than in the rise of the Republican Party. The ideology of the initial Republican and then Union Party is itself a good indicator of the causes and effects of Northern nationalism (Lawson 2002, 68). Although we must be careful of simply equating the Republican or Unionist parties with 'the North' (as support was far from univocal for either) the fact that Lincoln was comfortably elected in 1860 by a Northern coalition, and that he won by landslide in 1864, suggests a certain amount of correlation between Northern ideals and party ideologies (Foner 1982, 8). Lincoln's presidency threatened the South simply because his Republican Party clearly represented the nationalism that differed so much from the Southern ideal. Its centralising, free labour, capitalist drive was the antithesis of Jeffersonian republicanism. The obvious opposition of slavery and free labour ideologies was heightened by the Republican rise to power that signaled a move beyond mere difference of economies or cultures to a war of nationalities.

Rapid industrialisation in the North was another catalyst to change. As long as the likes of Rockefeller and Carnegie benefited hugely from trading with the Union during the war, they were likely to share in Northern patriotism, if only for profit. Furthermore, as the greatest beneficiaries of capitalism, industrial magnates felt none of Jefferson's anxiety over an economy based on debt, and thus did not experience the mistrust for commercialism his ideas inspired in the South (Hicks 1935, 2). Furthermore, they wanted none of the responsibility for their workers that 'Jeffersonian' slave-owners had for their indentured servants.

The urbanised working class had different motivations, but found the same solution. As theorists of 'modern' nationalism have often argued, industrial urbanisation breeds political consciousness and desire (Gellner 1983, 40). For David Williams, in very much a 'history from below' point of view, industrialists blunted the dangers of such a scenario by using patriotism as a tool to divide a growing

labour movement along racial and ethnic lines (Williams 2006, 125). He perhaps ignores the close relationship of Northern labour and the Republican Party. Republican ideology contributed hugely to Northern national consciousness, and workers certainly played their part (Foner 1982, 12).

In the middle classes, the appearance of a self-consciously 'intellectual' group in the North proved another difference from Southern society. There were of course intellectuals in the South, but as Frederickson points out, 'most of the celebrated writers and thinkers at the time were Northerners' (Frederickson 1965, viii). It was more common for Southerners 'to express themselves in deeds' rather than in words (Thomas 1979, 255). The willingness with which many anti-war intellectuals took up the Union mantle is evidence of their belief that it was the best way to achieve a truly 'American' civilisation (Williams 1958, 477-8). To those invested in the North's cultural institutions, the inalienable rights guaranteed in Washington were of more importance than the autonomy afforded by an agricultural system they would never experience. Of even greater import was the belief that secession in the South hailed the advent of a radical individualism that posed a serious threat to Northern social stability and, by connection, Northern institutions. For men such as Henry Bellows and Ralph Emerson, the North's growing nationalist desire to deal firmly with the South was the perfect antidote to the threat. As Bellows said, 'when threatening and anxious times come upon us, then all the great realities begin to shine out. Citizenship and nationality [...]' (Frederickson 1965, 54). Because of their own faith in Northern nationality, they threw themselves so readily behind the cause of building patriotic loyalty to it (Frederickson 1965, 131).

Just as Northerners perceived a threat from the South, Southerners felt the same in reaction to the growing capitalism and antislavery interests above the border. United in the common concern of maintaining slavery, they established loyalty to slavery as an ideal, but secession became an ideal in itself as well. (Carp 2002, 13; Rubin 2005, 11). In search of legitimacy, Southerners drew direct parallels between secession and the revolution of 1776. Like the British before them, Yankees were painted as decadent and greedy, while the South was the moral force guarding the legacies of the founding fathers (Rubin 2005, 14). As Jefferson Davis claimed, the 'government of the Confederate States is in conformity to that established by the fathers of the American Revolution' (Davis 'First Inaugural Address'). Confederates constantly repeated that the founding fathers avoided 'subjecting themselves to the dominion and authority of a centralised [...] government,' meaning that Republican aims of ending slavery contravened the rights of states to govern themselves as British sovereignty had flouted the entitlement of its subjects (Wakelyn 1996, 36). This attitude only deepened as Lincoln resorted to more and more to actions that could be viewed as despotic during the conflict (Neely 1991, 220). Centralised control over the states was for Jeffersonians 'the most corrupt government on the earth,' and the shared fear of it played a significant role in consolidating Southern nationalism against Northern 'treachery.' (Jefferson, 'A Few Plain Duties').

Northerners replied with similar depictions of its opponent as traitors to the nation and its heritage, by carefully separating the rebellion of 1861 from that of 1776. For example, an address given at the Pennsylvania Democratic State Central Committee in 1862 asked '[i]s there a Pennsylvanian who values the title of American citizen – who reveres the memory of the men of the Revolution [...] who abhors anarchy or despotism – or who claims to possess a manly, patriotic heart, that is not prepared to pledge life, fortune and sacred honor for his country?' (*Republican Compiler* 1862). The speaker made a deliberate connection between Southern action and lawlessness in an attempt to remove any respectability from the claims of Rhett and his ilk that secession was a continuation of the Revolution. In so doing, and by reaffirming the Northern connection to 1776, the address continued the definition of Northern nationalism along aggressive lines. Others labelled South Carolina, the original secessionist state, as a 'hot-bed of treason' (Switzer 2005, 188). The Union Party appealed to a similar sense of nationalism as a tool against partisanship in the Northern political arena when fighting for Lincoln's reelection in 1864, so that '[r]ather than a referendum on who

should control the government, voting for Lincoln was a test of loyalty to the cause' (Smith 2006, 131). By proxy, the Unionists sought to equate voting for the Democrats with treason.

The New York Times also focused on lawlessness when it referred to the rebellion as 'so foul and causeless a conspiracy' perpetrated against 'loyal upholders of the best and most beneficent Government that the sun has yet witnessed' by the 'lawless insurgents of the Southern Heptarchy.' Emphasis on criminality was guided by Northern ideology in which the process of government-sanctioned law was a better guarantee of freedom than physically enforced independence. In that spirit, the reporter wrote, 'the brawlers of the Cotton State tap-rooms, the desperadoes of the Mississippi gaming-table, have long been unable to account otherwise for the concerted refusal of many Northern representatives to violate the laws, both of God and man, by engaging in duels, whenever challenged' (*New York Times* 1861).

Loyal Confederates saw Northern action in terms of foreign occupation (Rubin 2005, 89). Viewing American virtues through the lens of land-owning culture, they did not recognise Union attacks as fighting for an opposing ideology, but as invasion of their home soil. As one Southerner wrote, '[the] enemy is crowding around us like so many pirates to rob us of our rights [...] to steal our property and leave desolation in our path' (*Cotton States* 1864). It was not only journalists, but soldiers too who viewed Northern action in this way. One Confederate war song ran:

Northern vandals tread our soil,
Forth they come for blood and spoil,
To the homes we've gained with toil
[...] Traitorous Lincoln's bloody band
Now invades the freeman's land (Fagan 2005, 94).

Yet this hatred for Northern treachery was largely forgotten within fifty years of the war's end. There have been several explanations offered as to how reconciliation was so quickly and completely achieved. It is almost universally (and correctly) accepted that the biggest single reason was the rise of the 'Lost Cause' mythology, and its popularity in the North. Ideology was largely forgotten, and emphasis was instead placed upon shared experience of wartime hardship and battle courage. States' Right was forwarded as the cause instead of the defence of slavery, and Reconstruction was portrayed as a crime committed against the South, in which unprepared enfranchised African Americans had freedom thrust upon them by the North. The 'Dunningite' school of history lent these sentiments an academic legitimacy and Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* (1915) imprinted it upon the popular memory of the (re)United States (Foner 1988, 609).

There are different opinions as to why the mythology was readily accepted in the North, but few studies have considered the remaking of popular memory in-depth, since for many 'to attack Confederate myths is somehow seen as an attack on the South itself' (Davis 1996, 177). Of those who have questioned it, many like Michael Rogin and Cecelia Elizabeth O'Leary suggest that the prevalence of foreign immigrants in the North sparked cross-sectional sympathy over the trials of controlling a racially inferior workforce (Lang 1994, 253; O'Leary 1999, 129). While it surely played a part, this reason alone is not convincing. Neither foreign immigration nor anti-immigrant feeling was new in the late nineteenth-century North, as the success of the Know-Nothing Party in the 1856 election shows, running as it did on a largely anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic ticket. Indeed, the Know-Nothing success was largely confined to the North (Gienapp 1985, 530-1). Apparently anti-immigrant feeling did not forge sectional alliance in the 1850s, so it seems unlikely that this alone forged it after the war. An alternative explanation might simply be the considerable unpopularity of conflict after a bloody and brutal war. This also seems unlikely considering that even during the war, when brutality was most apparent and the North was suffering its heaviest losses, Democrat Richard

Winthrop's suggestion that North and South rush 'into each other's arms under the old flag of our fathers' was hugely unpopular (Smith 2006, 128).

Edward J. Blum stresses the role of Protestantism in creating a unifying image of America, an image in which godliness and whiteness were paramount. Incorporating the growing popularity of social-Darwinist ethnography, Protestant pastors used race as a tool to reunite the country (Blum 2005, 43). Blum's ideas represent the most sophisticated idea to date, but more can be added. While Northerners and Southerners certainly did create a new American nationalism at the expense of ethnic minorities, racist science was not the only weapon in their arsenal; they were also able to employ the 'usable American past' that Rubin highlighted.

When describing how her grandfather had felt when enlisting for the Second Virginia Cavalry, Susan Leigh Blackford claimed that he, and other Virginians, were particularly vexed because no 'state in the South had been more devoted than Virginia. It was literally the child of her loins, and she could not stand idly by and see it destroyed without solemnly protesting against the sacrilege' (Blackford and Blackford 1947, 2). H. E. Belin wrote that '[it] was not the fear of losing its slaves, therefore, that drove the South to arms in 1861, but rather the fear of losing those rights bequeathed to it by its revolutionary sires and solemnly guaranteed to it by the constitution of the United States' (Belin 1903, 259). These references to antebellum history are examples of how Americans used the ambiguity in the meaning of 'America' to justify reunification. In appealing to sentiments surrounding Virginia's role in founding the country, and the Constitution itself, Southerners used this indistinctness in a way that was antithetical to previous uses. Northerners could accept the ambiguity because, when all was said and done, it was 'American.' John Carvell Hatzell was just one of many Northerners ready to admit that their 'enemies [...] fought for what they considered right and true, and no men ever displayed more fortitude and bravery [...] and these men were] the best and noblest men' (Switzer 2005, 194). The description 'right and true' can be taken to mean 'American,' as the country became a higher power to appeal to than it had been during the war and its immediate aftermath.

That the nation had this unifying power at this particular juncture rather than before was the result of a pragmatic understanding of circumstance. By the early twentieth century, the former Confederacy found itself in a position of shared interest with the North, which slavery and a slave-based economy had previously prevented. Once the Old South was truly beyond reach, shared interests of capitalism, white superiority and religion impressed the logic of reunification upon white Americans both above and below the Mason-Dixon Line. For the Postbellum South, the North meant 'philanthropic allies to help in the building of schools and other institutions [...The South now] counted on the power of markets, contracts and profits to reinvent the economy' (Ayers 2006, 146). The former Confederacy finally experienced the 'change' to which McPherson refers, and redeveloped economic and social kinship with the North that it had not seen since the spread of Northern manumission. In order to give these new interests an historical legitimacy, they referred to the similarities in their heritage that they had ignored in the 1860s. By doing so, they were able to conclusively 'slide back into the Union.'

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