

Chapter 120. The Growing Sectional Divide As Van Buren Leaves Office (1841)



Beware of Threats to the Union

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Time: 1776-Forward

The South's Historical Narrative Around Slavery In America

While the timing is premature, John Calhoun's warnings in 1837 and 1838 about the deep divisions between the South and the North over the future preservation and expansion of slavery will prove prophetic.

The Southern view is now well articulated in a narrative that harkens back to the start of the nation. It goes as follows:

- The practice of slavery does not originate in America but is imported here by the British.
- Most of the nation's slaves enter the country through ports in the North, not the South.
- Over time, the North manages to cleanse itself of its slave population.
- The Africans are an inherently inferior and potentially violent species, incapable of being assimilated.
- The "burden" of caring for -- and controlling -- the slaves then falls entirely on the South.
- In return for managing this burden, the South uses the slaves to support their agrarian economy.
- The slaves are also given the chance to embrace Christianity along the way and achieve salvation.
- The best interests of the nation are served by supporting the South's practices and needs related to slavery.

- That kind of regional cooperation was exactly what the founding fathers sanctioned in the 1787 Constitution.
- The Union is being threatened by stealing power from the states and handing it to the federal government.
- The South will leave the Union if the federal power is turned against its interests in slavery.

These are the themes picked up and recited in the 1830's by slavery's most aggressive defenders, especially in South Carolina.

The institution has endured in the South out of "obligation and duty" to the nation. Blacks are "so poor, so wretched, and so vile...as to be totally disqualified from exercising freedom." Instead of criticizing and meddling in slavery, the North should be thankful to the South for "fulfilling the high trust which has devolved on us as owners of slaves."

Time: 1841

The South's View Of Life In The North

Along with the South's defense of its "planter society" comes a scathing indictment of the many woes it sees in the North's shift away from Jefferson's agricultural vision and to Hamilton's capitalism and industrialization.

- The basic freedoms and values Americans hold dear are now threatened across the North.
- No longer is it a place where independent farmers are working their own land, enjoying comparable wealth and influence, avoiding debt, solving their own domestic issues at the local level, and electing a small, fiscally frugal national government whose main role lies in managing foreign affairs.
- Instead wealth and power have been concentrated in the hands of a few at the expense of the many.
- The villains here are capitalism and corporations which place private profits above public good.
- Together they encourage personal greed and "get rich quick" speculation.
- Together they end all too often with personal debt and corruption.
- A corrupt corporate banking system provides the fuel for these schemes by printing and distributing soft money "unbacked" by gold and silver, thus eroding the "real value" of the dollar for all Americans.
- Corrupt politicians, co-opted by the wealthy few into supporting their profit-making programs, threaten the very notion of a "government for the people."
- Corrupt businessmen convert Northern workers into "wage slaves," whose daily lives in factories or offices often leave them worse off than a Southern field hand picking cotton.
- The credo of industrial capitalism across the North lies in maximizing profits for its stockholders over doing what is in the best interests of the country and the common man.
- Most critically, personal freedom has been eroded across the North. Jefferson's yeoman farmer is, above all else a free (white) man, indebted to no one but himself. He is not a wage earner, dependent on a capitalistic owner/boss for his economic well-being. Nor is he a borrower, in hock to a capitalistic banker. Being free economically, he can be free politically. Government is there to serve him; not vice versa.

Starting from these principles, the South sees the North's drift toward big cities and big factories, big banks and big government, not only as a threat to its chosen economic path, but to its personal values and its very "way of life."

Time: 1841

The Northern Narrative About The South

By 1841, many Northerners are likewise forming up a negative impression of the South.

The basis for this is definitely not moral qualms related to the institution of slavery.

Indeed the vast majority of whites across the North and West have already signaled in state Constitutions and "black codes" that they want nothing to do with blacks – be they slaves or freed men – in their midst.

Instead, the antipathy felt probably centers on a "sense of privilege" perceived at play in Southern society.

The target here is the Southern planter class, with their vast farms, aristocratic lifestyles, and leisurely indulgences, all built off the backs of unpaid slave laborers.

The hard daily work recorded by the white men of the North – be it on farms or in cities – seems disrespected by the planter system that dominates the South. Over time, Northern politicians will vilify this system as an affront "to the dignity of free white labor."

The sense of Southern privilege also seems to be operating within the Federal government.

The fact that four of the first five US President are Virginians is not lost on the Northern politicians in Washington.

Nor is the sense that the make-up of the Senate is rigged to insure that the Southern states retain equal control over the passage of legislation – despite the fact that Census counts show a widening majority of citizens living up North.

Animosity of this sort also grows around actions like the 1836 "Gag Rule," the South's attempt to shut down debate on the abolist petitions. It is not that the North supports these petitions – rather that a certain amount of heavy-handed Southern arrogance seems at work in the demands.

As the Northern economy takes off along with city life, the South also begins to appear backwards, as if it has been left behind. In its attempts to block congressional programs to build needed roads, canals and other infrastructure needs of the country, it appears out of touch and self-serving.

The sum total of these impulses across the North and West is to push back on the South, to "put it in its place," especially when its planter class seems intent on exercising its privilege.

At times in almost perverse fashion, the North will discover that nothing rattles the South like goading it over the institution of slavery.

Time: 1841

Two Roads Diverging In 1841

As a disappointed Van Buren exits the White House, sectional differences that almost prevented the formation of the Union in 1787 are intensifying.

The South, frozen in its agrarian tradition, betting its entire future on crops of cotton and slaves, growing suspicious that the North will stand in the way of its future success.

The North, impatient to move on to the promises of capitalism and industrialization, sensing a backwards South asserting unwarranted privilege and blocking progress.

The threat of dis-union in the air.

All with echoes of George Washington's 1796 Farewell Address ringing in the background:

The unity of government which constitutes you one people is ...now dear to you.

Discountenance... even a suspicion that it can in any event be abandoned...frown upon...every attempt to alienate any portion of our country from the rest, or to enfeeble the sacred ties which now link together the various parts.

With slight shades of difference, you have the same religion, manners, habits and political principles. You Have in a Common cause fought and triumphed together; the independence and liberty you possess are the work of joint counsels...common sufferings and successes.

The most commanding motives (exist) for carefully guarding and preserving the union of the whole... Protected by the equal laws of a common government...the North...the South..the East...the West...secure enjoyment of ...outlets for their own production...across agriculture and manufacturing.

(Beware) of the danger of Parties in the State, with particular reference to the founding of them on geographical discriminations...The alternate domination of one faction over another, shaped by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension...

The name of American, which belongs to you... must always exalt the just pride of patriotism.

Sidebar: Those Exiting And Entering The Public Stage In 1840

Exiting	Death	Age At Death
Charles Pinckney	October 29, 1824	67 years
CC Pinckney	August 16, 1825	79
William Eustis	February 6, 1825	71
John Adams	July 4, 1826	90
Thomas Jefferson	July 4, 1826	83
Luther Martin	July 10, 1826	78
Rufus King	April 29, 1827	72
John Jay	May 17, 1829	83
David Walker	August 10, 1830	33
James Monroe	July 4, 1831	73
Reverend Thomas Paul	1831	58
John Marshall	July 6, 1835	79
James Madison	June 28, 1836	85
Aaron Burr	September 14, 1836	80
Elijah Lovejoy	November 7, 1837	34
Tecumseh	October 3, 1838	71
Benjamin Lundy	August 22, 1839	50
Robert Hayne	September 24, 1839	47
Aging	Born	Age In 1840
Albert Gallatin	Jan 29, 1761	79
James Forten	September 2, 1766	74
JQ Adams	July 11, 1767	73
Andrew Jackson	March 15, 1767	73
William H Harrison	Feb 8, 1773	67
Roger Taney	March 17, 1777	63
Henry Clay	April 12, 1777	63
James Tallmadge, Jr.	January 28, 1778	62
Richard M. Johnson	October 17, 1780	60
Daniel Webster	January 18, 1782	58
Thomas Hart Benton	March 14, 1782	58
John C Calhoun	March 18, 1782	58
Lewis Cass	October 9, 1782	58
Martin Van Buren	Dec 5, 1782	58
Zachary Taylor	Nov 24, 1784	56
Arthur Tappan	May 22, 1786	54
Winfield Scott	June 13, 1786	54
Theo Frelinghuysen	March 28, 1787	53
John J. Crittenden	September 10, 1787	53
Lewis Tappan	May 23, 1788	52
John Tyler	Mar 29, 1790	50
George McDuffie	August 10, 1790	50
Francis P. Blair	April 12, 1791	49
James Buchanan	April 23, 1791	49

James Birney	February 4, 1792	48
Thaddeus Stevens	April 4, 1792	48
Willie P. Mangum	May 10, 1792	48
George Dallas	July 10, 1792	48
Rev. Charles Finney	August 29, 1792	48
Lucretia Mott	January 3, 1793	47
Sam Houston	March 2, 1793	47
Austin Steward	1793	47
Thomas Dalton	October 17, 1794	46
Emerging	Born	Age in 1840
Silas Wright	May 24, 1795	45
Joshua Giddings	October 6, 1795	45
James Polk	Nov 2, 1795	45
Rev. Samuel Cornish	1795	45
John Bell	February 18, 1796	44
Andrew Butler	November 18, 1796	44
Gerrit Smith	March 6, 1797	43
Thurlow Weed	November 15, 1797	43
Sojourner Truth	1797	43
Rev. Theodore Wright	1797	43
Millard Fillmore	Jan 7, 1800	40
Caleb Cushing	January 17, 1800	40
Daniel Dickinson	September 11, 1800	40
Robert B. Rhett	December 21, 1800	40
Henry Seward	May 16, 1801	39
Brigham Young	June 1, 1801	39
Ralph Waldo Emerson	May 25, 1803	37
Theodore Weld	November 23, 1803	37
Henry Foote	February 28, 1804	36
Nathaniel Hawthorne	July 4, 1804	36
Franklin Pierce	Nov 23, 1804	36
Angelina Grimke	February 20, 1805	35
William Lloyd Garrison	December 12, 1805	35
John Hale	March 31, 1806	34
Henry Wise	December 3, 1806	34
Preston King	October 14, 1806	34
Robert E. Lee	January 19, 1807	33
David Atchison	August 11, 1807	33
Salmon Chase	January 13, 1808	32
Jefferson Davis	June 3, 1808	32
Edgar Allan Poe	January 9, 1809	31
Abraham Lincoln	February 12, 1809	31
Robert MT Hunter	April 21, 1809	31
Hannibal Hamlin	August 27, 1809	31
Charles Lenox Raymond	February 1, 1810	30
David Ruggles	March 15, 1810	30
Robert Toombs	July 2, 1810	30
Robert Purvis	August 4, 1810	30

Charles Sumner	January 6, 1811	29
Owen Lovejoy	January 6, 1811	29
Horace Greeley	February 3, 1811	29
Harriet Beecher Stowe	June 14, 1811	29
Lewis Hayden	December 2, 1811	29
John McClernand	May 12, 1812	28
Alexander Stephens	February 11, 1812	28
John Fremont	January 21, 1813	27
Stephen A Douglas	April 23, 1813	27
William Yancey	August 10, 1814	26
Howell Cobb	September 7, 1815	25
Nathaniel Banks	January 30, 1816	24
Henry David Thoreau	July 12, 1817	23
Frederick Douglass	February 1818	22
Herman Melville	August 1, 1819	21
David Wilmot	January 14, 1820	20
John C. Breckinridge	January 16, 1821	19
Ulysses S. Grant	April 27, 1822	18