

Chapter 169 - Southern Intellectuals Ramp Up Their Defense Of Slavery

Time: !852

The Pro-Slavery Argument Reprises Southern Views On Slavery

In response to the national controversy stirred in 1852 by *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the Charleston firm of Walker, Richards & Co. publishes a 512-page book titled *The Pro-Slavery Argument* – built around four landmark works between 1832 and 1852 by Southern intellectuals:

- *Commentary on the Virginia Debate on Slavery (1832)*, by the academician, Thomas Roderick Dew.
- *Memoir on Slavery (1837)*, by the jurist, Chancellor William J. Harper.
- *Two Letters On Slavery In The U. S. Addressed To Thomas Clarkson, Esq. in 1845*, penned by James Henry Hammond, the budding “fire-eater” politician from South Carolina.
- *The Morals of Slavery (1852)*, an essay from the novelist, Dr. William Gilmore Simms.

Thomas Dew In 1832

The first entry comes from Thomas Roderick Dew, son of a planter, who graduates from William & Mary in 1820, teaches metaphysics and economics there, and eventually serves as President of the college from 1836 to his death in 1846. Dew's contribution comes in the form of his lengthy *Commentary on the Virginia Debate To End Slavery In 1831-32*.

This remarkable debate occurs in the Virginia state legislature in response to Nat Turner's rebellion, where 58 whites are slaughtered by a band of slaves, followed by hundreds of reprisal executions of blacks. The impetus are some forty public petitions which focus on cleansing the state of all Africans, first by freeing the slaves and then shipping them back to Africa. A select committee studies the issues and reports out two resolutions to be voted on by the full body.

One, offered by William Goode, calls for outright rejection of any proposals to emancipate the slaves. The other, from Thomas Jefferson Randolph, asks that a formal plan leading to emancipation be prepared. Actual debating occurs from January 10-25, 1832.

Those favoring emancipation tend to reside west of the Blue Ridge, where personal wealth is less dependent on slavery. They argue that the institution “undermines virtue and morality in the community,” makes a mockery of white laborers who work the land with their own hands, reduces privileged families to lives of “idleness and extravagances,” and retards the

modernization and diversity of the Southern economy. It also leaves the entire white population perpetually vulnerable to more murderous acts of revenge by the Africans living in their midst.

As expected, opponents cite their 5th Amendment rights against government seizure of their property without fair value compensation. They contend that slavery was handed to them by the British, along with the duty of being good stewards in perpetuity, and they have succeeded. In exchange for their labor, the Africans are well cared for, free from worry, and generally happy with their current state.

In rebuttal, William Ballard Preston (later Secretary of the Navy) asserts that slaves are human beings and, as such, should not be treated as “property.” Others join in, questioning whether children should be born into slavery, and whether emancipation alone will reduce the risk to all whites of future terror attacks.

The debate ends on January 25, 1832, with a decision to acknowledge the concerns raised in the petitions, but table any further action in regard to emancipation.

Thomas Dew’s *Commentary* on this debate provides the framework going forward for all who argue that slavery is a “positive good” for society in general and indeed for the slaves themselves. Thus:

- *Slavery is sanctioned in the Bible: God’s chosen people owned slaves and Christ never condemned the practice.*
- *From Greece to Rome to England and America, slavery has been integral to creating great civilizations.*
- *The Africans are inherently inferior to whites and are thus suited to the menial labor they are assigned.*
- *In exchange for this labor they are fed, clothed and protected for life by their paternalistic owners.*

Dew, who owns only one slave his entire life, further concludes that emancipation would cripple the economy of Virginia, and that neither colonization nor assimilation are feasible options.

William J. Harper in 1837

Harper is a prominent lawyer in Columbia, South Carolina who serves briefly in 1826 as a U.S. Senator before defending the state’s “nullification” effort in the late 1820’s. His 1837 lecture titled *Memoir on Slavery* is one of the first to announce the theme of “slavery as a positive good” which is then picked up and repeated by many other Southern rationalists. As Harper says,

The Creator did not intend that every individual human being should be highly cultivated morally and intellectually. It is better that a part should be fully and highly cultivated, and the rest utterly ignorant.¹

Slavery has done more to elevate a degraded race in the scale of humanity; to tame the savage; to civilize the barbarous; to soften the ferocious; to enlighten the ignorant, and to spread the blessings of Christianity among the heathen, than all the missionaries that philanthropy and religion have ever sent forth.¹

James Henry Hammond In 1845

James Hammond regards himself as the logical successor to John C. Calhoun for his unwavering defense of slavery and of the superior society it facilitates across the South.

He ascends to prominence in South Carolina first through a conniving marriage into wealth and then a legal practice that launches him into Calhoun's Nullifier Party in 1828. From there he will go on to serve in the U.S. House (1835-36) – where he is first to propose the “gag rule” tabling anti-slavery petitions – then as state Governor (1842-44), and finally as a U.S. Senator (1857-60).

Nothing so riles Hammond as the abolitionists, domestic and foreign – and editors of *The Pro-Slavery Argument* choose to highlight this topic by reprinting his *Two Letters On Slavery* directed in 1845 to the famous English emancipator, Thomas Clarkson. Along the way here, Hammond chooses to openly announce many charges leveled at slaveholders by abolitionists, and then attempt to brush them aside. But in doing so, he acknowledges the litany of horrors endured by those enslaved.

As for chains and iron, they are rarely used; never I believe except in cases of running away.

As to willfully selling off a husband or wife or child, I believe it is very rarely done, except when some offense has been committed demanding “transportation.”

But your grand charge is that licentiousness in intercourse between the sexes...necessarily arises from slavery.. I do not intend to admit that this charge is just or true. ..I will say that I wish the subject could be avoided...I will not deny that some intercourse of the sort does take place. It's character and extent, however, are grossly and atrociously exaggerated.

Hammond goes on to assure Clarkson, falsely, of his propriety toward those slaves in his care.

I freely acknowledge my obligation as a man to treat humanely the fellow creatures to whom God has entrusted to my charge.

He closes with the contention that, despite the misguided accusations of the abolitionists, the South's slaves inhabit a virtual "Eden," free from troubles, and far better off than the laboring classes in England's factories and mines.

And to sum up all...I believe our slaves are the happiest three millions of human beings on whom the sun shines. Into their Eden is coming Satan in the form of the abolitionists...(and) I affirm that in Great Britain the poor and laboring classes of your own race and color, your fellow citizens, are more miserable and degraded, morally and physically, than our slaves.

As sectional conflicts in the 1850's, James Hammond takes his place among the South Carolina "Fire-Eaters" who lobby for secession. His Senate speech of 1858 – "Cotton Is King" – develops his "mudsill theory" of civilizations and adds another chapter to the "positive good" lexicon.

Dr. William Gilmore Simms In 1852

William Simms emerges from obscurity in Charleston, South Carolina, to become a prolific novelist and political commentator. He converts stories about American history told to him by his grandmother into popular works of literature beginning with the colonial era and extending through the Revolution. His success leads to his inclusion into the "sacred circle" of Southern intellectuals who deliver essays and lectures on cultural issues of the time.

The Morals of Slavery is a reprint of a pamphlet first published in 1838. In it Simms offers up his paternalistic defense of slavery as providing a naturally inferior race the opportunity to become civilized and achieve salvation. All delivered through the benevolence of their white masters.

Taken Together

These Southerners touting the "positive good" thesis tend to mirror their opponents in New England – another fervent band of clergymen, academics, literary men, and a few politicians, all prone to airing their beliefs with the hope of shaping public opinion.

Both are relatively tight knit groups. Dew and Beverly Tucker are colleagues at William & Mary; Tucker's circle includes Simms, Holmes, Ruffin and Hammond; Hammond's legal tutor is Harper; Holmes corresponds with Thornwell, Bledsoe, Simms and Fitzhugh; DeBow's *Review* becomes a go to periodical for the group as a whole.

As with the New England set, the hard-hitting rational prose is complemented by the often more accessible and emotionally moving work of the novelists and poets. If John Greenleaf Whittier often hits the mark for the abolitionists, William Grayson does the same for those ready to believe that enslaving the Africans is ordained in Heaven:

*For these great ends hath Heaven's supreme command
 Brought the black savage from his native land,
 Trains for each purpose his barbarian mind,
 By slavery tamed, enlightened, and refined;
 Instructs him, from a master-race, to draw
 Wise modes of polity and forms of law,
 Imbues his soul with faith, his heart with love,
 Shapes all his life by dictates from above.*

Proponents Of The “Slavery As A Positive Good” Argument			
Name	Dates	Profile	Writing
James H. Thornwell	1812-1862	Presbyterian minister & Calhoun of the Church	Pro-slavery sermons (1830's forward)
Thomas R. Dew	1802-1846	Prez Wm & Mary	<i>Commentary on Virginia Debate on Slavery</i> (1832) <i>The Pro-Slavery Argument</i> (1852)
N. Beverly Tucker	1784-1851	Law professor & novelist	<i>The Partisan Leader</i> (1836) <i>The Pro-Slavery Argument</i> (1852)
John C. Calhoun	1782-1850	Political leader of South	<i>Slavery: A Positive Good</i> speech (1837)
William J. Harper	1790-1847	US Senate from SC 1826	<i>Memoir on Slavery</i> (1838)
George F. Holmes	1820-1897	Professor	Letters & journal articles (1840's forward)
James H. Hammond	1807-1864	House 1835-36 Gov of SC 1844-46 Senator 1857-1860	<i>Two Letters On Slavery</i> To Clarkson (1845) <i>The Pro-Slavery Argument</i> (1852) “Cotton Is King” speech (1858)
J. D. B. DeBow	1820-1867	Publisher	<i>DeBow's Review</i> (1846 forward)
William G. Simms	1806-1870	Novelist & historian	<i>The Sword and the Distaff</i> (1852) <i>The Pro-Slavery Argument</i> (1852)
George Fitzhugh	1806-1881	Social theorist	<i>Sociology for the South, or, the Failure of Free Society</i> (1854) <i>Cannibals All!, or Slaves Without Masters</i> (1857)
Josiah Clark Nott	1804-1873	Physical anthropology Eugenics	<i>Types of Mankind</i> (1854) <i>Indigenous Races of the Earth</i> (1857)
William J. Grayson	1788-1863	Poet, US House 1833-37	<i>The Hireling and the Slave</i> (1855)

Edmund Ruffin	1794- 1865	Planter/soil scientist	<i>Slavery & Free Labor Compared</i> (1855)
Albert T. Bledsoe	1809- 1877	West Point, minister, lawyer	<i>An Essay On Liberty And Slavery</i> (1857)