

Free trade paved way for human bondage

by Fredric W. Henderson

The Road to Disunion: Vol. I, Secessionists at Bay 1776-1854

by William W. Freehling

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In 1853, Henry C. Carey, the political economist of the American System and the architect of the economic policies of the Lincoln administration, very succinctly summarized the history of the growth of slavery and secession in America:

Hence it is that we see the slave trade prevail to so great an extent in all the countries subject to the British system. . . . The system to which the world is indebted for these results is called "free trade"; but there can be no freedom of trade where there is no freedom of man, for the first of all commodities to be exchanged is labour, and the freedom of man consists only in the exercise of the right to determine for himself in what manner his labour shall be employed, and how he will dispose of its products. . . . It [the British System] is the most gigantic system of slavery the world has yet seen, and therefore it is that freedom gradually disappears from every country over which England is enabled to obtain control. . . . In this country protection has always, to some extent, existed; but at some times it has been efficient, and at others not; and our tendency toward freedom or slavery has always been in the direct ratio of its efficiency or inefficiency. In the period from 1824 to 1833, the tendency was steadily in the former direction, but it was only in the latter part of it that it was made really efficient. Then mills and furnaces increased in number, and there was a steady increase in the tendency toward the establishment of local places of exchange; and then it was that Virginia held her convention at which was last discussed in that State the question of emancipation. In 1833, however, protection was abandoned, and a tariff was established by which it was provided that we should, in a few years, have a system of merely revenue duties; and from that

date the abandonment of the older State proceeded with a rapidity never before known, and with it grew the domestic slave trade and the pro-slavery feeling. Then it was that were passed the laws restricting emancipation and prohibiting education; and then it was that the exports of slaves from Virginia and the Carolinas was so great that the population of those States remained almost, if not quite stationary, and the growth of the black population fell from thirty percent, in the ten previous years, to twenty-four percent. . . .

Slavery now travels North, whereas only twenty years ago freedom was traveling South. That such is the case is the natural consequence of our submission, even in part, to the system that looks to compelling the export of raw products, the exhaustion of the land, the cheapening of labour, and the export of the labourer. Wherever it is resisted, slavery dies away and freedom grows.

Although Carey's "The Slave Trade Domestic and Foreign" was written before the major crises of the 1850s that directly produced the Civil War, and without the hindsight and research of modern historians, there has never been a more accurate and precise description of the root cause of the growth of slavery and disunion in America.

The road to disunion was paved by British free trade doctrines. Secession and an effort to forever fracture the United States into impotent, enslaved "confederacies," was the work of the Freemasonic agents of what Carey accurately described as the "most gigantic system of slavery the world has yet seen," the doctrines of economic and moral irrationalism called the British System. The desire to avoid this simple truth—that it was the battle between free trade, the British System of economic exploitation, and the system of political-economy of Leibniz, Franklin, Hamilton, and Mathew and Henry Carey, that led to the crisis of 1860-61—is the given in every "traditional" history of this period. If one would identify the major shortcoming of William Freehling's *The Road to Disunion*, this certainly is it. However, Freehling's book is still a useful one, for he, unlike many, identifies some of the most abhorrent aspects of the process by which the South by 1861 what it was.

From the Revolution to Kansas-Nebraska

Secessionists at Bay is the first volume of what is an intended two-volume work on the period before the war, and covers the period from the Revolution through the Kansas-Nebraska crisis of 1854. While there has been a massive amount of literature created covering this period and the causes of disunion, there are several distinctively useful and refreshing aspects to the view which is developed by Professor Freehling. The road to disunion for Freehling is one of an extraordinarily adept effort of over 40 years by a small grouping of ideologues to plunge the nation into the abyss of

secession. While Freehling tends too often to see the process as accidental, and those who were the engineers of that process as never really fully conscious of the final consequences of their actions, at least the salient features of the period are described with an accuracy almost always lacking in others. He also identifies with more precision than one would expect what these apologists for the destruction of America fashioned in the South along the way.

In describing the major inflection points of national disruption—the Missouri controversy, the gag rule fights, the Nullification crisis, Texas annexation, and Kansas-Nebraska—he makes quite clear that such were “manufactured” by the creators and defenders of the South’s many peculiar institutions, and that in doing this, they in each case increased their stranglehold over both the South, accelerating the tendency toward anti-republican developments there, and over national policy, corrupting it and moving closer each time to the inevitable disruption of national union.

Freehling describes with fair accuracy, and much useful detail, how in 1843, for example, the “getting up” of a move for the annexation of Texas, was a deftly crafted project of English power-brokers and their Southern allies, around a totally discredited and lame duck President Tyler, to push America toward war with Mexico. The result was increased demands for American acquisitions in Central and South America for an expanding Southern slave empire. Increasingly, Southerners believed that such a Southern “manifest destiny,” could protect and maintain their peculiar system, to the detriment of those who sought its containment and eventual elimination. And in this crisis the seeds of future crises stemming from the threat to Southern institutions from free soil on its borders were sown: As Freehling points out it, was the threat of a Free Soil republic on the western border of the slave states, which was manipulated to solidify the position of the advocates of states rights, secession, and perpetual slavery in Southern minds. Such treatment of the nodal points of crisis throughout the 1830s, ’40s, and ’50s, is extremely useful, even within the limitations of this book.

Equally important is the graphic discussion of the process by which the South was systematically transformed into a bastion of anti-republican, Spartan, political, social, and economic practice. Freehling’s description of the political battles throughout the South from 1800 into the late 1820s over who would rule in the South and over the character of Southern institutions, is particularly valuable. Understanding how a growing Anglophile planter class, with its elitist, repressive outlook toward society, would consolidate itself in the face of challenges to its power by republican tendencies, is critical to understanding how slavery and the doctrines of disunion ultimately became hegemonic.

Stamping out opposition

Freehling shows, for example, how the alleged threat of slave insurrection, was used to control the whole of society—

white opponents, as well as black. Not only were resisters silenced, but also the very character of public debate was defined by the institution of human bondage, such that by the 1840s any debate in the South on any question was gauged by this measure. The implications of this for opponents of free trade, for those with a commitment to republican institutions, was profound. Its effect on the development of national institutions like the Democratic and Whig parties was disastrous. As a result, the Whig Party in the South was transformed, and Freehling’s treatment of this issue offers significant insight into how the destruction of the Whig Party of Henry Clay was ensured.

One may wish that Freehling had done more in this vein, and may not agree with many of his conclusions, but the material he marshals is not generally available in a single work. Most discussions of the road to disunion deal more with “broader historical processes,” and less with the internal dynamic of how undemocratic and barbaric Southern society had become. It is possibly for this reason that his book has drawn criticism from other reviewers, who have labeled much of this type of material distracting or disconcerting, taking away from the “overview” that readers should have. That is somewhat unfortunate, because it is this material that this student of the period found most attractive about Freehling’s new work.

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