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Disunion!

THE COMING OF THE
AMERICAN CIVIL WAR,
1789–1859

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Introduction

“Folly and wickedness are inherent proclivities of human nature.” So began an editorial in the influential *Philadelphia North American*, published in January 1849, a time of bitter debates over whether slavery should extend into the Western territories the United States had claimed at the end of the Mexican War. Entitled “Union or Disunion—Life or Death,” the editorial condemned proslavery Southerners who threatened to dissolve the Union if slavery’s expansion were restricted. Disunion, the commentary warned, would bring “an almost immediate war, of the most deadly character” between the slave states and the free ones, a war “of treason on the one side, and of vengeance on the other.” Civil war would soon give rise to a second kind of “mortal struggle”: a “universal insurrection . . . of slaves against their masters” that would bathe the country in “flames and massacre.” The prospect of such a descent into chaos, the editorial lamented, “makes the heart sick.” Pleading for moderation and compromise, it concluded by saying of disunion: “Wo [*sic*] to the American, whether of the North or the South, who compels his countrymen to think such thoughts and dream such dreams.”¹

This book argues that “disunion” was once the most provocative and potent word in the political vocabulary of Americans. From the time of the Constitutional Convention in 1787 up to the Civil War, *disunion* conjured up the most profound anxieties of Americans as they considered the fate of their republic. This one word contained, and stimulated, their fears of extreme political factionalism, tyranny, regionalism, economic decline, foreign intervention, class conflict, gender disorder, racial strife, widespread violence and anarchy, and civil war, all of which could be interpreted as God’s retributions for America’s moral failings. Disunion connoted the dissolution of the republic—the failure of the Founders’ efforts to establish a stable and lasting representative government. For many Americans in the North and the South,

disunion was a nightmare, a tragic cataclysm that would reduce them to the kind of fear and misery that seemed to pervade the rest of the world. And yet, for many other Americans, disunion served as the main instrument by which they could achieve their political goals.

Can it be that such a word, so strange sounding and archaic to modern ears, had such a power over the imagination of antebellum Americans? This book makes the argument that it did, and indeed suggests that disunion—both the word and the varying meanings that nineteenth-century Americans assigned it—offers a new and hitherto hidden key to understanding the origins of the American Civil War. Disunion was, like freedom, slavery, democracy, and tyranny, a *keyword* of the nation’s political vocabulary—a word that had no fixed “content,” that captured complex ideas and values, and that served as a site for protracted moral, political, and economic conflicts in a deeply and multiply divided nation.² Debates over the meaning of disunion constituted a rhetorical mode that dominated antebellum politics and that gave sectional tensions an unmanageable cast. That is, disunion rhetoric shaped and limited Americans’ political and moral imagination, ultimately discouraging a politics of compromise and lending an aura of inexorability to the cataclysmic confrontation of North and South.

Naturally, the argument that follows does not push to one side the long-standing, time-tested explanations for the origins of the Civil War, such as those concerning demographics, economics, ideology, culture, and least of all slavery. Rather, the analysis presented here offers a new way to look, literally, at the terms of the debate that pulled the Union apart. In what follows, we will analyze what the participants said, what they believed, and how they expressed their own passions, and agonies, as they set the Union on the road to war.

To place this new approach into some context, it is worth briefly recalling the ways that previous scholars have tried to explain the origins of the Civil War. The economic interpretation for the coming of the war was pioneered by Charles A. and Mary R. Beard, whose 1927 book *The Rise of American Civilization* argued that because the economies of the dynamic industrializing North and the static agrarian South were incompatible, the two societies were on a collision course that led inexorably to war; issues such as banking, tariffs, and subsidies, not debates over the morality of slavery, divided the two sections. Arguing against the notion that armed conflict was

inevitable, James G. Randall and Avery O. Craven, writing in the 1930s and 1940s, countered that irrational and irresponsible agitators in each section—abolitionists in the North and secessionists in the South—inflamed popular passions and prejudices and thus caused a “needless war.” Slavery did divide the nation, but it should not have—the “peculiar institution” would have faded away naturally had blundering politicians not brought on its violent demise.³

This debate over whether the war was “irrepressible” or “repressible” has raged on in the modern day, with scholars aligned in two interpretive camps—the “fundamentalist” and the new “revisionist.” Fundamentalists build on the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, the great black historian and champion of the “emancipationist” memory of the war. Taking issue with the Beards’ approach and with the “blundering generation” school alike, Du Bois tirelessly insisted, in countless speeches, articles, and books, that slavery was the root cause and emancipation the noble purpose of the war. For Du Bois, the Civil War was not only a clash of economic systems but also a war of ideas and ideologies (systems of thought). With careful attention to both the economies and the ideologies of North and South, modern “fundamentalists” such as James M. McPherson, Eric Foner, Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Bruce Levine, John Ashworth, Brian Holden Reid, and Sean Wilentz have described the two sections as different and deeply antagonistic societies; all agree that slavery was the root cause of that antagonism. The North’s commitment to capitalism and modernization, these scholars explain, was the context for abolitionism and for the free labor ideology of Abraham Lincoln’s Republican Party. The South’s commitment to staple production and slave labor was reflected in the region’s distinctive cult of honor, its preoccupation with localism and states’ rights, and its defense of social inequality.⁴

“Modern revisionists,” for their part, have followed the lead of Kenneth Stampp and David M. Potter. Trying to recapture the contingencies, possibilities, and volatility of antebellum politics, Stampp and Potter emphasized the shared values of North and South and lamented the failure of political leaders to reach compromises that might have averted war. More recently, revisionists like Michael F. Holt, William E. Gienapp, William W. Freehling, and Joel H. Silbey have focused on those political debates *within* each section that do not fit neatly into a linear narrative of the slavery controversy. Northern voters, political historians have shown, were preoccupied with and motivated by

issues such as nativism (anti-immigrant bias); slavery was not their overriding concern and did not explain their voting behavior. The Southern electorate, too, was deeply divided—on the basis of class, economic setting, and sub-region. The differences between the Upper South and the Deep South in particular make it treacherous to generalize broadly about the “fundamental” nature of Southern society.⁵

As Edward Ayers has put it, succinctly, “for the fundamentalists, slavery is front and center; for the revisionists, slavery is buried beneath layers of white ideology and politics.” His own recent book—a careful comparison of a Pennsylvania county in the Shenandoah Valley with a nearby Virginia county—has straddled the line between fundamentalists and revisionists. On the one hand, Ayers demonstrates that the presence of slavery in the Virginia county rendered it fundamentally different, economically, socially, and politically, from the “free labor” Pennsylvania county. On the other hand, seeking to understand the war’s origins on an “intimate scale,” he emphasizes that average citizens did not see the war as irrepressible—up to the very end, they sought alternatives. Acknowledging the difficulty of breaking free of the fundamentalist/revisionist dichotomy, Ayers has called on historians to look anew for “catalysts” of sectionalism.⁶ In other words, while scholars can agree that slavery, more than any other issue, divided North and South, there is still much to be said about why slavery proved so divisive and why sectional compromise ultimately proved elusive.

This book takes up Ayers’s challenge. It aims both to provide a narrative synthesis of the best recent studies on antebellum America and to reframe the issue of Civil War causality. Inspired by scholars who have argued that language has a profound power to shape political reality, this book asks: Why could Americans not debate the fate of slavery without also conjuring up the notion of disunion?⁷

To answer this question, we must begin by recognizing the profound resonance of the concept of “Union” for Americans before the Civil War. For them, the word “Union” connoted “nation” and “country,” and called to mind the geographic, linguistic, cultural, and historical bonds that held America’s citizenry together. The Union was also the government, as it embodied the constitutional arrangement whereby individual states compacted with each other in a federal system. Most fundamentally, the Union was synonymous with the republic—America’s unique experiment in self-rule

“by the people.” Although the Union existed on all these levels, it was for most Americans more, symbolically, than the sum of these parts: it had a transcendent, mystical quality as the object of their patriotic devotion and civic religion. No one in antebellum America did more to articulate these prevailing beliefs than clergyman and politician Edward Everett, of Massachusetts, who drew admiring audiences in North and South alike with his vast array of speeches on patriotic themes. A voice of conservative nationalism, Everett made a name for himself as the country’s greatest orator by singing the praises of the Founders. The Union, he proclaimed again and again, was the “most auspicious mode” of “popular government” ever devised. It was “set up by Providence, as a great exemplar to the world, from which the most enlightened and best governed of the ancient nations have much to learn.” Bound up in the Union were “all the feelings of ancestry, posterity, and fellow citizenship; all the charm, veneration, and love” that Americans felt for each other; and all the “delight, the enthusiasm, with which we seek out, after the lapse of generations and ages, the traces of our fathers’ bravery and wisdom.”⁸

The word “disunion” was so jarring because it suggested that the beloved Union might be contingent—and even fatally flawed. And yet disunion was pervasive in antebellum rhetoric among Northerners and Southerners alike. Disunion was invoked by Americans, across the political spectrum, in five registers: as a *prophecy* of national ruin, a *threat* of withdrawal from the federal compact, an *accusation* of treasonous plotting, a *process* of sectional alienation, and a *program* for regional independence. These five registers were distinct but overlapping, and while their uses changed and shifted over time, none of the five was ever fully drowned out by any of the others; predictions, accusations, and intimations of disunion were woven together in a kind of siren’s song of civil war.

Because disunion had such a wide range of meanings, it is misleading to conflate it, as most scholarship on Civil War origins does, with another key word of the sectional conflict: “secession.” Secession referred to a specific mechanism whereby states could leave the Union, and it reflected complex constitutional theories on the boundaries of state and federal power. Threats of secession flared up periodically at flash points of crisis—during the Hartford Convention in 1814, the nullification controversy in 1832–33, and the Nashville Convention in 1850, for example—but they issued from political

leaders too isolated to translate them into viable programs. Only in the wake of John Brown's 1859 raid at Harpers Ferry were Southern nationalists able to convert calls for secession into a regional mandate—and to put the mechanism to the test.

While secession had a specific meaning, disunion by contrast was a sublimely adaptable concept and thus could be put to a stunning range of uses. What follows are illustrative definitions that introduce some key figures from the era and hint at how the rhetoric of disunion evolved.

DISUNION AS A PROPHECY

From the time of the Constitutional Convention, public debates over slavery featured prophecies of disunion. It must be emphasized that to prophesize disunion was not the same as to advocate it as a program. Indeed, such predictions typically came from those whose avowed goal was to preserve and redeem the Union. Self-styled political moderates, trying to define a pro-compromise “middle ground” in the slavery debates, warned that the nation faced ruin if extremists did not stop “agitating” the divisive issue. But opponents of slavery, too, prophesized that the nation faced ruin if it did not curb the political dominance of slaveholders and repent of the sin of human bondage. Defenders of slavery, for their part, predicted that the nation faced ruin if antislavery zealots disturbed the sectional balance of power and encouraged unrest among the slaves. In many of these variations, disunion was seen as the instrumentality wielded by an angry God to punish the unfaithful.

To predict disunion, at a time when Americans were steeped in biblical language and traditions, was to call to mind a distinct set of images: a prophet was, according to Western tradition, a “voice in the wilderness” seeking to “reassert the terms of the covenant to a people who had fallen away.”⁹ In antebellum American politics, prophecies of disunion were meant to alert the people that they had betrayed the promise that they would erect a shining “City on a Hill” as a moral beacon for the world, and had betrayed the constitutional covenant on which the security of the nation rested.

The language of prophecy was the language of metaphors—for it was the prophet's job to open the people's eyes to the overwhelming threat that faced them if they did not restore the covenant.¹⁰ Disunion talk thus took the form of a startling range of images. Antebellum Americans likened disunion to a

deformity, a disease, a monster, a storm, a sea, a whip, an arrow, a poison, a fire, a spell, and a curse. Those politicians who wielded the language of prophecy most effectively—Northerner Daniel Webster and Southerner Henry Clay—won reputations in the 1830s as great compromisers and mediators between the sections; both became national celebrities, widely respected for their oratorical skills and their patriotism. To these men, disunion could be avoided only if Americans were made, again and again, to imagine it in apocalyptic terms. For Webster, disunion was a “precipice” that looked out over a groaning “abyss” of civil war. Clay, too, favored this metaphor; he repeatedly asked Americans to “pause at the edge of the precipice, before the fearful and dangerous leap to be taken into the yawning abyss below, from which none who ever take it shall return in safety.” As the antebellum era unfolded, Northern and Southern interpretations of the moral mandate of American society, and of the nature of the constitutional covenant, would sharply diverge—leaving Clay and Webster, in the eyes of their critics, forsaken martyrs who had sacrificed their reputations and integrity to the cause of compromise.¹¹

DISUNION AS A THREAT

From the birth of the republic to the Civil War, disunion was frequently invoked as a threat, most often by Southerners seeking to preserve and extend slavery, but also eventually by radical abolitionists looking for a language in which to counter Southern menaces. These threats had their own distinct context in the cult of honor. In the absence of well-established political parties, the political combat of the early republic was highly personalized. Regional differences and distrust between North and South often translated into “honor disputes”—verbal assaults in which politicians questioned each others’ manhood and “bullied and taunted” each other into submission. Threats of disunion were a key weapon in this sort of combat as a tactic of intimidation. Proslavery partisans repeatedly threatened disunion in an effort to establish their superior courage and to bully their opponents into making concessions. A few Northern advocates of slavery restriction responded in kind, claiming to prefer disunion to submission and hoping to use the threat to extract concessions from the slaveholding South. Those who introduced this congressional pattern of threat and counterthreat in the early republic

were not seriously contemplating secession as a program, nor did they claim to speak on behalf of disunionist constituents. They sought to control the government, not to sever it. By invoking disunion as the prelude to civil war and then implying that such a war would be worth fighting, wielders of the threat practiced a kind of parliamentary maneuvering—they used fear as a political weapon. Northerners and Southerners who disapproved of this posturing worried that it would somehow prepare the public mind for the unraveling of the republic; they tried to silence the threats with the argument that disunion was the ultimate form of national dishonor.¹²

When Northern abolitionists launched their campaign for immediate emancipation in the 1830s, Southern threats multiplied and took on, especially among South Carolina nullifiers, ominous new forms. The master of such threats was the preening, relentless Robert Barnwell Rhett, who in a “clear, high-pitched voice” routinely “scorched” his listeners with fiery invective. More than anyone else, Rhett used disunion as a battle standard with which to rally defenders of slavery. “The whole world are in arms against your institutions,” he told his fellow South Carolinians in 1833 as he urged the state to “nullify” the federal tariff and thereby resist the “tyranny” of a federal government hostile to the South’s economic interests. Such posturing failed to win over most South Carolinians, let alone most white Southerners. But it did wring concessions from the North—in this case, a reduction of the tariff, brokered by “great compromisers” Henry Clay and Daniel Webster. In the 1840s Rhett began wielding threats not merely to secure tactical gains for slaveholders in their effort to assert power within national politics, but as a strategy for building a secessionist constituency, first in South Carolina and then throughout the region. Along with a vanguard of proslavery, states’ rights fire-eaters, Rhett was determined to move disunion threats from the realm of pure rhetoric to the realm of stark realism.¹³

By the early 1840s, slaveholder threats had so often wrought compromises from Northern politicians and lawmakers that William Lloyd Garrison and his cadre of radical abolitionists declared themselves disunionists and threatened to foment disunionism in the North. At this point Garrison’s followers—Northerners who demanded the immediate abolition of Southern slavery and spoke out on behalf of equal rights for whites and blacks—still constituted a small, beleaguered group on the fringes of political power; Garrison was under no illusion that any Northern state, even his own Massachusetts, would

seriously consider secession. But Garrison was a passionate man, and he was passionately sick of watching the North accede to Southern demands. Thus his mantra of “no union with slaveholders” was a consciousness-raising tool. It was shorthand for a complicated argument that a truly moral Union had never existed—and that the sham Union, based on compromises with slavery, had to be forsaken before a true Union could ever exist.¹⁴ This argument was a reaction not only to slaveholder threats, but also to accusations by Northerners targeting abolitionists like Garrison.

DISUNION AS AN ACCUSATION

From the time the immediatists took the stage in the 1830s, the primary obstacle facing them was the widespread charge that their antislavery program was inherently disunionist. This charge was the pretext for the violent suppression of abolitionist activity in the South; for abolition-disunion, slaveholders argued, would inevitably lead to slave rebellion. Abolitionists met with a furious backlash in the North as well. By forming interracial abolition societies and encouraging women to take a leading part in the antislavery movement, immediatists challenged the Northern social hierarchy. Lashing out against the racial and gender egalitarianism of radical antislavery societies, anti-abolitionists associated disunionism with the dreaded specters of racial equality and “woman’s rights.” Most important, anti-abolitionists contrasted the harmony and prosperity that awaited the Union, should abolition agitation cease, with the grim prospect of a bloody civil war brought on by immediatism and the attendant alienation of the South. Immediatists responded with a variety of interlocking arguments: that slavery, not abolition, was the root of sectional tensions; that Southern threats of disunion were not serious; and that the white South was not united in its support of slavery. But their critics did not relent: determined to associate abolition with treason, Northern anti-abolitionists persistently and willfully exaggerated the potency of Southern threats. They hoped that the image of an angry South turning its back on the Union would scare Northerners into rejecting both the emancipation of Southern slaves and the abolitionists’ radical agenda for promoting social equality in the North.

While Garrisonians adopted in the early 1840s their own defiant disunionism, a new “political antislavery” movement in the North, intent on

establishing a viable political party, promised that it would stand firm against Southern threats and against abolitionist extremism. In their own vocabulary of accusations, the activists who formed the core of the three successive antislavery parties—Liberty, Free-Soil, and Republican—placed the primary blame for the sectional crisis on the shoulders of the “Slave Power Conspiracy” of elite Southern masters and their malleable, subservient “doughface” allies among Northern Democrats. They charged that the small oligarchy of slaveholders who had dominated national politics and, increasingly, the three branches of the federal government, were determined to augment their power by spreading slavery into the Western territories—and that this affront to democracy would rob white Northerners of the right to establish the West as “free soil.” The standard-bearer for this position was David Wilmot, a Pennsylvania Democrat who in 1846 repudiated his party’s traditional alliance with the slaveholding interests of the South and offered to Congress his famous “proviso” that slavery should be barred from the Western territories acquired after the Mexican War. The proviso came with a stern rebuke to slaveholders for using the “cry of disunion” to appeal to people’s fears and emotions. Although it failed to pass Congress, the proviso signaled the determination of the emerging Free-Soil coalition not to be “frightened into obedience,” as Wilmot put it, by Southern intimidation.¹⁵

The Republicans took the stage in the mid-1850s promising not to interfere with slavery where it already existed; they wanted only to restrict its westward expansion. But no matter how hard the antislavery parties worked to establish their credentials as protectors of the Union against militant slaveholders, their opponents—the Democrats’ conservative base—assailed them as disunionist. The use of disunion as an accusation among Northerners reached a crescendo in 1856, as the Democratic Party bludgeoned the Republicans with the charge that they were abolitionists in disguise; a Republican victory, it maintained, would bring national ruin. This strategy came from none other than the Democratic presidential candidate, James Buchanan of Pennsylvania. A “northern man with southern principles,” Buchanan believed that the “Republicans must be, as they can be with justice, boldly assailed as disunionists and this charge must be reiterated again and again.” This proved to be an efficacious tactic, in part because it tapped long-standing fears about the fate of the Union, and in part because the Re-

publicans made themselves vulnerable, time and time again, by invoking disunion as a process.¹⁶

DISUNION AS A PROCESS

The notion that disunion was a process of sectional alienation took root, North and South, in the mid-1830s. The antislavery petition campaign of 1835–36—a grassroots effort that garnered the support of thousands of Northern citizens—furnished proslavery Southerners with the raw material to make, for the first time in the sectional debates, the case that disunion was a trend in public opinion. This was not the language of divine retribution or of impassioned honor but rather of a crude political science; to speak of disunion as a process was to regard the free labor North and slave labor South as political systems, and to reveal their internal dynamics. The most influential mouthpiece of this idea was John C. Calhoun of South Carolina. Calhoun was the mastermind of “nullification”—the notion that a state could void a federal law it regarded as unconstitutional, then appeal to a tribunal of the other states to amend the law, and finally, if the law were not amended, legally secede from the Union. He was also a leading proponent of the philosophy that slavery was a “positive good” for slaves and slaveholders alike. Thus Calhoun has earned a reputation as the godfather of secession. But Calhoun was no Robert Barnwell Rhett, given to extravagant threats. Calhoun regarded nullification as a means to “strengthen the Union, though not the federal government, by improving the chances that conflicts of sections or interests could be compromised or resolved peacefully.” He invoked disunion as a way to systematically build a Southern proslavery consensus impervious to Northern interference. Thus he chose, during the height of the abolition petition campaign, to exaggerate the influence of the abolitionists; although they were not yet a controlling majority, he argued, abolitionists very soon would capture the hearts and minds of the North. This image of Northern solidarity was calculated to foster Southern solidarity. Calhoun again and again insisted that the sectional divergence need not sunder the Union—provided the South was strong enough to resist Northern interference and therefore to maintain the balance of power that the framers had intended.¹⁷

Antislavery forces, for their part, also regarded disunion as a process. In

the 1830s, before they could lay claim to a Northern majority, they emphasized that sectional alienation was driven by Slave Power demands. By the late 1840s, political antislavery advocates could argue that Northern public opinion had coalesced around a Free-Soil agenda at odds with slaveholder designs on the West. That divergence need not sunder the Union, Free-Soilers like Wilmot explained, provided that the South yield to the growing Free-Soil electorate. If the alienation of North and South could not be reversed, it could still be forestalled and contained; compromise and sectional “repose” were still possible.

When Southern and Northern settlers came to blows over the Fugitive Slave Law and the Kansas Territory, however, the process of sectional alienation took on a fearful new cast. In the early 1850s, with Clay, Webster, and Calhoun all having passed from the scene, the two sections seemed not to be diverging but to be violently converging; images of warfare, of invasion, and even of annihilation suffused the public debates over slavery, and reached their apogee in New York Republican William Seward’s 1858 “irrepressible conflict” speech. The politically ambitious Seward had a penchant for introducing memorable turns of phrase that instantly became part of the political vernacular. So it was with his notion of an “irrepressible conflict.” The process of disunion, he argued, could not and regardless should not be reversed or contained. Yes, the South should yield to the Free-Soil majority—but because the very nature of slaveholding society was aggressive, it would and could not. Thus the irrepressible conflict was leading to a final reckoning, an epic clash in which Freedom would triumph over Slavery.

In invoking disunion as a process that would end in violent conflict, Seward and other commentators were not simply describing trends but interpreting them. Statistically and culturally, the North and South were actually, in many respects, becoming more similar in the 1850s. The South was modernizing, its cities growing and industries rapidly developing. Moreover, “intersectional migration, the exchange of information through newspapers and magazines, travel, and even kinship ties” were all potential sources of peaceful convergence between the sections. But because Southern boosters of modernization were increasingly determined to use slave labor as the basis of the region’s industries, Northerners perceived in the new Southern economy the threat of competition rather than the promise of reconciliation.¹⁸

DISUNION AS A PROGRAM

Militant Southern slaveholders such as Rhett, in trying to foster “Southern nationalism,” capitalized at every turn on Northern disunion rhetoric. Honing arguments they had developed over the course of the 1850s, Southern extremists drew a distinction between Northern disunionism (which they equated with an unconstitutional assault on Southern rights) and their own disunionism (which they equated with the constitutional right of secession). In their view, Republicans like Seward, by advancing the process of disunion, were betraying their true desire: to force the South to secede and then to use secession as the pretext for a war of conquest in which emancipation would be imposed at bayonet point. John Brown’s raid of 1859, a failed attempt to liberate Virginia’s slaves that captured the imagination of many Northerners, was interpreted by Southern nationalists as the fruit of Seward’s irrepressible conflict speech. They claimed, in other words, that Northern disunion caused Southern secession—that Northern abolitionist Republicans, in their uncompromising campaign to destroy the Southern way of life, had left the region’s leaders no honorable resort but to secede. The heart of the secessionist argument was this: If the South were divided, weak and uncertain, Republicans would prosecute a war that brought all the horrors Americans had long associated with disunion—a war of chaos and massacre. But if the South were united and strong, it could control the outcome of disunion—it could quickly and decisively turn back the Northern invasion and build, in the form of a new nation, an impenetrable bulwark against future aggression.

As America lurched into the secession crisis, the Republican administration of Abraham Lincoln pledged to resist the Confederacy. Secession, Lincoln declared in his first inaugural address, was a rejection of the very principle of majority rule; it could produce only “anarchy” or “despotism.” For Lincoln, whatever the secessionists might claim, disunion as a program was patently unconstitutional and a betrayal of the Founders’ design. Southerners were the aggressors; they had chosen to bring the nation to the brink. If Confederates could banish fears that a disunion war would cause suffering and ruin, and imagine instead that such a war would bring swift victory to the righteous, then Northerners must do the same. The president had an “oath registered in Heaven,” he intoned, to “preserve, protect and defend” the

Union. His message was unmistakable: the Union was perpetual, and the righteous would prevail.¹⁹

Lincoln was, of course, not only staking out a political position, but also expressing the hope that once the rebellion was defeated, the cacophonous and discordant debates over disunion would end forever. A prescient *Atlantic Monthly* editorial of August 1861, which sought to explain the origins of secession, captured this hope perfectly. Secessionists had “long meditated” the present conflict, the commentary intoned, and had steadily brought it to its “final consummation” by cannily making the “vocabulary of treason” the “vernacular of the country. . . . The danger of a dissolution of the Union . . . has so often been held up as a threat by one section, and so persistently used as a scarecrow by timid or profligate men in the other, that our ears have hardly ceased to be tormented” by disunion talk. Thus the linguistic stakes of the war were enormous. “It is time that this whole pernicious dialect should be exploded,” the editorial concluded, “and the ideas which it represented be eradicated from the minds of intelligent men everywhere.”²⁰

THIS BOOK OFFERS a new perspective on Civil War causality by arguing that disunion was a far more pervasive concept than secession in antebellum politics, that debates over the meaning of disunion permeated the political cultures of both North and South and embittered each section against the other, and that those debates reached back to the very founding of the republic. What united the various kinds of disunion talk into what I have called a “rhetorical mode” was their shared tendency to create political “others”—an “us,” defined as true Americans who upheld the principles of the Founders, and a “them,” defined as traitors who betrayed those principles.

In arguing that disunion rhetoric—not just the threats, but the disavowals, condemnations, predictions, and expectations of disunion—worked at every stage to escalate sectional tensions, I have no wish to revive the tired, threadbare, “blundering generation” argument that blamed fanatical political leaders on both sides for starting a “needless war.” The original proponents of that thesis suggested that there was a kind of equivalency between the extremism of radical abolitionists and that of proslavery secessionists. Indeed, some of them, echoing antebellum accusations of disunion, contended that abolitionists bore not only a share of the blame for the coming of war, but also the brunt of the blame. In this book, by contrast, radical abolitionists are not the

villains of the sectional drama but the heroes. In 1878 the great black abolitionist Frederick Douglass wrote: “There was a right side and a wrong side in the late war, which no sentiment ought to cause us to forget, and while to-day we should have malice toward none, and charity toward all, it is no part of our duty to confound right with wrong.”²¹ What is true of the Civil War is true, too, of the antebellum war of words.

My purpose is to elucidate that war of words. In an effort to understand the most influential participants in that struggle, I focus not only on politicians such as Calhoun and Seward but also on a wide range of reformers, editors, writers, and commentators. The voices of fugitive slaves, of white Southern dissenters, of free black activists, of abolitionist women, and of other outsiders to the halls of power are integral to the history of sectionalism. Abolitionists like Garrison and Douglass occupy the central place in this book’s narrative both because of the incisive and trenchant nature of their political analyses, and because their enemies worked relentlessly to keep them front and center in the slavery debates. Even when Garrison took his disunionist turn in the 1840s, and in a sense exiled himself to the margins of Northern politics, his proslavery enemies kept up the drumbeat of accusations that all antislavery supporters were disunionists. In other words, however hard immediatists tried to distinguish true abolitionism from gradual emancipation (with its emphasis on piecemeal, voluntary reform), and from Free-Soil political antislavery (with its faith in the electoral process), anti-abolitionists denied that there was a meaningful distinction between these varieties of opposition to slavery. To promote solidarity in their own ranks, defenders of slavery exaggerated the power and influence of radical abolitionists, even as the moderate Free-Soilers built a base of support in the North that far exceeded that of the immediatists.²²

By the early 1830s—the pivotal moment at which immediate abolitionists clashed with proponents of the “positive good” defense of slavery—the discourse on disunion was a half-century old. If we view U.S. history in an international context, it was much older than that: Americans’ disunion anxieties were shaped by Enlightenment writings on the inevitable decline of republics into tyranny, by the events of the English civil war and the French Revolution, and by the intrigues and strife of the European monarchies. Indeed, Americans’ “sense of impending doom” reflected their fear, itself a legacy of the European Enlightenment, that “greed and lust for power . . .

were unquenchable in mortal men.”²³ To say that Calhoun, Garrison, and the other opinion makers of the era inherited the discourse of disunion, and moved in its web, is not to deny their agency, but to better understand their choices. Defenders of slavery marshaled disunion, in all its guises, to justify the suppression of free speech and the perpetuation of human bondage. Opponents of slavery marshaled disunion, in all its guises, to defend democracy—and to promote imperfect visions, and irrepressible dreams, of freedom.

Did the antebellum discourse of disunion “cause” the Civil War? No. “Union and Disunion are but words—the *thing* is slavery,” Douglass insisted in 1852, anguished at how the dread of national ruin cast a shadow over the prospect of abolition. Douglass emphasized that slavery was the root cause of sectional differences. He attempted to convince Northerners that the use of disunion for political advantage should not obscure the fact that a moral issue—slavery’s sinfulness—was at the heart of the sectional crisis.²⁴ Disunion rhetoric did not make the war “inevitable.” But it was more than a catalyst for political strife—it was an integral part of the course that strife took. Suffused as it was with images of treason, rebellion, retribution, and bloodshed, the discourse of disunion bred disillusionment with party politics; mistrust of compromise; and, in the 1850s, the expectation that only violent conflict would resolve the debate over slavery once and for all.

Prologue

The antislavery impulse was as old as the republic itself. So too were sectional tensions deriving from the diverging interests of the free labor North and the slaveholding South. By the eve of the American Revolution, slavery had existed in North America for more than 150 years; it was legal in every one of the thirteen colonies. But different patterns of settlement and different geographies distinguished the Northern colonies from the Southern ones and set them on different trajectories. Slavery was marginal to the economy of New England, which was “wedded to family and wage labor.” It was pervasive in the middle colonies of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, but slave labor there was incorporated into a diverse economy; slaves worked in artisan shops, in the maritime industries, and on farms, alongside white and black indentured servants and wage workers. Slavery, in other words, was not the dominant form of labor in the North. The Southern colonies of Maryland, Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia, by contrast, were not merely societies with slaves but “slave societies,” organized economically, socially, and politically around the principle and practice of human bondage. In 1760, 88 percent of the 325,806 slaves in the British mainland colonies lived in the South.¹

Although the majority of white Southern families did not own slaves, the slaveholding minority, particularly the wealthy “planters” (those who owned twenty slaves or more and operated plantations), held the preponderance of power in the colonial South. In the deferential political culture of the region, wealth and, in plantation districts, slaveholding were the prerequisites for political leadership. The system of bondage defined black slaves as “chattels,” pieces of property with few, tenuous rights. Slaves could not leave plantations without permission, could not buy or sell goods, could not have legally recognized marriages, could not claim authority over their own children. The separation, through sale, of slave families was commonplace;

so too was the rape of slave women by their masters. Slaves who defied their owners or the law were viciously punished—whipping, branding, and even mutilation were common penalties for misbehavior. The slave system, Anthony S. Parent forcefully argues, did not “emerge” as an “unplanned consequence of a scarce labor market.” Rather, it was designed. In the period 1660 to 1740, a small class of ascendant planters in Virginia established the legal and ideological template for the development of slavery elsewhere in the colonies, and thereby “gave America its racial dilemma.”²

The slave codes first established by seventeenth-century Virginia became the model for successive Southern states, and they reveal a great deal about slaveholders’ anxieties and aims. Overturning traditions of English common law that stipulated that a child inherited the status of his father, the Southern slave codes provided that a child born to a slave mother would inherit his mother’s status as a chattel—in this way, a master who coerced a female slave into sex stood to gain financially by his act, for any child born of it would be his slave. The slave codes not only rewarded masters for their coercion but also worked to prevent the growth of the free black population. Virginia and other colonies passed statutes that criminalized interracial sexual acts, but such laws were enforced selectively—the vast majority of those prosecuted under the Virginia law, for example, were white women who had had sexual relationships with black men; white men’s interracial sexual misconduct went virtually unpunished. The system for policing sexuality was thus designed to “solidify the patriarchal stake of all white men in a slave system that offered the greatest benefits to large planters.” Both wealthy planters and white men of lower status were guaranteed sexual access to black women and strict enforcement of the ban on interracial liaisons of white women.³

The system of law enforcement that developed in the South is documented by runaway notices that slaveholders ran in their newspapers: When a slave fled, the master typically printed a description of the fugitive and promised a reward for his or her capture and return. Thousands of these advertisements survive from the colonial era, and their descriptions of slaves with lashed backs, broken teeth, brand marks, cropped ears, and other deformities caused by deprivation or punishment testify to the conditions in which slaves lived. The work of tracking down fugitive slaves initially fell to private citizens and to sheriffs and militias. But by 1704 South Carolina had created a new category of law enforcement officials—slave patrollers—who tracked down fugitives,

searched slave cabins for any sign of unrest, and broke up gatherings of slaves. Virginia and other Southern colonies followed suit. Eighteenth-century slave patrols drew on a broad cross section of white men, and patrol duty represented an opportunity for elite planters and men of modest means to collaborate across class boundaries. From the perspective of slaves, white patrollers were fearsome demons who embodied both white racial solidarity and white barbarity. Slave patrols' "indemnification and protection by courts of law allowed them to discipline, even brutalize, bondsmen with the legal imprimatur of Southern society."⁴

In addition to the laws and runaway notices they drafted, slaveholders have left behind "literary" sources, such as the diary of elite Virginia planter William Byrd II, that disclose the design of the slave system. Byrd's detailed account of his daily life remains one of the most revealing sources we have about the eighteenth-century Chesapeake Bay area. Byrd's diary shows that cruelty was routine in his household; in one particularly horrific episode, he recounts that, to punish his wife for whipping a slave named Prue without his permission, Byrd had another slave, named Anaka, whipped, "who had deserved it much more." Byrd also quarreled with his wife when she had a slave girl named Jenny "burned with a hot iron"—again, without his permission. Byrd's diary speaks both to the complicity of white plantation mistresses in the enforcement of the slave system and to the determination of planters to exert their supremacy over slaves and white women alike. In a 1736 letter, Byrd provided a pithy and chilling summation of his philosophy on the corporal punishment of slaves: "Foul Means must do, what fair will not."⁵

By the eve of the Revolution, then, nearly two centuries of law and custom had made slavery the foundation of the Southern economy and social order. Slaveholders did not, at this point, expend much energy in seeking to explain or justify their "peculiar institution." Rather, they rested secure in a long-standing set of assumptions that were not only dominant among Southern whites but widespread in the North, too. The first of those assumptions was that human society was, by God's design, hierarchical, with men of property and heads of households at the apex of the social pyramid. The second assumption was that both legal proscription and a certain amount of physical coercion were necessary for male patriarchs to enforce the submission of their dependents, be they wives, children, servants, or slaves; cruelty was, however lamentable, also necessary. The third assumption was that African slaves and

their descendants were inferior; their lack of civilization rendered them unfit for freedom and suited them well for a life of dependence on whites, and for the backbreaking plantation labor that free white men could not be induced to perform. A fourth assumption was that slavery was not created by American slaveholders, but inherited by them from their English forebears. Thus slavery had the inevitability and sanctity of tradition.⁶

The ferment of the Revolutionary era posed a formidable challenge to these assumptions. “During the 1750s and early 1760s,” David Waldstreicher explains, “Pennsylvania Quakers like John Woolman and Anthony Benezet had made significant headway against slavery on the grounds that the institution was inconsistent with Christian principles; by the late 1760s, however, Benezet broadened the argument to embrace contemporary politics.” In other words, Benezet drew the analogy between British abrogation of the colonists’ rights and the master’s abrogation of the rights of slaves. This analogy was highly problematic for the emerging leaders of the Revolution, such as Benjamin Franklin, for it cast the aggrieved colonists as “hypocritical slave-drivers.” Franklin himself devised a pragmatic solution. He redirected the analogy by training attention on British hypocrisy—reasoning that England was responsible for imposing slavery on the colonies, and that slavery was yet more “proof of British villainy.” This view gained credence during the war, as British efforts to recruit American slaves, with the promise of freedom as an inducement, “only proved British corruption.” The Declaration of Independence condemned the king for having incited “domestic insurrections” and enshrined the notion that slaves belonged with the “treasonous Tories” and therefore did not deserve citizenship or a place in the polity.⁷

But the analogy between American slavery and British tyranny, and the egalitarian implications of Thomas Jefferson’s preamble to the Declaration, proved impossible to contain. Drawing on both the political philosophy of republicanism and the spiritual egalitarianism that undergirded the religious revivals of the First Great Awakening, free blacks such as the brilliant Boston poet Phillis Wheatley exposed the contradiction at the heart of the patriot cause: How could a country proclaim itself the beacon of freedom when it nurtured a system of human bondage? On the eve of the Revolution, slaves in Wheatley’s native Massachusetts repeatedly petitioned the governor and house of representatives for emancipation, arguing that “we have in common with all other men a natural right to our freedoms.” Free black militiamen

staked a claim to these rights, fighting alongside white ones against the British in the opening engagements of the war, at Lexington and Concord. The upheavals of the war itself undermined slavery, as thousands of slaves fled their masters. With the British working to enlist such fugitives and the Continental army dangerously low in manpower, the Northern states recruited bondsmen as a way of complying with the federal draft. By war's end, more than five thousand blacks had rallied to the patriot cause as soldiers in the Continental army.⁸

In the wake of independence, Northern white leaders—confronting the erosion of slavery and the persistent pleas of free blacks for the redemption of their enslaved countrymen—adopted plans for emancipation. Not surprisingly, the abolition of slavery in the North proceeded most rapidly in those states least dependent on the institution. Slavery was liquidated quickly in northern New England but was only slowly dismantled, by formulas that gradually freed the slave population, in Connecticut, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and New York. The Pennsylvania law of 1780 decreed that slaves born after that date would win their freedom when they reached the age of twenty-eight, whereas those born before that date would remain forever in bondage; New York passed a similar law in 1799. A generation of “black founders,” including free blacks Richard Allen of Philadelphia and William Hamilton of New York, promoted emancipation in their respective states—vigilance was required to ensure that masters actually released those legally eligible for freedom—and built the case for national emancipation. For example, Allen, the head of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, asked the nation's political leaders to follow the lead of George Washington, whose 1799 last will and testament decreed that his slaves would be emancipated when his wife Martha died. Slaves themselves, in places such as New York City, hastened the emancipation process and the demise of slavery by negotiating for their freedom, offering money or the promise of compliant service in exchange for “early” emancipation, before the law required it.⁹

In the tidewater areas of Maryland and Virginia, where generations of tobacco cultivation had eroded the soil, a transition was under way to plant fewer labor-intensive crops; thus masters there could serve both convenience and conscience by freeing their slaves. Washington's is the best-known such story, but the most remarkable is that of Richard Randolph. A young cousin of Jefferson's, Randolph took to heart the notion that “all men are endowed

by their Creator with certain inalienable rights” and drafted a will in the early 1790s that not only liberated his bondspeople but also placed the blame for slavery squarely on the shoulders of his fellow Americans. His famous cousin’s view that slavery was a “necessary evil” imposed on America by the British Randolph rejected as a “threadbare cover” for “the lust of power.” Unlike contemporaries who freed slaves but insisted they emigrate from the South, Randolph set aside four hundred acres of his land for his former slaves to hold as their own property; free blacks did indeed establish a complex, resilient community—their own “Israel on the Appomattox”—on this bequest.¹⁰

According to the modern-day chronicler of the Israel Hill community, Melvin Ely, Randolph believed that slavery, with its power to corrupt all that touched it, had made “Tories” of the patriots themselves—they were traitors to their own cause. Randolph was unimpressed by the so-called wave of manumissions in the Upper South in this era. In Ely’s words, “The ‘wave,’ though real, might better be called a substantial ripple when it is measured by the fraction of slaves who actually went free; Virginia remained by far the largest slaveholder among the states until bondage itself ended in 1865.” The liberal burst of conscience on the part of some slaveholders, although it contributed to the growth of the free black population, did nothing to stem the advance of slavery. In fact, because the importation of slaves from Africa to the South continued unabated, and because so many Upper South masters preferred selling their slaves southward to manumitting them, slavery marched inexorably across the frontier and into the emerging “cotton kingdom” of the Deep South, leaving more blacks in bondage “at the end of the revolutionary age than at the beginning.”¹¹

SLAVERY, THE CONSTITUTION, AND DISUNION

Sectional antagonism shaped the Constitutional Convention of 1787. According to James Madison, the brilliant young nationalist from Virginia’s planter class, the states differed “principally from the effects of their having or not having slaves”; the primary fault line lay between North and South. Sectionalism was inscribed in the actual blueprint of the new government, in the form of three provisions of the Constitution that were drafted in the name of compromise but became potent sources of controversy. The most important

of these, the three-fifths compromise, stipulated that a state's tax burden and the size of its congressional and electoral college delegations would depend on the size of its population—namely, the number of free persons in the state plus “three fifths of all other persons.” Here and elsewhere in the Constitution, the drafters consciously eschewed using the words “slave” or “slavery” in order to render the document acceptable to the North. Southern delegates had pressed to have slaves count as full persons when it came to tallying congressional representation; they regarded this as consistent with the fact that other dependent and subordinate groups—white women and children, and free blacks—were to count fully toward representation in the North and South alike. But the counting of Southern slaves as full persons struck some Northern delegates as patently hypocritical—if slaves were human enough to boost the representation of the Southern states, New Jersey's Gouverneur Morris declared, they should be treated as persons and not property in the South.¹²

The convention resolved this debate by resorting to the three-fifths formula. This compromise did not satisfy Morris. Although it gave the South *less* representation than its delegates demanded, the compromise fraction, according to Morris, still *exaggerated* Southern power—he deplored the notion that a Southern slaveholder would derive *any* votes in the Congress from the bodies he owned. Morris predicted that the three-fifths clause's real legacy would be to give slaveholders majority control over electoral politics. This interpretation would gain salience in the coming decades, though during the convention itself Morris's warning fell on deaf ears. Most Northern delegates accepted the three-fifths clause as a necessary compromise, insofar as slaves would count partially for both representation and taxation.¹³

The issue of the slave trade proved more divisive. Virginia and the states north of it wanted the African slave trade suppressed; by denouncing the commerce, Virginians could win points for compassion, knowing all the while that if foreign importations ceased, Virginia slaves would become more valuable. The delegations from the Carolinas and Georgia, by contrast, sought to have the slave trade protected. Establishing a pattern that would be endlessly repeated during the ensuing decades, South Carolinians took up the proslavery mantle and issued threats: delegates John Rutledge and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney said that South Carolina could not join the proposed Union if the slave trade were prohibited. These threats were experimental—a bid to

see what concessions could be secured by uncompromising language. Neither man contemplated a separate Southern confederacy; indeed, both were committed Federalists who advocated and envisioned a strong national government dominated by Southern interests. Again the convention compromised, ruling that the slave trade would be guaranteed for another twenty years (following a motion by Pinckney to have the guarantee last until 1808, instead of 1800 as originally agreed upon in committee); after 1808 Congress could choose to renew or abolish the trade. Henry Weincek refers to the discomfort the convention's president, George Washington, must have felt as he watched the South Carolinians in action. Two years earlier Washington had confided to a friend that he could "foresee no evil greater than disunion," and now the "mere discussion of slavery" was poisoning the atmosphere. Washington followed the proceedings in silence, but his fellow Virginian, George Mason, gave voice to his fears. In a "moment of uncanny prescience," Mason railed against the "infernal traffic" of the slave trade and invoked disunion as divine retribution, warning that "as nations cannot be rewarded or punished in the next world, they must be in this. By an inevitable chain of causes and effects, Providence punishes national sins by national calamities."¹⁴

The last of the three major provisions on slavery sparked virtually no debate at the time of the convention. Worded vaguely so it could apply to apprentices as well as slaves, a clause requiring each state to extradite and deliver any fugitive from service to his or her master and state of origin passed with overwhelming support. Why was the North willing to concede so much? Northern supporters of the Constitution did not believe that the document defined slavery as constitutional; rather, at the time of the convention, the three slavery clauses "seemed to embody no ruling principle except compromise for the sake of union." Northern advocates of the Constitution naturally stressed its "antislavery potential" when speaking to their constituents, while Southern Federalists trumpeted its proslavery features in the South (Pinckney lauded the document to South Carolinians as unimpeachably proslavery). But the emphasis of Federalists, Northern and Southern, was on the equanimity and sanctity of the Constitution's compromises. It had to be, for Federalists were taken to task, during and after the convention, by those who maintained that the very formation of the Constitution was disunionist, as was the stipulation that only nine of thirteen states need ratify it to establish the Union. After all, the Constitution was dissolving the old Union of the

Articles of Confederation. Moreover, anti-Federalists such as James Winthrop of Massachusetts contended that centralization would lead to disunion, because an overbearing federal government would alienate the states. Federalists successfully countered this charge during the ratification debates by claiming that the old Union had already been undermined—the national government under the Articles of Confederation had not been strong enough to command the respect and compliance of the states, particularly with regard to raising revenue.¹⁵

Alexander Hamilton, of New York, an ardent nationalist whose political star was rising, addressed the issue of disunion by name in *The Federalist*, papers 6–8, enumerating potential sources of discord and division in a young republic. For Hamilton, Madison, and other Federalists, the disadvantages of disunion had been evident during the Confederation era and even during the Revolution itself. Shays' Rebellion of 1786, an armed uprising by backcountry farmers seeking debtors' relief, was the most dramatic example of how the financial legacy of the Revolution (economic recession and persistent tensions between procreditor merchants and landowners on the one hand and indebted artisans and farmers on the other) could threaten national stability. With the recent past in mind, Hamilton warned that disunion within and among the states could result from class conflict, from competition over the Western territories, from disagreements over commercial regulations or the handling of the national debt, and from debates over political apportionment. All of these varieties of disunion would make the country vulnerable to the machinations of foreign powers intent on stoking domestic rivalries and could result in "War between the states," with its attendant "violent destruction of life and property." Significantly, Hamilton also associated disunion with gender disorder—he introduced the topic with examples from European history of how female "bigotry," "petulancies," and "cabals" had fomented political discord within European monarchies. Naturally, the only "safeguard" against factionalism was, according to Hamilton, "a firm Union" designed on the federal principle. Only in "subordination to the general authority of the union" could states avoid becoming "jealous, clashing, tumultuous commonwealths."¹⁶

Even as they argued that a strong national government would be a bulwark against disunion, Federalists worked assiduously to reassure those, like George Mason, who feared that the individual states would lose all

vestiges of sovereignty in the new arrangement; the increased power of the Senate, presidency, and federal judiciary could translate into policies, so anti-Federalists fretted, inimical to the economic and political interests of minorities—such as slaveholders. In urging fellow Virginians to ratify the document, Madison explained that the new Constitution would *both* empower the Union and permit the states to retain a significant measure of their authority and independence—it granted “few and defined” powers to the federal government, while those reserved to the states were “numerous and indefinite.” Hamilton echoed Madison, as he encouraged citizens in his home state of New York to ratify the Constitution, in professing his respect for the rights of the thirteen individual states. This ambiguous, indirect language was, like the slavery compromises, an evasion—the Constitution failed to answer, directly and definitely, the question of just how far a state could go in defending its own sovereignty against that of the national government. Federalists could leave this question unresolved precisely because they understood that “even the most ardent believers in state sovereignty, thought of disunion as a calamity.”¹⁷

Indeed, during Virginia’s ratification debate, its leading anti-Federalists, including Mason, Patrick Henry, and Edmund Randolph, repeatedly assured their constituents that they “would not risk disunion to defeat the Constitution.” Instead, once ratification was a *fait accompli*, they would pressure the Federalists to amend the new Constitution to include a Bill of Rights protecting basic liberties from government encroachment. Madison, leading the first federal Congress, understood that amendments to safeguard freedom of speech and assembly and other fundamental rights would satisfy anti-Federalists and thus lend further legitimacy to the new Union. Bringing the era of constitution making full circle, the Tenth Amendment, ratified in 1791, decreed that “the powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.” By formalizing Madison’s notion that the national government was one of “delegated,” and therefore limited, powers, the amendment helped ensure widespread popular support for the new order—even though it left the exact line between state and federal jurisdiction theoretical and unclear.¹⁸

In essence, Federalists offered up, to use Rogan Kersh’s recent formulation, the vision of a “sustainable union”—a Union made “more perfect be-

cause it could be preserved.” In Madison’s view, as parsed by Kersh, the new government would rest on the secure foundation of territorial unity, of bonds of affection among the people, and of the Federalist system, with its separation of powers and checks and balances. Unity, affection, and balance depended, in turn, on compromise—indeed, Kersh explains that “Union in the convention and ratifying debates served as a shorthand for compromise.” In other words, Federalists, realizing how deeply the people feared disunion, reminded them again and again how close the confederation had come to collapse, and promised that the new government would be stronger.¹⁹

To effect ratification of and promote allegiance to the new order, Federalists elaborated a host of public rituals that celebrated the benefits of the Union. In their festivals, banquets, parades, toasts, and orations, Federalists defined the key elements of a nascent American nationalism: a providential sense of a distinct mission and destiny for the United States, a belief in the superiority of representative government led by a “natural aristocracy” of the virtuous, and a reverence for the military heroes of the Revolution and for the founding documents themselves. The Constitution, in this emerging nationalist ideology, was to be regarded as nothing less than a sacred document, the bedrock of an American civil religion.²⁰

The Federalist view that compromise equaled union, and that a failure to compromise would bring disunion, was ascendant in the early days of the republic. But George Mason’s warning—that no government could rest secure on immoral compromises—proved impossible to forget.