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A Self-Evident Lie: Southern Slavery and the Threat to American Freedom

Jeremy Tewell

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A Self-Evident Lie

Southern Slavery and the Threat to American Freedom



STUDIOS BY A THAYER

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Jeremy J. Tewell

AMERICAN ABOLITIONISM AND ANTISLAVERY

John David Smith, series editor

*The Imperfect Revolution: Anthony Burns and the Landscape
of Race in Antebellum America*

GORDON S. BARKER

A Self-Evident Lie: Southern Slavery and the Threat to American Freedom

JEREMY J. TEWELL

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The Badge of Freedom?

Three months before his death, Benjamin Franklin stepped into the public spotlight for the final time. Although he had once published ads for slave sales, and had even owned a slave couple himself, beginning in the 1750s Franklin had gradually turned against the institution. As president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, Franklin presented a formal petition to Congress in February 1790, denouncing both the slave trade and slavery itself. “Mankind are all formed by the same Almighty Being,” it declared, “alike objects of his care, and equally designed for the enjoyment of happiness.” Therefore, Congress had a solemn duty to grant liberty “to those unhappy men who alone in this land of freedom are degraded into perpetual bondage.”¹

Only fourteen years earlier, Americans had announced to the world that “all men are created equal.” Franklin’s reputation as an architect of that revolution was second only to George Washington’s. Nevertheless, southern congressmen displayed unveiled contempt for Franklin and his petition. Senator Pierce Butler of South Carolina castigated the society’s plan as a willful violation of the Constitution. In the House of Representatives, James Jackson of Georgia and William Loughton Smith of South Carolina suggested that the eighty-four-year-old Franklin was no longer in his right mind. Jackson was particularly vehement in his defense of slavery, insisting on the floor of the House that the institution was divinely sanctioned and economically vital to the southern economy.

As he had done in the past, Franklin decided to take his case to the public in the form of an anonymous parody. On March 23, 1790, a public

letter appeared in the *Federal Gazette* under the signature “Historicus.” In a disinterested tone, Franklin observed that Jackson’s speech in Congress bore a striking resemblance to a speech delivered a hundred years earlier by Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim, a member of the Divan of Algiers, in response to a petition condemning the enslavement of European Christians. Assuming that Jackson had never read this speech, Franklin could not help but note “that men’s interests and intellects operate and are operated on with surprising similarity in all countries and climates, whenever they are under similar circumstances.”²

Indeed, “the African’s” rationales for white slavery clearly presaged those invoked by Jackson and other Southerners in favor of black slavery:

If we forbear to make slaves of their people, who in this hot climate are to cultivate our lands? And is there not more compassion and favor due to us as Mussulmen than to these Christian dogs? . . . Who is to indemnify the masters for their loss? . . . And if we set our slaves free, what is to be done with them? . . . Must we maintain them as beggars in our streets, or suffer our properties to be the prey of their pillage? For men accustomed to slavery will not work for a livelihood when not compelled. And what is there so pitiable in their present condition? Were they not slaves in their own countries? They have only exchanged one slavery for another and I may say a better; for here they are brought into a land where the sun of Islamism gives forth its light, and shines in full splendor, and they have an opportunity of making themselves acquainted with the true doctrine, and thereby saving their immortal souls. [They are] too ignorant to establish a good government. While serving us, we take care to provide them with everything, and they are treated with humanity. The laborers in their own country are, as I am well informed, worse fed, lodged, and clothed. . . . Here their lives are in safety.

As for those “religious mad bigots” with their “silly petitions,” it was pure foolishness to argue that slavery was “disallowed by the Alcoran!” Were not the two precepts “Masters, treat your slaves with kindness; Slaves, serve your masters with cheerfulness and fidelity” ample evidence to the contrary? It was well known, explained the African, that God had given the world “to his faithful Mussulmen, who are to enjoy it of right as fast as they conquer it.”³

The stability and happiness of the nation could not be sacrificed simply to appease the demands of a few fanatics. Such was the determination of

the Divan of Algiers, which, according to Franklin, rejected the antislavery memorial. Following suit, Congress announced that it lacked the authority to act on Franklin's petition. Franklin did not live to see the cotton boom and the consequent entrenchment of slavery in southern life. Little did he know that Congressman Jackson's proslavery apology would become commonplace in the South during the first half of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, Franklin's last public letter anticipated an important, and underappreciated, facet of the antislavery argument.



The thesis of this book is that Northerners feared slavery, in part, because the rationales for black servitude were not inherently racial, and therefore posed a threat to the liberty of all Americans, irrespective of color. Southerners invoked five interrelated rationales in their defense of African slavery: race, moral and mental inferiority, the good of the slave, the good of society, and the lessons of history. Yet many of these rationales had been used in the past (as Franklin illustrated), and could be used in the future, to oppress people of any race. Northerners often expressed concern that proslavery arguments were subject to the mutable prejudices and economic motives of those who made them. Anyone could fall victim to the argument that they were "inferior," that they would be better off enslaved, that their enslavement served the interests of society, or that their subjugation was justified by history and religion. Preparing for his debates with Stephen A. Douglas in 1858, Abraham Lincoln wrote a neatly synthesized passage that highlighted the dangerous arbitrariness of proslavery justifications:

If A can prove, however conclusively, that he may, of right, enslave B—why may not B snatch the same argument, and prove equally, that he may enslave A?

You say A is white, and B is black. It is *color*, then; the lighter having the right to enslave the darker? Take care. By this rule, you are to be slave to the first man you meet, with a fairer skin than your own.

You do not mean *color* exactly?—You mean the whites are intellectually the superiors of the blacks, and, therefore have the right to enslave them? Take care again. By this rule, you are to be slave to the first man you meet, with an intellect superior to your own.

But, say you, it is a question of interest; and, if you can make it your *interest*, you have the right to enslave another. Very well. And if he can make it his interest, he has the right to enslave you.⁴

Because proslavery arguments were not strictly racial, some Northerners understood that the perpetuation of slavery, and its attendant rationales, made their own liberty, indeed everyone's liberty, contingent on circumstance—namely, the ability to defend oneself against those who would seek to subjugate. Freedom would depend on an individual's economic status, the prejudices of the majority, or the caprice of an aristocracy. They therefore held that the only effective safeguard of individual liberty was universal liberty, as expressed in the Declaration of Independence. As long as Americans believed that "all men" were endowed with inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, everyone's liberty would be *self-evident*, regardless of circumstance. Each person's liberty would be respected simply by virtue of his or her status as a human being. Conversely, the justifications invoked to exclude a segment of society from the rights of man destroyed the self-evidence of those rights. Having rejected the Declaration's principle that all men are naturally free, Americans eliminated simple humanity as an unquestionable defense against oppression. This was dangerous because humanity was the only objective and unchanging evidence that an individual was entitled to freedom. Unless all men were assumed to be free because they were men, anyone, under the right circumstances, could be classified as weak or dangerous or inferior, and enslaved for those reasons. By failing to repudiate slavery, Americans necessarily broke the bond between humanity and liberty, thus making themselves vulnerable to proslavery rationales, especially when they happened to occupy a position of political, social, or economic weakness.

Furthermore, the capriciousness of these rationales, which was confirmed by historical evidence, proved that American slavery was simply another example of "might makes right." Like other forms of tyranny, it was determined by the desire and ability of the strong to oppress the weak. As a result, even through the lens of bigotry, white Northerners could look upon the slaves' condition and wonder if a similar fate could ever befall them. Black skin had been stigmatized as a badge of servitude, yet there was nothing to guarantee that white skin would always serve as an unimpeachable badge of freedom.



It is incumbent upon anyone offering a new interpretation of the Civil War's causes to demonstrate that previous authors have missed an important component of the sectional conflict. It is obvious to most that slavery, as Lincoln stated, was "somehow" the cause of the war. From the southern

perspective, it is not difficult to discern slavery's social and economic importance. However, northern hostility to the institution has proven much more challenging to explain. Historians have offered numerous interpretations in an effort to answer a seemingly straightforward question: What direct relevance did southern slavery have for Republicans (or Northerners in general)? The results have been fruitful, but not entirely satisfying.

These interpretive challenges may explain the recurring efforts to downplay slavery's significance. The ethnocultural interpretation is a clear example. Unlike slavery, foreign immigration was an immediate and understandably visceral experience for many Northerners. Given the massive influx of Catholic immigrants (and the consequent expansion of the Democratic Party), northern Whigs were primed for revolt even before the spring of 1854. While they highlight some of the fundamental causes of northern antislavery sentiment, ethnocultural historians, most notably William Gienapp, argue that slavery was not the initial catalyst for political realignment in the North. Rather, they emphasize the impact of nativism and the temperance movement. Similarly, political partisanship and overwrought emotionalism may have fostered the development of sectional animosity, but can hardly be said to have created it. The revisionists of the 1930s and 1940s, led by Avery Craven and James G. Randall, argued that better statesmanship might well have averted the war. By this logic, the conflict was not the result of fundamental or structural problems in American society. Yet as John Ashworth has recently noted, it makes at least as much sense to argue that the conflict over slavery produced a failure of statesmanship as it does to contend that a failure of statesmanship produced the conflict over slavery.⁵

Nor can moral fervor sufficiently account for the Republican Party's opposition to slavery's expansion. As Leon Litwack and Eugene Berwanger have pointed out, anti-black prejudice was nearly as prevalent in the North as in the South. Sympathy for the slaves and religious conviction may have been driving impetuses for some Northerners, but were not sufficient to sustain a popular political movement. One can reasonably assert that the devotion to white supremacy so often attributed to white Southerners was also common among northern whites. Nevertheless, the violent backlash triggered by abolitionist tactics in the 1830s encouraged Northerners to contrast the characteristics of slave society with their own, and in so doing generated a broader antislavery, or anti-southern, ideology. Riots, murders, and the House gag rule on abolitionist petitions fueled the suspicion that slaveholders and their allies held the liberties of white Northerners

in contempt. Furthermore, this perception of southern despotism was closely related to northern antipathy for the southern work ethic (or lack thereof), which stood in sharp contrast to the values of hard work and upward mobility that many abolitionists exemplified.⁶

Indeed, economic opposition to southern bondage was undoubtedly a salient facet of the antislavery movement, considering the institution's threat to northern interests. Forty years after its publication, Eric Foner's *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men* remains one of the most influential volumes on antebellum politics, in part because its emphasis on slavery's threat to the North's economic and social values provides us with a structural explanation of Republican antislavery, not just an explanation of its timing. I stand quite convinced of the validity of Foner's argument that many Northerners opposed the spread of slavery because it inhibited upward social mobility by stigmatizing labor and, consequently, threatening their access to the West, which served as a safety valve for the growing population of white laborers. In addition, James L. Huston has argued that the emergence of a national market threatened to put northern workers and southern slaves into direct competition, thus depressing northern wages and further stultifying social progress. Yet it seems to me the primary weakness of the economic interpretation is that it fails to differentiate Republicans from northern Democrats. There is no reason to believe that the latter were any less devoted to the free-labor ideology. Many of those who supported the Kansas-Nebraska Act may have believed, as Douglas did, that climate would keep slavery out of the territories, and therefore that congressional prohibition was both meaningless and needlessly antagonistic to the South. But as David Potter suggested, the possible outcome of popular sovereignty was not the Republicans' only concern. Whereas northern Democrats failed to see any symbolic need for a national policy against slavery's expansion, Republicans believed such a policy was a vital statement of American values.⁷

Other historians have pointed to the specter of a Slave Power conspiracy against northern liberties. The Slave Power has been a prominent theme in Kansas studies, particularly Nicole Etcheson's recent book. This is hardly surprising, considering that northern settlers, facing hostile Missourians and an illegitimate legislature, described their condition as "white slavery." Bill Cecil-Fronsman's 1997 article, "Advocate the Freedom of White Men, as Well as that of Negroes," accurately describes the principal concern of many free-soil Kansans. Leonard Richards has also demonstrated

that southern political power was a major concern to Northerners on a national level, primarily in respect to the Three-fifths Clause, southern parity in the Senate, and the complicity of northern “doughfaces.” In addition, Gienapp and Michael Holt point to Republicans’ insistence that the Slave Power undermined America’s revolutionary heritage. Like their forebears, Republicans continued to imbibe such “republican” precepts as self-government, fear of conspiracy, and hostility to aristocratic privilege.⁸

Similarly, the political and symbolic importance of the Declaration of Independence has received attention from historians such as Michael Morrison, Garry Wills, Major Wilson, and Douglas Wilson. They have explained how Republicans, northern Democrats, and southern Democrats appealed to the legacy of the Revolution to legitimize their policies. For Southerners, the Revolution upheld property rights in slaves and served as a reminder of the dangers posed by centralized government. For northern Democrats, the Revolution upheld the principle of self-government (for whites alone) inherent in popular sovereignty. And for Republicans, the Revolution, and in particular, the Declaration of Independence, established the United States on the principle of universal human liberty. Of course, given the prejudice endemic in northern society, Lincoln and the Republicans could not advocate racial equality, but, according to Douglas Wilson, they recognized that “there was political advantage to be gained in preempting the most revered clause of the most revered statement of national purpose.”⁹

In respect to my interpretation, however, the symbolic and political importance of the Declaration is tangential. It boils down to a somewhat amorphous conflict between democracy and aristocracy, or between liberty and the Slave Power. This is not meant as a criticism of the aforementioned historians. The majority of Republicans who invoked the Revolution did so without specifying precisely how Democrats’ apparent repudiation of the Declaration threatened the liberty of white Americans.

The facet of the Republican position I will highlight is the more detailed argument that individual liberty, including the liberty of whites, depended on universal liberty (or at least the American people’s continued devotion to that principle). Perhaps not surprisingly, given the prominence of this facet in Lincoln’s speeches and letters, Lincoln scholars have come closest to elucidating the importance of universal freedom. According to Harry Jaffa, “there was no principle which justified enslaving Negroes which did not at the same time justify enslaving whites.” He also points to Lincoln’s

insistence that Americans had to stand dedicated to the principle of universal freedom, lest they become victims of proslavery justifications. In the same vein, David Zarefsky has written that “slavery denied the rights of man and, in this very fundamental sense, threatened the entire edifice of natural rights.” Therefore, the only protection for the liberties of whites “lay in recognizing that these liberties derived from their status as human beings and hence were shared by all other people, including blacks.” Stephen Oates highlights Lincoln’s belief that Democrats (both northern and southern) were attempting to overthrow the Declaration of Independence, thus transforming the United States into “a despotism based on class rule and human servitude.” Likewise, Allen Guelzo observes that the Declaration became the rhetorical touchstone for Lincoln after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The enslavement of blacks was a step away from the Declaration, he explains, and “a step toward the enslavement of everyone.”¹⁰

It is fair to state that these authors have contributed significantly to the ideas in this book. However, their comments on the Declaration’s importance to white liberty are somewhat scattered and, in my opinion, should be fleshed out as a complete interpretation. It is not my contention that this aspect of the antislavery argument in any way supplants the free-labor ideal or the more generalized resentment of a nefarious Slave Power. Yet I do believe that the idea that individual liberty depended on universal liberty should be added to the list of reasons for Northerners to have worried about slavery’s impact on their own lives.



Of the proslavery rationales mentioned here, the only one that has been specifically analyzed as a threat to whites is race. This is somewhat surprising, considering that white skin is generally assumed to have been the clearest badge of personal freedom. The stigmatization of black skin, going back to the 1550s, has been well described by Winthrop Jordan in his examination of the connotations Englishmen attached to black and white (which he attributes to their desire for negative reference groups). These assumptions would continue to define “blackness” as a mark of sin and inferiority, and a consequent qualifier for bondage, throughout the antebellum period.¹¹

Nevertheless, a handful of historians, including Russel B. Nye, Carol Wilson, Calvin Wilson, Thomas D. Morris, and Lawrence R. Tenzer, have observed that, from a legal perspective, slavery was not entirely, or even primarily, based on race. Beginning with a Virginia statute of 1662,

Southerners determined slavery by the status of the mother. After several generations of white paternity, which was anything but uncommon, the result was a class of people who were white by all appearances, but legally held in bondage. Indeed, Northerners were quite aware that people who appeared fully white labored as slaves in the South. They called attention to countless advertisements in southern newspapers in which masters described their absconded property as having “blue eyes, light flaxen hair,” and “skin disposed to freckle.” One such slaveowner candidly admitted that his slave was “so nearly white that it is believed a stranger would suppose there was no African blood in him.” With these descriptions in mind, a slightly waggish Northerner wrote to a Kansas newspaper expressing a desire to settle in the new territory, but then complained he was “almost afraid to come, for should I happen to tan a little under your hot sun I might be taken for a mulatto.”¹²

Many abolitionists began to argue that the common sight of these light-skinned slaves would put poor whites at risk for abduction and enslavement. Carol Wilson and Calvin Wilson effectively examine the northern assertion that white children, in both the South and the North, were being kidnapped and sold as the offspring of white slaves. Harriet Beecher Stowe dramatically expressed this fear in her *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*: “When the mind once becomes familiarized with the process of slavery . . . and when blue eyes and golden hair are advertised as properties of *negroes*—what protection will there be for poor white people, especially as under the present fugitive slave law they can be carried away without a jury trial?”¹³

Other Northerners, both abolitionists and Republicans, concluded that the continuing effects of amalgamation were destroying race as the natural barrier between freemen and slaves, thus producing a willingness to impose bondage without so much as the pretext of an enslaved maternal line. Southern slavery embraced all complexions, noted a Wisconsin editor. He then warned that white skin was quickly supplanting black through the natural process of miscegenation, which would ultimately “obliterate all distinctions of color.” William Lloyd Garrison went even further in personalizing the danger to northern whites, reminding them that Southerners actively sought light-skinned slaves, particularly women: “No person can say I am safe, my wife is safe, my mother or my child is safe; that complexion settles the question in America, that none but black people can be enslaved.” In the fall of 1855 the *Liberator* took note of two slave children purchased in the nation's capital who, according to observers, possessed no visible trace

of African blood. Garrison suggested that local photographers display their pictures in order to convince the public that Southerners were willing to enslave “any child in the land” if it would serve their financial interests. Congressman James Ashley of Ohio also warned his constituents that “the bleaching process” of amalgamation and the consequent appearance of white-skinned slaves could produce a willingness to impose bondage without any regard to color or birth.¹⁴

Yet as a rationale for bondage, race may be best described as a subjective manifestation of arbitrary characteristics. Even if each and every southern slave had been clearly black, slavery was still a threat to the liberty of others because these characteristics could be attributed to people with little or no reference to their racial background. Indeed, “the social construction of race” has been a key interpretation in the works of Eric Williams, Oscar and Mary Handlin, Kenneth Stampp, Edmund Morgan, William McKee Evans, and Barbara Fields. Williams argued that race had nothing to do with the choice of Africans as a labor force. They were simply the most vulnerable, and hence the most economical. Racism developed later as the justification for an existing practice. It was therefore apparent, as Stampp explained in his study of the peculiar institution, that race has no real meaning of its own; “its meanings accrue from ideas the powerful attach to it.”¹⁵



The belief that proslavery rationales were dangerously subjective was expressed by Northerners across the antislavery spectrum. Consequently, the evidence I present in this study comes from political as well as abolitionist sources. That being said, it is not always a simple task to draw a clear line between the abolitionist and Republican versions of antislavery. The traditional view of abolitionists is that they were a small group of evangelical Northerners who demanded “immediate” emancipation, denounced colonization and compensation for slaveowners, felt genuine sympathy for the plight of the slave, and were morally opposed to the racial prejudice endemic in American society. Republicans, on the other hand, looked to the gradual emancipation of slavery (through territorial restriction), and opposed the institution because of its deleterious socioeconomic impact. In reality, however, the dividing line was hazy at best. After antislavery developed into a political force in the 1840s and 1850s, the Republican Party could claim important leaders who, despite their support for gradual emancipation over immediatism, can be accurately designated as abolitionists, including Charles Sumner, Salmon Chase, and Owen Lovejoy.

Even if the typical abolitionist had a greater claim to morality than the typical Republican, morality was certainly not devoid of self-interest. As James Brewer Stewart has observed, immediate abolitionists “showed no less concern than other white Northerners about the fate of republican freedom” in a slaveholding country. The Golden Rule can easily be interpreted as a warning to individuals that the oppression of others opens the door to the possibility that they might be similarly oppressed. According to one evangelical paper published at the time of the Missouri crisis, if it were truly the duty of all men to do unto others as they would wish others to do unto them, slavery would come to an immediate end, “for no man is willing to become a slave himself,” or to see his children enslaved. Consequently, Stowe, Garrison, James G. Birney, and other abolitionists were quick to warn white Americans that the slave’s lot could potentially become their own. Like the Republicans, they feared that Americans no longer honored the ideals of the founding fathers. They warned that qualifying or rejecting universal liberty in order to justify black slavery would put people of all races at risk. Theodore Parker argued that the principles that allowed slavery in South Carolina would also establish it in New England. If Virginians could raise Africans for sale, he saw no reason why people could not raise Irishmen, Democrats, and Know-Nothings for sale in Massachusetts. “The bondage of a black man in Alexandria imperils every white woman’s daughter in Boston,” he explained. “You cannot escape the consequences of a first principle more than you can ‘take the leap of Niagara and stop half way down.’” Abolitionists and Republicans also made a point of reminding Northerners that the slavery of antiquity—which Southerners were so fond of invoking—had been primarily white slavery.¹⁶

Because these arguments emphasized slavery’s potential threat to whites, rather than the suffering of the slaves themselves, they easily fit the free-labor platform and political purposes of the Republican Party. It is not surprising that many historians have charged Republicans with hypocrisy, given the fact that they failed to offer civil equality as a corollary of their condemnation of slavery. In fact, many Republicans, particularly in the Midwest, vehemently denied any intention or desire to introduce social or political equality between the races. And many believed, or certainly claimed to believe, that blacks were morally and intellectually inferior to whites. Yet at the same time, they would not deny the black man’s humanity. They would not embrace the fiction that slaves were simply another form of property, in the same category as pigs and cattle. In the

final analysis, it was their common humanity that linked the black man's fate to the rights of white men. Republicans were thus forced to balance their own prejudice—and that of their constituents—with their insistence that whites and blacks were members of the same human family. As a result, they consistently attempted to segregate natural rights from social and political rights, maintaining that blacks were entitled to the former, but could be safely denied the latter. (Northern Democrats, on the other hand, insisted that the Republican platform would lead inexorably to political and social equality.) For Republicans, ultimate emancipation was as much a means to an end as an end in itself. In his second annual address to Congress in 1862, Lincoln argued that “in giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free—honorable alike in what we give and what we preserve.” Yet given the prejudice of northern voters, most placed a greater emphasis on the second half of that equation. Lyman Trumbull, Illinois's first Republican senator, observed that Southerners had just as much right to enslave a white man in Kansas as they did to hold a black man in the same condition. White skin was no protection. He therefore maintained that “it is not so much in reference to the welfare of the negro that we are here.” The Republicans' goal was to protect the rights and dignity of laboring whites.¹⁷

From a strictly political standpoint, Democrats spared no attempt to capitalize on northern prejudice by characterizing Republicans as racial egalitarians, while Republicans actively sought to portray Democrats as tools of the Slave Power and traitors to the nation's founding principles. The declension of American freedom, marked by a failure to respect the ideal of universal liberty, became a significant line of attack against both northern and southern Democrats. Republican editors and politicians made a point of connecting them to a defense of slavery in the abstract, characterizing southern papers that lauded slavery as the “special organs” of James Buchanan and, occasionally, Stephen A. Douglas. These editorials would often carry sensational titles—“The Buchanan Democracy Hate Freedom”—while the Democratic Party was frequently disparaged as “the bogus Democracy” or “the party calling itself democratic.”¹⁸

Republicans also frequently included a special message for foreign-born Americans, warning them that they would be the most susceptible to enslavement and asking them to reconsider their devotion to the Democratic Party. This became an interesting facet of the Republicans' balancing act between nativism and an appeal to immigrants in 1856. “These Democratic

rhapsodies over the peculiar institution are not confined to merely negro slavery," proclaimed the Springfield, Illinois, *Journal*. "The Douglas Democracy, it will be seen, say that 'the principle of slavery does not depend on difference of complexion,' but goes further and embraces within its folds likewise all the poor and laboring classes, no matter to what race or lineage they belong. They argue that the free-born sons of Ireland, of Germany, of Scotland, of America would be bettered and improved in their condition were they likewise brought into the bondage of the Southern slave. Was there ever a more monstrous doctrine promulgated? And yet it is to this that the present avowals of the Sham Democracy are rapidly tending."¹⁹

One might protest that Republicans were willing to accept the continuation of slavery in those states where it already existed, and were therefore complicit in the legitimization of proslavery rationales. Maintaining the ideal of universal liberty required the American people to repudiate slavery, but this did not require the immediate abolition of slavery in the South. Prohibiting the expansion of slavery, thus keeping it "on the course of ultimate extinction," would signify that the public considered it a necessary evil, to be tolerated temporarily as an aberration in a nation still dedicated to the proposition that all men possess equal rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. "Let us, by our legislation, show that we really believe the declaration," announced the *New York Times*. Americans could not yet enforce the doctrine in every section of the country, but they could strive to "stay the plague," and affix the mark of national disapprobation on southern slavery.²⁰

This was a major theme in Lincoln's campaign against Douglas and the application of popular sovereignty as the method for determining slavery's status in the territories. His greatest challenge was to convince northern audiences, including some of his fellow Republicans, that simple indifference to slavery was itself inimical to the liberty of whites. The question, as Lincoln saw it, was whether liberty would be universal (at least in theory) or whether the justifications for black slavery would survive to threaten the liberty of all—a danger he pointed to repeatedly, as when he criticized Douglas for convincing the public not to care about slavery and for qualifying the Declaration of Independence, which he viewed as the only sure defense against circumstance and the self-interest of the powerful. In order to fix my topic in the political context of the 1850s, I will begin with an examination of Lincoln's reaction to the Kansas-Nebraska Act and his subsequent debates with Senator Douglas.

Proceeding from Lincoln's argument, the next three chapters will examine each of the proslavery rationales I have identified (inferiority, the good of the slave, the good of society, and the lessons of history and Christianity) and demonstrate how northern whites could perceive each one to be a threat to their own freedom. Chapter five will highlight the northern argument that slaveholders constituted a burgeoning aristocracy. Chapter six will examine the antislavery response to Southerners' denials and qualifications of the Declaration of Independence, particularly in respect to the Dred Scott decision, while the final chapter will consider the debate between antislavery Northerners and northern Democrats after 1854 (including the historical accuracy of their respective claims) as well as the Republican Party's devotion to the ideal of universal liberty in the 1860 presidential campaign.

One of the primary challenges that confront students of antislavery is the need to extrapolate northern motivations from the sources at hand. Fortunately, antebellum Northerners left us an abundance of material with which to work, including newspapers, political tracts, published speeches, legislative petitions, and private correspondence. In the course of my research, I examined hundreds of newspapers and printed sources. Whether or not political speeches and newspaper editorials can reveal the actual depth of these antislavery arguments in the northern consciousness is certainly open to debate. But these are by far the most informative sources we have, and if the repetition of an argument by numerous individuals can be taken as evidence of its prominence, the antislavery positions examined in this study had a significant impact on the northern psyche. Consequently, the fear that black slavery posed a threat to white liberty cannot be dismissed as a mere conspiracy theory held by a paranoid minority. Furthermore, given the broadness of my topic, I saw no value in confining my research to a particular state or region—although a significant portion of my material emerged from the Old Northwest, which was the heart of the early Republican Party. Most of my sources will fall within the period of rapidly escalating tensions (1854–1860); however, some arguments will reach back into the nation's first half century, a period in which many aspects of the proslavery and antislavery arguments initially took shape.

Finally, it is important to clarify my use of the term "universal liberty." It is not meant to express a belief that American slaves (much less all human beings) would actually enjoy freedom at any point in the foreseeable future; rather it is a reference to Northerners' belief that liberty had to be maintained as a national ideal. Only by defining slavery as an aberrant

and temporary evil could human bondage be delegitimized as a social arrangement and cordoned off from American society. If the principle of human liberty were not maintained (which it could not be if the American public sanctioned slavery's expansion and perpetuation), no one's liberty would be respected as "self-evident"—an inviolable aspect of the human condition—particularly if they were unable to defend themselves against the machinations of would-be aristocrats. So my use of the term is very much predicated on Lincoln's defense of the term "created equal." All men were endowed with inalienable rights, but Northerners' devotion to the concept was not tantamount to an argument that all human beings the world over should be immediately freed (certainly not for Republicans). It was an axiom adopted by the founding fathers to guide the nation in the future. And in this case, the territories were the future.