

Prologue

THE CHALLENGE OF CHATTEL SLAVERY

No one attacked the black slavery prevailing throughout the southern states with greater vehemence than a group of young, radical abolitionists who burst upon the American landscape in the early 1830s. Exasperated at the betrayal of the Revolutionary promise that all forms of human bondage would disappear in this new land of liberty, and marshaling all the evangelical fervor of the religious revivals then sweeping the country, they demanded no less than the immediate emancipation of all slaves. They not only opposed any compensation to slaveholders and any colonization outside the country of freed slaves, but they also demanded full political rights for all blacks, North and South.¹

The most prominent of these abolitionists was William Lloyd Garrison. Son of a drunken sailor who had abandoned his family, Garrison grew up in a poor but piously Baptist household in Newburyport, Massachusetts. He served as a printer's apprentice and then made his first notable mark on antislavery activism when he went to jail rather than pay a fine for libeling as a "highway robber and murderer" a New England merchant who shipped slaves between Baltimore and New Orleans. From Boston on January 1, 1831, the near-sighted, prematurely balding, twenty-five-year-old editor brought out the first issue of a new weekly paper, *The Liberator*.² Garrison left no doubt about his refusal to compromise with the sin of slavery:

I *will* be as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. On this subject, I do not wish to think, or speak, or write with moderation. No! No! Tell a man whose house is on fire, to give a moderate alarm: tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hands of the ravisher; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen;--but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present. I am in earnest--I will not equivocate--I will not excuse--I will not retreat a single inch--AND I WILL BE HEARD.³

Garrison conceded that the elimination of slavery would take time in practice. But that should not inhibit forthright condemnation of moral evil. "Urge immediate abolition as earnestly as we may, it will alas! be gradual abolition in the end. We have never said that slavery would be overthrown by a single blow; that it ought to be we shall always contend."⁴

The crusading editor, however, did not look to direct political action to eradicate slavery. Moral suasion and non-violent resistance were his strategies. With agitation, he hoped at first to shame slaveholders into repentance. By early 1842 Garrison had gone so far as to denounce the U.S. Constitution for its proslavery clauses as "a covenant with death and an agreement with hell." He publicly burned a copy during one 4th of July celebration, proclaiming: "So perish all compromises with tyranny!" He now believed that if anything the North should secede from central government. The slogan "No Union with Slave-Holders" appeared on the masthead of Garrison's *Liberator* for

years.⁵

Needless to say this disrespect for the Union did not go over well in the North. Throughout the 1830s, even before Garrison made his call for secession explicit, abolitionist lecturers, presses, and property were frequent targets of hostile violence, often instigated and directed by gentlemen of prominence and high rank. A Boston mob, enraged at reports that the editor of *The Liberator* had dared, while touring abroad in England, to condemn the United States for countenancing slavery, almost lynched him after he returned. Nor did every abolitionist embrace disunion. Many would turn away from Garrison's pacifism and anarchism to take up political activity in a quest for respectability and success. As the antislavery crusade split into doctrinal factions, the resort to the ballot box would bring both a broadened appeal and a dilution of purity.

Nonetheless, Garrison's strategic vision was hardly unique to him. Nearly all of slavery's most radical opponents at one time shared it, including, among others, Frederick Douglass, the free black leader who had escaped in 1838 from slavery in Maryland, and Wendell Phillips, a wealthy lawyer and Boston Brahmin converted to the cause by anti-abolitionist violence.⁶ When the American Anti-Slavery Society endorsed disunion in May of 1844, this radical tactic had already found expression in anti-slavery politics. Twelve northern Congressmen, led by the venerable former president, John Quincy Adams, had one year earlier issued an address to the people boldly asserting that the annexation of Texas as a slave state would "not only inevitably result in a

dissolution of the Union, but fully justify it,"⁷ and eight more Congressmen added their support to the statement in the newspapers. The legislatures of Massachusetts and Ohio passed similar resolutions in 1845, while the year after that, Congressman Joshua Giddings, influenced by his Garrisonian daughter, ran for reelection declaring that the unlawful annexation of Texas followed by the unconstitutional war with Mexico had annulled the Union's authority. Such sentiments, however, ultimately subsided, particularly after the Compromise of 1850 appeared to have settled the divisive issue of slavery at the national level. Subsequent efforts by Garrison and his associates in 1857 to get Republican Party politicians to attend disunionist conventions held in Worcester, Massachusetts, and Cleveland, Ohio, brought meager results.

The radical abolitionists, consequently, have too often been dismissed as hopelessly naive. Garrison's opposition to government was so intense that he and his followers refused even to vote. But this appearance of strategic naiveté is misleading. Once it became clear, for instance, that Southerners were not inclined to repent and free their chattels voluntarily, the Garrisonians fully understood that abolition would require some political act. They further realized, however, that the politics would take care of itself--indeed only could take care of itself--after moral suasion had first created a powerful antislavery constituency.⁸

Yet how could northern secession from the Union help the slaves? Historians have tended to attribute this proposal to an

ineffectual moral perfectionism, in which radical abolitionists wished to symbolically and dramatically disassociate themselves from the moral stain of southern slavery. In fact, closer investigation will reveal that disunion would have been an effective and practical way to bring down what Southerners called their "peculiar institution." To appreciate the true sophistication of this tactic, however, a sophistication that Garrison himself may not have grasped entirely, we must navigate thorny and controversial issues surrounding the political economy of American slavery.

Endnotes

¹My favorite introduction to nineteenth-century abolitionism is James Brewer Stewart, *Holy Warriors: The Abolitionists and American Slavery* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), primarily an intellectual history. Other introductory volumes include Ronald G. Walters, *The Antislavery Appeal: American Abolitionism After 1830* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); Merton L. Dillon, *The Abolitionists: The Growth of a Dissenting Minority* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974); and Gerald Sorin, *Abolitionism: A New Perspective* (New York: Praeger, 1972). To flesh out narrative events, the most oft-cited larger volume is Louis Filler, *The Crusade Against Slavery, 1830-1860* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960). Unfortunately, Filler's study, part of the New American Nation Series, is much more clumsily written than it should be. Another history, violently partisan, that covers the antislavery movement all the way back to the colonial period

is Dwight Lowell Dumond, *Antislavery: The Crusade for Freedom in America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966). Dumond's earlier and briefer *Antislavery Origins of the Civil War in the United States* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1939) prefigured many of the findings of his longer work. Lawrence J. Friedman emphasizes abolition's evangelical underpinnings in *Gregarious Saints: Self and Community in American Abolitionism, 1830-1870* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1982); whereas Betty L. Fladeland, *Men and Brothers: Anglo-American Antislavery Cooperation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972) explores the connections between British and American abolitionism. Carleton Mabee, *Black Freedom: The Nonviolent Abolitionists From 1830 Through the Civil War* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), is a sensitive treatment of abolitionist tactics.

More recently, James L. Huston, "The Experiential Basis of the Northern Antislavery Impulse," *Journal of Southern History*, 56 (Nov 1990), 609-40, has provided an exhaustive survey of the scholarly literature that places special weight on abolitionists' direct experience with slavery's coercion, while Daniel J. McInerney, *The Fortunate Heirs of Freedom: Abolition & Republican Thought* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), has grounded abolitionism's ideological heritage not in evangelical religion but in the radical republicanism of the American Revolution. Both works are good antidotes to the tendency--most strikingly manifest in the study by Lawrence Friedman--to associate radical abolitionism with the Benevolent Empire's paternalistic and often statist reforms (e.g., mandatory Sunday closing, alcohol prohibition, and compulsory government schools). This is not to deny

that there were many institutional and personal connections between the two movements. But their more fundamental, ideological antagonisms ultimately predominated. It is best to think of abolitionism as a crusade that drew its recruits primarily from those who were culturally prone toward elitist conservatism but then radicalized them ideologically. Herbert Aptheker, however, carries this approach too far in *Abolitionism: A Revolutionary Movement* (Boston: Twayne, 1989), where he tries to paint abolitionists as class-conscious, anti-property precursors of Marx.

The latest attempt at a comprehensive reinterpretation of the abolitionism is Paul Goodman, *Of One Blood: Abolitionism and the Origins of Racial Equality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Unfortunately Goodman inflates his claims to originality with respect to the importance of black abolitionists, the desire for racial equality on the part of white abolitionists, and on the opposition of both to colonization, all of which have been fully recognized in previous works. The one aspect that is indeed original is the book's wholehearted embracing of Charles Sells's thesis about pervasive resistance to the market revolution in antebellum America, but Goodman marshals paltry evidence that the origins of abolitionism owes anything to this resistance.

²Until recently Garrison was not adequately served by his biographers. Now with Henry Mayer's *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998) we finally have a biography worthy of the crusading editor. Mayer does a masterly job of integrating the personal details of Garrison's life with a sensitive exposition of Garrison's

intellectual odyssey. Among the older biographies, Walter Merrill, *Against Wind and Tide: A Biography of Wm. Lloyd Garrison* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), at least is not hostile towards its subject, as is John L. Thomas, *The Liberator, William Lloyd Garrison: A Biography* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963). Perceptive but flawed by excessive psychologizing is James Brewer Stewart's short study, *William Lloyd Garrison and the Challenge of Emancipation* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1992).

One contribution to understanding abolitionism that cannot be praised too highly is Aileen S. Kraditor, *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and His Critics on Strategy and Tactics, 1834-1850* (New York: Random House, 1969). Prior to her work, the all-too-common inclination was to disparage William Lloyd Garrison and his followers. This goes back to Gilbert H. Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse, 1830-1844* (New York: American Historical Association, 1933), and tainted the works of both Filler and Dumond. They portrayed Garrison as a vituperative and intolerant zealot whose actual antislavery activities were far less constructive than the those of other, more respectable but less visible figures, such as Lewis Tappan and Theodore Dwight Weld. Kraditor reestablished the centrality of the Garrisonians and, in the process, shows that they were often more tolerant and less sectarian than conservative opponents in their willingness to welcome all factions within the abolitionist fold. Another seminal work that looks into Garrison's anarchism and non-resistance is Lewis Perry, *Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery Thought* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973).

³*The Liberator*, 1 (1 January 1831), p. 1.

⁴*The Liberator*, 1 (13 August 1831), p. 129.

⁵William M. Wiecek, *The Sources of Antislavery Constitutionalism in America, 1760-1848* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), thoroughly compares the conflicting abolitionist interpretations of slavery's constitutionality and also covers the period's more mainstream interpretations.

⁶An impressive biography of one of the more conservative abolitionists is Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Lewis Tappan and the Evangelical War Against Slavery* (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1969), while Irving H. Bartlett, *Wendell Phillips: Brahmin Radical* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), is a biography of a prominent Garrisonian that contains one of the best discussions of their advocacy of disunion. See also Richard Hofstadter, "Wendell Phillips: The Patrician as Agitator," in *The American Political Tradition: And the Men Who Made It* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), pp. 137-63, and James Brewer Stewart, *Wendell Phillips: Liberty's Hero* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986). Frederick Douglass has attracted many biographers, most recently, William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991). The participation of free blacks in the abolitionist crusade is the subject of Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), and Jane H. Pease and William H. Pease, *They Who Would Be Free: Blacks Search for Freedom, 1830-1861* (New York: Atheneum, 1974).

⁷Address to the people of the free states of the Union, 3 Mar 1843, as reprinted in Frederick W. Merk, *Slavery and the Annexation of Texas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), p. 205.

⁸For a defense of Garrison's strategy of moral suasion, see James B. Stewart, "The Aim and Impact of Garrisonian Abolitionism, 1840-1860," *Civil War History* (Sep 1969), 197-209, reprinted in Robert P. Swierengo, ed., *Beyond the Civil War Synthesis: Political Essays of the Civil War Era* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), pp. 329-41. The traditional perspective on abolitionist disunionism is well represented in ch. 8 of Walters, *The Antislavery Appeal*.