**The Emergence of Proslavery Thought**

In the years immediately following the Revolution, slave-owners began to offer defenses of slavery. For the first time, a defense of slavery seemed necessary. Before the Revolution, there was no need to defend slavery per se. As one more level of social status in the British Empire, slavery fit perfectly well into a society built on hierarchy. But with hierarchy under attack, American masters had to develop some explanation for why they continued to hold slaves. During the Revolution, the British intellectual Samuel Johnson asked, “How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of Negroes?” The move toward abolition in the North suggested the some Americans agreed with the implications of Johnson’s question. The onus was now on the slave-owners of the new nation to answer that question.

**Thomas Jefferson’s Defense of Slavery, Excerpted**

In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson had set out, unintentionally perhaps, the argument for abolition: “We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights that among them are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.”

A few years after drafting the Declaration, Jefferson developed the outlines of a number important proslavery arguments that countered his assertions of equality…Jefferson argued in the *Notes: On the State of Virginia* that blacks were inherently inferior to whites in their mental abilities and their moral virtues…he asserted that they were “inferior to the whites in …body and mind,” further arguing that he had never found a black who “had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration; never seen an elementary trait of painting or sculpture…” Jefferson continues to argue that historically the white race has always had slaves, reflecting back to Roman times.

Being unequal, blacks could never, in Jefferson’s mind, survive in competition with whites. At the time, free black men could vote in the states surrounding Virginia: Pennsylvania, Maryland, and North Carolina. Nevertheless, Jefferson fervently believed that blacks could never be political equals of whites and must never be allowed to vote or to participate in public life. As Jefferson saw it. If emancipated, former slaves would become a permanent class of peasants or serfs. This would undermine American democracy. Thus Jefferson asserted that if slavery were to end, the slaves themselves would have to be exiled, perhaps sent to the Caribbean, Africa, or some remote part of the American continent.

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**John C. Calhoun: Speech in the U.S. Senate, 1873**

In this speech, John Calhoun responds to antislavery petitions sent to the Senate by abolitionists groups. He refuses to concede that slavery is in the slightest degree evil. On the contrary, he argues that slavery is “indispensable to the peace and happiness of both” whites and blacks. Like other proslavery politicians, he makes claims for the constitutional protection of slavery while at the same time asserting that the racial inferiority of blacks require that they be held as slaves. He asserts that “instead of an evil, slavery is a good—a positive good.” This argument helped characterize the entire debate over slavery until the Emancipation Proclamation, the realities of the Civil War, and Thirteenth Amendment finally ended the institution of slavery.

“…But I take higher ground. I hold that in the present state of civilization, where two races of different origin, and distinguished by color, and the other physical differences, as well as intellectual, are brought together, the relation now existing in the slaveholding States between the two, is, instead of an evil, a good—a positive good. I feel myself called up on to speak freely upon the subject where the honor and interests of those I represent are involved. I hold then, that there never has yet existed a wealthy and civilized society in which one portion of the community did not, in point of fact, live on the labor of the other.”

“…I fearlessly assert that the existing relation between the two races in the South, against which these blind fanatics are waging war, forms the most solid and durable foundation on which to rear free and stable political institutions…There is and always has been an advanced stage of wealth and civilization, a conflict between labor [slaves] and capitol [slave owners]. The condition of society in the South exempts us from the disorders and dangers resulting from this conflict; and explains why it is that the political condition of the slaveholding states has been so much more stable and quiet than that of the North…Be assured that emancipation itself would not satisfy these fanatics:--that gained, the next step would be to raise the negroes into a social and political equality with the whites;…we would soon find the present condition of the two races reversed. They and their northern allies would be the masters, and we the slaves…”

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**Thomas R. R. Cobb: Effects of Abolition in the United States, 1858**

Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb was a Georgia lawyer, a legal scholar, and served in the Confederate legislature, later becoming a colonel and organized Cobb’s Legion. He was promoted to brigadier general shortly before he was killed at the battle of Fredericksburg in 1862. One of his key arguments in favor of slavery was the failure of free blacks to prosper. Cobb considered the condition of the blacks in the West Indies, Africa, and elsewhere in the world. He discusses what he calls “the savage barbarity, the miserable idleness, the continual outbreaks, and ruined cities, the abandoned agriculture of Haiti, where the dark mantle of heathenism has settled upon this once beautiful and fertile island. Cobb predicted that the emancipation in the United States would lead to similar results, a nation destroyed and ruined.

“…The labored efforts made for their intellectual improvement, taken as a body they have made no advancement. Averse to physical labor, they are equally averse to intellectual effort. The young Negro acquire readily the first rudiments of education, where memory and imitation are chiefly brought into action, but for any higher effort of reason and judgment he is, as a general rule, utterly incapable.

His [northern free African Americans] moral condition compares unfavorably with that of the slave of the South. He seeks the cities and towns, and indulges freely in those vices to which his nature inclines him. His friends inveigh against the prejudice of color, but he rises no higher in Mexico, Central America, New Grenada, or Brazil. Where no such prejudice exists. The cause lies deeper: in the nature and genic make-up of the Negro race.

The emancipated Negroes do not enjoy full and equal civil and political rights in any State in the Union, except the State of Vermont. In several of the States they are not permitted to vote, in some under peculiar restrictions. In almost every State where the matter has been made a subject of legislation, intermarriages with the whites are forbidden. In none are such marriage at all common. In many states they are forbidden to serve as jurors, or to be sworn in as witnesses against a white person, or hold any elective office.”

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**Edmund Ruffin: The Political Economy of Slavery, 1853**

Edmund Ruffin was one of the most fanatic proslavery theorists of the late antebellum period. In 1859, the sixty-five-year-old enrolled in a militia company so he could attend the execution of John Brown. Two years later, he moved to South Carolina when his home state of Virginia did not immediately secede. Shortly thereafter, this longtime advocate of secession was given the honor of igniting a fuse to fire the first shot on Fort Sumter. When the war ended with the Confederacy in ashes, Ruffin shot himself in the head with a pistol, preferring death to the prospect of living in a reconstructed Union where slavery was illegal.

“Hundreds of thousands of individual cases of emancipated negro slaves, and their descendants, have existed in this country in the last two centuries. This class has now increased, in Virginia alone, to more than 50,000 in number. In the non-slaveholding States, also, there are numerous free Negroes. It is true, that when interspersed among the dominant class of white inhabitants, the free Negroes are subjected to some depressing and injurious influences, from which they would be relieved if forming a separate community…

…with few individual exceptions, the free Negroes in every State of this Confederacy, are noted for ignorance, indolence, improvidence, and poverty—and very generally, also for vicious habits, and numerous violations of the criminal laws. In this plentiful country, where the only great want is for labor, and where every free laborer may easily earn a comfortable support, this free negro class is so little self-sustaining, that it now scarcely increases, in general, by procreation, and would annually decrease throughout the United States, if not continually recruited by new emancipations, and by fugitives from slavery…A very few have acquired considerable amounts of property. But these rare qualities were not hereditary—and the children of these superior individuals would be as likely to fall back to the ordinary condition of their class. In short, taken throughout, and with but few exceptions, the free negro class, in every part this country, is a nuisance, and noted for ignorance, laziness, improvidence, and vicious behavior.”

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**Dred Scott v. Sanford: Supreme Court ruling supporting the slaveholding South**

In 1834, slave Dred Scott was purchased in Missouri and then brought to Illinois, a free (non-slave) state. His owner and he later moved to present-day Minnesota where slavery had been recently prohibited, and then back to Missouri. When his owner died, Scott sued the widow to whom he was left, claiming he was no longer a slave because he had become free after living in a free state. At a time when the country was in deep conflict over slavery, the Supreme Court decided that Dred Scott was not a “citizen of the state” so they had no jurisdiction in the matter, but the majority opinion also stated that he was not a free man.

The main question postulated to the Supreme Court was, “can a Negro, whose ancestors were imported into this country, and sold as slaves, become a member of the political community formed and brought into existence by the Constitution of the United States, and as such become entitled to all the rights, and privileges, and immunities, guaranteed by that instrument to the citizen? One of which rights is the privilege of suing in a court of the United States in the cases specified in the Constitution.”

The decision the Supreme Court Justices rendered was, “We think they [people of African ancestry] are not [citizens], and that they are not included, and were not intended to be included, under the word "citizens" in the Constitution, and can therefore claim none of the rights and privileges which that instrument provides for and secures to citizens of the United States.”

“Upon these considerations, it is the opinion of the court that the act of Congress which prohibited a citizen from holding and owning property of this kind in the territory of the United States north of the line therein mentioned, is not warranted by the Constitution, and is therefore void; and that neither Dred Scott himself, nor any of his family, were made free by being carried into this territory; even if they had been carried there by the owner, with the intention of becoming a permanent resident.”