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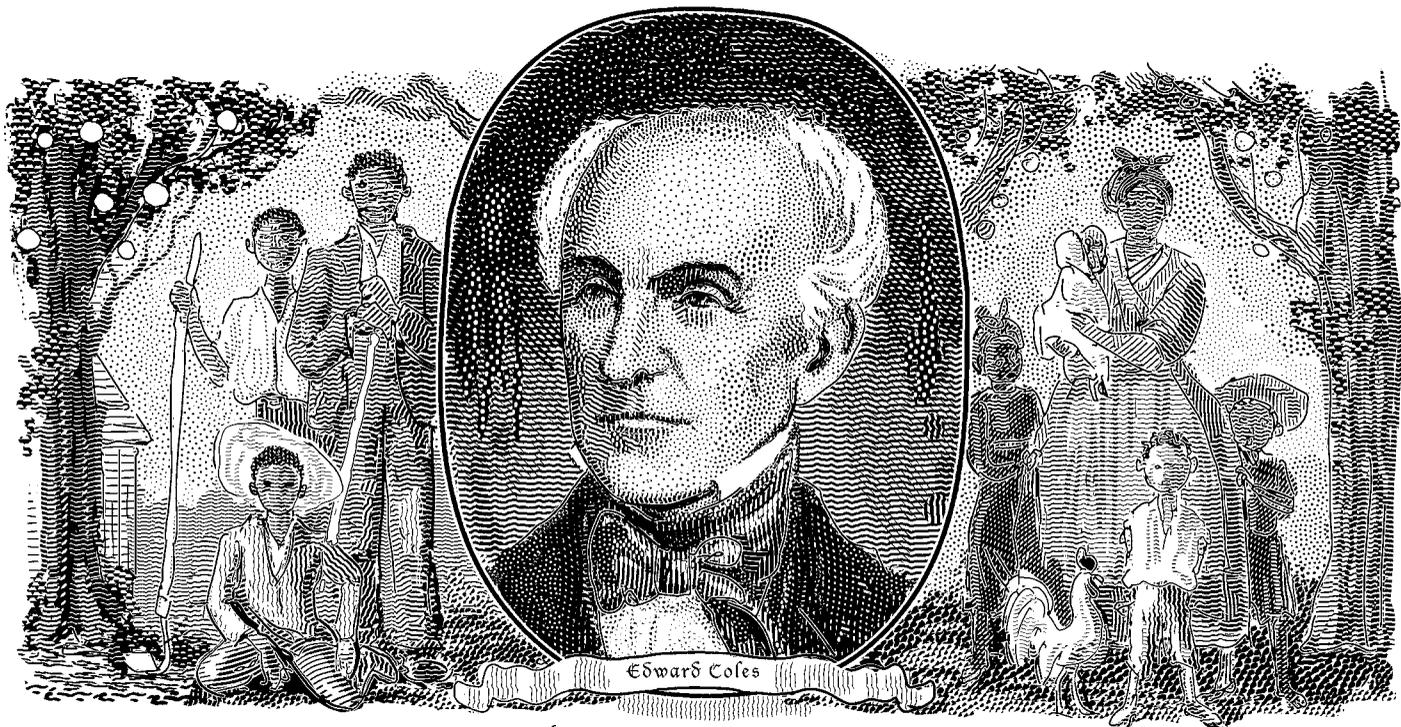
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SHAKING HANDS WITH MADISON AND LINCOLN

Confronting Slavery: Edward Coles and the Rise of Antislavery Politics in Nineteenth-Century America,
by Suzanne Cooper Guasco. Northern Illinois University Press, 265 pages, \$28.95



EDWARD COLES (1786–1868) TOUCHED two great dramas in American history, the founding and the Civil War. He knew many of the great actors; as a young man he was the neighbor and adoring protégé of Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe; as an old man he greeted Abraham Lincoln on his way to his first inauguration. In Coles's mind, these men were part of the same story: the principles of the Revolution, upheld by the great Virginians, were finally fulfilled, as far as slaves were concerned, by Lincoln and the Republican Party. Coles himself played a leading role in a lesser but still important drama: from 1822 to 1826 he was governor of the new state of Illinois, Lincoln's future home, and was instrumental in keeping it a free state. Suzanne Cooper Guasco, an associate professor of history at Queens University of Charlotte, tells Coles's story as a "lifelong confrontation with slavery." Her account is fascinating, inspiring, and tragic all at once.

Coles grew up at his family's plantation, Enniscorthy, in the Virginia Piedmont. The Coleses were a numerous, rich, well-connected clan—James Madison was an in-law. As a fifth son, Edward was far down the totem pole of inheritance, yet even so after his father

died in 1808 he became the master of a 728-acre farm and 20 slaves.

Coles, however, had already come to reject his birthright. In 1805 he had matriculated at William and Mary, where he studied moral philosophy with Bishop James Madison (cousin of the future president). The bishop, an apostle of both the English and French Enlightenments, taught his students that owning slaves "could not be justified on principle." Was it right then, Coles asked him, "to do what we believe to be wrong?" The bishop answered that it would be impractical to do otherwise: slavery was an established institution; getting rid of it would be difficult. Young Coles was not convinced by these counsels of caution; he wrote that he could not "screen myself...from the pelting and upbraidings of my own conscience...[and] could not consent to hold as property what I had no right to." Our only source for Coles' conversion experience is a memoir he wrote almost 40 years later. But the youthful tone, both naïve and earnest, rings true.

IN 1809, COLES TOOK A TRIP DOWN THE Ohio River to scout the Northwest Territory—declared off-limits to slavery by the Ordinance of 1787—for somewhere he

might relocate and liberate his slaves. The fact that he and they had to move was significant. After the Revolution a number of Virginians had freed their slaves (most famously George Washington in his will). But time and a failed slave revolt in 1800 had cooled anti-slavery sentiment, and a law passed in 1806 required freed slaves to leave the state within a year. Under those circumstances, for Coles to have turned his slaves loose would have been irresponsible; it would also have incurred the wrath of his neighbors. So the liberator and his future freemen would have to leave home.

Just then, however, the other James Madison, newly elected president, asked Coles to be his private secretary in Washington, D.C. Accepting the offer meant putting off his plans for manumission. One way Coles managed to keep his principles intact was to keep bringing them to the notice of his mentors. When he and President Madison passed gangs of chained blacks on the capital's streets (the domestic slave trade flourished in the District of Columbia), Coles congratulated his boss that no foreign diplomats were nearby: the president was thus spared the "mortification of witnessing such a revolting sight in the presence of a representative of a nation, less boastful



perhaps of its regard for the rights of man, but more observant of them." In 1814 Coles wrote former President Jefferson, asking the old hero to call for a program of "gradual emancipation" in Virginia. Jefferson's reply was marked by the split-mindedness that characterized his mature years. With all his old eloquence he looked forward to "the hour of emancipation...advancing with the march of time." But he begged off doing anything to assist time's march himself; emancipation would have to be the project of "the younger generation." Jefferson's inertia disappointed Coles; the struggle for emancipation, he wrote back, required leaders with a "great weight of character," such as only the Sage of Monticello possessed. But over the years Coles would publish Jefferson's letter in various newspapers, to show that the great man had to the end of his days remained opposed to slavery at least in principle.

AFTER MADISON LEFT OFFICE IN 1817, Coles put his plans for manumission into effect. In 1818 he went back to the Northwest Territory, and applied to be register of the federal land office in Edwardsville, in western Illinois (Coles's friendship with new President James Monroe helped him get the job). The next year he took his slaves from Enniscorthy over the mountains to Pittsburgh, then down the Ohio to Indiana

and overland to Edwardsville. At the beginning of their river journey he told them they were freed—a moment depicted in an 1885 mural, kitschy but jubilant, in the Illinois State House. Once they reached Illinois he did more, giving the heads of households land, and helping them and their families through the financial panic of 1819.

Coles found that he had to do even more than that. Most settlers in the new state came, like him, from the South, and many of them wanted to change its constitution and make it, in defiance of the Northwest Ordinance, a slave state. Coles ran for governor in 1822 and narrowly won a four-man race against pro-slavery opponents. He spent his term fighting to block a pro-slavery constitutional convention. Frontier politics was rough. A mob paraded in front of the governor's residence in Vandalia, the capital, shouting "Convention or death!" There was a fire at Coles's Edwardsville farm, possibly arson. The new governor pushed back; he bought a controlling interest in the capital's newspaper, fired its pro-slavery editors, and installed anti-slavery ones.

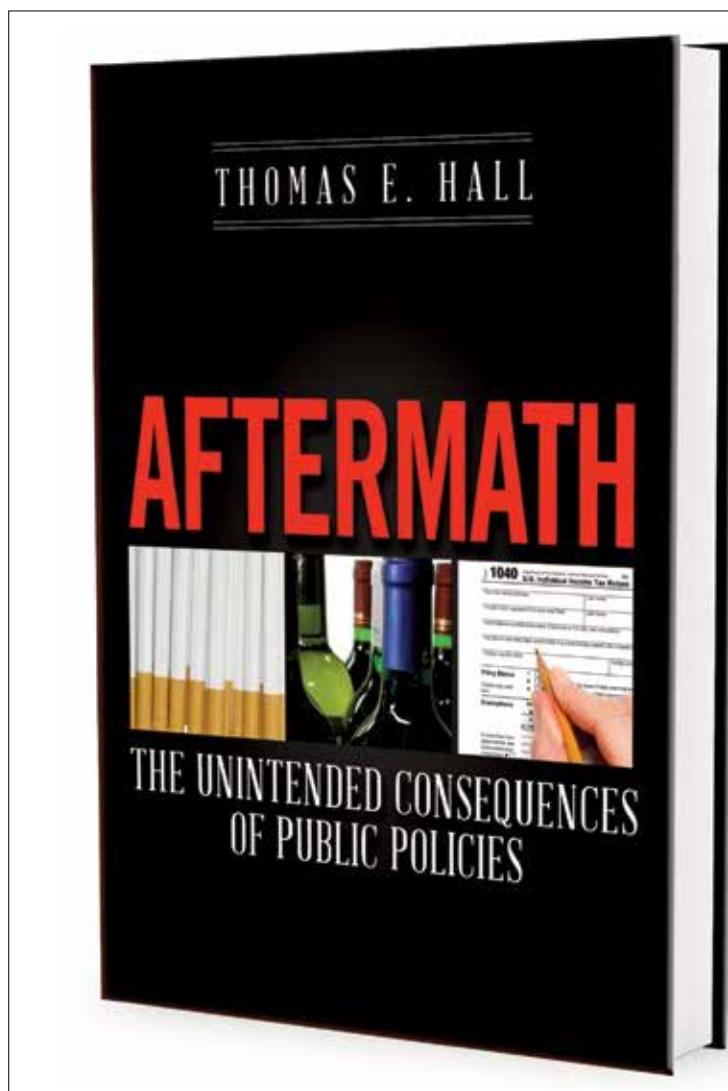
Coles recognized that he needed to lead a broad coalition. It included those who disliked slavery because they disliked blacks. The "importation of slaves," wrote one anti-slavery essayist, would make Illinois "dark...in complexion" as well as dark "in moral character."

Coles himself appealed to the ideals of his friends and patrons, the American Founders. He wrote that two of the founders' documents—the Northwest Ordinance, which prohibited slavery in the territories, and the Constitution, which allowed the slave trade to be banned after 1808—showed their intention to "restrict & finally eradicate" slavery "from our soil." Both arguments would have a long future ahead of them, in Illinois and nationally. Abraham Lincoln would not be above appealing to prejudice ("If white and black people never get together in Kansas, they will never mix blood in Kansas"), though his favorite strategy was to appeal to the founders ("Why [did they] stop [slavery's] spread in one direction and cut off its source in another, if they did not look to its being placed in the course of ultimate extinction?").

In August 1824, in a heavy turn-out, Illinois voters solidly defeated the call for a convention.

COLLES HAD WON AN IMPORTANT VICTORY—one that would become more so over time, as Illinois grew to be one of the most populous states in the Union. But Coles was still bound to Virginia by family ties and personal sentiment. Could the success he had had in Illinois be repeated there?

From October 1829 to January 1830, Virginia held a convention to revise its indepen-



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dence-era constitution. Coles went to Richmond to observe and lobby from the sidelines. The convention deadlocked between Tidewater planters, on the one hand, and reformers demanding reapportionment and an end to property qualifications for voting, on the other. Coles was pro-reform, hoping thereby to break the planters' power and indirectly boost emancipation. He was shocked when former President Monroe, trying to lull the planters into a compromise, gave a speech to the convention explicitly rejecting emancipation, on the grounds that it would produce "perfect confusion...the thing is impossible." Coles wrote a letter to the *Richmond Enquirer*, insisting that gradual emancipation would be safe, but no one listened to him, to the reformers, or even to Monroe. In the end the planters kept their grip on Virginia politics.

Virginia would let him down again. In 1831 Coles visited Madison at Montpelier, and left believing that he had convinced his former employer to free his slaves in his will. The last of the founders would join the greatest in calling for emancipation. But when Madison died five years later, his will included no such provision. Coles persuaded himself that Madison must have written a codicil, which his widow, Dolley, had destroyed.

A cynic might find comedy in the spectacle of Coles beating his head against the moral sloth of his mentors. A historian must find tragedy, for millions of lives—of slaves, then of soldiers—hung in the balance. A biographer finds poignance. The great men in Coles's life repeatedly let him down. But who was truly great—the men who announced an immortal principle? Or the man who lived it?

COLLES SETTLED IN PHILADELPHIA IN 1832 and married the next year. Most of his subsequent anti-slavery efforts focused on the American Colonization Society (ACS). Abolitionists hated the ACS as a sham that siphoned a few free blacks to Liberia while leaving slavery untouched. But Coles (like Lincoln before the Civil War) thought colonization was the necessary end of emancipation. He was no racist; he saw that his ex-slaves in Illinois managed their lives as well as anyone. But Coles believed free blacks would be "forever excluded by public sentiment" from real equality. He repeatedly urged the blacks he had freed to give Liberia a chance. But none of them would go. They were, after all, Americans.

Virginia had chosen stasis; colonization did not catch on. A third disappointment of Coles's later years was that opposition to slavery became a sectional cause. Coles thought freedom was the nation's cause. How could it be only the property of Northerners? How

could Southerners reject it? One Southerner would not. In November 1860 Coles, almost 74 years old, voted for Abraham Lincoln for president. Three months later, when the president-elect stopped in Philadelphia on his way to Washington, Coles shook his hand; Lincoln told him how esteemed he was back in Illinois. "In this fleeting moment," Guasco writes, "Coles finally became the physical link he had always aspired to be, connecting the nation's rapidly fading revolutionary past to its emerging, yet still unfulfilled, antislavery future."

Fulfillment, when it came, was devastating. In the fall of 1861 Coles's youngest son, Roberts, joined a Virginia infantry regiment. He hoped that his father would see his decision to fight for the Confederacy as defending the family's state from invaders. The senior Coles thought it was a calamity. "There is little or no prospect of my ever again being happy," Edward Coles wrote. In February 1862 Roberts was killed at the Battle of Roanoke Island, on the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Edward continued to support the Union in a quiet way, contributing to fundraisers for the war effort. But age and grief silenced the old advocate. Coles died in 1868, leaving a bequest to the ACS.

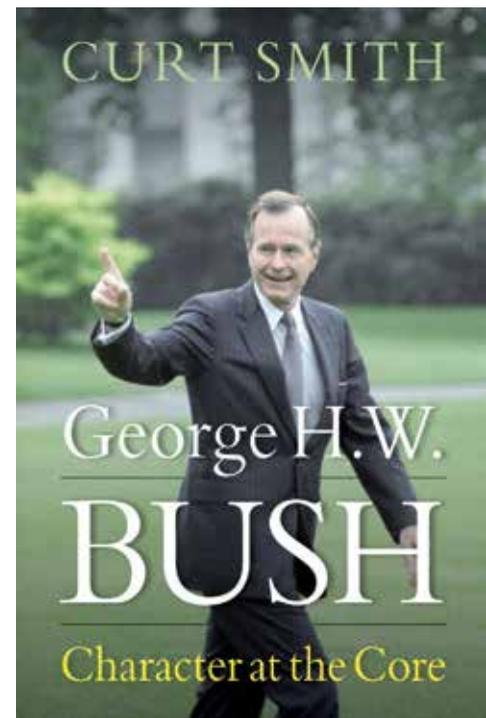
GUASCO WANTS TO TELL THE HISTORY of an idea, as much as the story of a life. "The challenges to slavery that first emerged in the Revolutionary era never disappeared.... Men like Edward Coles persistently and consistently promoted a political antislavery appeal designed to destroy the institution that gave the lie to the nation's political and social ideals."

Guasco makes her case—just. Lincoln and other Republicans did not create an antislavery ideology out of thin air in the 1850s—they appealed to the principles of the American Founding. Nor did they conjure this principle from the grave—it had been kept continuously alive by men like Coles.

But enough founders—including Coles's particular idols, the great Virginians—were so lukewarm about their own principles that slavery lived on in half the nation, including its most eminent state. Emancipation could not be accomplished without destruction. In his 1854 Peoria speech Lincoln urged his listeners—and by extension all Americans—to wash the soiled robe of republicanism "white, in the spirit if not the blood of the Revolution." It would be washed in both.

Richard Brookhiser is a senior editor of National Review, and the author, most recently, of Founders' Son: A Life of Abraham Lincoln (Basic Books).

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