William Howard Russell had seen it all by 1861—the Crimean War, the Indian Mutiny, the Opium Wars—and written about it all as the London Times’s first world-roving war correspondent. But when he was sent by the Times to report on the newly-seceded states of the Southern Confederacy and the impending civil war in America, he finally encountered something that genuinely surprised him—Americans enthusiastic for monarchy. “From all quarters have come to my ears the echoes of the same voice,” he wrote in his first dispatch from Charleston two weeks after Confederate artillery had pounded and starved the U.S. garrison of Fort Sumter into surrender. “It may be feigned, but there is no discord in the note, and it sounds in wonderful strength and monotony all over the country,” ringing out: “If we could only get one of the royal race of England to rule over us, we should be content.”

Russell did not expect his readers to believe him, and he was not sure he himself could believe what he was hearing: “It is absolutely astounding to a stranger who aims at the preservation of a decent neutrality to mark the vileness of these opinions.” But there it was, “the admiration for monarchical institutions on the English model, for privileged classes, and for a landed aristocracy and gentry, is undisguised and apparently genuine…. We, it appears, talked of American citizens when there were no such beings at all.”

This would not, however, have surprised Forrest Nabors, and that is the burden of his stupendously important new book, *From Oligarchy to Republicanism*. A professor of political science at the University of Alaska, Anchorage, Nabors has, in effect, presented us with the map to a mystery: why did the American republic, which had succeeded against all odds in achieving its independence from the world’s greatest empire and then succeeded against even longer odds in perpetuating itself for generations, suddenly turn and plunge itself into a fratricidal bloodbath? The answers most often given point to slavery, or sectionalism, or states’ rights—which is to read back into the 1860s either our present preoccupations with race, or the Progressives’ assumptions about a capitalist North pitted against an agricultural South, or modern conservatives’ anxieties about an all-devouring centralized government.

Even those, like Harry Jaffa in *A New Birth of Freedom* (2000), who came closest to recognizing that the real issue of the Civil War was a terrible ideological derangement that had lifted an entire portion of the American Republic away from the ideological moorings of the founders, were unable to do more than suggest that John C. Calhoun (and through him, Georg Hegel and Jean-Jacques Rousseau) had somehow seduced one half of the Republic into treason. If, as Abraham Lincoln said in 1861, “the central idea pervading this struggle is...proving that popular government is not an absurdity”—and therefore that slavery and sectionalism and state’s rights are only surface manifestations of an ideological disease that had struck the roots of the American experiment—then how had the germ of this evil ever managed to find root in republican soil in the first place?

Nabors’s answer arrives in one word: oligarchy. Which is to say, the same phenomenon William Howard Russell encountered in Charleston. And here, as Nabors explains, is how oligarchy insinuated itself, like chestnut blight, into the political life of the American regime:
Forty years after the birth of American liberty, a race of kings arose from American soil. They sprouted wherever the institution of slavery was planted, like the warriors in the Greek legend.... Over time, these kingly men compacted with one another, repudiating the lofty principles of their nation's birth, acquired rule over most of the landmass of the United States, and finally aspired to install themselves as permanent suzerains over a great empire, whether with the American Union or outside of it, it mattered not to them, except as a question of expediency.

In these three sentences, Nabors overturns a century of historiography. He transforms the Civil War into a clash of political regimes (or rather, an inter-regime conflict); he repositions slavery as a political question before it becomes a racial one; and he makes the Union victory in the war a vindication of the founders, not a Romantic turning toward some new egalitarian horizon in a perfect future. He will not let the war for black freedom obscure the far larger war against oligarchy. He will not permit the paladins of bullwhip feudalism to be disguised as free-traders, free-marketers, or free-anything.

This is the book that Jaffa might have written after a New Birth of Freedom, had not age finally overtaken him. (Jaffa is one of the book’s four dedicatees.) It is the book that fully one third of the members of the Civil War Congresses—from Charles Sumner and Thaddeus Stevens to James Ashley, the 13th Amendment’s floor manager, and dozens more—could have written. As Nabors patienty shows, the Republicans who endured the oligarchs’ attempts on the life of the Republic told us, over and over again, that the war they had fought and won was a war against oligarchy. They would repudiate the lofty principles of their nation’s birth, acquire rule over most of the landmass of the United States, and finally aspired to install themselves as permanent suzerains over a great empire, whether with the American Union or outside of it, it mattered not to them, except as a question of expediency.

As Nabors explains, oligarchy, strictly speaking, is a regime “in which a rich minority rules for the advantage of the rich minority and in which the people composing that political society are ranked...because the ruling principle of that regime is the principle of natural inequality.” Aristotle called it a deviant form of aristocracy (in the same way that tyranny is a deviant form of monarchy), and in practical terms, it exhibits its form through excessive concentrations of property in the hands of a few, the reservation of education to the elite, and the organization of government to serve the purposes of the oligarchs. No wonder, then, that Southern slave owners constantly agitated in the 1850s for state centralization of economic activities that would promote slave agriculture: state-sponsored agricultural surveys, state-subsidized agricultural periodicals, and state investment in railroads (at more than twice the rate of Northern state assistance) which would unite the South and the West and encourage more intensive cotton cultivation. They were, as historian John Majewski remarks, the forerunners of the southern Progressives of the early twentieth century.

This symbiosis leads ineluctably to the control of labor, and from there, as Nabors writes, “commanders of labor become accustomed to their command over the common people in economic and social life” as well. Where a republic demands equality, and equality tends to ensure mobility, oligarchy is about hierarchy and stasis. “Society is a pyramid,” explained the editor of the Nashville Daily Gazette late in 1860. “We may sympathize with the stones at the bottom of the pyramid of Cheops, but we know that some stones have to be at the bottom, and that they must be permanent in their place.”

Trying to plant such an oligarchy in the midst of what was otherwise the world’s most successful republican regime was no small task, and it required the invocation of ideological monstrosities to justify it. In the Southern case, the monstrosities included race-based rationales for the enslavement of Africans. The Montgomery Mail felt no shame in whipping up Alabama opinion in 1860 by promising that Lincoln’s aim was “to free the negroes and force amalgamation between them and the children of the poor men of the South.” “Multitudes of these feel that they are crushed to the earth by this heartless aristocracy,” argued Indiana abolitionist George Julian in 1852; but with breathtaking cynicism, the oligarchs played on the racial illusions which they themselves had invented to keep black slaves and poor whites in hostility and mistrust. “White supremacy,” Nabors observes, “is but one species of supremacy that all anti-republican regimes incorporate in one form or the other”, and “oligarchy was its parent.”

Still, one hesitates to accept prima facie the claim that the slave South had deliberately converted itself by 1860 into an engine of anti-republicanism. After all, the Southern states still held elections; the South Carolina legislature had 124 representatives in the lower house and 24 senators, while New York had a senate of 32 members and lower house of 128, so that both New York and South Carolina seem at least reasonably and similarly democratic; and there were courts of equity, appeals, common pleas and general sessions alike in South Carolina and New Jersey. Merely gathering together, as Nabors does in his first 222 pages, the raging testimony of Civil War Republicans against a “Slave Power” oligarchy may not seem any more convincing than Lincoln’s evidence in the “House Divided” speech that Franklin Pierce, Roger Taney, Stephen Douglas, and James Buchanan had all been in collusion to
produce the Kansas-Nebraska Act and Dred Scott decision.

It is not until the crucial sixth chapter that Nabors begins to lay out the empirical evidence for the slide of the slave South into oligarchy. As he does so, the charge begins to take on stark, full color. Begin with education. Across the South in 1860, slavery and illiteracy "were strongly correlated"—which is to say that the density of slaveholding in a given area invariably sat side-by-side with an unwillingness by state legislatures to vote funding to educate poor whites. Funding public schooling, sniffed Thomas Cooper of South Carolina College, "has the demerit of introducing habitual jealousy and hatred among the persons of no property." Move to landowning. In the Northern free states, the median size of all farms ranged between 20 and 100 acres; in the slave states, the median farm was 1,000 acres and larger. In Pennsylvania alone, with a population of 3 million, there were only 76 farms larger than 500 acres, while in Georgia, with a population of one third that size (but 44% of it enslaved), there were over 3,594 farms over 500 acres. Big plantation landowners had, in effect, squeezed the economic life out of ordinary farmers' lives.

No wonder Confederate soldiers who marched north into Pennsylvania under Robert E. Lee in the summer of 1863 found themselves staring at the landscape: they had never seen in their own home states so many small farms, and so many fences marking their boundaries. Pennsylvania, wrote Charles Blackford, who served in Lee's army, was nothing but "small farms divided into fields no larger than our garden," all of it surrounded by "substantial fences." (Those fences, ironically, would eventually march against them, since Pickett's Charge would be repeatedly broken up and disordered by the need to cope with the farm fences in its path).

But the most damning and embarrassing statistics are the ones which uncover the degeneration of Southern state governments into a kind of oligarchic sclerosis. In the states which eventually formed the Confederacy, a little less than 2% (some 98,000 Southerners) of the free population owned three quarters of all the slaves; yet, this tiny class ruled the state governments of the South. In Alabama, 51% of state representatives and 61% of state senators were slaveholders; in Mississippi, 51% of state representatives and 67% of the state senate were slaveholders; in South Carolina—the horde of secession—60% of the state representatives and a whopping 90% of the state senate were slaveholders. Even in Virginia, where 54% of the voters cast their ballots for pro-Union candidates in the 1860 presidential election, the secessionists still carried the state out of the Union six months later. Republican government had become a sham.

Curiously, one statistic Nabors does not cite is voter participation. Nationally, in 1852, out of a population of 23 million, approximately 69.6% of Americans cast votes for the presidency. In the free North, that baseline was routinely exceeded, showing a healthy openness in the political process: in Pennsylvania, 72.6% of eligible voters cast ballots; in neighboring Ohio and New York, the percentages rose to 80.6% and 84.7%; and even in frontier Michigan, 71.3% of eligibles voted. But the South told a different story: in Louisiana, the numbers slumped to 48.7%, and to 45.3% and 48.6% in Alabama and Arkansas. In the eleven states which would form the Confederacy, only one (Tennessee) showed voter participation higher than the national average; the rest showed voter participation 15 percentage points lower, and in some cases lower by 20% than in the free states. If oligarchy is the rule of the few and the exclusion of the many, the voter percentages already begin to tell the story.

Why did the American republic, which had succeeded against all odds, suddenly turn and plunge itself into a fratricidal bloodbath?

W hat would have been next, after secession? "Who knows," asked the New-York Tribune, "but we may see revived there the feudal tenures—maidenright, wardship, baronial robberies, the seizure of white children for the market, military service, and the horrible hardships of villain-
The Claremont Review of Books is a publication of the Claremont Institute for the Study of Statesmanship and Political Philosophy.

Subscribe to the Claremont Review of Books

“By far the best review of books around, both in its choice of books and topics and in its treating them in depth, in style, and—most unusual of all—with real thought, instead of politically correct rhetoric.”
—Thomas Sowell

Subscribe to the CRB today and save 25% off the newsstand price. A one-year subscription is only $19.95.

To begin receiving America’s premier conservative book review, visit www.claremont.org/crb or call (909) 981-2200.