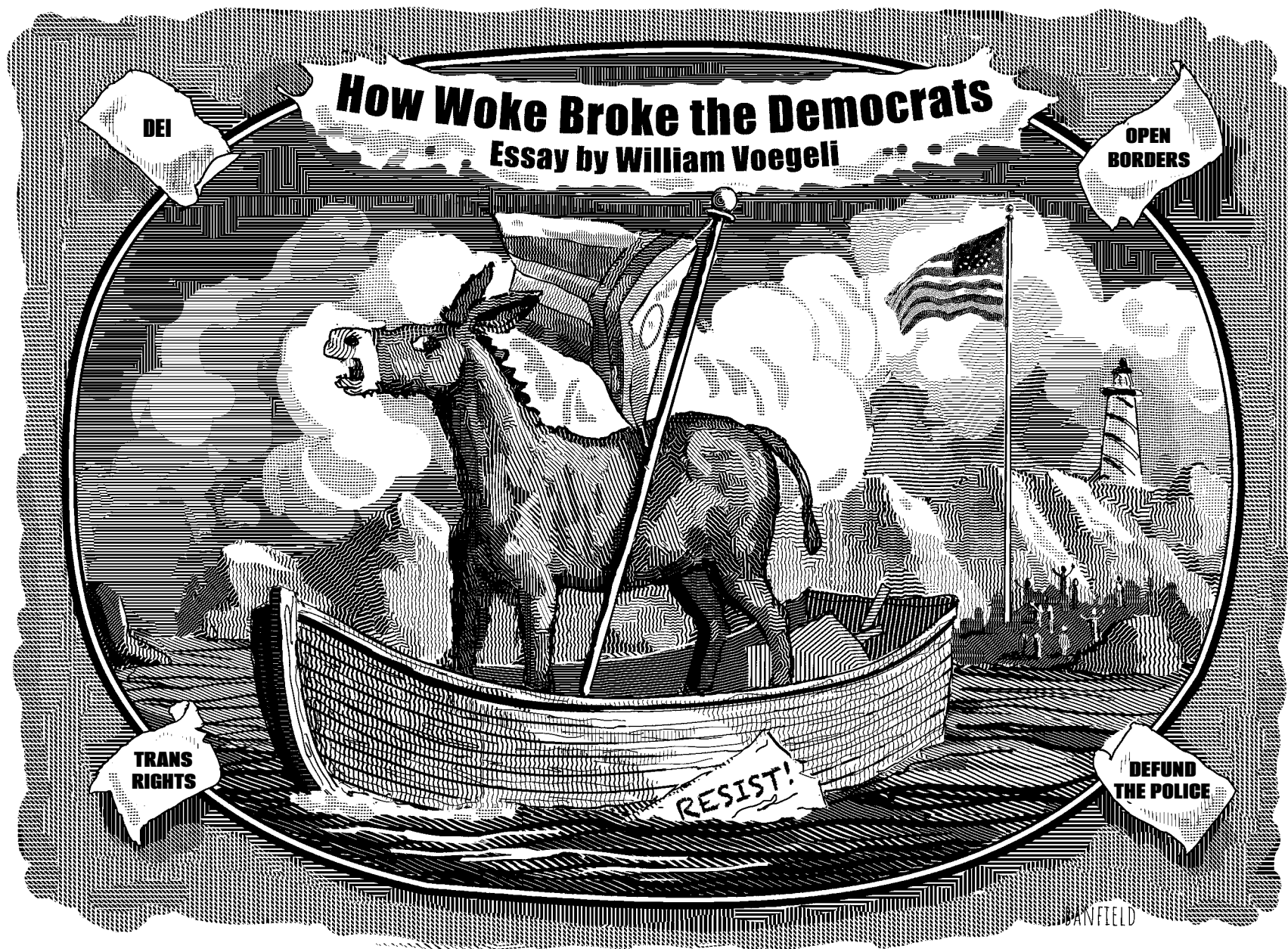


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PATH OF OUR FATHERS

Lincoln vs. Davis: The War of the Presidents, by Nigel Hamilton.
Little, Brown and Company, 800 pages, \$38

[B]y the existence of negro slavery, the white man is raised to the dignity of a freeman and an equal.

—Jefferson Davis, reply to Senator William Seward, Senate Chamber, February 29, 1860

You think slavery is right and ought to be extended; while we think it is wrong and ought to be restricted. That I suppose is the rub.

—Abraham Lincoln, letter to Alexander Stephens, December 22, 1860

[W]e recur to the principles upon which our Government was founded...we but tread in the path of our fathers when we proclaim our independence.

—Jefferson Davis, Farewell Speech to the U.S. Senate, January 21, 1861

Let us return [slavery] to the position our fathers gave it; and there let it rest in peace. Let us re-adopt the Declaration of Independence.

—Abraham Lincoln, Speech at Peoria, Illinois, October 16, 1854

I have for many years advocated...the right of a State to secede from the Union.

—Jefferson Davis, Farewell Speech to the U.S. Senate, January 21, 1861

Plainly the central idea of secession is the essence of anarchy.

—Abraham Lincoln, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1861



ON THE SAME DAY—FEBRUARY 11, 1861—Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln both set out on fateful meandering train trips: Davis from Vicksburg, Mississippi, over five days and 700 miles, to Montgomery, Alabama; Lincoln from his hometown of Springfield, Illinois, over twelve days and 1,900 miles to Washington, D.C. That is where Nigel Hamilton begins his “dual biography,” *Lincoln vs. Davis: The War of the Presidents*. Both men were born in Kentucky. Both were 52 years old—or would be when Lincoln celebrated his birthday the next day. In Montgomery, Davis would take office as the provisional president of the Confederate States of America (CSA) on February 18. At that time, Davis’s CSA consisted of six states of the deep South, which, one after another, had seceded following Lincoln’s election on

November 6, 1860: South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Florida (with Texas on the way). In Washington, Lincoln would be inaugurated president of the United States of America on March 4. With the recent admission of Kansas as a state (January 29, 1861), Lincoln’s USA consisted of 34 states, including the ones that supposed they had just seceded.

What ensued Hamilton calls a “Shakespearean drama,” as each president became the leader of one warring fragment of a House Divided (Davis insisted he had left the House). Davis’s CSA could only exist as a sovereign nation if the nation of which Lincoln understood himself to be president ceased to exist. As Lincoln would put it in his Second Inaugural Address, four bloody years later, “Both parties deprecated war but one of them would

make war rather than let the nation survive, and the other would accept war rather than let it perish. And the war came.”

SWIFTLY: ON APRIL 12—39 DAYS AFTER Lincoln’s inauguration—Davis’s batteries opened fire on Fort Sumter; on April 15, Lincoln issued a proclamation calling for 75,000 volunteers for three months’ military service; on April 17, Virginia seceded from the Union; on April 20, Robert E. Lee resigned from the U.S. Army. In the following week, tens of thousands fled Washington, D.C. in every direction, emptying hotels. Most of those leaving were secessionists; many were Union officers making their way south to serve the Confederacy. For the moment, Washington had no telegraph or mail service. According to one observer, “[T]here was prac-

tically no intercourse in any form between the national capital and any part of the country.”

On May 3, the president called for another 42,034 volunteers, to serve for three years rather than three months. On May 8, still in Montgomery, Davis signed a bill in secret session calling for 400,000 recruits for three-year enlistments. In his July 4 address to Congress, published in newspapers North and South, Lincoln asked for 400,000 more troops at three-year enlistments. Congress approved 500,000. On July 21, about 18,000 green Union troops engaged with about 18,000 green Confederate troops in what became known as the Battle of Bull Run, or Manassas, just 30 miles west of Washington. The Confederate victory inspired editors in the South to proclaim ecstatically the end of the war. The Union rout inspired editors in the North to despair.

A month after declaring secession, Virginia joined the Confederacy in May 1861, followed by Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee; the Confederate capital moved from Montgomery to Richmond, Virginia, less than a hundred miles from Washington. From that point on, Hamilton’s drama moves back and forth, chapter by chapter, between Washington and Richmond. We see each of the warring presidents dealing with his cabinet, Congress, generals, governors, the people, the uproariously partisan press, foreign powers, domestic tragedies—making life and death decisions or procrastinating desperately, while a flood of astounding and unprecedented human events sweeps over and around them. As Hamilton puts it, this “story of the two competing commanders in chief in their White Houses...when viewed close-up, is as mired in treason, treachery, tragedy, and villainy as any Shakespearean history play.” And because Hamilton thinks he sees in America today the same divisions he sees in the Civil War—divisions “over the very concept of democracy and...the matter of race and racial justice”—he views his story as a “Shakespearean drama...for their time and ours.”

HAMILTON’S DRAMA RUNS FOR LESS than two years, from February 1861 to January 1863. At the outset—as he tells it—Davis, a “born soldier,” pursues a sensible and promising “defensive” strategy, like George Washington and the American revolutionaries in their war for independence. Lincoln, a “born politician,” fumbles along ruinously as “vacillator in chief” until Davis catastrophically decides to adopt an “offensive” strategy, and Robert E. Lee with his Army of Northern Virginia invades Maryland in September 1862. This unintentionally forces Lin-

coln to do what he had been obtusely determined not to do: issue an emancipation proclamation. In Hamilton’s words, “[t]he story of how and why the vacillator in chief was compelled at last to make up his mind and counterstrike at the very root of the Confederacy’s mass armed insurrection, is perhaps the most consequential part of this epic drama.” The war would continue for more than two years, but Hamilton ends his tale on January 1, 1863, when Lincoln’s proclamation goes into effect. In Hamilton’s view, this determined the outcome of the war and “doomed” the Confederacy.

British-born Nigel Hamilton is a senior fellow at the McCormack Graduate School, University of Massachusetts Boston. His chief works are bestselling and award-winning multi-volume biographies of General Bernard “Monty” Montgomery and Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He has written biographies of John F. Kennedy and Bill Clinton, among other subjects. *Lincoln vs. Davis* is, as the author advertises, his “first foray into the American Civil War.”

HAMILTON EMPHATICALLY GIVES CENTER stage to what he regards as the most consequential part of his epic drama. He asserts and repeats at every chance that Lincoln’s delay in issuing the Emancipation Proclamation was so astoundingly stupid and morally bankrupt as to be baffling to anyone with an ounce of sense or decency. So obvious is this to him that, without bothering to give serious consideration to any other possible point of view, he expresses his moral shock and intellectual incredulity for over 700 pages with frequent exclamation points.

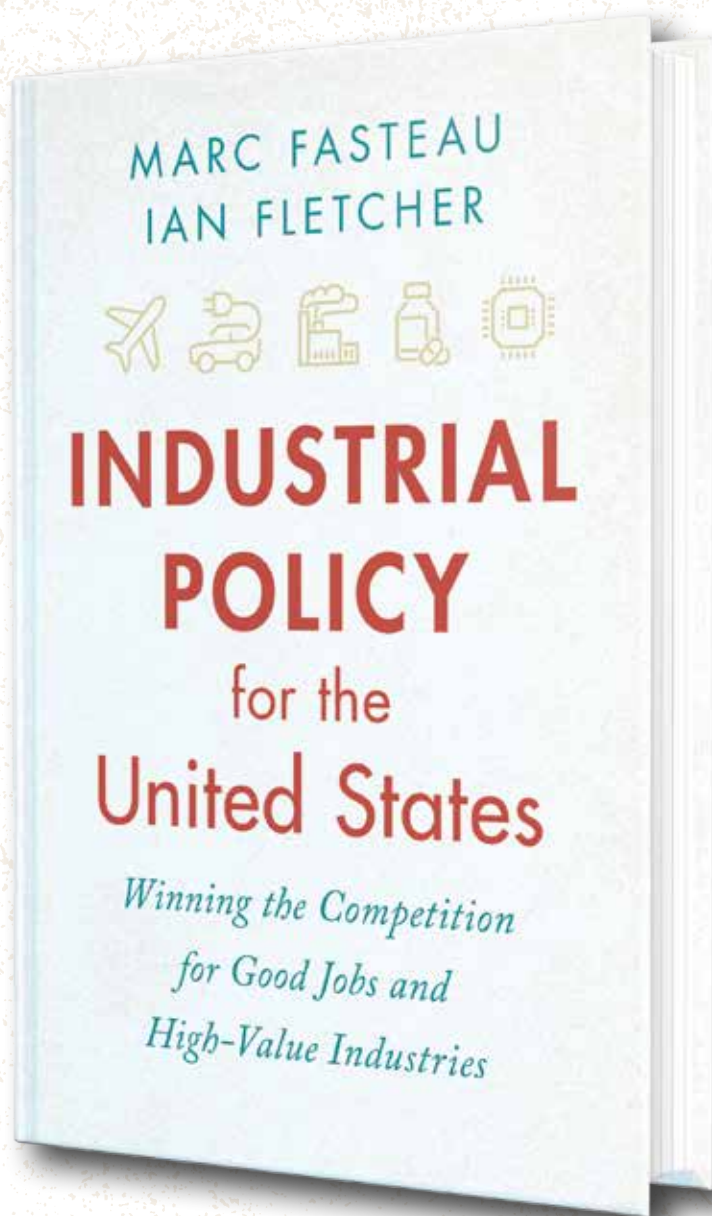
Treating Lincoln as the “reluctant emancipator” came into fashion among Civil War historians after World War II. Around the same time, it became popular to dismiss the proclamation itself. Richard Hofstadter’s *The American Political Tradition: And the Men Who Made It* (1948) buried the proclamation with one clever line: “The Emancipation Proclamation...had all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading.” Published in honor of the centennial of the proclamation, John Hope Franklin’s *The Emancipation Proclamation* (1963) could still treat Lincoln as the Great Emancipator, as did Martin Luther King, Jr. that same year in his “I Have a Dream” speech delivered from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. But for decades already, at least since W.E.B. Du Bois’s debunking article in the NAACP’s magazine *Crisis* in May 1922, it had been increasingly in style to discredit the Emancipator and his proclamation. In 1968, when Lerone Bennett asked in *Ebony* magazine, “Was Abe Lincoln

a White Supremacist?” (answer: of course), it was still provocative—shocking to some—to ask such a question. In the same year, Julius Lester asked in *Look Out, Whitey! Black Power’s Gon’ Get Your Mama!* “How come it took him two whole years to free the slaves? His pen was sitting on his desk the whole time.” This is the attitude that permeates Hamilton’s book, though, to his credit, he doesn’t go so far as to call Lincoln a white supremacist, and he rightly regards the Emancipation Proclamation as a momentous deed.

TWENTY YEARS AGO, IN LINCOLN’S *Emancipation Proclamation* (reviewed in the Spring 2004 CRB by the late Peter W. Schramm), Allen Guelzo conclusively demonstrated that, between Lincoln’s inauguration and his first introduction of a draft Emancipation Proclamation to his cabinet 16 months later, “The most salient feature to emerge” in his presidency was “the consistency with which Lincoln’s face was set toward the goal of emancipation from the day he first took the presidential oath.” Lincoln “understood from the first that his administration was the beginning of the end of slavery and that he would not leave office without some form of legislative emancipation policy in place.” He opposed various attempts at partial emancipation by his generals and cabinet members—for which Hamilton mocks and scolds him—“[n]ot because he was indifferent to emancipation, but because he was convinced (and with good reason) that none of these methods would survive challenges in federal court.” Lincoln always preferred an emancipation that would be voluntary, gradual, compensated, lawful, and permanent. And he always bore in mind, as it was his constitutional duty to do, the effect of any plan on the fate of the Union dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Guelzo provides compelling evidence confirming Frederick Douglass’s assessment of Lincoln, expressed in an oration on the occasion of the dedication of the Freedman’s Memorial in 1876 on the eleventh anniversary of Lincoln’s assassination. After listing, from the abolitionist point of view, practically every supposed failing of Lincoln with respect to slavery in the first two years of the war, Douglass concludes nonetheless that “in the light of the stern logic of great events and in view of that divinity which shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will...the hour and the man of our redemption had somehow met in the person of Abraham Lincoln.... [M]easuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical, and de-

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terminated." On practically every other page of his book, Hamilton presents a Lincoln who, especially on the most consequential question of slavery (but not only there), is fecklessly halting, myopic, muddled, and weak—the "vacillator in chief."

CERTAINLY, LINCOLN FELT THE PRESSURE of the crisis into which he was inaugurated. Though outgoing Democratic president James Buchanan had known for days that federal Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor had provisions for just a few weeks, he said nothing to the incoming president about it. Lincoln learned only the day after his inauguration. For his first month in office, he lost sleep over what to do about Fort Sumter. Some cabinet members, with much more national political experience and standing than he, and generals, with immeasurably more military experience and standing than he, advised him to give up the fort and avoid hostilities at all costs. Others, with similar bona fides, urged him to defend the fort even at the risk of losing more slave states to secession. Without question, Lincoln "vacillated" between these views, and he felt the pressure physically and mentally. Aside from losing sleep, he literally "keeled over" at one point (apparently of a migraine), according to his wife, Mary. He said of these days in retrospect that if he had known how hard it would be, he couldn't have imagined living through it.

To give up the fort seemed to concede the existence of the Confederacy, which Lincoln was resolutely determined not to do. To attempt to reinforce it risked driving the other eight slave states into the Confederacy, which would mean the end of the Union. As tension mounted and days passed, and Secretary of State William Seward treasonously maneuvered, Lincoln listened to his generals and to his cabinet, with all their contrary views and often conflicting interests and ambitions, probed them with questions, and then, exercising his authority as president and commander-in-chief, decided for himself. He chose neither to reinforce nor to evacuate, but to inform the governor of South Carolina that he intended to *resupply* the fort—not with arms, but with provisions to keep the garrison from starving. He would deal with the governor rather than with Davis, because he did not, and never would, acknowledge that Davis was president of a sovereign state. He would attempt to resupply the fort rather than defend it because he understood unshakably that if war was to come, it must come from the seceding states, as he had pledged in his inaugural address. As Jefferson Davis biographer William Cooper writes, "It was a masterful maneuver, provid-

ing the first clear sign of the political genius that would make Lincoln such a formidable president and war leader." Hamilton sees only the confused vacillations of an "amateur commander in chief."

MICHAEL BURLINGAME, WHOSE TWO-volume *Abraham Lincoln: A Life* (2008) Hamilton rightly regards as the "bible" for Lincoln biographers, shows the commanding purpose that underlay all of Lincoln's vacillations in those first critical months of his presidency. From the beginning, and before Fort Sumter, Lincoln knew exactly what he stood for. He had taken pains to articulate it and publish it in his speeches. It was in the Republican Party platform for the world to see, and he laid it out again in his inaugural address. He knew that if shedding fraternal blood was necessary to maintain the Union and the liberties of the nation, he would shed that blood. In the critical weeks following the firing on Fort Sumter, writes Burlingame, Lincoln "acted decisively to meet the emergency":

In that hectic time...Lincoln took decisive hold of the government. In his first hundred days in office, he raised and supplied an army, sent it into battle, held the Border States in the Union, helped thwart Confederate attempts to win European diplomatic recognition, declared a blockade, asserted leadership over his cabinet, dealt effectively with Congress, averted a potential crisis with Great Britain, and eloquently articulated the nature and purpose of the war. While pursuing these objectives, he demonstrated that he had the same "indomitable will" that he ascribed to Henry Clay... [And he] infused his own iron will into the North as it struggled to preserve what he would call "the last, best hope of earth."

On January 13, 1862, just six months after the first battle of the war, Lincoln wrote to generals Henry Halleck and Don Carlos Buell:

I state my general idea of this war to be that we have the *greater* numbers, and the enemy has the *greater* facility of concentrating forces upon points of collision; that we must fail, unless we can find some way of making *our* advantage an over-match for *his*; and that this can only be done by menacing him with superior forces at *different* points, at the *same* time; so that we can safely attack,

one, or both, if he makes no change; and if he *weakens* one to *strengthen* the other, forbear to attack the strengthened one, but seize, and hold the weakened one, gaining so much.

Lincoln constantly pressed this strategy upon his generals, and they just as constantly ignored it, until Ulysses S. Grant came along. According to historian James McPherson, "In the end, this strategy won the war." But it wasn't just his grasp of the essence of the winning strategy that made Lincoln a great commander-in-chief. The renowned student of war Carl von Clausewitz argued that what is required for successful direction of war is not primarily familiarity with military affairs, but "a remarkable, superior mind and strength of character." This is what made Lincoln a great war leader. As Grant said of him, "He was incontestably the greatest man I have ever known."

INTERPRETING DAVIS'S SECOND INAUGURAL Address delivered in Richmond in February 1862, Hamilton observes that Davis "left completely out" of his speech any mention of the "three and a half million people forced to labor for an armed revolt against the federal government" (Hamilton mentions these "three and a half million," like a mantra, at least 43 times in his book). It was this "omission," the biographer argues, "that had allowed the Confederate president to close his inaugural speech with a simple appeal to 'thee O God,' to whom 'I trustingly commit myself, and prayerfully invoke thy blessing on my country and its cause.'" Jefferson Davis was, indeed, a devout Christian. On his inauguration day, his wife, Varina, found him in his room "on his knees in earnest prayer 'for the divine support I need so sorely.'" But, contrary to Hamilton, Davis needed no such "omission" to pray with his whole heart, soul, and mind that the God he believed in would bless the cause for which he was fighting, certainly including the protection of the institution of slavery.

Davis believed the cause of the South, including slavery, was "just and holy." On the floor of the U.S. Senate, he had avowed that slavery was ordained by "the decree of God." It was "sanctioned in the Bible, authorized, regulated, and recognized from Genesis to Revelation." In Davis's view, the freedom of the white man and the slavery of the Negro were part of God's providential design. "History," Davis wrote, "exhibits the Negro in all times as the subservient race." In the eyes of Davis's God, the Negro was not "fit to be free." So natural was this arrangement that, to those clamoring for or against a slave insur-

rection, Davis said he had “no more dread of our slaves than I have of our cattle.”

Davis deliberately delivered his inaugural speech on George Washington’s birthday under the equestrian statue of the first president of the United States, next to the Virginia statehouse. He believed Negro slavery was sanctioned not only by God and nature but by the American Founding Fathers, including the greatest of these. The day before, he had written to his brother warning him to move their slaves from their plantation on the Mississippi River, lest the Union “plunderers” on gunboats coming down the river steal their chattel. Hamilton, who is consumed with the evil of Negro slavery, cannot imagine Davis praying to the Christian God to preserve that peculiar institution. So, he lends his abolitionist conscience to Davis, and as a result completely obscures the real Shakespearean and American tragedy in whose grip Davis found himself.

DURING THE DEBATES IN MISSISSIPPI on whether or not to secede, Senator Davis was known to oppose secession as a prudential matter. His young and popular wife wore a badge in Washington reading “Jeff Davis no seceder!” But everyone also knew that Davis held secession to be a right proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence and enshrined in the Constitution. As he said to his Senate colleagues in his departing speech, “[W]e but tread in the path of our fathers when we proclaim our independence.”

John C. Calhoun, the preeminent South Carolina statesman and political theorist who was the voice of the South in the antebellum years, had famously (or infamously) called the principles of the Declaration of

Independence “the most false and dangerous of all political errors.” Davis’s vice president, Alexander Stephens of Georgia, joined Calhoun in this understanding and rejection of the principles of the Declaration. They both understood the Declaration to proclaim the equal rights of *all* human beings—and they both denied the truth of this idea. Davis revered Calhoun. He was one of the pallbearers at his funeral. In his younger days, he was flattered when a Vicksburg newspaper predicted that he would become “the Calhoun of Mississippi.” And he agreed with Calhoun and Stephens that the idea of the equal rights of human beings was false and pernicious. But he disagreed with them in his reading of the Declaration. In Davis’s view, the equality spoken of in the Declaration of Independence was an equality of communities, not individuals. It followed that the Declaration meant to declare that each of the sovereign states asserting independence was legally and morally equal to the government of Great Britain and to one another. Each of these sovereign states went on to create the Constitution and the Union.

DAVIS ALWAYS INSISTED ON THE CONSTITUTIONALITY of secession. So firm was his conviction that secession was in conformity with the Constitution that he refused to ask for pardon or for the removal of political disabilities imposed on him by the 14th Amendment. Even Robert E. Lee requested a pardon (and received one over a hundred years later from President Gerald Ford). But Davis’s view was that he had taken an oath to uphold the Constitution and that seceding from the Union was in perfect keeping with that oath; it was an exercise of his

constitutional right as a member of one of the sovereign states that had ratified the Constitution. Those who had the authority to ratify had the authority to unratify.

Davis understood his firmly held beliefs about slavery and secession to be perfectly in harmony with his fidelity to God, the Bible, the Revolution, the Constitution, and his country. He was by his own lights a firm Union man—an American. It became his practice in later years, and until the day he died, when acquiring a new book, to sign his name on page 61. This was to commemorate 1861, the year of the great American tragedy. January 21 of that year—the day he said farewell to the U.S. Senate and joined his seceding state—he called at the time and ever after “the saddest day of my life.”

As Lincoln would memorably say in his Second Inaugural, both sides in the Civil War “read the same Bible and pray to the same God and each invokes His aid against the other.” This is the soul of the American tragedy in which Lincoln and Davis played the leads. Like their Revolutionary fathers before them—and indeed like the Houses of York and Lancaster in Shakespeare’s histories—both warring parties of which these two men were the leaders “appeal[ed] to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of [their] intentions” and asserted their “firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence,” as they mutually pledged to each other their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor in support of their cause. Lincoln and Davis both understood themselves to be walking in the path of the fathers.

Christopher Flannery is a contributing editor of the Claremont Review of Books.

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