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## Understanding the Civil War

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## Understanding the Civil War

One of the most prevalent historical debates is why the Civil War happened. Some people maintain that slavery was the primary issue that caused the South to secede. Others claim that slavery was only one of many factors or was totally insignificant to causing the Civil War. The opinion of some Southerners is that “states’ rights” was the true cause of the Civil War. There is incontrovertible evidence that the Southern states seceded primarily to protect slavery and that this attempted secession would never have taken place had slavery never existed. The Civil War still has significance in the twenty-first century due to its role in political issues of civil rights.

The myth that the Civil War was not about slavery can be broken into multiple parts. The first argument, sometimes referred to as the “States’ Rights” argument, is that the South seceded at least partly because the North was forcing them to pay unfair taxes on imported goods.<sup>1</sup> Why did some Southern secessionists, such as newspaper-owner Robert Rhett, claim that the tariff issue was a reason to leave the union?<sup>2</sup> First of all, the tariff was an economic blow to slavery. Because of its agricultural, slave-based economy, the South traded cotton with Europe in exchange for industrial goods. If imported goods were heavily taxed, the South could be forced to abandon slavery in favor of industrialization, in order to produce its own affordable industrial goods. Thus, the tariff was seen as a threat to slavery. John Calhoun, a proslavery South Carolinian who threatened to lead his state to secession in the 1830s ostensibly over a high tariff, wrote that slavery had caused the South to be economically dominated by the North and that, as a result, Northerners could use the federal

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<sup>1</sup> Krannawitter, Thomas L., *Vindicating Lincoln: Defending the Politics of Our Greatest President* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 213.

<sup>2</sup> Singletary, William W. Frehling, *The Road to Secession, Volume II: Secessionists Triumphant, 1854-1861* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 366.

government to enact abolition.<sup>3</sup> The second reason for Confederate leaders mentioning the tariff was that it might have appealed more to the region's poor whites than promoting the war as a fight to preserve slavery. Third, a major reason that Britain and France were reluctant to aid the Confederacy, in spite of trading with them for cotton, was the fact that they knew that the European public would probably not support a war for slavery. Thus, deemphasizing the issue of slavery made strategic sense. That did not, however, stop Confederate leaders from frequently citing the issue as their reason for secession. Mississippi, Texas, South Carolina, and Georgia all passed declarations of secession when they joined the Confederacy. The only issue that Mississippi and South Carolina referenced directly as a reason for secession was slavery.

Texas' Declaration of Secession was almost entirely about slavery, with the exception of one complaint about Northerners "having impoverished the slave-holding States by unequal and partial legislation, thereby enriching themselves by draining our substance." The overall slavery-centered context of Texas' tirade, however, as well as the use of term "slave-holding States" makes it apparent that Texans' anger at this perceived injustice was largely due to seeing it as an attack on slavery. If alleged economic exploitation of the South by a supposedly Northern-controlled federal government was a major, distinct issue in causing Texas' secession, one would think that it would get more attention in the state's Declaration of Secession than one quick mention that also referenced slavery, in the middle of a massive proslavery document.

Georgia's declaration discussed other economic issues but two quotes make it clear that slavery was the reason for seceding. For one thing, the declaration stated that, "Mr. [Thomas] Jefferson condemned the restriction [the Missouri Compromise] and foresaw its consequences and predicted that it would result in the dissolution of the Union. His prediction is now history." The

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<sup>3</sup> Anastaplo, George, *Abraham Lincoln: A Constitutional Biography* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 116-117.

declaration also says that Georgians, “refuse to commit their own to the rulers whom the North offers us. Why? Because by their declared principles and policy they have outlawed \$3,000,000,000 of our property in the common territories of the Union; put it under the ban of the Republic in the States where it exists and out of the protection of Federal law everywhere; because they give sanctuary to thieves and incendiaries who assail it to the whole extent of their power, in spite of their most solemn obligations and covenants; because their avowed purpose is to subvert our society and subject us not only to the loss of our property but the destruction of ourselves, our wives, and our children, and the desolation of our homes, our altars, and our firesides.”

Mississippi’s declaration states, “Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery– the greatest material interest of the world...There was no choice left us but submission to the mandates of abolition, or a dissolution of the Union, whose principles had been subverted to work out our ruin.”<sup>4</sup> Southern political leaders may have felt disgruntled for multiple reasons, but slavery was the reason that they were willing to secede.

Upon his resignation from the Senate, future Confederate president Jefferson Davis cited slavery as the reason for his decision to resign, saying that, “It has been a conviction of pressing necessity, it has been a belief that we are to be deprived in the Union of the rights which our fathers bequeathed to us, which has brought Mississippi into her present decision. She has heard proclaimed the theory that all men are created free and equal, and this made the basis of an attack upon her social institutions; and the sacred Declaration of Independence has been invoked to maintain the position of the equality of the races...”<sup>5</sup> Davis’s stance was clear: he correctly ascertained that the Founding Fathers had given Southerners constitutional protection for their

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<sup>4</sup> “Declaration of Causes of Seceding States,” <http://sunsite.utk.edu/civil-war/reasons.html>, accessed February 20, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Jefferson Davis, “Farewell Address to the U.S. Senate” (speech, Washington, D.C., January 21, 1861) <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=491>

practice of human bondage, and he feared that Northerners would no longer uphold this protection. Hence, Southern states were leaving the Union.

The Confederate Constitution is very revealing when it comes to Southern motives for seceding. The document did prohibit the African slave trade, but not the domestic slave trade. This was for three reasons. First, there was the aforementioned strong desire by the Confederacy to placate Britain, something unlikely to be successful if the African slave trade was allowed. Britain, after all, had taken a leading role in trying to suppress the importation of slaves from Africa.<sup>6</sup> Second, the African slave trade was questionable from an economic standpoint, as it put more slaves “in circulation” and therefore decreased the market value of each individual slave. Third, the sanctimony of many slaveholders was actually offended by the African slave trade. The same Virginia planter who bought hundreds of blacks born into slavery often felt uncomfortable with the idea of importing kidnapped people from Africa on disease-ridden ships.<sup>7</sup> The Confederate Constitution did, however, guarantee the “right” of white people to own black slaves anywhere under Confederate jurisdiction and maintained the U.S. Constitution’s fugitive slave clause.<sup>8</sup> The fact that there was a considerable risk of alienating Britain and France by emphasizing slavery should make it plain that other proposed reasons for the war, such as tariffs or the idea that the agrarian, “chivalrous” South was repelled by the coarse, industrial North, played a negligible role in causing secession. If these alleged reasons had actually helped cause the South to secede, the Confederate leaders would have emphasized them more to avoid offending Europe. In order for one

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<sup>6</sup> Hamilton, Keith and Patrick Salmon, *Diplomacy and Empire: Britain and the Suppression of the Slave Trade, 1807-1975* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2009), 197.

<sup>7</sup> Foner, Eric, “The Amistad Case in Fact and Film,” accessed March 9, 2013.  
<http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/74/>

<sup>8</sup> “Constitution of the Confederate States,” Article 4, Section 2, Clause 1, 3; Article 4, Section 3, Clause 3.

to claim that slavery was simply one of multiple major causes for secession, one would have to believe that Confederate leaders were very politically obtuse for emphasizing it so much.

There is also a possible psychological reason for why Southern political leaders sometimes cited reasons other than slavery for secession. They may have, at least subconsciously, felt guilt over enslaving millions of people. Abraham Lincoln once noted that even slave masters considered the traders who sold slaves to be morally despicable people. This observation indicates that slaveholders themselves had a sense of misgiving about the system of human bondage. Thus, stating in public or in private reasons for secession such as tariffs could have served as a form of guilt reduction.<sup>9</sup>

One argument that pro-Confederate historians often use to defend the “States’ Rights” argument is that the North offered to expand the U.S. Constitution’s protection of slavery if the Southern states would remain in the Union, only to have the South refuse the offer. Unfortunately, this argument does not take into account the way in which tensions over the slavery issue had ratcheted up in the ten years before the South seceded. In 1850, Congress had attempted to forge a compromise between the two regions of the country. This compromise included measures to make the Constitution’s fugitive slave clause more enforceable, with the goal of preventing Northerners from aiding the Underground Railroad. This goal was not achieved, as abolitionists in the North continued aiding runaway slaves. In 1859, radical abolitionist John Brown attempted to incite a slave rebellion, aided by a group of Northern abolitionists. These factors made the South convinced that, Constitutional protections or not, Northerners could be expected to continue to interfere with slavery if secession did not take place. As evidence of this, consider the fact that the Georgia Declaration of Secession explicitly complained that the fugitive slave law was a dead letter statute

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<sup>9</sup> Ludwig, Emil, *Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1929), 203.

in the North.<sup>10</sup> There was no protection of slavery the federal government could pass that Northern abolitionists would not break.

An additional argument used to claim that the Civil War was not about slavery is that, contrary to popular myth, the North did not go to war to end slavery.<sup>11</sup> It is indeed true that, with the exception of the abolitionist minority, *most* white Northerners who supported going to war were not primarily interested in freeing slaves.<sup>12 13</sup> Indeed, it was not the presidents or generals from either side who were truly the greatest freedom fighters in the war, but rather the abolitionists. Yet although slavery did not motivate most Northerners to fight, it certainly motivated the South's political leaders. While Professor Jeffrey Rogers Hummel of San Jose State University disagrees with Lincoln's decision to fight the Civil War, he agrees with Eric Foner that why the Southern states seceded and why the North stopped them are two different questions and acknowledges that the answer to the first is slavery.<sup>14</sup> Conflating these two questions and assuming that both the North and the South pursued the war for the same reason is faulty logic and flies in the face of historical fact.

If slavery was the cause of secession, then why did white Southerners who did not own slaves serve in the Confederate Army? To answer this question, one must first look at the economic importance of slavery in the South. Determining the total value of Southern slaves in 1860 is

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<sup>10</sup> "Declaration of Causes of Seceding States," <http://sunsite.utk.edu/civil-war/reasons.html#Mississippi>, accessed February 20, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Loewen, James W., "5 Myths About Why the South Seceded," *Washington Post*, January 9, 2011, accessed March 9, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/07/AR2011010706547.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Loewen, James W., "5 Myths About Why the South Seceded," *Washington Post*, January 9, 2011, accessed March 9, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/07/AR2011010706547.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Wiley, Bell Irvin, *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 40.

<sup>14</sup> Hummel, Jeffrey Rogers, *Emancipating Slaves, Enslaving Free Men: A History of the American Civil War* (Peru: Open Court Publishing, 1996), 3.

difficult, but the Georgia Declaration of Secession's figure of three billion dollars<sup>15</sup> is a mid-range estimate. With slavery so economically important to the South, it makes sense that plantation interests could have controlled the state governments and that poor white Southerners often feared the economic consequences of abolition.

Working class Southern whites had several other reasons to enlist in the Confederate Army. First, plantation tycoons had other issues such as taxes that they could use to inflame the passions of their salt of the Earth brethren. Second, working class Southern whites sometimes feared that black freedom would result in racial equality. Andrew Johnson, Abraham Lincoln's second vice president, observed that when antislavery efforts took place in Tennessee, whites who did not own slaves reacted extremely negatively.<sup>16</sup> The Texas, Georgia, and Mississippi declarations all raised the issue of racial equality as a result of abolition.<sup>17</sup> Third, many Southerners probably enlisted in the Confederate Army because of feelings of loyalty to their state and fear that their homeland was under attack. Furthermore, a number of working class white Southerners opposed the Confederacy. Anti-Confederate sentiment was strong in parts of the South, particularly among working class whites in mountain regions.<sup>18</sup>

Some point out that after the initial seven Southern states seceded over slavery, four more seceded when it became clear that Abraham Lincoln expected them to provide resources to reunite

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<sup>15</sup> "Declaration of Causes of Seceding States," accessed February 20, 2013, <http://sunsite.utk.edu/civil-war/reasons.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Bartlett, Bruce, *Wrong on Race: The Democratic Party's Buried Past* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 27.

<sup>17</sup> "Declaration of Causes of Seceding States," accessed February 20, 2013, <http://sunsite.utk.edu/civil-war/reasons.html#Mississippi>.

<sup>18</sup> Loewen, James W., *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: The New Press, 2008), 194.



the country. These people argue that “Northern Aggression” caused the war.<sup>19</sup> This, however, begs the question: why were powerful people in these four states appalled enough by Lincoln’s use of force against the Confederacy that they embraced secession? The evidence demonstrates that they were so appalled because they sympathized with the Confederacy due to its proslavery origin. Arkansas, one of the states that seceded after the firing at Fort Sumter, had earlier formed a convention to debate secession but voted to remain in the Union. That convention had put forth a list of proposed compromises to avert war. All of these compromises revolved around slavery and race.<sup>20</sup> When Virginia seceded after Fort Sumter, it published an ordinance of secession. Unlike the declarations that Mississippi, Georgia, Texas, and South Carolina had passed, the Virginia Ordinance of Secession was quite brief. However, it tellingly referred to “the oppression of the Southern slaveholding States.”<sup>21</sup> Slavery was the primary cause of secession for each of the eleven Confederate states.

Finally, it is sometimes claimed that the South did not secede to preserve slavery based on the fact that the Confederacy offered to abolish slavery later in the war in exchange for recognition by Europe. Yet the reason for the South’s offer is fairly obvious. Following a string of major defeats, the South knew that they would lose the war. Once this occurred, it was only a matter of time before slavery was abolished. Thus, the South had two choices: end slavery but remain independent and have the option of using methods such as deportation to Africa in order to prevent racial amalgamation, or be forced back into the union and risk humiliating surrender terms, not least

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<sup>19</sup> Buchanan, Pat, “The New Intolerance,” *Townhall.com*, April 9, 2010, accessed March 9, 2012, [http://townhall.com/columnists/patbuchanan/2010/04/09/the\\_new\\_intolerance?page=full](http://townhall.com/columnists/patbuchanan/2010/04/09/the_new_intolerance?page=full).

<sup>20</sup> “Arkansas Secession Convention, ‘Resolutions,’ March 11, 1861,” *The Confederate and Neo-Confederate Reader: The “Great Truth” about the “Lost Cause.”* Ed. Loewen, James W. and Edward H. Sebesta (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 156-159.

<sup>21</sup> “Virginia Ordinance of Secession, April 17, 1861,” <http://www.wvculture.org/history/statehood/ordinanceofsecession.html>, accessed April 17, 2013.

among them black equality. Indeed, within five years of the South's defeat, blacks had constitutional guarantees of equal rights. This would have been highly unlikely to have occurred had the Confederacy won the war, whether it chose to end slavery or not.

While the evidence that slavery caused the war is abundantly clear, individuals such as Republican presidential candidate Ron Paul have argued that the Civil War could have been avoided if the U.S. government had simply paid to buy the slaves and then released them. This argument does not take into account the fact that funding this effort would have been extremely difficult, given that the federal income tax was not instituted until the war was in progress. Many slaveholders might have also been disgruntled at the loss of their workforce, even if they were compensated. After all, no matter how much money they were given, they would still need workers on their plantations, and Southern planters had long resisted a transition to wage labor. Additionally, African Americans would have probably not received the Constitutional guarantees of equal rights that were codified as a result of the Civil War and that laid the groundwork for Supreme Court decisions like *Brown v. Board of Education*. Perhaps most importantly, it would have been morally reprehensible to compensate the masters but not the slaves. The Civil War was bloody and tragic, but as soon as the ink dried on the U.S. Constitution, it was inevitable.

Even those who admit that the Civil War was caused by slavery will sometimes assert that the Confederate Flag is merely a piece of history rather than a symbol of racism and persecution. However, the various Confederate flag designs all have their origins in the Confederate government. The battle flag for the Confederacy's Army of Northern Virginia is the most commonly displayed version. If the existence of this flag predated its use by the Confederacy, it would be perfectly reasonable to see it as merely a symbol of Southern pride and history. However, this is not the case. Because the flag was designed specifically for an institution of the Confederate government, it

cannot be separated from that government. It will always be the symbol of a regime established to continue slavery. The Confederate flag should be in a museum, where people can observe it and learn about it is a symbol of an oppressive, racist government. However, when a Confederate Flag flies on an automobile or a state capitol or over the graves of fallen Southern soldiers, it is celebrating the symbol.

Still, some people argue that the Confederate Flag is no more racist than the American Flag due to the fact that slavery existed in the United States as well as in the Confederacy. Yet the fact of the matter is that whatever role racism may have and probably did play in the American Revolution, slavery was not *the* central cause of the war between Britain and the colonies in the same way that it was for the war between North and South. None of this is to deny that America was a racist nation for the majority of its history or that the Founding Fathers gave slavery constitutional protection and should be castigated as a result. However, the United States was not founded primarily to promote slavery, while the Confederacy was.

Confederate war memorials, while less offensive than Confederate flags, should still be opposed. These memorials exist in various parts of the country. At one memorial located in Arlington, tradition dictates that every U.S. president must leave a wreath to honor the dead soldiers buried there. The Arlington memorial was erected at the height of the Jim Crow era by the United Daughters of the Confederacy, an organization whose support for racial segregation is well documented.<sup>22 23</sup> The monument also depicts a loyal slave marching to serve a master fighting in a war to keep him in bondage. One of the goals for this display was, “illustrating the kindly relations

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<sup>22</sup> “The Confederate Memorial Arlington National Cemetery,” accessed February 25, 2013, <http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/csa-mem.htm>.

<sup>23</sup> “Florida High School Keeps KKK Founder’s Name,” accessed February 25, 2013, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,448684,00.html>.

that existed all over the South between the master and the slave.”<sup>24</sup> Confederate memorials mock the suffering of slaves and promote the idea that the Confederate cause was valid or just.

What is the significance of the Civil War today? In order to answer this question, it is essential to look at the war in conjunction with the overall civil rights history of America. There is some argument to be made that the first blacks who came to the United States arrived as indentured servants, their status similar to that of their white counterparts. Over the next few decades, however, the statutes of the American colonies were constructed to solidify the enslavement and inferior legal status of the black race. This racial issue eventually provoked the Civil War. While the South was defeated, Jim Crow endured for just over a century after the actual war ended. However, evidenced by the Confederate nostalgia displayed by many even today, the racial issues that caused the war live on. The fact of the matter is that while legal racism has been eradicated, racial bigotry is still a serious problem. Aside from the frequent displays of the Confederate Flag, it is important to remember the judge in Louisiana who refused to marry an interracial couple as recently as 2009. In addition, two candidates with documented histories of making racist statements, Haley Barbour and Mike Huckabee, were widely discussed as potential Republican presidential candidates in the 2012 election. Ron Paul, who has also made blatantly racist statements, was actually a contender in the 2012 Republican presidential primaries. Furthermore, despite being illegal in most countries, slavery continues to exist in the twenty-first century.

The significance of the Civil War extends beyond race and slavery. The policies of the Founding Fathers did not include liberty and justice for all. Blacks were enslaved, Native Americans had their land seized against their will, women were denied most legal rights, and gays

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<sup>24</sup> Herbert, Hilary A., “History of the Arlington Confederate Monument,” accessed March 9, 2013, <http://www.archive.org/stream/historyofarlington00herb#page/77/mode/1up/search/young+master>.

could not marry and faced arrest or even execution if they found sexual partners. The Constitution indeed supported slavery. The racist Southern politicians of the nineteenth century believed that the policies of the Founding Fathers should be continued. They believed, in essence, that not all Americans should have equal rights.

Abolitionists felt differently. They believed that the Founding Fathers had been wrong and that equality was a fundamental aspect of justice. Not all Confederate leaders revered the work of the Founding Fathers, and not all abolitionists held it in contempt. Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens tacitly criticized Thomas Jefferson for writing that all men were created equal<sup>25</sup>, while Frederick Douglass tried to claim that the Constitution was an antislavery document.<sup>26</sup> But other Confederates like Jefferson Davis realized that they were following in the footsteps of men like Thomas Jefferson and George Washington by trying to preserve slavery just as the Founding Fathers, as a whole, had preserved it.

Meanwhile, abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison<sup>27</sup>, William Nell<sup>28</sup>, and Wendell Phillips<sup>29</sup> correctly determined that the Constitution was a proslavery document that could not be relied on in the pursuit of abolition. Like the politicians of the Confederacy, many social conservatives agree with the policies of the Founding Fathers and believe that gays and lesbians should not have equal rights. A growing number of Americans, however, oppose the stance of the founders and believe that the sexual orientation a person is born with should not impact their rights.

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<sup>25</sup> Alexander Stephens, "Cornerstone Address," (speech, Savannah, Georgia, March 21, 1861), Teaching American History, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1861stephens.asp>.

<sup>26</sup> Frederick Douglass, "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro," (speech, Rochester, New York, July 5, 1852), PBS, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h2927t.html>

<sup>27</sup> Mayer, Henry, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 445.

<sup>28</sup> Potter, Joan, *African American Firsts: Famous, Little Known and Unsung Triumphs of Blacks in America* (New York: Dafina Books, 2009), 134.

<sup>29</sup> Stewart, James Brewer, *Wendell Phillips: Liberty's Hero* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 124.

The Bible was often the Constitution's companion in the Southern defense of slavery. Jefferson Davis argued that according to the Bible, slavery was divinely sanctioned, the result of a curse God placed on the black race.<sup>30</sup> A strong parallel can be drawn between the conflict that led to the Civil War and the current struggle for gay equality. Like Davis and other Confederate leaders, religious opponents of gay rights base their anti-equality stance on specific Bible passages, in this case those that condemn homosexuality. Just as abolitionists were accused by slaveholders of ignoring the "Word of God," modern day gay rights activists are accused of trying to subvert Biblical teachings. Many of the most prominent abolitionists were in fact Christians. But these men and women emphasized the overall Biblical message of love for all people, rather than individual Scriptures promoting injustice and cruelty. Similarly, gay Christians and heterosexual Christians who support gay rights also believe that Jesus's ideal of love should take precedence over specific passages that promote discrimination.

The present debates over anti-gay ballot initiatives have parallels with the debates over slavery in the Western territories that were applying for statehood in the 1850s. Former Arkansas governor and Republican presidential primary candidate, Mike Huckabee, wondered in 2008 how anybody could support gay marriage when it had been voted down in so many states. When Stephen Douglas and Abraham Lincoln debated in 1858, Douglas postulated that the intense moral issue of slavery could be settled by a public vote in each new state. In essence, the rights of the slaves were dependent on majority will. Lincoln felt differently. He believed that blacks had some natural, fundamental rights—albeit not necessarily equal rights—that could not be taken away by referendum. That, combined with a demand for full equality, was the argument promoted by individuals like William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Philips, Lydia Maria Child, Frederick Douglass,

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<sup>30</sup> Guyatt, Nicholas, *Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607-1876* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 238.

William Nell, John Brown, and Sojourner Truth. Likewise, the argument for natural rights to full legal equality regardless of public opinion is now being put forth by attorneys David Boise and Ted Olson as they challenge the California law banning gay marriage. The Thirteenth Amendment did not just set the slave in Savannah, Georgia free. It also planted the seeds for the freedom of the Irish American lesbian in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Wendell Phillips once stated that, “liberty knows nothing but victories.”<sup>31</sup> Hopefully, he was right.

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<sup>31</sup> Russell, Charles Edward, *The Story of Wendell Phillips: Soldier of the Common Good* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr and Company, 1914), 63-64.

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