

EUROPE and AMERICA: 1850 TO 1870:

The Triumph of Nationalism and Industrialism

1. Modernism, Cosmopolitanism, and Industrialism

A stroll around London, Paris or Vienna in the 1850s would reveal the construction of a new world. In London's Hyde Park, one encountered a vast glass and iron edifice covering an area roughly equivalent to thirteen football fields. It was called the [Crystal Palace](#) (Link A) and housed the Exposition of 1851. It offered illumination by gaslight and even public toilets for the more than 6 million visitors who could choose among 13,000 exhibits celebrating the industrial age, Britain's primacy in manufacturing, the progress of the human race, and the ways that science was now contributing to modern industry. An ominous note was provided by the Prussian display of huge Krupp cannon. Nevertheless, for Britain it was a confident time, an age of optimism that led Victoria to exclaim that now everything seemed possible. (Contrast this with Dostoyevsky's Russian lament that if there is no God, then everything is indeed possible.)

Meanwhile in Paris, Napoleon III offered his own world's fair in 1855. He then went on to rebuild the capital transforming medieval Paris into the city we know today – arguably, the most beautiful in Europe with lovely parks and broad landscaped boulevards lined with fancy cafes. Haussmann added 4,000 acres of parks to the city. Aqueducts were built to provide cleaner water for residents and an underground sewer system improved health conditions in a city that had been ravaged by cholera in 1832 and 1849. In Vienna, the old ramparts around the inner city were being replaced by the famous boulevard, the Ringstrasse, as a showcase for the grandeur and glory of the Habsburg Empire.

What one observed was no Potemkin Village, but the visible emergence of a new way of living as the fruit of an industrial revolution that had begun in England in the previous century and was now spreading across the continent. England produced huge volumes of machine-made goods and flooded European markets with cheap textiles. The utilization of mass production and the use of steam would usher in a period of rapid economic growth beginning in the early 1850s. The expansion of rail networks would allow for the rapid transportation of

food crops so that the periodic famines that had been endemic throughout history would largely disappear in the advanced nations of Europe. By the following century, the developed world would enjoy a standard of living so much higher than humanity had ever known that we look back on museum exhibits of how people lived in ‘the olden days’ with bemused disbelief – even when those olden days were no more than a couple of centuries ago.

Traditional society had been rural because the labor of most of the population was required to produce its food supply. This changed with the ever-accelerating modernization of agriculture in the preceding few centuries which had created the surplus labor force required for industrialization. With industrialization came urbanization; with advances in transportation came the beginnings of a global economy and a cosmopolitan world view. The year 1856 witnessed capitalism’s first global economic crisis, a general deflation that originated in the United States. From New York, the panic spread to England and Scotland, reached Hamburg and Paris, and extended to Moscow and Latin America.

Clearly, the economic expansion and dramatic creation of wealth in our period justified its inclination to be optimistic about the future. “At mid-century, Britain entered a period of relative social harmony... The Victorian consensus <had>rested on a strong belief that the ‘hidden hand’ of the economy would generate economic growth... But, increasingly aware of the devastating poverty of millions of workers, most middle-class Victorians by mid-century had changed their minds about the role of government in society. Thereafter, parliamentary commissions began to call upon ‘experts’ to gather information and assess conditions of British life. The age of statistics had arrived... Gradually, middle-class liberals came around to the view that social reform was necessary... In Great Britain, the age of optimism became the age of improvement.” (John Merriman; *A History of Modern Europe*; p.797ff)

Nationalism and Reason d’etat Replaces Community of Nations

Italian Unification

In Giuseppe Verdi’s 1842 opera, *Nabucco*, a chorus of Hebrew slaves laments the loss of their national autonomy in the famous chorus [Va, pensiero, sull’ali dorate](#) (Fly, thought, on golden wings,) with its cry: Oh, my country so beautiful and lost! Oh, remembrance so dear

and so fatal! (Link B)¹ Because Italy was disunited, it had been the plaything of European nation-states for centuries, except of the period of unity under the Medici family that we know as the Renaissance. Following that brief but brilliant flowering, the peninsula was dominated by the Holy Roman Empire under Charles V, by the French under Napoleon and, in Verdi's time, by Austria and the detested Hapsburg Empire. Thus, Italian nationalists identified with Verdi's Hebrew chorus which became an Italian Marseillaise.

At this time, Italy was, as Metternich had said, a mere geographic expression. Northern Italy was dominated by the Hapsburgs except for the independent kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia – the home of Victor Emmanuel, Garibaldi and Cavour. In central Italy, French soldiers enforced the autocracy of the Papal States while in the south, Austrian troops propped up unpopular rulers in The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

Italian aspirations for unity can be traced back to the Renaissance when Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* as a patriotic appeal. However, the political realization of this aspiration would only come about in our period when the sentimental nationalism of Mazzini and the revolutionary republicanism of Garibaldi combined with the cynical Realpolitik of Cavour to expand the power of the kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia to make its sovereign, Victor Emmanuel, the king of Italy. In fact both the idealistic nationalism of Mazzini and the republicanism of Garibaldi were manipulated by Cavour in the interest of Piedmont-Sardinia. A similar outcome would be effected by Bismarck's unification of Germany under Prussia. Thus, both in Germany and Italy, unification would really amount to hegemony of the more advanced northern section over a more agricultural south. A similar outcome would result from the American Civil War.

The Congress of Vienna that pacified Europe after Napoleon's defeat ignored nationalistic sentiment. This sentiment grew steadily throughout the Italian peninsula reaching a state of acute resentment against Austrian domination by the middle of the century. For a time, Italians differed about who should lead a united Italy. The Mazzini faction envisioned a liberal republic while clerical conservatives preferred a federal government under papal leadership. In the end, Mazzini was too radical for his time, and his military failures were too costly and ineffective. Pope Pius IX reacted against what he viewed as Mazzini's radicalism to become a resolute opponent of unification.

1 And see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Va._pensiero for the history and text of the aria.

In the end, the liberals would be led by King Victor Emmanuel II; and unification would be effected by the Realpolitik manipulations of Camillo di Cavour, his minister. Cavour realized that, without the assistance of one or more of the great powers, the small kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia had no chance against the Hapsburg empire. He thus elicited British and French sympathy by joining the allies in the Crimean War even though his government had no genuine interest in the conflict. He then formed an alliance with France and together they provoked Austria into a war that they easily won resulting in the acquisition of most of Northern and Central Italy. Meanwhile, Giuseppe Garibaldi conquered the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies which opted for union with Sardinia. That left Venetia, still in Austrian possession, and Rome and Latium, which the pope was able to retain because of French protection. Cavour allied with Prussia in the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 to obtain Venetia. Four years later, when France was forced to withdraw its protection from the Papacy because of the military demands of the Franco-Prussian War, Italy seized the papal possessions and Italian unification was complete.

German Unification

Cavour was not primarily a nationalist. He was above all a servant of the principality of Piedmont-Sardinia, manipulating Italian nationalist sentiment to advance the expansionist ambitions of his royal master. Much the same can be said of Otto von Bismarck of Brandenburg-Prussia. Like Cavour, he was also a cynical master of “a type of politics that came to be known as Realpolitik, the pursuit of a nation’s self-interest based on a realistic assessment of the costs and consequences of action. Inherent in Realpolitik was an absence of ethical or moral considerations...” (John Merriman; *A History of Modern Europe*; p.765ff.) In order to unite Germany under Prussian leadership, Bismarck would instigate three otherwise unnecessary wars and win all of them. He would employ blatantly unconstitutional means to effectively reform both the Prussian state and its military – a ruthlessness that earned him the enmity of German liberals and made him the most hated man in Germany until his success made him accepted as a good fellow after all.

Indeed, Bismarck was unbelievably successful. Through war and diplomacy, he saw to it that Prussia displaced Austria as the dominant power in the German speaking territories, melded the multitude of German principalities into a united country under the Prussian king, thereby creating a united Germany that displaced France to become the hegemonic power in continental Europe. How did he manage all of this without either personal charisma, a popular following or military command? He was able to exercise his astonishing diplomatic ability

because he secured and retained the support of his sole constituent, King William I of Prussia. Indeed, he dominated royal thinking to such an extent that on one occasion William complained that “It’s hard to be Kaiser under Bismarck.”

The king first called on Bismarck when the legislature was blocking his plans for a military reform that was absolutely essential to the task of competing with Austria for dominance in Germany. Bismarck blithely ignored constitutional restrictions and proceeded with the necessary re-organization. He allied with Austria against Denmark to acquire Schleswig-Holstein for the German Confederation dominated jointly by Prussia and Austria. After victory over the Danes, he “used a dispute with Austria over Schleswig-Holstein to provoke a war in which Prussia was victorious and which resulted in the unification of two-thirds of non-Austrian Germany under Prussian leadership.” (Carlton J. H. Hayes; *A Political and Social History of Modern Europe*; Volume II; p.183ff.) To unify the rest of the country, Bismarck instigated the Franco-Prussian War. When this too proved successful, the Liberal parliamentarians retroactively approved Bismarck’s blatantly unconstitutional regime.

2. The End of the European Community

Napoleon III and the Franco-Prussian War

Bismarck’s foil and victim in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 was Napoleon III, the nephew of Bonaparte, who came to power after the French ousted its last king, Louis-Philippe, in the Revolution of 1848. After leading a Republican government for a few years, Napoleon followed the presumptuous example of his uncle and had himself declared Emperor of France. His domestic reforms encouraged an economic advance impressive enough to be described as France’s “industrial take-off.” In addition to having created the wonder that is modern Paris, he is credited with having brought the industrial revolution to France. The Suez Canal was opened in 1869 and railways helped to increase consumption and end the famines that had resulted from the localization of agriculture for all of recorded history.

Unfortunately, he couldn’t forget that he was named Napoleon – and lusted after the glory of military adventurism. Just as [Ingres](#), the great French painter of our period, (Link C) disdained the portraits on which much of his reputation rests favoring instead the history paintings that, with few exceptions, are largely forgotten, so Napoleon III disvalued his truly notable achievements in domestic politics, yearning instead for the glory of an aggressive foreign policy for which he had no talent and in which he was a pawn in the hands of such masters as Cavour and Bismarck. This foolish ambition would cost him his throne.

Napoleon had imperial ambitions to rival those of his uncle. Indeed, this is just one more example of the extent to which the ghost of Bonaparte would haunt European history throughout the nineteenth century. After emerging on the winning side of the Crimean War, an absurd little affair in which France and Britain opposed Russian expansion in the Middle East, Napoleon joined with Count Camillo di Cavour of Piedmont-Sardinia in war with Austria from which France ultimately gained Nice and Savoy. He then dreamed of expanding his empire in Africa, Asia and ultimately in North America where the United States, engaged in its Civil War, a bloodbath that would make the Crimean conflict seem very tame indeed, would be unable to enforce the Monroe Doctrine. Taking advantage of American weakness, Napoleon installed Austrian Archduke Maximilian as Emperor of Mexico, but the end of the Civil War allowed the U.S. to intervene. Invoking the Monroe Doctrine, The U.S. “requested” the departure of French forces, whereupon Maximilian was defeated and executed by Mexican nationalists.

Napoleon’s final defeat was the result of his playing the lamb to Bismarck’s slaughter house in the Franco-Prussian War. This arose out of a dispute over the succession to the Spanish throne that had already been resolved when Prussia agreed to withdraw support for its Hohenzollern candidate. However, Napoleon insisted on a letter from the King of Prussia apologizing to France and promising never to revive its claim. This demand was politely declined by King William I who sent Bismarck a routine report of the incident in a document that is known to history as the Ems Dispatch. Bismarck “edited” the document and then leaked it to the press in a form that he knew would arouse the nationalist rage of both the French and the Germans. His version depicted the minor incident as an intolerable affront to the national pride of both nations. He thus provoked France into declaring a totally pointless war on Prussia which he correctly believed would unite German patriots behind a victorious Prussia. The upshot was the defeat of France and the capture of Napoleon himself (who went into exile in Britain). King William of Prussia had himself crowned as Kaiser (emperor) of a united Germany in the Hall of Mirrors of the Versailles Palace on January 18, 1871. In addition, France was forced to cede Alsace-Lorraine to Germany and to pay an indemnity for a war instigated entirely by Bismarck. These extortions would haunt the world well into the next century, as French bitterness over the loss of Alsace-Lorraine would poison Franco-German relations, contributing significantly to the two world wars in which Europe collectively committed political suicide.

More immediately, the armistice that made these concessions was

rejected by Parisian militants of the Paris Commune who rose up against France's newly elected National Assembly. France descended into a civil war in which the Republic under Alphonse Thiers crushed the Communards. At least 25,000 Parisians were killed – a number comparable to the total of deaths attributed to the entire reign of terror of the French Revolution. The victorious Republic would remain the government of France until it was defeated by Hitler in World War II. However, France would henceforth be replaced by Germany as the hegemonic power in continental Europe.

'Realpolitik'

The world that emerged from our period is, for better or worse, the world that men like Otto von Bismarck created when they discarded as “quaint” the restraints of the statesmen of the Congress of Vienna. It's ironic that they viewed themselves as realists in contrast to such consummate diplomatists as the Princes Talleyrand and Metternich who could hardly be described as naïve. Neither Bismarck nor Cavour were idealistic nationalists; they were devoted servants of their royal masters in Prussia and Piedmont-Sardinia. By contrast, Talleyrand and Metternich were above all Europeans who successfully sought to bring Europe peace and stability – freedom, not so much. It was for this reason that Talleyrand opposed the grandiosity of Napoleon in keeping with the Metternichean vision of a diplomacy in which the concert of Europe would maintain the balance of power. “But balance of power in 1852 did not mean (as it meant in 1914) a balanced alignment of hostile states against each other; it meant rather that no state could obtain aggrandizement without the consent of the others.” (Robert C. Binkley; *Realism and Nationalism*; p.162). By contrast, Bismarck and Cavour tended to view international politics as a zero sum game played with utter ruthlessness with the aim of extending the power of their sovereigns at the expense of everyone else regardless of the consequences for the European community.

Bismarck and his ilk regarded this loyalty to the aggrandizement of his sovereign, as “realistic.” But why was that loyalty, the conventional loyalty of the Prussian Junker class, any less sentimental than a commitment either to the nation-state, on the one hand, or to the European community, on the other? In any event, the “quaint” restraints of Europeans like Metternich and Talleyrand were now abandoned and the “realists” gave us a world in which the slaughter of war itself was merely a pawn to be played on the diplomatic chess board even against a nation that posed no threat. Bismarck did not instigate the Franco-Prussian War because of any genuine issue between the two nations, but merely because he believed, correctly, that he could use that war to persuade those German states not yet united with Prussia to do so. To

this end, he manipulated nationalistic mob emotion in a pointless loss of life and helped to create a Europe whose chronic instability (especially in light of the Prussian insistence on the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine) would lead directly to the two world wars – and thus to both the holocaust and the rise of Stalinist Russia. Sometimes the claim that one is being realistic can be the last refuge of the simple-minded.

Nationalism

Of course, it was not just the Realpolitik of people like Bismarck that caused the trouble. They could not so cynically have manipulated the fiercely competitive nationalism of the time if the mob had been less eager to kill and die to avenge the honor of their ‘fatherland’ against all affronts, real or imagined. This popular sentiment seems to have intensified in our period. It had begun with the total war of the levee en masse of the French Revolutionary citizen armies and by now has become so widespread and conventional that it is hard to appreciate how strange it really is. Why in heaven should I be willing to die because the king of another country was rude to my ambassador as in the controversy that provoked the Franco-Prussian War? The answer may lie just those words “why in heaven.”

The Enlightenment did not succeed in overthrowing the Christian religion, but it did dethrone the clergy; and the faith that endured and even flourished was no longer the old time religion in which the drama of salvation and eternal damnation was central both to individual life and to the historical narrative. Even the most devout Christians worshiped a deity who was no longer as terrifying – and they anticipated an afterlife with both less conviction and less terror. When John Milton, Latin Secretary to Oliver Cromwell and thus a devout Puritan, thought it both necessary and appropriate, rather than blasphemous, to “justify the ways of God to man,” humanism had triumphed – and the resulting earthquake was an effect of Thomas à Kempis, Luther, Calvin and Phillip II spinning in their graves.

There would still be plenty of religious enthusiasm in Methodism and Evangelical Christianity, but Christians of this kind are neither Calvinists nor medieval Christians. They lack the gloom and doom, the destructive ferocity needed to satisfy what Bertrand Russell called “man’s cruel thirst for worship” – the need to find some transcendent source of meaning and value that could redeem their lives from insignificance. Men now attempted to satisfy that need through the worship of nature, commitment to social progress and reform, a near-religious exaltation of art, and through the cult of romantic love. All these solutions were tried and found lacking. At the same time,

beginning in France during the French Revolution, spreading throughout Europe in the period of Napoleonic dominance, intensifying in our period, and continuing to the present day was a fervor of nationalism. This romantic patriotism proved a vibrant substitute for a Christian faith that had grown tame, and was now unable to demand sacrifice in return for transcendence, and could no longer provide the 'oceanic' sense of belonging as an antidote to anomie and social alienation.

As it turned out, a religion of national patriotism with its saints and martyrs, its simplistic moral loyalties, its demand for faith and submission, and its persecution of non-believers and apostates, would satisfy the need for worship wonderfully well. It would provide moral cover for our basest inclinations while satisfying our hunger for belonging and acceptance. It would demand the ultimate sacrifice in suffering and death. And it would inspire fervid expression in the music, art and literature of the period. (It is not merely coincidence that the era of national unification in Italy and Germany was dominated by the music of Verdi and Wagner.) Here was the whole package and it triumphed everywhere. The cosmopolitan might sneer with Einstein that nationalism is "a juvenile disease – the measles of mankind;" but it is only the citizens of other countries that are nationalists. As patriots, we know that, we are the greatest nation on earth, that God is on our side and that we "shall reign forever and ever. Hallelujah!"

3. Meanwhile in Russia

In the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire, losing its ability to defend its territories, became known as 'the sick man of Europe.' This was a source of instability because it invited aggression from its expansionist neighbors – especially the Russian Empire. In 1853, when Tsar Nicholas I invaded Moldavia and Wallachia, the Sultan declared war. Britain and France intervened with Turkey against Russia. When it was noted that more British troops were dying of disease than in combat, Florence Nightingale introduced hygienic standards into military hospitals, and effectively established nursing as a profession, saving many lives. Apart from this real triumph, this tawdry affair known as the Crimean War was conducted with incompetence on both sides; and ended in 1855 with Russia's defeat. Its importance lies in the fact that the great powers had not previously gone to war since the final defeat of Bonaparte in 1815. It thus signaled the breakdown of the Vienna settlement through which these powers, acting in concert, had been able to administer European politics in the interest of peace and stability. "Henceforth diplomacy would rely more on naked power than on shared values... In the course of the nineteenth century, Great Britain became the dominant country in Europe <and>... the leading industrial

nation <whose> Royal Navy commanded the seas.” (Henry Kissinger; Diplomacy; p.92ff.)

After its defeat, Russia withdrew from great power politics and thus could not provide any deterrent to Bismarck’s three wars of German unification. In 1855, the year that the war ended, Nicholas I was succeeded by Alexander II, who recognized the need for domestic reform. “The overwhelming majority of Russia’s people were impoverished serfs bound to the land...Serf rebellions, more than 1,500 during the first half of the century, shook the empire...<After emancipation in 1861, serfs no longer owed labor to the lords, but taxes to the state.> These would be collected by the communes. Peasants were no longer dependent on the whims of landlord justice. Henceforth they could not be beaten, flogged, or even killed with impunity.” (John Merriman; A History of Modern Europe; p.806ff.)

However, as in the southern United States after the Civil War, the reforms in Russia remained incomplete. In contrast to the liberal, modernizing states like France and Britain, Russia remained “an autocracy, a police state in which the absolute authority of the tsar was limited only by bureaucratic inefficiency and the impossibility of reaching into every corner of his vast empire. Russian nobles dominated the backward peasant masses, and unlike Britain and France, Russia had only a tiny middle class, sparse industrialization, and no representative political system.” (John Merriman; A History of Modern Europe; p.787f.)

This is an aspect of the unresolved fundamental conflict in Russian society between Westernizers and Slavophiles that has raged from Peter the Great to the present day. It is also a reflection of how important abstract ideas tend to be in Russian culture, as exemplified by the significance accorded to the self-conscious class called the Intelligentsia – defined by Fowler’s Modern English Usage as “the class of intellectuals regarded as possessing culture and political initiative.” By way of illustration, while both Dickens and Hugo exposed the cruel inequities of their societies, they were really Victorian Enlightenment progressives identifying a problem to be solved. Dostoyevsky was a radical who, like Pascal in the seventeenth century, was a mighty fortress opposed to the program of Liberal rational progress itself, and to the view of human nature it entails. Both Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy were more interested in ideas and spirituality than in programs of reform. Dostoyevsky described Raskolnikov, the hero of Crime and Punishment, as “having come under the influence of some of those strange, ‘incomplete’ ideas which go floating about in the air.” (Crime and Punishment; “Publisher’s Preface” ; The Easton Press). In War and Peace; Tolstoy ends his masterpiece with a very long

discourse on the nature of history. That both these writers would think in such terms illustrates the special place of intellectuality in Russian society. By contrast, British culture was dominated by the practical hard-headedness of Utilitarian reformers like Bentham and Mill, and by the Victorian faith in material progress through technological advance and the new science of statistics.

4. The American Civil War

In a cheerful State of the Union address at the end of 1848, President James K. Polk contrasted the prosperous and triumphant state of the American Union with the disorder and devastation of Europe in that year of revolutionary violence. “Peace, plenty and contentment reign throughout our borders, and our beloved country presents a sublime moral spectacle to the world... While enlightened nations of Europe are convulsed and distracted by civil war or intestine strife, we settle our political controversies by the peaceful exercise of the rights of freemen at the ballot box.” (quoted in Whitney and Whitney; *The American Presidents*; p.98.) Since Polk died the following year, he never shared our knowledge that his “beloved country,” just a little more than a decade later, would be torn asunder in a civil war that would pre-figure the slaughter of the wars of the twentieth century. We must now examine the melancholy story of that terrible conflict – its onset, course and consequences.

The English Origins

The ultimate origin of the American Civil War lies in the English Civil War more than two centuries earlier, between the so-called ‘Cavaliers’ and ‘Roundheads,’ transported across the ocean in their settlement of the new world. Both North and South were, in part, settled by persecuted religionists – but these were not of the same religion. The English Civil War of the seventeenth century was a conflict in which the Aristocratic, High Church Anglicans were fiercely opposed by bourgeois Puritans. When Charles I and Archbishop Laud imposed High Church Anglicanism on England, their Puritan opponents fled to New England. As the English Puritans gained the ascendancy, the Anglican Cavaliers fled to America settling not in Puritan New England, but in Virginia. The point is that the settlers of Virginia and New England remained in their hearts aristocrat and bourgeois respectively and this difference of mindset and values, creating a tension that pervaded all of the conflicts of early nineteenth century American history.

The New Englander believed in the inherent dignity of work and industry – an inclination that the Southern gentleman disdained as vulgar and dishonorable. The former tended to be commercial, urban

and meritocratic; the latter rural, agricultural and entitled by birth. The former favored a strong central government because it was efficient; the latter feared such a government viewing it as despotic; i.e., a threat to the hereditary privileges of the aristocratic elite. This contrast underlay all of the conflicts over the ratification of the Constitution and its interpretation – a conflict between two diametrically opposed views of life that, both in America as in England, could not be contained by politics, but would be resolved by force of arms. In America as in England, the forces of commercial modernity would prevail.

The Road to War

On one occasion, Professor Henry Graff of Columbia University began a lecture on the Civil War with the observation that if the war had not occurred, he would be arguing that it could not have happened. However, since it did take place, he was now going to tell us why it was inevitable. But it really was neither necessary nor inevitable – and therein lies a tragic tale of terrible suffering and immense devastation.

In 1793, the talking heads in America were pre-occupied with the execution of Louis XVI and his French queen while paying little heed to a contemporary event of far greater significance: the invention of the cotton gin by Eli Whitney. Prior to that, the cotton yield was modest and the founding fathers were looking toward the gradual withering of slavery across the land. Once this new invention allowed for the efficient separation of the cotton fiber from the cotton seed, cotton production exploded until it became the leading export product of the country – and America became the leading supplier of cotton to England and France. In 1800, there were less than a million slaves in the country; by 1850, that number had more than tripled – and constituted the very foundation of Southern society and its prosperity. It is reasonable to suggest that without the cotton gin, there might have been no Civil War.

While some in the North favored outright abolition of slavery, there was never very widespread support for this position. However, there was a growing sensibility in the North and West that, while there should be no interference with the South's "peculiar institution" where it existed, it should not be allowed to expand. The expectation was that if expansion was prevented, the institution of slavery would wither away over time. Indeed, this would be the position of Lincoln and the Republican Party. It was not some sort of romantic fantasy like the Marxist idea of the withering away of the state in communist society. It was based on the agricultural reality that cotton and tobacco farming tended to rapidly deplete the nutrients of the soil necessitating a move to new soil. If one refuses to allow the acquisition of new soil, the old soil would no longer be able to support an export crop – which was the

economic foundation of the institution of slavery in the South – and the entire Southern way of life.

A national crisis was precipitated when Missouri sought admission to the Union and a Northern congressman attempted to require gradual emancipation as a condition of statehood. Then, in 1820, Henry Clay led the effort to arrange a compromise. “Missouri was admitted as a slave state, but at the same time Maine was cut loose from Massachusetts and came in as a free state; and Congress decreed that slavery should be forever excluded from the territory acquired by the Louisiana Purchase north of the...southern boundary of Missouri.” (Nevins and Commager; *A Pocket History of the United States*; p.161f.) The immediate crisis was assuaged; but over the next decade, as abolitionist movements spread in the North and slave culture became ever more entrenched in the South, the conflict intensified.

By 1850, with the nation again on the brink of war over the status of the vast territory acquired from Mexico by conquest and purchase, Senator Henry Clay, on behalf of another compromise, delivered an emotional appeal so effective that, his “eloquence brought tears to the eyes of both men and women. The walls of the chamber shook with cheers, applause and the stamping of feet... To many present in the room, it seemed as though the omnibus bill would be enacted without further delay...<However, less than two weeks later the compromise went down to defeat .> The shattered Clay slumped in his seat... Then he slowly rose and walked out of the chamber...devastated...It now seemed hopeless. <as the nation seemed to face the prospect of secession and Civil War.>” (Robert V. Remini; *At the Edge of the Precipice*; p 138ff.)

This outcome was avoided by the political astuteness of Stephen A. Douglas who took apart Clay’s omnibus bill and managed to forge coalitions to pass each of its components as individual bills. The Union temporarily stepped back from the edge of the precipice. California was admitted as a free state, slavery was preserved in the District of Columbia, a tough new fugitive slave law was enacted and New Mexico was allowed to decide if they wanted slavery under the doctrine of “popular sovereignty” – Texas having already been admitted as a slave state in 1845. Steven Douglas deserves the credit for shepherding this Compromise of 1850 through the Senate and his is the name most closely associated with the doctrine of popular sovereignty – allowing the inhabitants of a given territory to determine if the territory would be admitted as a slave state or a free one. We encounter this doctrine again in the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and in the crucial election of 1860. The necessity for the inclusion of a fugitive slave law was particularly upsetting to Northerners. It inspired Harriet Beecher Stowe to write *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. When Northerners refused to comply, the

Southerners felt aggrieved; when they complied and had to watch helplessly as a runaway slave was captured and returned to bondage, they felt humiliated.

Even more provocative was the enactment of the Kansas-Nebraska Act four years later. This arose out of plans for the building of a trans-continental railroad – and the desire of Steven Douglas that Chicago in his home state become the Eastern terminus of the line to San Francisco. However, for such a route to be possible, the Great Northern Plains would have to be settled. To accomplish this, Douglas proposed that Kansas and Nebraska be organized into territories, and ultimately admitted into the union under the doctrine of “popular sovereignty.” To win Southern support, Douglas agreed to an explicit repeal of the Missouri Compromise thus directly challenging the Northern refusal to countenance the expansion of slavery. The response was the creation of the Republican Party whose core foundation was the rejection of the doctrine of “popular sovereignty.”

A year later, the Supreme Court decided to clarify the issue of slavery by a spectacular exercise of judicial activism. In 1803, the Court had usurped the right to strike down a law of Congress in the famous case of *Marbury v. Madison*. We have tended to take judicial review for granted as a necessary and natural part of our governmental structure forgetting that after 1803, the power was not invoked again for over fifty years. Indeed, the next time a Congressional mandate was overridden was in an 1857 decision that is widely regarded as the worst decision in the history of the Court – in the case of *Dred Scott v. Sanford*. Scott, who had been taken to a free state by his master, contended that this act automatically liberated him. The Court could have ruled on any number of narrow grounds, but elected to rule that the Missouri Compromise (which had already been repealed by the Kansas-Nebraska Act) had always been unconstitutional and that Congress had no power to restrict slavery in any territory. This, of course, only further inflamed an issue that was being violently contested in Kansas.

Three years earlier, Kansas and Nebraska had opened for settlement – and Kansas became the laboratory in which the doctrine of “popular sovereignty” would be tested. Settlers from North and South attempted to determine its status. There is no doubt that a majority of the population favored free statehood. However, in an atmosphere of violence that presaged and, in part, provoked the Civil war, a rump convention drafted a pro-slavery constitution as the basis for an application for statehood. Steven Douglas insisted on abiding by the results of a free and fair election on the issue and defeated the slave state application while President Buchanan sided with the slave

interest. This shattered the unity of the Democratic Party and ensured the electoral victory of the sectional anti-slavery Republican Party in 1860. If Buchanan had simply supported an honest election in Kansas under the doctrine of “popular sovereignty,” there would have been no Democratic Party split, no Republican Victory – and no Civil War. As it was, upon the Republican victory, South Carolina immediately seceded.

Given that the South had long been warning that a Republican victory would lead to secession, this outcome is not altogether surprising. But was it unavoidable or was it an over-reaction? What threat did the South really face from a national government headed by a Republican President who was opposed by a pro-slavery Court and a divided Congress? I don’t see how Lincoln could possibly have passed his program. Rather, I suspect that, left to his own devices, he would have been an ineffectual one-term President and that the new Republican Party would have suffered the fate of most new parties. It has been said that these are rather like bees in that they sting once and then die. In two to four years, the Democrats might have re-organized as a nationalist party of moderates – possibly around a genuine commitment to the “popular sovereignty” doctrine of Steven Douglas – and Abraham Lincoln would have become an historical footnote.

But what choices did this president have? The Confederate States of American were formed in Montgomery, Alabama on February 1, 1861 – following Lincoln’s election but prior to his inauguration. Could he have preserved the Union? Could a Civil War have been avoided? He could save the Union or avoid a Civil War – but it had to be one or the other. He could not do both at the same time.

The devastation of the Civil War was objectively avoidable. Lincoln’s refusal to allow the South to secede was not the only or indeed the most rational choice. If Lincoln had simply let them go, he could then have prevented the expansion of the confederacy by a defensive military alliance with Mexico and a fortification of the western territories – thus actually fulfilling the Republican pledge to prevent the extension of slavery. If the Confederacy refused to accept containment, he could then have blockaded Southern ports, and instigated slave uprisings – simultaneously offering generous terms to states who had second thoughts and wanted to re-join the Union. The important point is that it would then be the South that would have been forced into a counter-insurgency. Lincoln would not have needed to conquer the South, but only to prevent it from a stable possession of any territory into which it attempted to expand.

So much for rationality. To borrow a conception from William James, mere containment was not a “live option” for Lincoln because he had

imbibed the intoxication of nationalism with its long emotional and rhetorical history throughout the century – a history that includes Webster’s reply to Hayne (“Liberty and Union, now and forever, one and inseparable.”) and Jackson’s Jefferson Day Dinner toast directed at Calhoun (“The Federal Union; it must be preserved.”). His fervent embrace of the sentiment of American nationalism made it unthinkable to the new President that the South would be allowed to secede without war, though it was a very real possibility for many at the time. The moment of truth came when Lincoln had to decide whether to defend Fort Sumter in South Carolina at a time when other southern forts had already been turned over to the Confederacy. Lincoln was urged by virtually his entire cabinet to surrender the fort and accept secession. He was urged to compromise on the extension of slavery. He refused to budge and only concerned himself with manipulating Jefferson Davis into firing the first shot, so that the onus of “firing on the flag” and beginning hostilities would lie with the Confederacy, thereby strengthening his war message to Congress.

The Course of the War

I once worked in a residential treatment center for very disturbed and vulnerable adolescents. One day, I became alarmed to learn that the boys were experiencing a widespread enthusiasm for boxing as a recreational activity. Given the level of pathology from which the youngsters suffered, I was very upset by the potential for emotional traumatization until a colleague told me to calm down: “This enthusiasm won’t last more than a week; they haven’t yet figured out that the other kid is going to hit them back.” Well, I have often thought of that story when reading about the onset and course of so many wars. They tend to begin with the expectation on both sides that the conflict will be brief, easy, cheap – and, of course, successful. Then when the conflict becomes a quagmire, one is told that one can’t just end it because one cannot allow one’s brave soldiers to have died in vain. For that reason, many more brave soldiers must die in vain until one or both sides are devastated. Such was the course of the American Civil War from Sumter to Appomattox.

Lincoln had originally planned for a six month conflict, and the South was equally confident of easy victory. Indeed, in one of the early battles, Washingtonians organized a picnic meal to be consumed as they enjoyed the spectacle of the victorious Northern triumph. In the event, the picnickers had to scramble to avoid being trampled by their retreating forces. Another anecdote is less droll. It seems that on one occasion a company of Irish Northern troops were opposed by a Southern company of their countrymen. At the time, the stirring song

[“Dear Old Ireland”](#) (Link D)² was very popular with the Irish soldiers. The evening before the battle, no doubt with some of the drink taken, the Northern soldiers broke into song. Their Confederate kinsman, recognizing the tune took up the chorus: “Ireland boys hooray, Oh Ireland boys hooray – We'll toast old Ireland, Dear old Ireland, Ireland boys hooray.” After a night of singing together, the quiet of sleep descended upon the battlefield. The next morning, the two groups of kinsmen woke up – and slaughtered one another.

The initial battles of the war were the Southern victory at Bull Run in Virginia, followed by defeats in Western Tennessee, Shiloh and New Orleans. Robert E. Lee successfully defended Richmond whereupon General McClellan successfully defended Washington, D.C. at Antietam – a victory over Lee’s forces that precipitated the Emancipation Proclamation. The Confederates prevailed in Virginia at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, Lee invaded the North and met defeat at Gettysburg. Grant in the Vicksburg campaign then acquired control of the of the Mississippi River, and, in a costly war of attrition in the Wilderness Campaign, began to surround Lee in a process that would end at Appomattox. Meanwhile General William T. (“War is Hell.”) Sherman captured Atlanta, waged a devastating scorched earth campaign in Georgia, and captured Savannah. Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox Court House in Richmond on April 9, 1865. There is one final casualty to be noted. President Lincoln was murdered five days later.

The Civil War was responsible for more casualties than all of America’s other wars combined – including all of the American casualties of the two world wars of the twentieth century. In all, 600,000 lives were lost out of a population of around 23 million. In terms of today’s population figures, that would represent a death toll of around 8 million. It was not fought against the institution of slavery (as opposed to its extension). Lincoln was sincere when he said that he was fighting not to free the slaves, but to preserve the Union. The monumental slaughter was in the service of an emotionally charged idea that, “The federal union must be preserved,” in the words of Andrew Jackson. All those lives were lost or destroyed because Lincoln refused to just let the South go in peace. The idea of Nationalism was triumphant in America as in Europe – at an even greater human sacrifice. I am aware that I have skipped over the military history over which Civil War enthusiasts dwell with such loving attention. I see little lost by just summing up the war by observing that many were slaughtered; in the end, the North prevailed; and the South was in ruins. Well, as Scarlett O’Hara said: “Tomorrow is another day!” So let’s see what tomorrow would bring.

2 And see <http://www.martindardis.com/id378.html> for the lyrics.

The Failure of Reconstruction

When Lee surrendered at Appomattox Court House, it could be said that the South had finally given up the struggle to be an independent plutocracy. Well, they may have given up, but they never gave in. Indeed for the South, as opposed to most of the North, the conflict was never really about secession and states rights which were only means to perpetuate slavery – itself a vehicle for a white supremacy that very few Northerners really opposed. Appomattox ended the period of formal military conflict and initiated the ineffectual attempt to defeat an insurgency of white Southerners that we know as Reconstruction. Having lost the war, the South would employ continued violence to defeat this federal occupation.

Actually, Reconstruction began with the Emancipation Proclamation, a war measure that didn't free a single slave, but was designed to define the Southern cause as a defense of slavery in order to make it difficult for cotton-hungry Britain, the commercial and military super-power of the age, to give the South material support. The actual liberation of slaves occurred when victorious Union armies freed them and recruited them for military service. Indeed, in 1865, General Sherman issued Field Order #15 which gave some freedmen forty acres and a mule so that they could function as independent farmers. The land thus awarded had been abandoned by Southern whites in the stress of war, and its transfer to former slaves would soon be challenged.

After the South's military defeat, the victorious Northerners had to decide how to bring its former enemies back into the political fold in a re-constituted national union. Most Northerners had fought the war not as abolitionists, but to preserve the union – and perhaps to prevent the expansion of slavery. They tended to side with Lincoln who insisted only that the South renounce slavery and secession and had little inclination to interfere with whatever form white supremacy would subsequently take in the South. They certainly had no great interest in extending the suffrage to the freedman, as very few free Negroes could vote in the North. However, a radical minority of the Republican Party, comprised of former abolitionists, envisioned a reconstruction of Southern society supplanting white supremacy by full civic equality for the freedman – a social revolution to be imposed by military occupation of the South. This revolutionary program had little stable political support in the North, and would be opposed by a determined Southern insurgency of endemic violence. It could not succeed in the end. That this program could succeed even briefly can be attributed to the astounding political ineptness of President Johnson and his Southern allies. Sometimes, assassinations do make a difference, at least in the short run.

The civil war that ended in 1865 resulted in a nation divided between a prosperous North whose booming economy now made it one of the leading commercial powers in the world and a South in ruins and wracked by chronic racial violence. Within a year, President Johnson restored the plantations to their former owners. The Thirteenth Amendment is conventionally seen as outlawing slavery. However, what the text actually says is that: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” In other words, you can’t enslave a man unless you first convict him of a crime. Well, for the good white folks of the South that was no problem at all. Thus began a systematic exploitation of the criminal justice system in the service of white supremacy that continues to the present day. The white Southerners enacted a series of racial laws that enshrined white supremacy, re-established the plantation system through labor contracts and the punitive use of vagrancy laws all backed by whippings and lynching of “uppity niggers.” In fact, their brutal treatment of the freedman, combined with President Johnson’s political ineptness, in 1866 produced a congressional victory for the Radical Republicans that actually gave them a veto-proof majority which they used to pass the Fourteenth Amendment granting full civil equality to the former slaves and imposing military rule on the South. In 1868, General Grant was elected president with the campaign slogan that is engraved on his tomb in New York City: “Let us have peace.” He gave moderate support to Congressional reconstruction – and, in fact, used federal troops to try to crush the Ku Klux Klan. By the time that Grant was re-elected in 1872, Northern support for the prolonged struggle to ensure the civil equality of the freedman was rapidly wilting as the corruption of the Reconstruction governments (mirroring that of the corrupt Northern city political machines) engendered a sentiment that the South should be allowed local self-government – and that politics should no longer be dominated by race, but by economic development – particularly by expansion of the railroads. When over-enthusiastic railway investment resulted in the bursting of the ensuing bubble and the Panic of 1873, Northern support for reconstruction was abandoned. In 1875, the Democrats, always solicitous of Southern interests in the cause of political compromise and national unity, won a majority in the House of Representatives. When President Grant sent troops to dislodge a white racist cabal in the Louisiana legislature, Northerners saw this as an abuse of federal power – -and moderate Republicans began to view Reconstruction as bad politics.

The presidential election of 1876 between Hayes and Tilden was a disputed election nominally decided by an electoral committee – but actually resolved by a deal between the parties. The Democrats, who

arguably really won the election, allowed the Republican Rutherford B. Hayes to become President. In return, President Hayes ended Reconstruction; the federal troops left the South – and the freedman was left to the tender mercies of his white neighbors.

Historians usually attempt to use the past to explain the present. Indeed, a radical version of this viewpoint even asserts that all good history is contemporary history. Truth be told, this series of papers is, in part, just such an exercise. However, that view introduces an important systemic bias into the historical narrative – one that is generally overlooked. In attempting to use the past to explain the present, historians tend to focus on the causes and outcomes of events. In this exercise of evaluating positive and negative results, they often give short shrift to the human costs incurred by those who actually lived through them. I have often been struck by the difficulty of discovering the casualty tolls for a military conflict whose causes, tactics and outcomes are analyzed in loving detail. By contrast, I am more interested in the price paid by those contemporaries who were called upon to give their “last full measure of devotion.” Having a battlefield dedicated to their memory would seem cold comfort!

Links

- A. [The Crystal Palace](#)
- B. [You Tube: Va Pensiero Sull'Ali Dorate - Nabucco Met Opera](#)
- C. [Wikipedia Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres](#)
- D. [You Tube: Ireland boys hurrah](#)