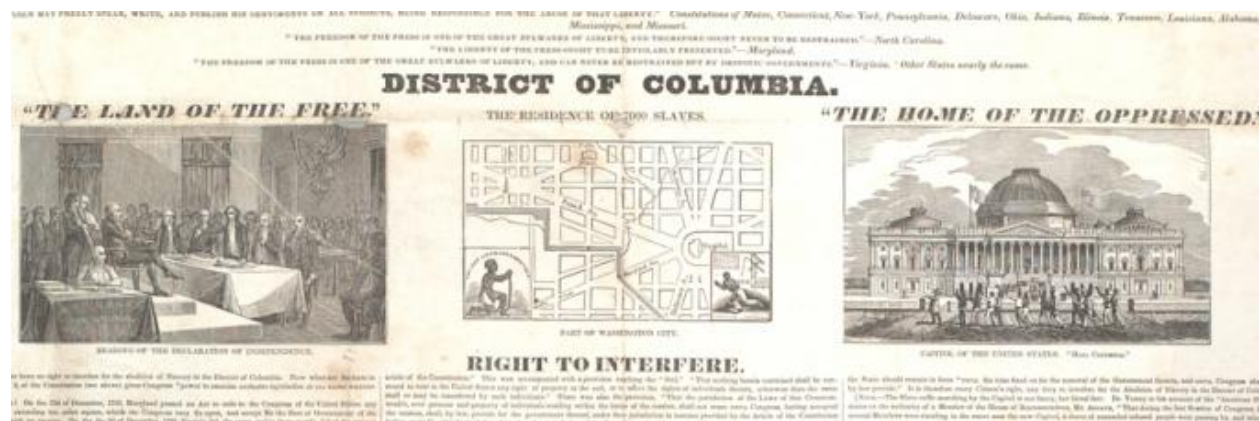


Slavery and Anti-Slavery

by David Brion Davis



A detail from a broadside urging the abolition of slavery in Washington, DC, published by the American Anti-Slavery Society, 1836. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

Abolitionism emerged in America as part of a massive fusion of reform movements related to religious revivals and dedicated to the goal of creating a righteous society capable of fulfilling America's high ideals.^[1] In part, the religious revivals and emergence of a reform-oriented "Benevolent Empire" was a response to drastic economic and social changes related to what historians term "the market revolution" and "the transportation revolution." In the generation following the War of 1812, improved roads and especially canals opened up markets and profits that were beyond the previous dreams of many enterprising farmers, skilled artisans, and manufacturers. But the rapid economic growth and urbanization devastated many other Americans who could no longer hold their own against more efficient and productive competitors. In the eyes of many religious leaders, faced with geographic mobility and the breakup of traditional communities, it appeared that the United States had become increasingly dominated by materialism and greed. But while this new "Great Awakening" was partly a reaction to unsettling economic and social change, the revivalists and reformers were also addressing fundamental questions about the meaning of human life, justice, and the ability to rise above sin.

To the young abolitionists who began to appear in the early 1830s, black slavery was *the* great national sin, in much the way that the famous and highly influential preacher Lyman Beecher had perceived the sinfulness of dueling and then the drinking of alcohol. The fusion of American religious revivalism with the influence of the contemporary British anti-slavery movement was symbolized by Theodore Dwight Weld, the passionate son of a Connecticut minister. Weld was a religious convert and close associate of the renowned evangelist Charles Grandison Finney in upstate New York. Weld's closest friend and religious model was Charles Stuart, a visiting British reformer who worked with Finney's disciples in New York State's so-called Burned-Over District and then in 1829 returned to England to throw himself into the crusade for slave emancipation in the British colonies, which succeeded in 1833. After being urged by Stuart to take up the cause in America, Weld shifted from temperance, educational, and physical labor reforms to abolitionism, becoming one of the most fearless and powerful lecturers in the region from Ohio to Vermont. Early in 1833 he declined a request by William Lloyd Garrison to join the board of managers of the New England Anti-Slavery Society but then went on to eloquently illuminate the meaning of slavery as sin:

That no condition of birth, no shade of color, no mere misfortune of circumstances, can annul the birth-right charter, which God has bequeathed to every being upon whom he has stamped his own image, by making him a free moral agent, and that he who robs his fellow man of this tramples upon right, subverts justice, outrages humanity . . . and sacrilegiously assumes the prerogatives of God; and further, though he who retains by force, and refuses to surrender that which was originally obtained by violence or fraud, is joint partner [sic] in the original sin, becomes its apologist and makes it the business of every moment to perpetuate it afresh, however he may lull his conscience by the vain plea of expediency or necessity.^[2]

Weld's statement undercut southerners' excuses that they had simply inherited an institution that had been forced upon their ancestors. It also conveys three convictions that were fundamental for abolitionists: (1) that all men and women have the ability to do what is right and therefore are morally accountable for their actions; (2) that the intolerable evils of society are those that degrade the image of God in man, stunting or corrupting the individual's capacities for dignity, self-control, and self-respect; (3) that the goal of all reform is to free individuals from being manipulated like physical objects, or, as one Garrisonian put it, that the goal of abolitionism was "the redemption of man from the dominion of man." Since American slaveholders had long taken advantage of the moral privilege of dissociating themselves from the African slave trade (because of the great natural increase of the American slave population, in contrast to the sharp decline in Brazil and the Caribbean), Weld skillfully linked the violent holding of a slave with the original violence of enslavement in Africa.

The fact that abolitionists were almost wholly concerned with ideals was both their greatest strength and their greatest weakness. America was supposedly a nation of doers, of practical builders, framers, drafters, organizers, and technicians. The overriding question, in abolitionist eyes, was whether the nation would continue to accommodate itself to a social system that was based in sheer violence. To propose rational plans or to get embroiled in debates over the precise means and timing of emancipation would only give slavery's defenders an advantage. What the times required, it seemed, was "an original motive power" that would shock and awaken public opinion, create a new moral perspective, and then require legislators to work out the details, however imperfectly, of practical emancipation. This was essentially what happened in England from 1830 to 1833. But in America the government not only lacked an all-powerful parliament but also was largely dominated by slaveholding southerners.

On one level the abolitionists realistically saw that the nation had reached a dead end on slavery. Instead of gradually withering away, as earlier optimists had hoped and as slavery did in the North from 1777 to 1848, the evil had grown and then won increasing acceptance among the nation's political leaders and most powerful institutions, such as the Supreme Court. Therefore, the abolitionists took on the unpopular role of agitators, of courageous critics who stood outside the popular refuges of delusion, hypocrisy, and rationalization. In 1830 Garrison went to jail for writing libelous attacks against a New England merchant who was shipping slaves from Baltimore to New Orleans. After his fine was paid and his release secured by Arthur Tappan, the wealthy supporter of reform groups, Garrison in 1831 founded his newspaper *The Liberator* in Boston. In the first issue he hurled out his famous pledge: "I *will be* as harsh as truth, and as uncompromising as justice. . . . I am in earnest—I will not equivocate—I will not excuse—I will not retreat a single inch—AND I WILL BE HEARD."

Although *The Liberator* had an extremely small circulation and derived most of its support from free African American subscribers in the Northeast (as we will see, free blacks pioneered the new radical anti-slavery movement), Garrison succeeded in being heard. In the South especially, newspaper editors seized the chance to reprint specimens of New England's radicalism, accompanied by their own furious rebuttals. Even before the end of 1831, mere months after *The Liberator* first appeared, the Georgia legislature proposed a reward of \$5,000 for anyone who would kidnap Garrison and bring him south for trial. In 1835 Garrison was almost lynched by a Boston mob.

Soon after the founding of the prestigious American Colonization Society (ACS) in 1816, free African Americans in the North took the lead in denouncing this movement to "colonize" free blacks in Africa while also calling for the urgent emancipation of slaves. The idea of resettling African Americans in Africa, which led

to the creation of Liberia in 1820, had a long history and for some time appealed to many African Americans as well as to eminent national leaders and most white opponents of slavery. Until the early 1830s most white abolitionists assumed that the profound and ubiquitous white racial prejudice, which greatly increased with the gradual freeing of slaves throughout the North, would always prevent the two races from living together as even approximate equals. There would thus be no chance of slave emancipation in the South unless initial steps were made to provide a more hopeful refuge for the freed slaves and their descendants. Such ideas appealed even to major black leaders like the Reverend Richard Allen and the wealthy sailmaker James Forten, until a meeting of some three thousand African Americans in Philadelphia in 1817 revealed that the vast majority saw colonization as a racist scheme to strengthen slavery by removing all symbols of black freedom. Forten and other leaders then kept opposition to the ACS alive through the 1820s, a time when black consent and support was essential for the success of the colonization movement. Educated African Americans also transformed American abolitionism with the first black newspapers and other publications, and then helped Garrison emerge in the early 1830s as the central if highly controversial figure in American abolitionism. Forten was partly responsible for Garrison's blistering attack on colonization in 1832 (which he had earlier supported), helped recruit black subscribers to the *Liberator*, and also played a major part in persuading the wealthy Arthur Tappan to sever his ties with the ACS.

Like the wealthy British supporters of humanitarian causes, including anti-slavery, Arthur Tappan and his brother Lewis moved from various benevolent causes to that of "immediate emancipation." That phrase has long evoked considerable confusion and controversy. To the general public in the 1830s it simply meant the abolition of slavery without delay or preparation. But the word "immediate" may denote something other than closeness in time. To many reformers the phrase mainly implied a direct, intuitive consciousness of the sinfulness of slavery, and a sincere, "immediate" commitment to work for its abolition. In this subjective sense the word "immediate" was charged with religious overtones and referred more to the moral disposition of the reformer than to a particular plan for emancipation. Thus some reformers confused immediate abolition with an immediate personal decision to abstain from consuming slave-grown produce. A person might be considered an immediatist if he or she were genuinely convinced that slavery should be abolished absolutely and without compromise, though not necessarily without some preparation. Such a range of meanings led unavoidably to misunderstanding. The doctrine of immediatism, in the form it took in both Britain and America in the 1830s, was at once a logical culmination of the anti-slavery movement and a token of a major shift in intellectual history, as abolitionists reacted against continuing slaveholder recalcitrance as well as a generation of unsuccessful "gradualism."

By 1833 humanitarians in Britain had won the support of the established order as well as of middle-class public opinion. But in America even the prestigious Tappans were viciously attacked for encouraging Garrison, Weld, and other radicals and for betraying the common interests that had allowed leaders in the North and South to do business with one another. Mass rallies in the South pledged as much as \$50,000 for the delivery of Arthur Tappan's body, dead or alive. In New York City, business leaders pleaded in vain with the Tappan brothers, whose lives were repeatedly threatened by 1834, to give up their radical activities. In that year prominent New Yorkers cheered on a mob of butcherboys and day laborers who smashed up Lewis Tappan's house and burned the furnishings. Only the unexpected arrival of troops prevented an armed assault on the Tappans' store.

Despite such increasing violent opposition, the American abolitionist movement grew with amazing rapidity in the mid-1830s. By 1838, less than five years after the founding of the national American Anti-Slavery Society, and following a financial panic and deep recession beginning in 1837, there were some 1,346 local anti-slavery associations with about 100,000 members. (In 1840 the population of the northern states was around 9.7 million). Compared with the far more successful British movement, which could support only six paid anti-slavery agents, Theodore Dwight Weld's vigorous band now included seventy paid agents. In 1834 the American Anti-Slavery Society distributed 122,000 pieces of literature; the next year, thanks to innovations in printing, that figure soared to 1.1 million, and it was 3 million by 1840, far exceeding anything done in the British campaign. And even more than in Britain, women played an absolutely central role in distributing anti-slavery literature and petitions; Garrison estimated that women out-petitioned men by "three to one." While such female participation helped launch the movement for women's rights, the gender issue also contributed in a major way to the 1840 division of American abolitionism into two separate organizations.

From the outset black abolitionists had worked closely with anti-slavery societies in New England and New York. Beginning with Frederick Douglass's celebrated escape from slavery in 1838 and his enlistment as a lecturer for Garrison's Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in 1841, fugitive slaves performed the indispensable task of translating the abolitionists' abstract images into concrete human experience. The lectures and printed narratives of Douglass, William Wells Brown, Ellen Craft, Henry Bibb, Solomon Northup, and other escaped slaves did much to undermine whatever belief there was in the North that slaves were kindly treated and contented with their lot. The wit and articulated militancy of black abolitionists like Henry Highland Garnet, James McCune Smith, Sarah Parker Remond, and Charles Lenox Remond, coupled with the towering dignity of Douglass, also helped to shake confidence in the popular stereotypes of black inferiority.

Yet black abolitionists faced barriers and physical dangers that made the difficulties of white abolitionists seem like child's play. When Douglass and Garrison traveled together on lecture tours, it was Douglass who experienced constant insult, humiliation, and harassment. Black vigilance committees could help a small number of fugitives find their way to relative security in Canada—and African Americans were the main conductors on the so-called Underground Railroad—but except in Massachusetts, black abolitionists had little leverage for loosening the rocklike discriminatory laws that deprived their people of basic rights. Instead, white abolitionists kept pressuring African Americans to keep a low profile, to act the part assigned to them by white directors (who presumably knew the tastes of an all-white audience), and to do nothing that might spoil the show.

In the 1840s black leaders gradually cast off the yoke that had bound them to a white man's cause and tried to assert their own leadership. In 1843, at the Convention of Free People of Color held at Buffalo, New York, Garnet openly called for a slave rebellion, arguing that it was a sin to submit voluntarily to human bondage. Douglass adhered to his own version of Garrisonian nonresistance until 1847, when he broke with Garrison over the idea of founding another black abolitionist newspaper, the *North Star*. In the same year Garrison sadly reported that Charles Lenox Remond, who had toured Britain as an extremely popular lecturer, had proclaimed that "the slaves were bound, by their love of justice, to RISE AT ONCE, en masse, and THROW OFF THEIR FETTERS."

But speeches were one thing, action another. Most black abolitionists had always looked to voting—a right few African Americans possessed—as the most promising route to power. The Garrisonians, who had adopted the ideal of absolute nonresistance, refused to vote or engage in any political activities. Most African Americans therefore supported the non-Garrisonian whites who founded in 1840 a third political party, the anti-slavery Liberty Party, which ran James G. Birney for president and which popularized the idea of a Slave Power—an alleged conspiratorial alliance of southern slaveholders and their northern supporters. But after 1844 anti-slavery politics drifted away from promoting black civil rights in the North and immediate emancipation in the South. Indeed, abolitionism in general became more acceptable in the North by accommodating itself to white racism. Many of the dissident northern Democrats who helped form the Free Soil party in 1848 had consistently opposed black suffrage and had exploited the prejudice against African Americans. The Free Soil platform, unlike the platform of the Liberty Party, ignored the legal discriminations that free blacks suffered and implied that free blacks would be no more welcome than slaves in the western territories. But the overreaching goal of political abolitionism would now be the prevention of any westward expansion of slavery.

It is not surprising that by 1854 Martin Delaney and a few other black leaders were talking of a separate black nation, or that African Americans who had proudly defended their American heritage and right to American citizenship were beginning to reconsider voluntary colonization.

By 1854, however, many northern whites had also concluded that the Slave Power had seized control of America's manifest destiny, thereby appropriating and nullifying the entire evangelical and millennial mission of creating a model New World. Moreover, the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, requiring federal agents to recover fugitive slaves from their sanctuaries in the North, directly challenged the North's integrity and its new self-image as an asylum of liberty. The arrival of federal "kidnappers" and the spectacle of African Americans being seized in the streets invited demonstrations of defiance and civil disobedience. Increasing numbers of former moderates echoed Garrison's rhetoric of disunion, and an increasing number of former nonresistants called for a slave uprising or predicted that the streets of Boston might "yet run with blood." Wendell Phillips, a Boston aristocrat and the most powerful of all abolitionist orators, rejoiced "that every five minutes gave birth to a black baby," for in its infant wail he recognized the voice that should "yet shout the war cry of insurrection; its baby hand would one day hold the dagger which should reach the master's heart."^[3]

In the 1850s many northern abolitionists finally concluded that if southern slaveholders were not overthrown by insurrection or expelled from the Union, the Slave Power would cross every legal and constitutional barrier and destroy the physical ability of northerners to act in accordance with the moral ability that had been the main legacy of the religious revivals. The western territories were thus the crucial testing ground that would determine whether America would stand for something more than selfish interest, exploitation, and rule by brutal power. All of the aspirations of the Benevolent Empire, of evangelical reformers, and of perfectionists of every kind could be channeled into a single and vast crusade to keep the territories free, to confine and seal off the southern Slave Power, and thus to open the way for an expansion of righteous liberty and opportunity that would surpass all worldly limits.

^[1] I have revised and updated much but by no means all of this material from my treatment of pre-Civil War America in a two-volume textbook of American history authored by six leading historians: From Bernard Bailyn, et al., *Great Republic, 1 3E* © 1985 Wadsworth, a part of Cengage Learning, Inc. Reproduced by permission.

[2] Theodore Weld to William Lloyd Garrison, January 2, 1833, *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimke Weld, and Sarah Grimke, 1822–1844*, ed. Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond (1934; Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1965), 1:97–98.

[3] Speech of Wendell Phillips, *Liberator*, November 4, 1859.

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