We may congratulate ourselves with living under the blessings of a mild and equal government, which knows no distinctions but those of merits or talents—under a government whose honors and offices are equally open to the exertions of all her citizens, and which adopts virtue and worth for her own, wheresoever she can find them.

—Charles Pinckney, May 14, 1788, at the South Carolina Ratifying Convention

The room fell silent as the president of the Constitutional Convention called the delegates to order. A new article was read. Almost immediately, a familiar voice filled the hall. Charles Pinckney was, once again, sharing his opinion. He had a view on everything, as the delegates knew well. Many at the Convention distrusted Pinckney, thinking he was too young, too proud, and too ambitious. No one, however, would deny his contributions to the Constitution or to the continuing debate about slavery.

Background
Charles Pinckney was born on October 26, 1757, near Charles Town (now Charleston), South Carolina. His father was a well-known lawyer and slaveholding planter whose wealth made it possible for young Pinckney to study languages and the law from local tutors. Pinckney had hoped to continue his studies in England, as his cousins Thomas and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney had, but the American Revolution changed his plans.

Forced to remain in South Carolina, Pinckney studied in his father’s office and was admitted to the bar in 1779. Election to the South Carolina Assembly quickly followed. At the same time, he joined the militia and fought in losing battles against the British in Savannah and Charleston. When his city surrendered, he became a prisoner of war but was released in the summer of 1781, a few months prior to the great American victory at Yorktown.

Representative Pinckney
By 1784, Pinckney was back in Philadelphia. For the next two years, he sat as a representative of South Carolina in the new Confederation Congress. He soon became convinced that the Articles of Confederation were flawed. He saw firsthand their weaknesses and concluded that the growing nation needed a strong central government. Without one, he believed that established foreign powers would not give financial or political credit to the new country.

In May 1786, Pinckney suggested revising the Articles. He was named to a new committee for revision and drafted most of the amendments proposed. But Pinckney then went further and advocated a “general convention of the states for the purposes of increasing the powers of the federal government and rendering it more adequate for the ends for which it was ratified.” By the fall of 1787, however, he acknowledged the need to create a completely new form of government.
Constitution Charlie
When the Constitutional Convention was organized in Philadelphia in 1787, South Carolina sent Pinckney as one of her four delegates. Twenty-nine years of age, he was one of the youngest men there. Many considered him too vain and ambitious. Nevertheless, he was one of the most active participants in the proceedings, speaking more than one hundred times. Pinckney was eager to contribute and make a name for himself. In his later years, those who knew him playfully referred to him as “Constitution Charlie” because he often referred to his contributions at Philadelphia.

Early in the debates, Pinckney gave a celebrated speech in which he trumpeted the uniqueness of America. “Our true situation,” he declared, “appears to me to be this—a new extensive Country containing within itself the materials for forming a Government capable of extending to its citizens all the blessings of civil & religious liberty.” At the convention, Pinckney championed civil liberties, and though the safeguards he suggested were not incorporated into the new Constitution, many of them were later included in the Bill of Rights.

Some of Pinckney’s ideas did, however, make their way into the Constitution. He is credited, for example, for being the first to use the term Senate. He worked to prohibit religious qualifications for public office. He also pushed for a “vigorous Executive,” but with limitations. He feared that if the executive had too much power in the realms of war and peace, then the system “would render the Executive a Monarchy, of the worst kind, to wit an elective one.” Despite his fear of an overzealous ruler, he supported a single executive, with the title President, instead of a governing body. These ideas were part of the plan of government he introduced at Philadelphia—a plan similar to the Virginia Plan, which was offered the same day and which resembled closely the final version of the Constitution.

An advocate of elitist government, he proposed high property qualifications for federal office, arguing that “the Legislature, the Executive, and the judges should be possessed of competent property to make them independent and respectable.” He encouraged the selection of representatives by state legislatures and wanted the legislature, not the executive, to choose justices for the Supreme Court. Pinckney also favored a federal veto over state laws and backed an effort to establish a national university. But these two proposals failed to pass.

Pinckney did not back away from difficult issues. As a large slaveholder, he was steadfast in his support of the institution of black slavery and defended the slave trade, a practice that even many of his fellow southerners found revolting. He deemed the trade in human flesh to be “in the interest of the whole Union,” and he warned that “South Carolina can never receive the plan [of the new national government] if it prohibits the slave trade.” In the end, however, believing the Constitution to be on the whole a worthy document, he was ready to compromise on the issue, agreeing to the clause that prohibited Congress’s interference with the practice for twenty years. He reassured antislavery delegates by suggesting, “if the States be all left at liberty on this subject, South Carolina may perhaps by degrees do of herself what is wished [banning the importation of slaves], as Virginia and Maryland have already done.”

The debates at Philadelphia ended, compromises were made, the vote was taken, and the Constitution was sent to the states. Pinckney diligently pursued its ratification in South Carolina, making passionate speeches in support of the new government. He told his fellow South Carolinians that they should be “astonishingly pleased” that a government “so perfect could have been formed from such discordant and unpromising material.” On May 23, 1788, South Carolina became the eighth state to ratify the Constitution.
The Question of Slavery Continued

In the years that followed, Pinckney continued to be active in state and national politics, initially as an ally of those who formed the Federalist Party. He was elected governor of South Carolina four times, served as senator two terms, and sat as a member of the House of Representatives for one term. In the early 1800s, Pinckney, like most Southerners, became uncomfortable with Federalist policies and embraced the Jeffersonian Republicans instead. Pinckney served as ambassador to Spain for the Jefferson Administration.

Thereafter, Pinckney returned to the national arena only once before his death in 1824. To prevent the election of a Federalist, he ran for and was elected to the House of Representatives in 1819. In the House, he participated in the debates about the western expansion of slavery, opposing the Missouri Compromise, which proposed to ban slavery in the rest of the Louisiana Territory above 36°30' latitude. In the debate about the extension of slavery, “Constitution Charlie” relied heavily on his personal experience at the Philadelphia Convention, arguing that Congress was never “authorized to touch the question of slavery.” Had Southerners known that Northerners intended to meddle with the institution, Pinckney declared, “no Constitution would have been achieved.” But the Missouri Compromise passed, the balance between slave and free states in the Union was preserved, and the resolution of the slavery question was left for another day. For the nation, it was the beginning of heightened sectional discord. For Charles Pinckney, it was the end of an era.

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. What were Pinckney’s contributions to the Constitution?

2. Which provisions supported by Pinckney never made it into the final version of the Constitution?

Critical Thinking Questions

3. Explain how Pinckney was consistent when he supported the slave trade at the Constitutional Convention and later opposed the Missouri Compromise.

4. You are young Charles Pinckney attending the first day of the Constitutional Convention. You have your plan for the government in hand and you are preparing to speak, when the Virginia Plan is introduced. You’ve been “beaten to the punch”! How do you deal with the situation?

5. Describe a time in your own life when someone beat you to the punch. How did you deal with it?
VOCABULARY AND CONTEXT QUESTIONS

Excerpt from Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787 (reported by James Madison)

1. **Vocabulary:** Use context clues to determine the meaning or significance of each of these words and write their definitions:
   - a. apportionment
   - b. apprehensive
   - c. insurrections
   - d. exempt
   - e. commodities
   - f. meddle
   - g. meddling
   - h. expedient
   - i. dispatching
   - j. render
   - k. provision
   - l. sanction
   - m. avail
   - n. assent
   - o. contend
   - p. consumption
   - q. revenue
   - r. impeded
   - s. sagacity
   - t. traffic

2. **Context:** Answer the following questions.
   - a. When was this document written?
   - b. Where was this document written?
   - c. Who wrote this document?
   - d. What type of document is this?
   - e. What was the purpose of this document?
   - f. Who was the audience for this document?
IN HIS OWN WORDS:
CHARLES PINCKNEY AND THE ISSUE OF SLAVERY

Excerpt from Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787
(reported by James Madison)

Note: Before reading the following excerpt, please note that it is taken from the debate about Article I, Section 9, Clause 1, with two major changes. The dialogue is now conveyed in the present tense, and from the first person point of view (“I” rather than “he”). Also, capitalization, punctuation, and spelling have been modernized.

August 22, 1787

Luther Martin (Maryland): I propose...to allow a prohibition or tax on the importation of slaves as five slaves are to be counted as 3 free men in the apportionment of Representatives; such a clause would leave an encouragement to this traffic. Slaves weaken one part of the Union, which the other parts are bound to protect: the privilege of importing them is therefore unreasonable. It is inconsistent with the principles of the revolution and dishonorable to the American character to have such a feature in the Constitution.

John Rutledge (South Carolina): I am not apprehensive of insurrections and would readily exempt the other states from the obligation to protect the southern against them. Religion and humanity have nothing to do with this question. Interest alone is the governing principle with nations. The true question at present is whether the southern states shall or shall not be parties to the Union. If the northern states consult their interest, they will not oppose the increase of slaves, which will increase the commodities of which they will become the carriers.

Oliver Ellsworth (Connecticut): I believe we should leave the clause as it stands. Let every state import what it pleases. The morality or wisdom of slavery are considerations belonging to the states themselves. What enriches a part enriches the whole, and the states are the best judges of their particular interest. The old confederation did not meddle with this point, and I do not see any greater necessity for bringing it within the policy of the new one.

Charles Pinckney (South Carolina): South Carolina can never receive the plan [the Constitution] if it prohibits the slave trade. In every proposed extension of the powers of the Congress, that state has expressly and watchfully excepted that of meddling with the importation of negroes. If the states be all left at liberty on this subject, South Carolina may perhaps by degrees do of herself what is wished, as Virginia and Maryland have already done.

Roger Sherman (Connecticut): I disapprove of the slave trade; yet as the states were now possessed of the right to import slaves, as the public good did not require it to be taken from them, and as it was expedient to have as few objections as possible to the proposed scheme of government, I think it best to leave the matter as we find it. The abolition of slavery seems to be going on in the U.S., and the good sense of the several states will probably by degrees complete it. I urge on the Convention the necessity of dispatching its business.
George Mason (Virginia): The present question concerns not the importing states alone but the whole Union. . . . Maryland and Virginia have already prohibited the importation of slaves expressly. North Carolina has done the same in substance. All this will be in vain if South Carolina and Georgia are at liberty to import. The western people are already calling out for slaves for their new lands, and will fill that country with slaves if they can be got through South Carolina and Georgia. Slavery discourages arts and manufactures. The poor despise labor when performed by slaves. They prevent the immigration of whites, who really enrich and strengthen a country. They produce the most pernicious effect on manners. Every master of slaves is born a petty tyrant. They bring the judgment of heaven on a country. As nations cannot be rewarded or punished in the next world they must be in this. By an inevitable chain of causes and effects providence punishes national sins, by national calamities. I lament that some of our eastern brethren have from a lust of gain embarked in this nefarious traffic. As to the states being in possession of the right to import, this is the case with many other rights, now to be properly given up. I hold it essential in every point of view that the general government should have power to prevent the increase of slavery.

Oliver Ellsworth (Connecticut): Since I have never owned a slave, I cannot judge of the effects of slavery on character: However, if it is to be considered in a moral light we ought to go farther and free those already in the country....As population increases, poor laborers will be so plenty as to render slaves useless. Slavery in time will not be a speck in our country. Provision is already made in Connecticut for abolishing it. And the abolition has already taken place in Massachusetts.

Charles Pinckney (South Carolina): If slavery be wrong, it is justified by the example of all the world. I cite the case of Greece, Rome, and other ancient states; the sanction given by France, England, Holland, and other modern states. In all ages one half of mankind have been slaves. If the southern states were let alone they will probably of themselves stop importations. I would myself as a citizen of South Carolina vote for it. An attempt to take away the right as proposed will produce serious objections to the Constitution which I wish to see adopted.

Charles Cotesworth Pinckney [second cousin of Charles Pinckney] (South Carolina): I declare it to be my firm opinion that if I and all my colleagues were to sign the Constitution and use our personal influence, it would be of no avail towards obtaining the assent of our constituents. South Carolina and Georgia cannot do without slaves. As to Virginia she will gain by stopping the importations. Her slaves will rise in value, and she has more than she wants. It would be unequal to require South Carolina and Georgia to confederate on such unequal terms. . . . I contend that the importation of slaves would be for the interest of the whole Union. The more slaves, the more produce to employ the carrying trade; the more consumption also, and the more of this, the more of revenue for the common treasury. I admit it to be reasonable that slaves should be dutied like other imports, but should consider a rejection of the clause as an exclusion of South Carolina from the Union.
**John Dickinson (Delaware):** I consider it inadmissible on every principle of honor and safety that the importation of slaves should be authorized to the states by the Constitution. The true question was whether the national happiness would be promoted or impeded by the importation, and this question ought to be left to the national government, not to the states particularly interested.

**Rufus King (Massachusetts):** I think the subject should be considered in a political light only. If two states will not agree to the Constitution as stated on one side, I can affirm with equal belief on the other, that great and equal opposition would be experienced from the other states. I believe that the exemption of slaves from duty whilst every other import was subjected to it, as an inequality that could not fail to strike the commercial sagacity of the northern and middle states.

**John Langdon (New Hampshire):** We must give this power to the general government. I cannot with a good conscience leave it with the states who could then go on with the traffic, without being restrained by the opinions here given that they will themselves cease to import slaves.

**Charles Cotesworth Pinckney (South Carolina):** I am bound to declare candidly that I do not think South Carolina will stop her importations of slaves in any short time, but only stop them occasionally as she now does.

**ANALYSIS:**
**DEBATE ABOUT ARTICLE I, SECTION 9, CLAUSE 1**

**Directions:** In each of the Statements columns, mark Y (Yes) if the statement applies; mark N (No) if it does not apply; mark X if you cannot determine the position from the document excerpt. In the appropriate columns labeled Moral, Economic, and Political, summarize or paraphrase the arguments of each speaker (not every speaker uses all three types of argument). Please remember that several of the speakers have more than one passage.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPEAKER</th>
<th>1. He supports slavery.</th>
<th>2. He supports some federal regulation of slavery.</th>
<th>3. He supports taxation on slaves as imported property.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rutledge</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellsworth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pinckney</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherman</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mason</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genl, Pinckney</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dickinson</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Langdon</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For nearly 250 years, the existence of slavery deprived African Americans of independent lives and individual liberty. It also compromised the republican dreams of white Americans, who otherwise achieved unprecedented success in the creation of political institutions and social relationships based on citizens’ equal rights and ever-expanding opportunity. Thomas Jefferson, who in 1787 described slavery as an “abomination” and predicted that it “must have an end,” had faith that “there is a superior bench reserved in heaven for those who hasten it.” He later avowed that “there is not a man on earth who would sacrifice more than I would to relieve us from this heavy reproach in any practicable way.” Although Jefferson made several proposals to curb slavery’s growth or reduce its political or economic influence, a workable plan to eradicate slavery eluded him. Others also failed to end slavery until finally, after the loss of more than 600,000 American lives in the Civil War, the United States abolished it through the 1865 ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution.

American slavery and American freedom took root at the same place and at the same time. In 1619—the same year that colonial Virginia’s House of Burgesses convened in Jamestown and became the New World’s first representative assembly—about 20 enslaved Africans arrived at Jamestown and were sold by Dutch slave traders. The number of slaves in Virginia remained small for several decades, however, until the first dominant labor system—indentured servitude—fell out of favor after 1670. Until then indentured servants, typically young and landless white Englishmen and Englishwomen in search of opportunity, arrived by the thousands. In exchange for passage to Virginia, they agreed to labor in planters’ tobacco fields for terms usually ranging from four to seven years. Planters normally agreed to give them, after their indentures expired, land on which they could establish their own tobacco farms. In the first few decades of settlement, as demand for the crop boomed, such arrangements usually worked in the planters’ favor. Life expectancy in Virginia was short and few servants outlasted their terms of indenture. By the mid-1600s, however, as the survival rate of indentured servants increased, more earned their freedom and began to compete with their former masters. The supply of tobacco rose more quickly than demand and, as prices decreased, tensions between planters and former servants grew.

These tensions exploded in 1676, when Nathaniel Bacon led a group composed primarily of former indentured servants in a rebellion against Virginia’s government. The rebels, upset by the reluctance of Governor William Berkeley and the gentry-dominated House of Burgesses to aid their efforts to expand onto American Indians’ lands, lashed out at both the Indians and the government. After several months the rebellion dissipated, but so, at about the same time, did the practice of voluntary servitude.

In its place developed a system of race-based slavery. With both black and white Virginians living longer, it made better economic sense to own slaves, who would never gain their freedom and compete with masters, than to rent the labor of indentured servants, who would. A few early slaves had gained their freedom, established plantations, acquired servants, and enjoyed liberties shared by white freemen, but beginning in the 1660s Virginia’s legislature passed laws banning interracial marriage; it also stripped African Americans of the rights to own property and carry guns, and it curtailed their freedom of movement. In 1650 only about 300 blacks worked Virginia’s tobacco fields, yet by 1680 there were 3,000 and, by the start of the eighteenth century, nearly 10,000.

Slavery surged not only in Virginia but also in Pennsylvania, where people abducted from Africa and their descendants harvested wheat and oats, and in South Carolina, where by the 1730s rice planters had imported slaves in such quantity that they accounted for two-thirds of the population.
The sugar-based economies of Britain’s Caribbean colonies required so much labor that, on some islands, enslaved individuals outnumbered freemen by more than ten to one. Even in the New England colonies, where staple-crop agriculture never took root, the presence of slaves was common and considered unremarkable by most.

Historian Edmund S. Morgan has suggested that the prevalence of slavery in these colonies may have, paradoxically, heightened the sensitivity of white Americans to attacks against their own freedom. Thus, during the crisis preceding the War for Independence Americans frequently cast unpopular British legislation—which taxed them without the consent of their assemblies, curtailed the expansion of their settlements, deprived them of the right to jury trials, and placed them under the watchful eyes of red-coated soldiers—as evidence of an imperial conspiracy to “enslave” them. American patriots who spoke in such terms did not imagine that they would be forced to toil in tobacco fields; instead, they feared that British officials would deny to them some of the same individual and civil rights that they had denied to enslaved African Americans. George Mason, collaborating with George Washington, warned in the Fairfax Resolves of 1774 that the British Parliament pursued a “regular, systematic plan” to “fix the shackles of slavery upon us.”

As American revolutionaries reflected on the injustice of British usurpations of their freedom and began to universalize the individual rights that they had previously tied to their status as Englishmen, they grew increasingly conscious of the inherent injustice of African-American slavery. Many remained skeptical that blacks possessed the same intellectual capabilities as whites, but few refused to count Africans as members of the human family or possessors of individual rights. When Jefferson affirmed in the Declaration of Independence “that all men are created equal,” he did not mean all white men. In fact, he attempted to turn the Declaration into a platform from which Americans would denounce the trans-Atlantic slave trade. This he blamed on Britain and its king who, Jefferson wrote, “has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating it’s [sic] most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere.”

The king was wrong, he asserted, “to keep open a market where MEN should be bought & sold.” Delegates to the Continental Congress from South Carolina and Georgia, however, vehemently opposed the inclusion of these lines in the Declaration of Independence. Representatives of other states agreed to delete them. Thus began, at the moment of America’s birth, the practice of prioritizing American unity over black Americans’ liberty.

Pragmatism confronted principle not only on the floor of Congress but also on the plantations of many prominent revolutionaries. When Jefferson penned his stirring defense of individual liberty, he owned 200 enslaved individuals. Washington, the commander-in-chief of the Continental Army and future first president, was one of the largest slaveholders in Virginia. James Madison—who, like Jefferson and Washington, considered himself an opponent of slavery—was also a slaveholder. So was Mason, whose Virginia Declaration of Rights stands as one of the revolutionary era’s most resounding statements on behalf of human freedom. Had these revolutionaries attempted to free their slaves, they would have courted financial ruin. Alongside their landholdings, slaves constituted the principal asset against which they borrowed. The existence of slavery, moreover, precluded a free market of agricultural labor; they could never afford to pay free people—who could always move west to obtain their own farms, anyway—to till their fields.

Perhaps the most powerful objection to emancipation, however, emerged from the same set of principles that compelled the American revolutionaries to question the justice of slavery. Although Jefferson, Washington, Madison, and Mason considered human bondage a clear violation of individual rights, they trembled when they considered the ways in which emancipation might thwart their republican experiments. Not unlike many nonslaveholders, they considered especially fragile the society that they had helped to create. In the absence of aristocratic selfishness and force, revolutionary American governments relied on virtue and voluntarism. Virtue they understood as a manly trait; the word, in fact, derives from the Latin noun vir, which means “man.” They considered men to be independent and self-sufficient, made free and responsible by
habits borne of necessity. Virtuous citizens made
good citizens, the Founders thought. The use of
political power for the purpose of exploitation
promised the virtuous little and possessed the
talent to cost them much. Voluntarism was
virtue unleashed: the civic-minded, selfish desire
to ask little of one's community but, because of
one's sense of permanence within it, to give much
to it. The Founders, conscious of the degree to
which involuntary servitude had rendered slaves
dependent and given them cause to resent white
society, questioned their qualifications for
citizenship. It was dangerous to continue to enslave
them, but perilous to emancipate them. Jefferson
compared it to holding a wolf by the ears.

These conundrums seemed to preclude an easy
fix. Too aware of the injustice of slavery to expect much
forgiveness from slaves, in the
first decades of the
nineteenth century a number
of Founders embarked on
impractical schemes to
purchase the freedom of slaves and “repatriate”
them from America to Africa. In the interim, debate
about the continued importation of slaves from
Africa stirred delegates to the Constitutional
Convention. South Carolina’s Charles Pinckney
vehemently opposed prohibitions on the slave
trade, arguing that the matter was best decided by
individual states. The delegates compromised,
agreeing that the Constitution would prohibit for
twenty years any restrictions on the arrival of newly
enslaved Africans. As president, Jefferson availed
himself of the opportunity afforded by the
Constitution when he prohibited the continued
importation of Africans into America in 1808. Yet
he had already failed in a 1784 attempt to halt the
spread of slavery into the U.S. government’s
western territory, which stretched from the Great
Lakes south toward the Gulf of Mexico (the
compromise Northwest Ordinance of 1787 drew
the line at the Ohio River), and in his efforts to
institute in Virginia a plan for gradual
emancipation (similar to those that passed in
Northern states, except that it provided for the
education and subsequent deportation of freed
African Americans). Of all the Founders, Benjamin
Franklin probably took the most unequivocal
public stand against involuntary servitude when, in
1790, he signed a strongly worded antislavery
petition submitted to Congress by the Pennsylvania
Abolition Society. This, too, accomplished little.

The revolutionary spirit of the postwar decade,
combined with the desire of many Upper South
plantation owners to shift from labor-intensive
tobacco to wheat, created opportunities to reduce
the prevalence of slavery in America—especially in
the North. Those opportunities not seized upon—
especially in the South—would not soon return.

Eli Whitney’s invention of the cotton gin in
1793 widened the regional divide. By rendering
more efficient the processing of cotton fiber—
which in the first half of the nineteenth century
possessed a greater value than all other U.S.
exports combined—Whitney’s machine triggered
a resurgence of Southern slavery. Meanwhile, the
wealth that cotton exports brought to America
fueled a booming Northern
industrial economy that
relied on free labor and
created a well-educated middle class of urban
professionals and social
activists. These individuals
kept alive the Founders’
desire to rid America of
slavery, but they also provoked the development of
Southern proslavery thought. At best, Southerners
of the revolutionary generation had viewed slavery
as a necessary evil; by the 1830s, however,
slaveholders began to describe it as a positive good.
African Americans were civilized Christians, they
argued, but their African ancestors were not. In
addition, the argument continued, slaves benefited
from the paternalistic care of masters who, unlike
the Northern employers of “wage slaves,” cared for
their subordinates from the cradle to the grave.
This new view combined with an older critique of
calls for emancipation: since slaves were the
property of their masters, any attempt to force
their release would be a violation of masters’
property rights.

Regional positions grew more intractable as
the North and South vied for control of the West.
Proposals to admit into statehood Missouri, Texas,
California, Kansas, and Nebraska resulted in
controversy as Northerners and Southerners
 sparred to maintain parity in the Senate. The 1860
election to the presidency of Abraham Lincoln, a
Republican who opposed the inclusion of
additional slave states, sparked secession and the
Civil War.

“I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just,” Jefferson had prophetically remarked,
for “his justice cannot sleep for ever.” Americans
paid dearly for the sin of slavery. Efforts by
members of the founding generation failed to identify moderate means to abolish the practice, and hundreds of thousands died because millions had been deprived of the ability to truly live.

Robert M. S. McDonald, Ph.D.
United States Military Academy

Suggestions for Further Reading


