The Fire-Eaters and Seward Lincoln

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When Senator William Henry Seward in 1850 invoked a “higher law” than the Constitution of the United States that compelled people of conscience to stop the sin of slavery, the New Yorker became the Yankee that Fire-Eaters most loved to hate. Seward’s remarks contributed to a very real and widespread disunion effort from 1850–1852. His prominence in creating the new antislavery Republican Party helped reinvigorate the secessionist movement in the mid-1850s. And in 1858 Seward proclaimed that the rising hostility, conflict, and violent incidents that were occurring with greater frequency and consequence represented “an irrepressible conflict between opposing and enduring forces . . . and it means that the United States must and will, sooner or later, become either entirely a slaveholding nation, or entirely a free-labor nation.”1

Barely a year after that remark, John Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry confirmed in the minds of many Southerners that Seward had not summarized the plight of the country, but rather had called for an invasion of the South and race war. The Fire-Eaters could not have found a better opposition candidate to galvanize the South. But a funny thing happened to Seward’s aura of inevitability as his party’s candidate for president in 1860: Abraham Lincoln beat all comers at the Republican national convention. So what were over-zealous, Union-hating, slave-loving secessionist leaders to do? This article will focus on the most conspicuous Fire-Eaters of 1860, Edmund Ruffin of Virginia, Robert Barnwell Rhett of South Carolina and his son, Barnwell Rhett, Jr., and William Lowndes Yancey of Alabama, to demonstrate the varied responses to Seward and Lincoln. Although individual Northerners evoked slightly different reactions from secessionists, even before

1860 most disunionists found personalities inconsequential: whether
the presidential candidates were Republican, or even Democrat Stephen
Douglas, to the leaders of secession the great danger to the South
had become the North itself.

Only a few months before Lincoln’s ascendancy, the venerable and
deranged Edmund Ruffin of Virginia showed the way for others to
transition from Seward to Lincoln. Early in 1860, Ruffin reached for
his quill and began frantically writing a novel called Anticipations of
the Future to Serve as Lessons for the Present Time. He had just read a
novel called Wild Scenes of the South, calling it “a very foolish book
which I regret having bought, or spent the time in reading,” which
told the future tale of a separation of the South from the Union. But
a few days later, on February 29, 1860, Ruffin wrote the first pages of
his own version of this story. It took the form of a London Times corre-
spondent residing in the United States who observed and commented
upon William Seward’s reelection to the presidency in 1864 “& will
show how extreme oppression may be inflicted on the southern states,
& their virtual bondage to the north.” To his friend and once-fiery
secessionist, Senator James H. Hammond of South Carolina, Ruffin
explained of his novel, “I suppose every incident of danger, damage,
or disaster to the South, which is predicted by northerners, or south-
ern submissionists—as war, blockade, invasion, servile insurrection.”
Recent news that most delegates from slave states, led by Alabama’s
William Lowndes Yancey, had bolted from the Democrat’s national
convention in Charleston electrified Ruffin and spurred him to write
even faster. His fictional slaughter of Yankee soldiers and destruction
of the Union “were alike amusing to my mind, & . . . conducive to
immediate pleasure.” Before he completed his final draft on April 30,
Ruffin had already made arrangements with Robert Barnwell Rhett Sr.
and Jr.—the most veteran secessionist, and his son who edited the
Charleston Mercury—to serialize early chapters under the heading
“Glimpses of the Future.”

2. Anticipations of the Future to Serve as Lessons for the Present Time: In the Form of Ex-
tracts from an English Resident in the United States, to the London Times, from 1864–1870,
with an Appendix, on the Causes and Consequences of Independence of the South (Richmond,
3. William K. Scarborough, ed., The Diary of Edmund Ruffin, 3 vols. (Baton Rouge:
4. Ibid., 1:408; Ruffin to Hammond May 4, 1860, Hammond Papers, Library of Con-
gress.
5. Diary of Edmund Ruffin, 1:413.
6. Ibid., 1:415.
Three weeks later, on May 21, Ruffin received horrible news: “The abolition convention” he noted in his diary, “... had not nominated Seward, as expected, or [Edward] Bates, or [Salmon P.] Chase, or [Simon] Cameron, or [Benjamin] Wade ... but Lincoln of Illinois, inferior in ability & reputation to all—and whom no one had mentioned before.” For a while Ruffin bemoaned that Republicans had not nominated “their ablest man, Seward,” which Ruffin was certain would have made secession more likely.7

But Ruffin was a maniacal man facing a press deadline ahead of a singular general election, so he lost little time. He penned his introduction to Anticipations of the Future on June 5. He cautioned his readers that particular events, actors, and consequences might not match his predictions. “But this is of no importance to the argument, and detracts nothing from the force of its illustrations or conclusions. These do not depend upon such immaterial issues as, for example, whether the wily, able and prominent Seward, or the obscure and coarse Lincoln shall be either the first or the second President of the United States, elected by the sectional abolition party of the North.”8 So, Chapter 1 sketched out in seven paragraphs Lincoln’s victory in November, 1860, his lackluster presidency and cow-towing to party leaders, the lack of either secession or any overt act of any kind by either section against the other, and Lincoln’s inability to be renominated by his party. Chapter 2 began with Seward’s sweeping victory in 1864.

A week later Ruffin traveled to Washington to confer with elected officials, including the young South Carolina secessionist Congressman Laurence Keitt, Virginia Senator James M. Mason, and Gov. Andrew B. Moore of Alabama, all of who agreed that the South should secede if Lincoln were inaugurated.9 By October, heartened by the overwhelming victory of Republican candidates in Pennsylvania’s state elections, Ruffin was more certain than ever that Lincoln would win and thereby deliver unto Ruffin his long-sought-for Southern Confederacy. But on the eve of presidential balloting around the nation, Ruffin read that a close friend [unnamed] of Lincoln’s planned a “much moderated policy for his presidency . . . to appease the South,” Ruffin feared that his beau ideal for secession might lose his “most fanatical supporters” and vote instead for radical abolitionist Gerrit Smith.10

On election day, Ruffin cast his vote for the Southern Democratic ticket of John C. Breckinridge and Joseph Lane. The next day, Ruffin

7. Ibid., 1:421.
10. Ibid., 1:480.
read the election results from New York: the pro-Southern city delivered only 30,000 votes against Lincoln, meaning that the man from Illinois would carry that state and most likely the election. “It is good news for me,” Ruffin recorded elatedly in his diary.11

Because the imminent collapse of the Union was good for Ruffin—but still uncertain that the Old Dominion would secede, as he always had been—Ruffin decided to head to his spiritual home, South Carolina, and promote disunion there. On November 11 from Columbia, Ruffin wrote to his sons Edmund Jr. and Julian about the “most glorious news” that the state assembly called for a special convention to address disunion, scheduled for December 17. “The time since I have been here has been the happiest of my life . . . and there has been much to gratify my individual & selfish feelings.” On the evening of November 16 Ruffin publicly addressed “My friends, brother disunionists” and vowed to them that if his native Virginia remained in a Union under Lincoln, “under the domination of this infamous, low, vulgar tyranny of Black Republicans,” that he would move permanently to South Carolina.12 Ruffin’s son Julian wrote to him on November 17, “I am glad that you are having a pleasant time,” and “Godspeed in the good cause.” His daughter Mildred Ruffin Sayre added on December 4, “It seems to me your predictions are coming to pass far in advance of the time appointed.” But unlike her father, she wished to avoid a war. Another daughter, Elizabeth, wrote, “I fear that some of the Hot heads of the South will come into unnecessary conflict with the Fed[eral] troops [in Charleston].”13

Edmund Ruffin’s hotheadedness knew no bounds. He considered Lincoln’s inauguration address a declaration of war. Even after the secession of the first seven slave states and the call to create a new government in Montgomery, Alabama—just in case his friend Lincoln would prove too cowardly to commit some overt act to start a war—the aged Fire-Eater traveled to Charleston and hoped to personally provoke Union soldiers to fire at him as he sailed deep into the harbor. After that failed, Ruffin joined the Palmetto Guards and the Iron Brigade on Morris Island. Acknowledged by disunionists in

11. Ibid., 1:483.
12. Edmund Ruffin to Edmund Jr. and Julian Ruffin, November 11, 1860, Edmund Ruffin Papers, microfilm, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina; Ruffin’s remarks of November 16 in Charleston Mercury, November 17, 1860.
13. Elizabeth Ruffin Sayre to Ruffin, November 15, 1860; Julian to Edmund Ruffin, November 17, 1860; Mildred Sayre to Edmund Ruffin December 4, 1860, all in Edmund Ruffin Papers, microfilm, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina.
South Carolina as their greatest ally in Virginia, before dawn on April 12 his comrades allowed Ruffin the honor of igniting the signal shot that triggered the Civil War.\textsuperscript{14}

For the first year of fighting, Ruffin’s spirits remained high, but they started to fade some in 1862. But Ruffin’s love for Lincoln blossomed again like a hothouse flower in January 1863. “Lincoln’s promised [Emancipation] proclamation has appeared, to my surprise as well as gratification. I had feared that he would shrink from this formal consummation of his general negro emancipation & insurrection policy & plan,” because, of course, Ruffin believed that Southern soldiers would now rededicate their efforts to achieve independence. As a “real Virginian,” Ruffin rejoiced when “Lincoln has done another benefit to the C.S. in signing the bill making a new & separate state of western Va.” thus ridding his home state of its faithless western counties.\textsuperscript{15}

While Ruffin believed that Lincoln’s actions in early 1863 signaled that the tide of battle would turn inevitably to favor the South, of course the opposite occurred. As he watched his cause begin to slowly wither and die, his love affair with Lincoln ended. Lincoln’s soldiers sacked Ruffin’s plantations on the outskirts of Richmond, writing the following on the walls of one: “You did fire the first gun on Sumter, you traitor son of a bitch.” A Pennsylvanian autographed one of Ruffin’s books: “ Owned by Old Ruffin, the basest old traitor rebel in the United States. You old cuss, it is a pity you go unhanged.” Ruffin must have thought: how low; how vulgar—just like their commander-in-chief. Many of Ruffin’s slaves fled in advance of Union troops, and others joined the men in blue on their retreat. Ruffin wanted revenge via the destruction of every town and village from Pennsylvania to Ohio and beyond in a Confederate onslaught that never materialized.\textsuperscript{16} And so, at last he hated Abraham Lincoln.

Ruffin learned of Lincoln’s assassination on April 17, 1865, and scribbled the news without remark in his diary. A few days later he wrote, “The killing of Lincoln has produced much exasperation, in the popular mind, against secessionists, & the southern states—as if either had prompted the deed, or could have had any agency in


\textsuperscript{15} Diary of Edmund Ruffin, 2:533.

it.” Denying the southernism of John Wilkes Booth, Ruffin believed (or wished to believe) that “the act was committed in Yankeedom, & on Lincoln by a man of northern birth and residence.” Ruffin was “utterly disgusted by the servile sycophancy, the man-worship, of a low-bred & vulgar & illiterate buffoon. Of course, they made Lincoln a martyr. That was to be expected.” Only one piece of this news lifted Ruffin’s spirits: “The assassin of Lincoln at least died with undaunted courage,” holding off federal troops to the last. With the surrender of all Confederate forces in the east and his “one great idea” blasted, Ruffin, who believed that he was dying, looked forward to that fate. But death, like his slaveholding republic, eluded him now, so he took matters into his own hands.17

He wrote his final diary entry on June 17, 1865: “And now, with my latest writing & utterance, & with what will [be] near to my last breath, I . . . willingly proclaim, my unmitigated hatred to Yankee rule—to all political, social, & business connection with Yankees, & to the perfidious, malignant, & vile Yankee race.” He then put the muzzle of a rifle into his mouth, and with the use of a forked stick pulled the trigger, but a percussion cap detonated without firing the shot. He calmly reloaded his weapon and fired again, blowing off most of his head, his lifeless body remaining upright, defiant even in death.18

As Ruffin was to transparency, Robert Barnwell Rhett Sr. and Jr. were to deception. The elder Barnwell Rhett had been blunt and straightforward about his desire for secession since the 1820s and literally at least once every decade since then. But like other veteran secessionists, every failed effort left him wondering what in the world it would take to convince the lethargic mass of white Southerners to follow him out of the Union. Fortunately for the Rhetts, father and son, they had a Machiavellian streak in them as wide as Charleston Harbor: they lied, they invented, they denied, and they bullied.19

In 1851 the senior Rhett, as a United States senator, took charge of

the foreboding secession movement that began during the debates over the Compromise of 1850. By 1852 debates in South Carolina over disunion temporarily replaced their weak two-party system with a two-choice system: the Rhetts led the secessionist faction, while others joined the cooperationists. The former demanded immediate secession, and the latter agreed that cause existed to opt out of the Union, but they preferred to wait for any other slave state to make the first move, thus preventing a repetition of events from the Nullification Crisis of 1828–1833 in which Carolina stood alone in its defiance of the federal government. Secessionist Governor Whitemarsh Seabrook engaged in correspondence with the secessionist governor of Mississippi, John Anthony Quitman, himself ready to dissolve the Union and eager to “defy these assaults from the miserable submissionists who would lick the hand that smote them.” In fact, Quitman ordered an inventory taken of the state’s military supplies in case secession led to civil war, and he began corresponding with Senator Rhett. South Carolina Unionists laid low and remained quiet as Rhett and his followers, like Quitman, castigated cooperationists as submissionists and Unionists as traitors. Of course, cooperationists won the debate in South Carolina and thus ended the hope of disunion for a while. Senator Rhett was so angered by these events that in early 1852 on the Senate floor he announced, “I am a secessionist—I am a disunionist . . . . Others may submit: I will not. I will secede, if I can, from this Union. I will test, for myself and for my children, whether South Carolina is a State or an humbled and degraded province, existing only at the mercy of an unscrupulous and fanatical tyranny,” and he then resigned his seat rather than remain to represent the “submissionists” of his state. Those words and actions saddled the Rhetts with odium for a long time.

And with that odium, the Rhetts remained quiet for most of the 1850s. To be sure, through the Mercury, they remained steadfast advocates of southern rights—real and imagined—and attacked abolitionists and free-soilers. The Kansas controversy, however, jarred them out of their doldrums, as it did Abraham Lincoln and multitudes of

21. Congressional Globe, 32nd Congress, 1st Sess., 655, App., 43–48, 57; Walther, Fire-Eaters, 145. Barnwell Rhett’s wife Elizabeth was at least as disgusted as her husband was with the collapse of this secession movement. She condemned “this ungrateful, cowardly, stupid State,” and wrote, “My heart actually sickens at the prospect before us—what abject humiliation, what deep degradation is ours. I think death preferable to dishonor.” Elizabeth Rhett to R. B. Rhett, October 17 [1851], in Rhett Papers, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston.
In 1857, sensing “a progressively southern feeling arising,” the junior Rhett confided to a friend, “If we could only now get a great sectional issue like that of 1850, the Union would not last a month.” Then he suggested how to create one: the younger Rhett hoped that the proslavery minority in Kansas would craft its own constitution without bothering to submit it for popular ratification, either resulting in the admission of another slave state or triggering disunion. And because neither of these alternatives came to pass, the Rhetts fumed and again recalibrated their strategy.

With the rise of the Republican Party and the prominence of William H. Seward and his controversial pronouncements, the Rhetts sensed opportunity as the next presidential contest approached. On July 4, 1859, the senior Rhett made his first public speech in seven years. He warned that sectionalism was no longer spasmodic, but permanent. Because the South had failed to resist the North for so long, they were now a “defenseless minority” ruled by Northerners who sought the extinction of slavery, and Rhett predicted that soon Northerners would incite slave insurrections, and then respond to them by imposing military rule and using emergency war powers to emancipate slaves. But then Rhett shifted to a position already taken by most of his brother Fire-Eaters: the glory that awaited the South as an independent republic. By attempting to anticipate and then to diminish fear of the unknown—what might happen after secession—Rhett and others believed that when that next “great sectional issue like that of 1850” came, the result would be different.

Then came John Brown. Then came the Democratic national convention in Charleston, where the Rhetts used the Mercury to whip into hysteria the residents of that city as well as the arriving national delegates. Then came William Lowndes Yancey’s failed effort to secure a proslavery platform, the bolt of delegates that followed, and eventually the nomination of the Southern Democratic ticket of Breckinridge and Lane.

Addressing the people of Charleston to support Breckinridge, the elder Rhett uttered his only public remarks about the Republican candidate. Rhett played to the hair-trigger honor of his audience members by announcing that the Black Republican party had nominated a man from Kentucky, “a renegade Southerner,” a traitor to his section. Worse, and citing only a single unfounded assertion from an
obscure southern newspaper, Rhett presented as fact that Lincoln’s running mate, Hannibal Hamlin of Maine, was a mulatto. “To reward a traitor to the South, and to insult the South, by placing over the Southern States, in the Senate, a man of negro origin, is the policy of this sectional party . . . . Hatred and malignity, as well as sectional ambition, has dictated the choice of their candidates.” And if this ticket won, Rhett predicted that the South would be rendered merely a colony of the North. He never called explicitly for secession; he did not need to.24

Neither Rhett mentioned Lincoln much in the Mercury. Instead they continued to vilify the North itself, regardless of partisan divisions. Fully two months after Lincoln’s nomination, one Mercury editorial read, “The Constitution is set aside by the North. It is supported by the South. The party of Breckinridge and Lane derive their support from the South. The faction of [Stephen] Douglas and that of Seward, from the North.”25 In early August the Rhetts dissected Lincoln’s House Divided Speech from 1858, but in so doing merely attacked the Republican Party platform rather than anything in particular about Lincoln—arguing that by preventing the expansion of slavery to western territories and thereby placing slavery on a road to ultimate extinction, that party and all its supporters were in fact abolitionists. The Rhetts repeated this theme with minor variations for weeks. Lincoln, they announced on September 12, “is committed to their policy as much as Seward, [Owen] Lovejoy, or [Charles] Sumner.” Finally, in late September, the Rhetts could no longer restrain themselves. On the 24th they demanded that if Lincoln were elected, the South had to “be prepared for the consequences, whatever they may be. For the speedy formation of a Confederacy of all the Southern States, the best instrument, we believe, will be the sword.” The next day they added, “It requires little bravery now, in the South, to be a disunionist. Not only liberty and


honor, but the instinct of self-preservation, if Mr. Lincoln is elected to the Presidency, demands a separation of the South from the North.” In early October they repeated their lie about Hannibal Hamlin, called Lincoln “a notorious abolitionist,” and offered, “If wisely considered there are no terrors which resistance can bring to the South, in the estimation of the most timid, which can equal the inevitable horrors of submission to the sectional rule of the Northern States,” as they serialized Edmund Ruffin’s horrific cautionary tale.26

Finally, on October 15, the Rhetts explained their Seward-to-Lincoln transition: Republicans bypassed Seward at their convention because he “lacked the necessary nerve to carry through measures of Southern subjugation. Lincoln was believed to possess the . . . character and earnestness required, and to be fully equal to any emergency originating at Southern attempts at resistance . . . . The beau ideal of a relentless, dogged, freesoil border-ruffian—a Southerner by birth, and a northerner in feeling and association . . . . a vulgar mobocrat and Southern hater in political opinions, he is the very man for the occasion . . . . the author who first gave expression to the doctrine of ‘irrepressible conflict’ [in his House Divided Speech], now chosen to be the finisher of that faith.”

Between that editorial and into December, the Rhetts’ columns were mostly generic and hammered home the ideas that: Stephen Douglas and Northern Democrats could not be trusted; that the Black Republican Party was a dangerous and revolutionary faction that desired the annihilation of the South; and that glory awaited Southerners in a new slaveholding Confederacy. But on December 10 the elder Rhett could no longer control his words or emotions, as he congratulated a crowd for “the great revolution you have inaugurated,” then proclaimed, “For thirty-two years, have I followed the quarry. Behold! It at last in sight! A few more bounds and it falls—the Union falls; and with it falls, its faithless oppressions—its insulting agitations—its vulgar tyrannies and fanaticism. The bugle blast of our victory and redemption is on the wind, and the South will be safe and free.”27

By far the most junior of these leading secessionists, William Lowndes Yancey of Alabama cut his teeth as a Fire-Eater during the build up to and aftermath of the Compromise of 1850. He believed then and thereafter that the Compromise had effectively destroyed the Constitution. Like other disunionists, Yancey’s frustration with the results of this Compromise drove him from national political issues for several years.

26. Ibid., October 4, 1860.
27. Ibid., December 10, 1860.
Throughout most of his life, Yancey often spoke first and thought later, blessed as he was with, by all accounts, some of the greatest oratorical gifts of his very accomplished generation of public speakers. For the rest of the 1850s and deep into the presidential campaigns of 1860, Yancey not only swam against the tide of his fellow secessionists, he also seemed, frankly, clueless about the greatest threats to southern interests, the power of the South in national politics, and the best manner and means to promote disunion.

As Kansas-Nebraska drew back into national politics men such as Lincoln and the Rhetts, neither the debates over that bill, its implementation, nor even the rapid creation of the antislavery Republican Party seemed to Yancey the gravest threats to the South. No: for Yancey it was the anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic American, or Know-Nothing, party. Clearly miscalculating how the authority and force of free-labor ideology catapulted into viability and power the Republicans, Yancey tried his best to warn fellow Alabamians and other Southerners about the nativist menace. Make no mistake: Yancey actively supported the Buford Expedition from Alabama to do battle with antislavery forces in Kansas and later applauded as noble Preston Brooks’s savage attack on Senator Charles Sumner, but in 1855 he aimed his wrath at the Know Nothings, who had more elected officials than the infant Republicans. As Yancey explained to his brother, then also on the stump in Alabama, “Hold up its origins in the North, where it has without fail elected Anti-Nebraska & Abolition governors and senators,” and explain how “a secret caucus” was “one hundred fold worse than any mere party convention.” And as far as party conventions were concerned, when the Americans had one in Philadelphia in 1855, they refused to take a stand against abolitionism but did call for the maintenance of the Union as “the paramount political good,” thus trampling upon state sovereignty within the Union that, according to Yancey, had already abandoned the Constitution.28

As time went on, of course, Yancey finally realized the potential of the Republican Party. But when asked if the election of a Republican to the presidency would provide grounds for secession, the Fire-Eater replied that resisting a legal, constitutional election of any president would prove the worst conceivable reason to secede. In that case, he said, “I am asked to put myself in the position of a

traitor or a rebel,” and if federal forces used arms to “put down the revolution, [I would] be hung.” By the end of 1859, Yancey as well as most Fire-Eaters, set their sites on preventing Stephen A. Douglas from receiving the nomination of the Democrats for president the next year because of his opposition to the fraudulent proslavery Lecompton Constitution in Kansas. At the Democratic convention in Charleston, after lambasting Douglas in particular and northern Democrats in general for infidelity to the South, Yancey took aim at Seward. Yancey told northern delegates to stand by the Constitution, to go before their people and “Make it a question of Union of Disunion between you and Sewardism,” and to tell them that the westward expansion of slavery was “an abstraction with you, but a practical thing in the South. Tell them the South cannot exist in a government when dishonored.” Of course, Yancey’s stance against the Douglas Democrats and his unprecedented support by scores of fellow delegates split the party in two, and soon two Democrats, Douglas from the North and Breckinridge from the South, received nominations. And then so, too, did Lincoln.

Among prominent secessionists, Yancey stood alone through most of 1860 in sincerely believing that a Breckinridge victory and the safety of the South in the Union remained possible, and he therefore undertook a remarkable and audacious speaking tour of the United States. Yancey often referred to Lincoln and Seward as though they were running mates. In Richmond, Virginia, Yancey took aim at Lincoln on September 21, attacking Lincoln for his House Divided Speech, in which Lincoln accused the South of plotting to foist slavery upon the North. Yancey insisted that all the South desired was to be left alone, and then, referring to Lincoln’s paramilitary marching clubs, the Wide-Awakes, thundered, “No man is more wide awake than he who . . . determines, as far as God gives him power, that nobody shall aggress on him,” and reminded his audience that this spirit animated the founding fathers to fight off the greatest power in the world. Then Yancey set his sights on Seward and explained that the true disunionists in the country were those who believed in a higher law than the Constitution, and that it was Seward and his ilk who had proclaimed an “irrepressible war” on slavery and sought to “give freedom to everything in human shape upon the face of the earth.” He then asked if either Lincoln or Seward would stop another John Brown-like raid upon the South, and answered

himself by asserting that, to the contrary, the Wide Awakes formed an advance guard to force the South into subjugation. 30

In Wilmington, Delaware, Yancey’s oratory reached new depths. He argued falsely—as had Stephen Douglas—that Lincoln desired “to elevate the negro by depressing the white man to his level. . . . We stand upon the dark platform of southern slavery, and all we ask is to be allowed to keep it to ourselves. Let us do that, and we will not let the negro insult you by coming here and marrying your daughters.” 31

By October 10 Yancey had arrived in New York, the day after voters of Pennsylvania had just provided decisive margins of victories to Republicans in state elections, indicating to many that the Keystone State would help bring victory to Lincoln three weeks later. But Yancey still believed that Breckinridge and Lane could win. Continuing his speaking tour, Yancey spoke that night in the very Cooper Institute Hall in which Lincoln had demanded Republicans stand by their platform despite threats “of destruction to the Government [or] of dungeons to ourselves.” Overcoming a loud chorus of boos and hisses, Yancey declared that the only irrepressible conflict was between Seward’s doctrines and the Constitution and, with a reference to northern intransigence in the face of federal fugitive slave laws, demanded, “Enlarge your jails and penitentiaries, re-enforce and strengthen your police force, and keep the irrepressible conflict fellows from stealing our negroes.” Yancey predicted that Lincoln would attempt to nullify the Fugitive Slave Law and abolish slavery in Washington, D.C., and in federal military installations throughout the South. A man in the crowd demanded, “Who says so?” Yancey snapped back, “The abolitionists and black Republicans say so.” He detailed a grandiose plan in which Lincoln would use presidential patronage to build up an abolition party in every southern state and have his emissaries “percolate between master [and] slave as water between the crevices of rocks underground,” not to mention poison drinking water with strychnine. The Wide Awakes would finish the job, “carrying it out in the darkness of the night, with torch to burn and destroy” and urging slaves to rise up against whites in race war and genocide. 32 When pressed by many in the crowd about

32. Ibid., 262. For designs of Republican Party on the South see David Brown, Southern Outcast: Hinton Rowan Helper and the Impending Crisis of the South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006).
what he would do should Lincoln win, Yancey tried to evade a direct
answer, but in stark contrast to Ruffin and the Rhett’s finally offered,
“I hope to God that . . . will not happen. I am doing my effort to avert	hat awful calamity.” But if he did have to decide, he would make
that decision among his fellow Alabamians. “You in New York have
nothing to do with it.”33

Yancey carried similar messages to Faneuil Hall in Boston, to Albany,
Syracuse and Rochester, to Cincinnati, Louisville, and Nashville, and
finally to New Orleans by October 29. There in the Crescent City he
described in detail the fate that awaited the South under a Lincoln
administration. Yancey asserted that Lincoln would send more John
Browns to invade the South, appoint Republicans to ports, military
bases, and post offices to bring with them the “irrepressible conflict,”
and if white Southerners cried out to Lincoln for protection, “you will
get very much that kid of protection which wolves bestow on lambs.”
Almost immediately this policy would weaken, then soon destroy,
slavery in the upper South, delivering those states to the menacing
North. At best Lincoln’s stand against slave expansion would soon
create enough free territories and states that the North could pass
any constitutional amendment they desired, including emancipation.
Quickly or slowly, Yancey vowed, slavery faced its doom under Lin-
coln. And finally Yancey himself realized that Lincoln’s election was
certain, again explaining, “We cannot resist the inauguration of Lin-
coln, conducted according to the form of law . . . . It would be treason.”
But, Yancey now added, “there remains the right of self-preservation,”
the natural right “to save ourselves from a government which endeav-
ors to crush us” and to create a new one.34

Back home in Montgomery to cast his ballot for Breckinridge and
Lane, Yancey confided to a friend, “I shall trod the path before me
fearlessly—though filled with anxiety. I have done my duty by the
Union—I shall do it by my state.” A few days later at a bipartisan meet-
ing held to plan the course of action for Alabama, some questioned
whether Alabama should secede even if many slave states remained
in the Union. Yancey replied, “Shall we remain [in the Union] and all
be slaves? Shall we wait to bear our share of the common dishonor?
God forbid!” And even if disunion resulted in war, Yancey declared
that rather than live under a Lincoln government that “places me
in a position inferior to the Northern free negro,” he would rather
gather a corps of brave men who “however few in number, would

34. Walther, Yancey, 270–71; New Orleans Delta, October 30, 1860.
find a grave which the world would recognize, my countrymen, as a modern Thermopylae.”35 Yancey would have his way.

One particular editorial by the Rhetts in October 1860 demonstrated that they fully understood the key issues of the day, as well as why, to a degree, it did not matter whether Seward or Lincoln carried the banner of their party. The northern people, according to the Rhetts, “have manifested their determination to set up a sectional and fanatical domination over the South . . . . They have established a despotism; and it matters not who wields it, mildly or sternly—it should be thrown off.”36 Lincoln’s election signaled “a judgment and a feeling against slavery,” and his election was a manifestation of that antipathy.37 Lincoln’s North was dynamic, filled with internal conflicts and disenfranchised peoples clamoring for equality and calling for sweeping social changes in the name of liberty. By 1860 the collective white Southern mind had closed tight regarding serious debates about slavery and their self-styled and very much self-created, rigid, hierarchical slave society, one both literally and figuratively whipped, beaten, and shackled into submission.38 And our country paid dearly for that.

35. Montgomery Weekly Post, November 7, 1860; Yancey to John W. Forney, November 8, 1860; Ferdinand J. Deer Autograph Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

36. Mercury, October 13, 1860; see also Mercury, July 30, 1860.
