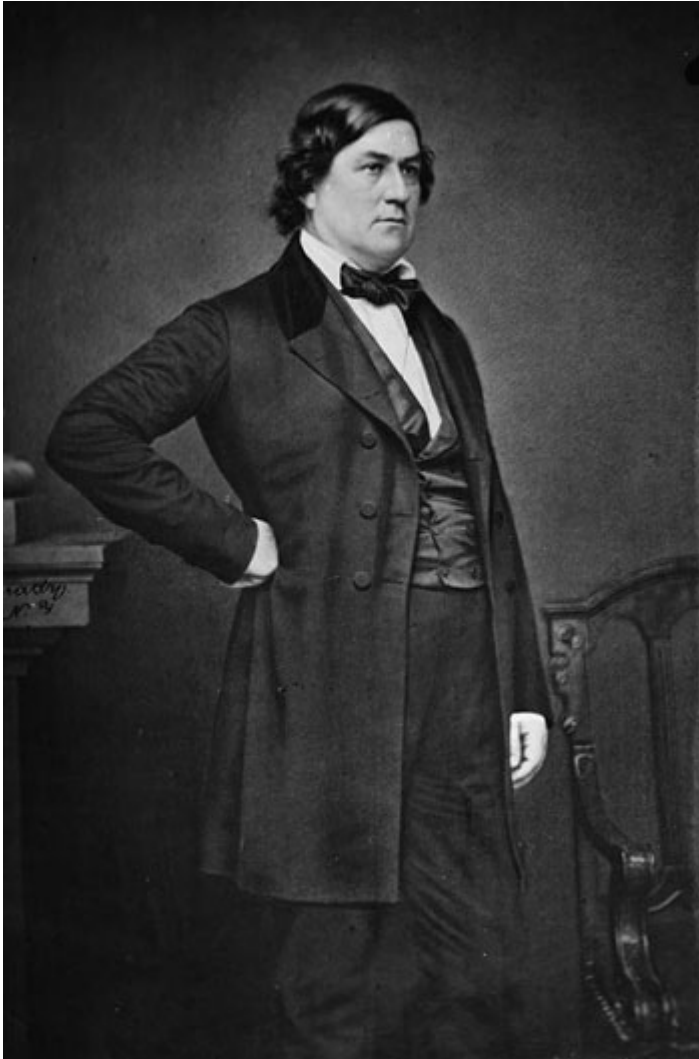


Arsenal of Empire: Southern Slaveholders and the U.S. Military in the 1850s



Southern Slaveholders and the U.S. Military in the 1850s

In late February 1854, Virginia Senator Robert Mercer Taliaferro Hunter rose from his seat to speak on the Kansas-Nebraska bill. Among the augustly named men who populated the political leadership of the antebellum South, Hunter cut no exceptional figure (fig. 1). He had fought no duels, killed no Mexicans, and, relative to Robert Barnwell Rhett or William Lowndes Yancey, he ate very little fire. With his heavy brows and massive head, thick torso and plain, faintly bedraggled waistcoat, Senator Hunter's appearance suggested unpretentious dignity, to his friends, or vegetable torpor, to his opponents. "It is unfortunate," mused his sympathetic son, "that all of Pa's compliments to his mind are the reverse to his person." Even these compliments, such as they were, tended to have a quality of equivocation. "I think he is the sanest,

if not the wisest, man in our new-born Confederacy," Mary Chestnut, who liked him, wrote seven years later.

But across the 1850s, Hunter's lumpish sanity earned him a larger share of national influence than many of his more charismatic rivals. As the senior senator from the South's most populous state, chairman of the Finance Committee, and a key member of the formidable F Street Mess—a Washington boarding hopoliuse that served as unofficial headquarters for pro-slavery politics in the capital—Hunter was one of the most powerful men in the Senate. And during the fierce sectional debate over slavery in the Kansas-Nebraska territory, it was the Virginian's sturdy and conventionally Southern instincts, no less than his seniority or chairmanship, that made his speech worth hearing. Neither a flame-breathing radical nor an ambivalent moderate, Hunter was fully aware of his influence: a "triarch of the slavery party in Congress," one contemporary called him; "the very head and front of the States-rights" men in the Senate, noted another. When he rose to speak on February 24, 1854, colleagues on both sides of the sectional divide had good cause to listen.

As befitted his talents and reputation, Hunter began his remarks by dutifully enumerating what were by then already familiar Southern arguments in favor of the Kansas-Nebraska bill. He reviewed the political history of slavery debates since 1820, adverting briefly to the South's patriotic spirit of self-sacrifice, while declining to dwell at too great a length on the North's monstrous inflexibility. He clambered into a thicket of constitutional law and emerged from his parsings with the not-entirely-unexpected discovery that Congress, in fact, possessed only limited control over the organization of new territories, and lacked the legal power to forbid slavery in any of them. He took notice of the latest demographic trends, as reported by the 1850 census, and offered the comforting observation that even if slavery were extended to every state in the Union, the rapid increase of the white population in the North meant that black bondage was very unlikely to overwhelm the free states.

Near the end of his 90-minute speech, however, Hunter ventured onto less familiar ground. Without retracting any of his earlier declamations about the urgency of the bill at hand, or the seriousness of the constitutional crisis, the senator paused to consider the entire Kansas-Nebraska controversy from an international perspective. Suddenly, he found its significance wanting. "We stand on the eve of a general European war," he noted, referring to ongoing tensions in the Crimea between Britain, France, Russia, and Ottoman Turkey. With these great powers poised to collide in battle, and the "commerce of the world" wavering uncertainly, Hunter asked, would the United States let itself be "distracted and divided here at home upon the miserable, pitiful question as to the mode in which a given number of slaves are to be divided between the country east and that west of the Mississippi river?" Rather than engage in this petty bickering, Hunter declared, the nation should be "consolidating our columns for the great march which is before us"—the larger international struggle that would define the rest of the nineteenth century.



Fig. 1. "Robert Mercer Taliaferro Hunter, Secretary of State of the Confederate States Government (1861-1862)," photograph taken between 1861-1865. Courtesy of the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

As he talked on, it emerged that even this very earthbound Virginian—"he resembles some quiet unpretending farmer," wrote one journalist, "who might have come up from a rural district, to sit in a State legislature"—was capable of viewing minor American squabbles from the magnificent heights of global politics. The foundation of those politics, Hunter believed, was the inevitable expansion of "the Anglo-American population" all across the earth. "It is plain that in the course of this progress, ours must rule all inferior races." The fate of slavery in a specific western province, no matter how it was decided, could not dislodge this great fact.

But while Hunter approved, in the most general sense, of all "Anglo" expansion, he was sharply critical of Great Britain's imperial policy: the British, he proclaimed, too often appeared "amongst nations composed of different races as intermeddlers and architects of ruin." The United States must pursue a different course. In contrast to Britain's emancipation project in the West Indies, and its further attempts to "Africanize" Cuba, America's first duty abroad was to preserve the international racial order. "The welfare of neighboring nations which are composed of different races," he argued, "depends upon the possession of power by that which is the superior of them all." American respect for "the natural relation of the races"—that is, black slavery—offered the best hope for stability, prosperity, and peace in the troubled "land of flowers."

Why, in the midst of this bitter sectional debate, did Virginia's senior senator guide the conversation towards foreign affairs? How did a speech that began in Kansas end up in the Caribbean, by way of Crimea? A cynic might answer

that Hunter sought to transcend domestic strife with vague, global evocations of national purpose. But why, then, would the senator expound at such length about the spread of slavery across the hemisphere—rhetoric that was sure to nettle, if not inflame, his Northern colleagues? In fact Hunter's speech illuminates the continuing importance of international politics, even amid the darkest moments of America's mid-century crisis. Few chronologies in U.S. political history are as familiar as the one that precedes the breakup of the Union. The Compromise of 1850, the Nebraska Act, "Bleeding Kansas," the caning of Charles Sumner, the Dred Scott decision, John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, the election of Abraham Lincoln—the narrative of disunion is as colorful and complex as it is closely studied. The theatrical intensity of these events, however, has an unfortunate tendency to obscure the importance of what was happening outside national borders. And yet as Hunter's remarks suggest, even the most dramatic sectional clashes unfolded in a political atmosphere regularly informed by, and strongly sensitive to, the larger universe of world affairs.

Hunter's approach to the Kansas-Nebraska question was structured not only by the conservative creed of states' rights, but by a keen interest in international commerce, foreign relations, and the global spread of empire. His irritation at the "pitiful" scale of the Nebraska debate, when compared to these great questions, grew out of a worldview profoundly uncomfortable with the idea of Southern provincialism. In national affairs, Hunter well understood, the slaveholding South played a part that was small and likely to grow smaller. Population growth in the North, not to mention the spread of anti-slavery feeling, was making the South a permanent and embattled minority. In this domestic context, a slaveholder's political tactics were bound to be both conservative and defensive—reliant on the narrowest possible readings of history, law, and the Constitution. Hunter himself had offered these readings in the first hour of his speech. But from an international point of view, such narrowness was obnoxious and even embarrassing.

For Hunter, as for many other Southern leaders during the 1850s, the global "march of civilization" itself depended on slave labor. The economic failure of British and other European emancipations, together with the world's surging demand for tropical products, demonstrated the international vitality of black servitude. Grandiose Southern rhetoric about "King Cotton," of course, was the most audible consequence of this view. But as most Southern leaders recognized, slavery's empire was far larger than the merely American kingdom of cotton. In 1850, as part of another sectional speech that soared well beyond national borders, Hunter had asked about the consequences if "African slavery had been abolished all over the world—in the colonies of France and Spain, in Brazil, in the United States...? I ask how such a policy would have operated upon the world at large? No cotton! No sugar! But little coffee, and less tobacco! Why, how many people would thus have been stricken rudely and at once from the census of the world?"

If slavery was growing weaker within the domestic councils of American

politics, it was only growing stronger on the world stage. Global commerce, economic growth—western civilization itself, powerful Southerners believed—proceeded atop a foundation of coercive agriculture. Hunter's vision of a ceaseless and unstoppable Anglo advance was also a vision of rapidly expanding black slavery. As the "great Caucasian hive" made its way across Latin America, "we shall have to establish some law that would respect the true relations of the races." Black bondsmen, in other words, must travel in tow with the great white horde. In this sense the slaveholding South stood on the vanguard of international progress. As the home base for an institution that could remake the tropical world, and a successful laboratory for the inevitable race-ordering that would soon spread across the hemisphere, the South occupied a position of particular significance.

And yet for all of his pro-slavery enthusiasm, Hunter retained a national frame of mind. "When I look to the high mission upon which we are sent—the great destiny which is within our reach," he insisted, almost peevishly, "I can scarcely feel the patience which becomes me in dealing with those who have interposed such obstacles." The entire Kansas-Nebraska crisis was a mere blip on his imperial radar. Despite the powerful evidence of sectional discord—evidence which he himself had cited in the first half of his speech—Hunter still believed that the United States could summon its "united energies" to play its great part on the world stage. "The empire of the seas," he announced, "the all-mastering influence of a great example, and the foremost place in the march of civilization, are the prizes to which we may justly aspire." These lofty goals could only be achieved through a domestic and a foreign policy that respected the larger racial truths wrought by Anglo-American global dominance.

In its confidence about the future global roles of both section and nation, Hunter's speech reveals the surprising extent to which late antebellum slaveholding leaders—even the most conventional and conservative—remained committed to an ambitious vision of American international power. The domestic battles of the decade, for all their corrosive intensity, could not entirely destroy slaveholders' faith in the ability of the United States to advance the interests of the South in the wider world. Having enjoyed proximate access to U.S. foreign policy since the Revolution, slaveholders were not quick to abandon it in the 1850s. Historians in recent decades have gradually come to reckon with Southern imperial interest in Latin America, and especially the frantic desire to obtain new slave territory through negotiated purchase or armed filibuster. In fact the South's aggressive "pro-slavery nationalism," as one scholar has labeled it, sank even deeper into American politics than we have realized—and helped build complex, intimate relationships that we are only beginning to uncover.

One particularly close bond connected Southern elites to the political leadership of the American armed forces. While the idea of a Southern "martial spirit" has long animated debates in cultural studies and military history, scholars have largely neglected the South's central role in the politics of

late antebellum army and navy reform. The bare fact that elite slaveholders led a major buildup of the U.S. Army and U.S. Navy, all across the 1850s, rests uneasily in a political narrative that culminates with Southern secession from the Union. And yet it is the inescapable truth, clarified by statistics and confirmed by events.

Between 1850 and 1860, men from slave states served atop the War Department for all eleven years, and atop the Navy Department for eight. Southerners chaired the House Naval Affairs committee for eight of the twelve major sessions of Congress during the decade; they chaired the House Military Affairs committee for nine of those sessions. In the Senate, the numbers are twelve of twelve for Naval Affairs, and six of twelve for Military Affairs. But Southern participation in military politics was not a matter of quietly filling committee seats. These men sought and achieved major changes in the structure, size, and capacity of the U.S. military. Led by executive and legislative officers like Secretary of War and Military Affairs Chairman Jefferson Davis (fig. 2), the American armed forces grew to their largest-ever peacetime levels, occupying a historically unprecedented share of the federal budget.

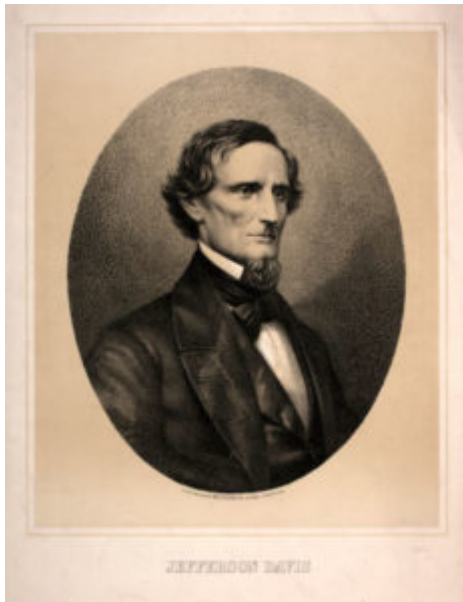


Fig. 2. "Jefferson Davis," lithograph, tinted (33 x 25.5 cm.), published by Blelock & Co., New Orleans, Louisiana (between 1866 and 1868). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

All this was done within the frenzied domestic politics of a dissolving Union. Even as Congress chafed and Kansas bled, "sectional" Southern leaders like Davis remained deeply invested in national military power. Indeed, the future Confederate commander-in-chief was perhaps the one man most responsible for late antebellum military reforms. Such muscular nationalism on the part of such devoted sectionalists is impossible to understand without coming to terms with the larger international worldview that Robert Hunter sketched out in his Kansas-Nebraska speech. As Virginia and Mississippi slaveholders within the

American Union, Hunter and Davis genuinely feared the consequences of a strengthened central government hostile to their state institutions. But as Americans in the wider Atlantic World, they were surpassingly confident in both the international power of slavery and the international power of the United States. From this wider perspective, the U.S. military was not slavery's enemy, but one of its most essential friends.

Unlike the somewhat lethargically steady Robert Hunter, Jefferson Davis was first and foremost a man of action. A West Point graduate, Davis left the Army in the 1830s, built a reputation for sizzling states' rights oratory in Mississippi, and then rejoined the military when war broke out with Mexico in 1846. Heroically wounded at the battle of Buena Vista, he made a quick return to politics and soon established himself as one of the Deep South's most vigorous defenders of slavery. Like Hunter, the more well-traveled Davis believed deeply in the vitality of black servitude beyond American borders. "[T]he products of Mexico," he informed Congress in 1850, "have dwindled into comparative insignificance since the abolition of slavery. And it is also on that account that the prosperity of Central and Southern America has declined, and that it has been sustained in Brazil, where slavery has continued." Over the rest of the decade, Davis would remain equally committed to both American power and hemispheric slavery.

Also like Hunter, Davis occupied a position of notable influence in Washington. Named President Franklin Pierce's Secretary of War in 1853, the Mississippi veteran was the most highly ranked Southerner within an administration devoted to Southern interests. Friendly contemporaries thought Davis was "the very soul of President Pierce's cabinet"; the anti-slavery press imagined that he "sustains the border ruffians [in Kansas], countenances the Cuban filibusters, wields President Pierce ... commands the army and navy, and, *a la plantation*, whips [Secretary of State William] Marcy and [Attorney General Caleb] Cushing up to their dirty work." In truth, Davis did not rule over the Pierce administration like a plantation overseer, but there is little doubt that he was in a strong position to carry out a program of military reform.

Secretary of War Davis made it clear that his most fundamental goal was to expand the size of the national army. In the last four decades, his first annual report observed, the United States "has increased in population more than eighteen millions, and in territory a million of square miles," but "the military peace establishment of this country has been augmented by less than four thousand men." The current troop count was "manifestly inadequate." In his report, Davis was careful to insist that he did not want to build up a "large military establishment" for its own sake. The ingrained legacy of the Revolutionary era, which distrusted the very notion of any standing army whatsoever, made this disclaimer a necessary rhetorical tactic for all military advocates in the early nineteenth century. But it did not prevent Davis from asking for significantly more officers and more army units. "[T]he experience of the last forty years," he argued, "has demonstrated the wisdom of maintaining, in peace, a military establishment that is capable of the greatest

expansion in war.”

It was not until the summer of 1854 that Secretary Davis made any real headway in his effort at army expansion. Half a continent away from Washington, near Fort Laramie in the Nebraska Territory, a dispute between white migrants and Sioux Indians had exploded into violence. On August 19, 1854, U.S. Army second lieutenant John Lawrence Grattan led a small detachment of soldiers into the Sioux camp to apprehend an Indian charged with killing a migrant’s cow. Young, totally inexperienced in Indian affairs, and possibly drunk, Grattan showed little concern that the military lacked the formal authority to adjudicate such local quarrels. He arrived in a belligerent mood and demanded the accused culprit be produced at once; when Sioux leaders refused his request, tensions mounted. With groups of Indian warriors maneuvering around the Army band, a nervous American soldier fired first into a crowd of Sioux. The firefight quickly became a rout. Heavily outnumbered from the start, Grattan and his 29 volunteers were all killed.

News of what was soon called the “Fort Laramie Massacre” set off a storm of protest across the country. In Washington, the Pierce administration responded with vigor. Immediately organizing a punitive expedition against the Sioux, Davis also seized on the frontier bloodshed as evidence for his larger argument that the Army needed more men. The Secretary’s public campaign began in the press. As early as October, an essay composed by the “Friends of the Administration” appeared in the *Charleston Mercury*, lamenting the “late melancholy annihilation of Grattan and his followers,” and demanding that the Army grow in size to prevent future conflicts.

Davis worked hard to keep the administration’s pro-military talking points consistent. When Pierce’s official newspaper organ, the *Washington Union*, attempted to alleviate the War Department’s responsibility for Indian attacks by discounting the possibility that there were not enough troops in the West, the Secretary reacted at once. Writing directly to the *Union*’s editor, Davis upbraided him for seeming to credit the idea that “there was no lack of troops for the protection of the frontier.” Such a mistaken notion, he declared, “may be an embarrassment to the Administration in its efforts to obtain the necessary increase of the Army.” If the paper covered Indian affairs in the future, Davis promised that the War Department would happily provide information underlining “the propriety of increasing the number of mounted troops as well as those of other arms.” The correction came swiftly: the very next day, the *Union* ran another column on “Indian Massacres,” this time making it clear that the puny size of the Army was in fact a danger to American settlers in the West. The Secretary of War “must have more troops at his disposal, or the sad intelligence must continue to reach us of the butcheries and violations of women and children by the savages.” Thereafter the administration’s pro-military propaganda machine functioned in rather better order.

When Davis delivered his second annual report to Congress in December, he

remained on message. The United States, the Secretary wrote, possessed just 11,000 men to cover 10,000 miles, in land inhabited by 40,000 Indian warriors. "That this force is entirely inadequate to purposes for which we maintain any standing army, needs no demonstration; and I again take occasion to urge the necessity of such immediate increase as will at least give some degree of security to our Indian frontier." Davis described the bloodshed in Nebraska as "the result of a deliberately formed plan, prompted by a knowledge of the weakness of the garrison at Fort Laramie ..." It was vital to the administration's military expansion program that the Laramie incident be viewed in this light. Along with his ally Adjutant General Samuel Cooper—who would later serve as the highest-ranking officer in the Confederate Army—Davis worked overtime to suppress competing accounts of Lieutenant Grattan's encounter with the Sioux.

On Capitol Hill, Davis's army proposals quickly ran into political controversy. The same Thirty-fourth Congress that had just witnessed the furious sectional clashes over slavery in Kansas now took sides in a passionate and wide-ranging debate about Indian relations, racial identity, and the military responsibilities of empire. What was striking about this debate, however, was that most leading Southerners now argued on behalf of federal power. Slaveholders like Robert Hunter, who only months before had denied the government's authority to do so much as regulate slavery in the territories, now spoke loudly in defense of the national army, and insisted that America's central military establishment must reflect its international clout.

Sam Houston set the tone with a long speech that indicted U.S. Indian policy across the decades. Although he hailed from Texas, the iconoclastic Houston was an ambivalent Southerner who had opposed the extension of slavery into Kansas. Now his January 1855 speech demonstrated that he also held serious doubts about the nature of U.S. imperial power on the North American continent. Almost every instance of Indian aggression in American history, Houston alleged, "has been induced or provoked by the white man, either by acts of direct aggression upon the Indians, or by his own incaution." The Fort Laramie incident was no exception to this rule. Houston rejected the administration's call for four new Army regiments, avowing that he preferred to civilize the Indians rather than simply exterminate them.

The response to Houston's heresy was swift and furious. Following several speeches by outraged Southern senators, Pierce administration ally Augustus Dodge of Iowa declared that Houston's position smacked of the "the carping spirit of Abolition." Like Africans, Indians were decreed by God "to give way to the Anglo-Saxon," and "that philosophy which blubbers over it is sickly indeed." It was no wonder, then, that Houston had "opposed every increase of our military force." For Dodge, it was vital that the administration receive its troop requests, not only to safeguard the frontier, but to reject the radical abolitionist logic that looked unkindly on the U.S. Army.

No Southern legislator quite replicated the raw simplicity of Dodge's pro-

slavery, pro-military position. But the lines of battle were clearly drawn. Anti-slavery Northerners like Charles Sumner of Massachusetts and William Seward of New York voted unanimously against the four-regiment bill. Pro-slavery Southerners, meanwhile, played a critical role in guiding the military expansion plan through Congress. In the House, acting Military Affairs chairman Charles Faulkner of Virginia worked closely with Secretary of War Davis to shepherd the four-regiment bill through committee and onto the floor. In the Senate, pro-slavery leaders like Robert Hunter, Stephen Mallory of Florida, and Albert Gallatin Brown of Mississippi all spoke enthusiastically in favor of military increase. None of them seemed too concerned about either the dangers of a "standing army" or the concentration of federal power in Washington. Even after the ordeal of Kansas-Nebraska seemed to cast a dark cloud over the future of the Union, slaveholding elites largely retained their confidence in the imperial muscle of the U.S. Army. "If we will stretch from ocean to ocean," declared George Badger of North Carolina, "we must necessarily multiply our military means."

There was no question that Southern leaders saw the process of American expansion in essentially international and imperial terms. As part of his rejection of military force, Houston had likened westward settlement to European imperial doings in Asia: all across the world, he observed, advanced nations were "seeking to civilize and christianize men on the banks of the Ganges, or the Jordan, or in Burrampootah"—why should the United States not do the same with its western indigenes? More powerful and more representative Southerners accepted Houston's imperial analogy but rejected his "sentimental" conclusions. Jefferson Davis, for instance, drew his understanding of frontier deployment from the lessons of European colonialism. His first annual report had announced a particular vision for the role of the military in places like Nebraska, Oregon, and New Mexico. The wide open West, Davis declared, was simply too vast to protect in its entirety. Instead, he proposed concentrating troops in large numbers at "commanding positions" where they might intimidate the native population through striking exhibitions of power. This vision of military deployment—which implicitly acknowledged the U.S. Army as an occupying force in fundamentally hostile territory—had much in common with European experiences in Africa and Asia.

In his 1856 report, Davis made the link explicit: "The occupation of Algeria by the French presents a case having much parallelism to that of our western frontier, and affords us the opportunity of profiting by their experience." French policy "leaves the desert in the possession of the nomadic tribes"; outposts were established on the limit of settled areas, and fortified with "strong garrisons," capable of dispatching large "marching columns" into native territory. For Davis, French colonialism in Algeria was not a moral blot, but an instructive example of imperial military organization. In the absence of the much larger Army he would have liked to build, this French plan—dependent on vigorous displays of force to subdue a racially inferior population—made practical sense. The Secretary of War refused to "blubber" over the fate of either Africans or Indians held in the grip of a superior power. Betraying no

qualms about the parallel between the United States' democratic manifest destiny in North America, and France's imperial subjugation of North Africa, Davis was unsentimentally satisfied to league his nation, and his army, on the side of empire.

A vision of the United States as a great international power, indeed, shaped the whole of Davis's activities in the War Department. Besides his plans for troop increase and frontier deployment, the Secretary suggested reorganizing Army bureaucracy on the model of the Prussian general staff, sent a delegation of officers to Europe to study munitions and military administration in the Crimean War, and even waged a lonely battle to bring camels into Army service (the animals, had, after all, been used with great success by French and British empires in the desert regions of Africa and the Near East). Like Robert Hunter, Davis understood the United States to be a great nation among other great nations. With a massive and growing population, a newly won continental empire to manage, and commercial interests in every corner of the world, the United States in the mid-1850s was well on its way to a triumphant role in global affairs. Whatever the damage that sectional strife had done to American domestic politics, Davis evidently believed the country's international destiny was as grand as ever.

In naval affairs, too, Southern leaders expressed their confidence in America's global position. The North Carolinian James Dobbin, Davis's counterpart as Secretary of the Navy under Franklin Pierce, worked strenuously to expand the U.S. Navy between 1853 and 1857. To maintain "our proper and elevated rank among the great Powers of the world," Dobbin urged, the United States must build up both its coastal defenses and overseas fleets. Over the course of the 1850s, Dobbin and his predominantly Southern allies in Congress succeeded in adding thirty new steam vessels to the Navy.

Along with Robert Hunter and Jefferson Davis, Southern naval advocates argued that U.S. sea power was a vital weapon both to protect slavery overseas and to manage the intractable racial problems associated with imperial expansion. "It is *manifest destiny* which is bearing the red man of the country westward upon a receding wave into the great ocean of annihilation," observed Hunter's Virginia colleague Thomas Bocock, the House Chairman of Naval Affairs, in 1854. "It is *manifest destiny* which will ever make a strong vigorous and healthful race overrun and crush out a weak and effete one ... All these considerations urge on us the necessity of preparation ... And there is no mode so appropriate as a proper increase of our Navy." In fact, neither Hunter nor Bocock were spread-eagle expansionists who supported every possible American territorial annexation. But even these sectionally stalwart Virginia conservatives saw the international future of the United States in essentially imperial terms. In that light, for all their worries about the stability of the Union, they believed that a larger U.S. armed forces enhanced rather than endangered the security of both slavery and the South.

Their collective achievement in military policy, over the course of the Pierce

administration, was not insignificant. In his four years as Secretary of War, Davis oversaw an Army that grew from under 11,000 to nearly 16,000 active troops—hardly an overwhelming total, but still a relative increase of almost fifty percent. The four-regiment bill of 1854, which added over 4,000 men all by itself, was responsible for the largest total one-year army expansion in the peacetime history of the country. None of these increases, of course, meant that the American armed forces, on land or at sea, approached the strength of the leading European powers. But in relative terms their growth was considerable, as military appropriations figures show. In 1852, the year before Davis took control of the War Department, the Army budget stood at \$8.5 million; by 1857, the year he left, that figure had risen to \$19.2 million. Naval spending, meanwhile, jumped from \$8.9 million in 1852 to \$12.7 million in 1857. Together, major military expenditures in the same period rose over \$14 million in total, and climbed from 39 percent of the total federal budget to over 47 percent.

The sectional partisanship that disfigured much of the domestic politics of the 1850s did not fatally undermine military expansion. Defensive Southerners often brandished strict constructionist rhetoric to block internal improvements, western homesteads, and, of course, attempts to settle the slavery question in the territories. As the sectional crisis mounted, such domestic politics of nation-building were viewed with increasing skepticism by nervous slaveholders. Their doubts about the spread of centralized domestic power, always serious, were only heightened by the anti-slavery turn in Northern politics. In both an ideological and practical sense, the South's leadership was less committed than ever to building a national community at home. Yet in military and foreign policy, more often than not, Southerners were to be found in the vanguard of federal growth, activity, and enterprise. Beyond army and navy expansion, Southerners in Congress and in the press led a successful campaign for the reform and enlargement of the U.S. diplomatic corps. An 1855 bill, the brainchild of Louisiana representative John Perkins, increased the number of ministers abroad, added a secretary of legation to each mission, and raised diplomatic and consular salaries around the world. Only six years later, Perkins would chair Louisiana's state secession convention, but for now, he argued, America's "great advances in wealth and power" demanded large-scale State Department reforms. "The age of entire national isolation has passed," Perkins crowed. A powerful, modern, interconnected government like the United States required an army, navy, and diplomatic system to match.

This concurrent enthusiasm for diplomatic reform is revealing, because for all their zeal about army and navy expansion, few Southerners sought to involve the country in war. Jefferson Davis might demand unprecedented military appropriations and deliver aggressive speeches about American dominance of the Caribbean, but in the key moment of 1854 he refused to stand up for a Cuban filibustering attempt that might involve the United States in a serious international conflict. In the other diplomatic imbroglios of the 1850s—generally over British interference in Central America—a few Southern hotspurs were quick to urge military action, but in every case they were

overruled by a more cautious and more powerful Southern mainstream. Leading slaveholders, in other words, understood that military power was desirable, even if military action was not. A suitably strong armed establishment, declared Robert Hunter in 1856, added to the American "sense of security; it adds to the respect which foreign nations may feel for us; and I confess that I desire to see this country placed in such a condition that no foreign Power shall ever direct a gun in menace upon our coast without feeling that they do it under the responsibility of aiming at those who have guns enough pointed in return..." For like-minded Southern leaders, peace, strength, and slavery were mutually reinforcing. A powerful, well-armed American state, at ease with Europe and dominant in its own hemisphere—this was the surest possible guarantee for both the South and its slave institutions.

As they looked around the globe in the 1850s, Southern slaveholders saw everywhere vigorous and well-armed European states expanding their influence at the expense of supposed racial inferiors. "The nations of the world are engaged in the great race for position and for empire," declared the New Orleans editor James D.B. DeBow—Great Britain in China, India, and Australia; France in North and West Africa; Russia in Central Asia. Whatever their individual opinions about each of these ventures, the powerful Southerners who backed military expansion saw America's international destiny in much the same terms. Black slavery, too, fit seamlessly into this overarching imperial paradigm. Within that model of global development, the U.S. Army was an essential tool—the most convenient physical arm of a larger world system that upheld the twin principles of white racial domination and imperial expansion, all the way from Algeria to New Mexico. Even the fiercest quarrels between North and South, slaveholding leaders trusted, could not overturn this great truth.

The persistence of their faith ultimately exposed Southern militarists to no shortage of cruel ironies after the fracture of the Union. Jefferson Davis's push for the adoption of troop regiments and better rifle technology left the U.S. Army in stronger shape to rally its forces against the Southern Confederacy in 1861. The naval shipbuilding projects of the late 1850s provided a significant boost for the North's blockade of Confederate ports during the Civil War. The strength of Southern confidence in American firepower abroad recoiled backward to help destroy slaveholding society at home. For much of the 1850s, however, that confidence survived intact. The domestic cords of Union might be slowly snapping, one by one, but the South's belief in American international power was still, perhaps, the sturdiest remaining bond.

Further Reading:

The best and most recent biography of Jefferson Davis is William J. Cooper Jr., *Jefferson Davis, American* (New York, 2000). Davis's activities in the War Department are most thoroughly reviewed in John Muldowny, "The Administration of Jefferson Davis as Secretary of War," PhD diss., Yale University, 1959. Robert Hunter awaits a definitive modern biography, but useful information on

his political career can be found in John E. Fisher, "Statesman of a Lost Cause: The Career of R.M.T. Hunter, 1859-1887," PhD diss., University of Virginia, 1968.

On the "Fort Laramie Massacre" and the Pierce administration's military response, see Paul N. Beck, *The First Sioux War: The Grattan Fight and Blue Water Creek, 1854-1856* (Lanham, Md., 2004). A valuable discussion of the antebellum U.S. Army more generally can be found in Russell F. Weigley, *History of the United States Army* (Bloomington, Ind., 1984). For works that reach beyond the debate over the South's "military tradition" and attempt to identify political connections between slaveholding elites and the the U.S. armed forces, see Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of the United States Government's Relations to Slavery* (New York, 2001); John Schroeder, *Shaping a Maritime Empire: The Commercial and Diplomatic Role of the American Navy, 1829-1861* (Westport, Conn., 1985); and my article, "Slavery and American Sea Power: The Navalist Impulse in the Antebellum South," *Journal of Southern History*, 77 (May 2011).

Several important scholarly treatments of the international, modernizing, and state-building impulses among the antebellum slaveholding elite have appeared in recent years. For a stimulating exploration of "proslavery nationalism" across the antebellum decades, see Robert E. Bonner, *Mastering America: Southern Slaveholders and the Crisis of American Nationhood* (New York, 2009). On the political, cultural, and economic ties between the slaveholding South and other hemispheric slave societies, see Matthew Pratt Guterl, *American Mediterranean: Southern Slaveholders in the Age of Emancipation* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008); Gerald Horne, *The Deepest South: The United States, Brazil, and the African Slave Trade* (New York, 2007); and Daniel B. Rood, "Plantation Technocrats: A Social History of Knowledge in the Slaveholding Atlantic World, 1830-1865," PhD diss., University of California, Irvine, 2010.

Other significant works that have sought to reframe the sectional crisis in international terms include Brian Schoen, *The Fragile Fabric of Union: Cotton, Federal Politics and the Global Origins of the Civil War* (Baltimore, 2009); and Edward Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge, 2008). For recent scholarship on Southern slaveholders and nineteenth-century visions of modernity, see John Majewski, *Modernizing a Slave Economy* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2009); Anthony E. Kaye, "The Second Slavery: Modernity in the Nineteenth-Century South and the Atlantic World," *Journal of Southern History* 75 (August 2009); and L. Diane Barnes, Brian Schoen, and Frank Towers, eds., *The Old South's Modern Worlds: Slavery, Region, and Nation in the Age of Progress* (New York, 2011).

This article originally appeared in issue 12.4 (July, 2012).

Matthew Karp received his PhD from the University of Pennsylvania and is a visiting scholar at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences; next summer, he will start as an assistant professor of history at Princeton University. He is writing a book about Southern slaveholders and American foreign policy in the Civil War era.