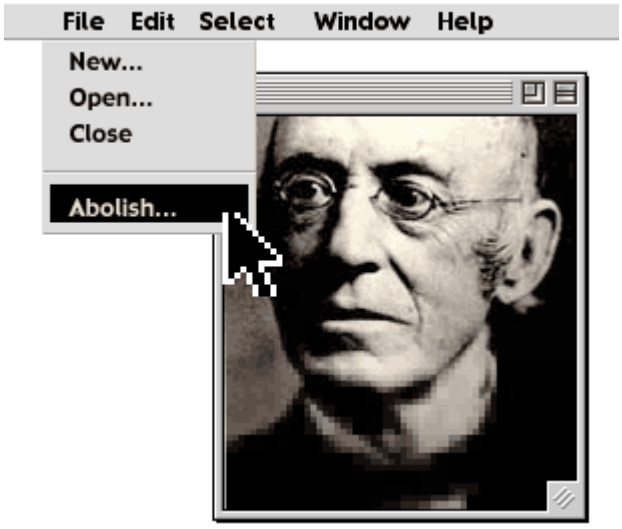
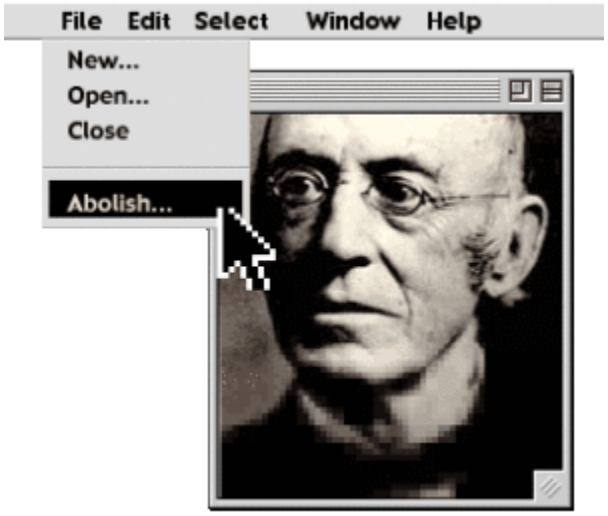
E-Abolitionists



Look at you: sitting there at your computer checking the weather reports, studying *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* episode guides, and reading online history magazines when you could be doing something worthwhile. “You can use the Internet to set people free,” reads the message across the bottom border of my browser. “And it takes only two minutes a week to help.”

The site that promises these powerful surfing opportunities is iAbolish.org, an “Anti-Slavery Web Portal” set up by the American Anti-Slavery Group. Founded by management consultant Charles Jacobs in 1993, the group has spearheaded a self-styled “new abolitionist” movement that claims to have freed tens of thousands of mostly African slaves, and has begun to get some traction in Congress and on college campuses. The immigration laws have already been modified at the new movement’s behest, and someday you may need to check candy bars and chocolate syrup bottles for a “slave-free” label that the group is pushing in its drive to call attention to forced child labor on the cocoa farms of West Africa. On its primary issue, the capture and enslavement of southern Sudanese by raiders from the dominant north, the group has generated enough publicity to push Sudan toward a pariah status similar to South Africa’s in the 1980s.

While the people it champions clearly are in dire need of help, historically minded Web surfers may find iAbolish.org rather jarring in its combination of Internet-era jargon with familiar terms and strategies from the nineteenth-century antislavery movement. The site has all the bells, whistles, and spending opportunities that netizens have come to expect: animated Flash presentations, on-demand multimedia content, interactive maps, and an online store where one can load up on antislavery books, t-shirts, posters, and videos.



Yet the substance of all this postmodernity would be quite familiar to William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass. There are personal narratives of freed slaves, horrifying accounts of the conditions that slaves endure with much emphasis on threats to women and children, prefabricated messages to send to elected officials, and inspiring stories of slaves who escaped from bondage. And then there are the constant references to the creators and users of the site as "abolitionists," a usage boldly appropriating the name of perhaps the most radical reform movement in American history that actually achieved its stated goal.

Almost inevitably this borrowing leads iAbolish to the wince-worthy coinage "e-abolitionist," which one can become by signing up. Along with that term goes a strong dose of the techno-messianism that has so infected recent American culture: "The Internet has changed your life," the site announces. "Now, you can use the Internet to help liberate millions in bondage."

There are many reasons why the people behind iAbolish.org seem justified in claiming the abolitionist mantle. The harnessing of cutting-edge persuasive techniques to a moral crusade was, of course, a hallmark of the old abolitionists. They and their colleagues in the other Jacksonian-era religious reform movements have been called the inventors of mass media politics (back when mass media meant newspapers, books, and pamphlets), and pioneered the use of direct mail solicitations. (In South Carolina, the slaveholders rioted to stop these abolitionist mass mailings.) One can easily see an analogy between Charles Jacobs and Lewis and Arthur Tappan, the dry-goods magnates who helped bankroll the original American abolitionist movement. In both cases, commercial sensibilities blend seamlessly with reforming zeal. Even if the new abolitionists were to go Hollywood and recruit some rock stars or commission a TV miniseries, they would only be following in the footsteps of the old abolitionists, whose arsenal included the popular Hutchinson Family Singers and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in multiple formats (including the best-selling novel, sheet music, and a special effects-laden theatrical production).

The new antislavery movement also represents a remarkable resurgence of the great nineteenth-century alliance of evangelical Christianity and social reform, the very nexus in which radical abolitionism once thrived. This alliance seems to have gone into hibernation somewhere around the time of the Scopes trial, and in my own lifetime politicized evangelical Christians have typically regarded liberals and radicals as godless communists and secular humanists, people they would no more team up with than Satan himself. So it's interesting to see a movement that counts both Jesses—Helms and Jackson—among its supporters, and can get Johnnie Cochran and Ken Starr on the same side of a law case. Its biggest legislative success to date, the Victims of Trafficking Protection Act of 2000, was cosponsored by arguably the most liberal man in the Senate, Minnesota's Paul Wellstone, and one of the most conservative, Sam Brownback of Kansas. (Brownback was a leader of the Christian Right takeover of Kansas Republican politics that has made the Alf Landons and Bob Doles of Kansas history look distinctly left wing.) It is almost unbelievable that a movement could be popular in the aggressively secular environs of Cambridge, Massachusetts, where the coffee shops are a lot more crowded on Sunday mornings than the local churches, yet have an educational director who publicly wished that God would add "another star" to Jesse Helms's "crown." Just this summer, the new abolitionists have gotten Republican fans of President Ronald "Constructive Engagement" Reagan to call for U.S. disinvestment in Sudan, a strategy most of them opposed regarding South Africa in the 1980s.

Startling as these feats are, there are other ways in which the new abolitionists fall far short of their role models. The most radical nineteenth-century abolitionists were stern critics of their own culture, ready to extirpate the evil of slavery "root and branch," even if that meant destroying the Union and revolutionizing American society. They were up against an institution of basic importance to the American economy, South and North (as Yale University has recently discovered), one with strong defenders in the political structure of their times. William Lloyd Garrison came to believe that the Constitution itself was a "covenant with death and an agreement with Hell," and famously burned it at a public meeting.

By contrast, the new abolitionists direct most of their outrage against foreign countries and certain immigrant cultures within the U.S. The most conspicuous villains in the new abolitionist literature are Arabs and other Muslims, one of the last remaining groups that American popular culture still freely demonizes. It is not insignificant for the movement's appeal to conservatives that many of the enslaved peoples are Christians.

At the same time, the new abolitionists' proposed policy solutions take the distinctly modern form of mostly cost-free miniproposals, like the cocoa labeling initiative and their new cause, a "Sudan Peace Act" that would have oil companies doing business in Sudan barred from the New York Stock Exchange. The foundations of the American economy will not be threatened by these blows—though the industries involved are still lobbying against them—and doubtless the new Republican abolitionists fully understand that.

Leaving aside the root and branch reformation of American race and labor policies, the new abolitionists seem to devote most of their money and energy to the controversial practice of “redeeming” slaves in Sudan. These redemptions involve paying armed men to take enslaved people away from their masters and deliver them to visiting foreigners for transport back to their villages or out of the country. Critics have argued that this practice actually creates a market in slaves. And while the new abolitionists take steps to avoid this result, they clearly are plugging into, rather than challenging, the existing cultures of raiding and captive taking that victimized the rescued people in the first place.

The new abolitionists have also identified a much more amorphous form of slavery to abolish than did the old. The “slavery” the e-abolitionists target is less a basic domestic institution than a disparate collection of bad social and economic situations: from debt peonage, to kidnapping, to child labor, to prostitution, to a few cases of outright chattel slavery. The miscellaneous nature of modern slavery does not make the situations iAbolish details any less evil or worthy of condemnation. But it does raise the question of whether “slavery” is the most appropriate label for dealing with them.

What do all these situations have in common with each other, and with antebellum American slavery? For one, almost all represent the social and political consequences of economic globalization, something that has been going on for centuries but clearly sped up during the 1990s. Forced labor is one of the things that can happen when very wealthy societies with highly developed market economies and power on the world stage get connected with much poorer, weaker societies that have things they need. Desire for the wealth to be gained overwhelms the fragile institutions protecting human rights in the poorer countries, as existing forms of conflict and oppression become tools for supplying what the world economy demands. So the fading, guilty-minded institution of slavery in the southern U.S. mushroomed and grew belligerent in response to the rise of northern and European textile manufacturing, and so the less lovely features of many poverty-stricken, starkly inegalitarian societies in Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Asia have been mobilized to supply the world’s wealthier nations with cheaply manufactured goods or scarce resources. Sometimes the new abolitionists apply the term “slavery” to the results, as with West African cocoa. And sometimes they don’t, as with the rush for coltan (an element used in the manufacture of advanced electronic devices such as portable phones and computers) that has fueled many of the horrors during Congo’s civil war. Either way, it sucks to be a poor person caught up in the ruthless efforts of local elites, militias, and “entrepreneurs” to get their cut of that foreign wealth.

Some new abolitionists may want to deny this. The iAbolish FAQ Page claims that slavery in Sudan is “not economic,” and while this may be true in terms of the labor that Sudanese slaves do, it leaves out the chief reason for fighting over southern Sudan or terrorizing the populace there, its oil resources.

The new abolitionism represents a rare effort to make the United States—or, rather, individual citizens—take some responsibility for a few of these problems, but it does so in a way that may not adequately acknowledge the complicity of our whole way of life in spawning them. Americans have always been against slavery, since the days of the Revolution when the term in politics usually referred not to human bondage but to a propertied white man being taxed by a government that did not allow him effective representation. With such absolutist notions of liberty, slavery eventually came to seem an intolerable evil to most Americans in whatever forms they found it.

The problem is, we find slavery such a uniquely monstrous evil that we have in the past forgotten to clean up after the monster is killed, much less to inquire into how it came into being. It was much easier for Civil War-era Americans to abolish the institution of slavery than face the egregious economic inequalities of Southern society, and so the poverty of Southern blacks and the ruthlessness of Southern white property owners combined quickly to create a new, less formal type of servitude, one that the self-congratulatory North left largely unmolested for a century.

Will labeling the many forms of exploitation and cruelty that are so prevalent around the world "slavery" prevent such an outcome? Or will it merely postpone our much needed reckoning with the brutal inequalities that make our discount shopping possible? I hope the answer is the former, but I fear it may be the latter. Our track record on pursuing the economic underpinnings of moral evils is not good. And now it is not a regional legal institution that needs abolition, but our whole manner of dealing with the rest of the world.

Further Reading:

On the old abolitionists as cutting-edge media politicians, see David Paul Nord, "The Evangelical Origins of Mass Media in America, 1815-1835," *Journalism Monographs* 88 (1984): 1-30; and Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System From Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995). For visual examples of, and links to, some of their productions, see these sections of the Library of Congress online exhibits The African-American Odyssey and The African-American Mosaic.

For additional, late-breaking comments on this and other historical-political topics, visit "the Historical Punditry Page".

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